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Four Roads: A Novel

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FOUR ROADS: A NOVEL

by

Kelly Daniels

A Dissertation
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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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Department of English
Advisor: Stuart Dybek, M.F.A.

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An old city bus, painted a clownish turquoise on top with dull orange fenders, sped west on the transcontinental highway a hundred miles out of Guatemala City. It was a rocky land, covered in dun scrub, high desert rising toward the low, gray sky. In the distance stood a range of mountains whose peaks disappeared into storm clouds that flickered with silent lightening. A white man drove the bus, middle-aged with bristly pale hair and a rum-burnt face. If anyone were watching—no one was—the lizards woven into his shirt would appear to crawl about his body, pushed by the wind that rushed through the glass-less windows. His assistant, a dark man of thirty or forty, marked by a dime-sized tattoo of a pentagram on his left cheek, rested against the pole behind the driver’s seat. He closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to drift into sleep. When he opened them he stared without emotion at the road. His tee shirt rode high, exposing a crescent of his protruding belly. Solemn-faced Maya took up most of the seats and overflowed into the aisle. The women wore tipica, the brilliant swaths prized by tourists, and the men dressed in charity trousers and shirts. Children
sprawled over laps and infants dozed in slings tied around their mothers’ shoulders. A few Ladinos sat here and there, men and women of lighter complexion than the Maya and dressed like bank tellers. Dazed by travel, no one spoke or moved except to jostle with the bumps in the road.

A gringo sat near the back of the bus, a square-jawed man in his late twenties, with a sparse reddish beard and faint acne scars on his cheeks. Hair whipping his face and neck, he looked out the window at the brush and dirt rushing by, not so different from the high desert California landscape where he grew up. A vague worry nagged him, interrupting the distraction of being alone and farther from home than ever before. He’d left abruptly, an animal reaction to the news of his father’s capture and incarceration. The shock still hadn’t worn off, and now he questioned the initial impulse that got him here. Just then a wave of motion and whispers washed through the bus, cutting off this line of thought. Some controversy ahead in the road.

The driver pressed on the horn, two long wails, and the gringo stuck his head out the window to see. A hundred yards away, a wild-haired, shirtless man stood in the center of the lane, waving his arms as if calling attention to a hidden calamity, calling attention, the gringo thought, to the calamity that he’d made of his life. The man looked familiar, could have been any number of desperate souls wandering the cities of America, looking for handouts and whatever else they sought. Though sun and filth had turned his skin brown, his fair complexion showed under his arms, and the passenger wondered how a white man had come to such a situation so far from home. The driver leaned on the horn again but didn’t slow. The vagabond stopped
waving, and dropped his arms. He wore pants cut off at the knees and sandals. His hair settled like a rusty cloud on his shoulders. He closed his eyes like one at peace.

Everyone on the bus tensed their muscles, trying to prepare for the experience of crushing a human being into pulp and shards. But at the last moment the vagabond dove and rolled across the shoulder, popped to his feet with surprising grace. His hair trembled in the bus’ wind, and his bared teeth illuminated his face with hilarious madness. He fumbled with his shorts and wagged his penis at the retreating passengers.

The gringo passenger watched the man grow small, pull up his shorts and resume his journey, step by step down the center of the road. He wondered what the man had gained from this display, some proof that he existed, coming so near to death, shocking a busload of citizens with his otherwise insignificant sex. He watched the vagabond disappear into the heat waves blurring the horizon, and then he turned to face the approaching range, with its dark mantle of clouds flashing like the silent, distant warfare shown on television.
June

Marilyn Gold, the Peace Corps volunteer, stood before her class of young Quiche in the tight space of a classroom that had once been a storage shed. “The Moon is a lady,” she said, “and the Sun is a man.” The kids sat in an arc, twenty-one serious little scholars. They loved the sky stories, and Marilyn was beginning to struggle to invent new versions. “Every day he follows her across the sky and every night she runs away.”

“Will he catch her?” Marilyn’s favorite student, Laura, asked in Spanish. An outsider, Laura walked from some tiny dirt village to attend class. She chewed her fingernail with worry, an awkward girl of seven who might or might not grow into her gawky limbs, her large toothy mouth, the big, flattened nose. Marilyn empathized. She herself had grown up too tall and homely, until her first year in college, when she
suddenly became pretty. Years later, she hadn’t gotten used to the glances of men, and most times still felt ugly.

“Yes,” Marilyn answered in English. “After sinking behind the mountains, he dresses in black, and little by little he catches her at night, lies over her bit by bit, covering more of her each night until he’s all the way on top and we can’t see her at all on those darkest nights. When he finishes with her, he slides off, just as slowly.”

The kids regarded this information in silence. Marilyn had no idea where she’d come up with this particular angle, except that if you concoct enough versions of any story, sex eventually enters into it. She amused herself briefly by imagining how this brand of pedagogy would go over back in her hometown of Media, Pennsylvania.

She asked if there were any questions, and Laura raised her hand and asked what Marilyn’s last name, Gold, meant. Funny it had taken them this long. They’d certainly inquired about every other aspect of her life imaginable. Marilyn translated and the children seemed impressed. “Como el pelo,” Laura said.

“In English please.”

Laura covered her mouth with her hand. “Like. Your. Hair.” Her other hand joined the first and hid her face entirely. Speaking English tended to affect the girls that way, as if the act were somehow scandalous.

“Interesting connection,” Marilyn said, and it was. She’d always thought of her hair as yellow in the summer, brown the rest of the year. Now she raised her arms. “Everybody up.”
To get the blood flowing, and as a break from thinking, she led the students through toe-touching, knee bends, rising on their toes. Then, falling back on one of the familiar, even stale, classroom activities, she initiated sharing time. She’d been off her game since her ex-boyfriend Cash’s puny postcard found her a week before. Last night again she’d not slept well, and went through her morning routine distracted, half-expecting him to burst through the door at any moment, hoping he wouldn’t, hoping he would. “Who has something new to tell us?” she asked. Her star English speaker, a nine-year-old boy with a long, mature face and hair slicked down with a perfect side part, shot up his hand. “Angel?”

He paused, glanced at his fellows and assumed an anxious though resolute expression. “Why do the gringos steal the babies?”

Marilyn rubbed her face while the room crackled with Spanish. “Calm down, calm down, calm down,” she chanted quietly, “shhhh.” And then she broke two of her own rules by raising her voice and speaking in Spanish. “Nobody is going to steal your organs!” This outburst surprised them into silence. But now that she had their attention, she didn’t know what to say. She was the resident gringa, after all. Babies disappeared from time to time. Women sold children they couldn’t care for in secret and claimed kidnapping to save face. Other babies and toddlers were actually snatched by street kids who sold them to the various adoption agencies throughout the country. At least that’s what Jonathan, her supervisor from the Peace Corps, had told her at a recent meeting, but she wasn’t entirely sure who to trust these days. Though the organ Dofiation claims seemed pretty unlikely, and had the air of horror stories,
probably invented by Guatemala City’s sad excuse for a press. And the notion that
tourists were snatching infants between trips to Mayan temples was clearly absurd,
but how to explain this to children? Even the adults of the village wouldn’t believe
her. “Don’t worry,” she finally said, “who would want to steal malvados like you?”
But the joke didn’t translate. The kids looked baffled, skeptical. Angel looked hurt.

“Okay. Time to go.” She rose and smoothed her skirt. “Enough for today.”

“Goodbye,” the children said in English, drifting toward the door. For many of
them, hello and goodbye were their only contributions to class. They were too shy to
put the new words in their mouths. And their parents didn’t care. In fact, they
distrusted the English language as much as they mistrusted gringos. Yet the more
helpless the situation became, the more Marilyn yearned to reach them. She pitied her
kids for what they would never have and never know. For a time, after Cash’s
presence in her heart and head had dwindled, after she’d broken off the ill-advised
affair with Jonathan Stubbs, her supervisor, she’d believed in her teaching without a
trace of doubt, and had found peace in the countryside, the village and the classroom.
She lived a simple pattern that did no harm and might even do good. But even her
morning yoga had been interrupted lately by anxiety. Simple questions, like what to
have for lunch, became matters of great vacillation, even anguish, and she felt herself
slipping from the zone she’d reached, back to the realm of desires, specifically the
realm of unfulfilled desire. Waking and eating, walking, meditating, preparing and
teaching no longer sufficed. The last of the children exited and Marilyn allowed
herself to sigh. She supposed she’d had it coming. She’d fled from heartbreak and
humiliation, and had hid for a while, but she’d always sensed the trouble inside, biding its time.

She followed the kids into the dusty village of San Francisco el Alto. Laura stood waiting by the door. “Goodbye, teacher,” she said.

“Bye, little bird,” Marilyn said, for the girl reminded her of a fledgling, clumsy, stick-thin, and adorable. Laura spun and ran off on her bare feet. She clearly had a crush on her teacher, and Marilyn returned it after a fashion, frightened herself at some point with a brief wish to take Laura back to the States with her, show her all the places she’d ever loved in her hometown, take her to Disneyworld for Christ’s sake. The kind of inclination that got you killed these days. Marilyn watched Laura wind around the randomly strewn huts, cross the highway and vanish into the woods toward her mysterious home.

Dark clouds gathered around the peaks, and the air was heavy and damp. Soon the rains would come. “Adios,” said Doña Felicidad, one of the children’s grandmothers.

“Adios,” Marilyn replied, watching the children, with mothers and grandmothers, and here and there a father, walking the steep paths that snaked through the village, back to their squat homes. The kids used to go alone, used to wander wherever they pleased, sometimes far into the surrounding hills and forests. But times had changed. The baby robbers lurked. Marilyn started toward her own hut, telling herself that the people of San Francisco de Alto trusted her, more or less. She’d been with them for nearly eighteen months.
A bus coughed in the distance, and she kept herself from watching it approach. She pulled her hair back with both hands, felt the oily texture, smelled wood smoke on her clothes, the tang under her arms. Cash’s postcard, addressed to the central Peace Corps office in the capitol, had somehow made its way to Xela, where someone, probably Jonathan Stubbs himself, attached it to Marilyn’s monthly check with a paper clip. Since then, every bus hauled possibility, hauled mystery. The card itself, a photograph of the Philadelphia skyline, Cash’s careful block letters spelling her name, and his name, had caused a shock to plunge through her body, and she’d immediately shoved it into her back pocket, as if it were secret and shameful, like a message from an adulterous lover, and at home she’d read it over and over. Yet the words betrayed nothing of Cash’s purpose. “Figured I’d come by for a visit. Hope you don’t mind. See you soon.” Now what was that supposed to mean? It pissed her off to be addressed by Cash as if they’d been vague acquaintances, as if she’d been one of his fawning groupies. She’d known him years before he became a two-bit rock star, back when he’d worn his hair in that bi-level cut.

As she walked through the village toward the market, a breeze crept under her skirt and cooled her thighs. She was famished, and cursed the interminable rice and beans, the measly scraps of meat available to her. She thought she’d transcended the need to eat for pleasure, or identity. Her relationship with food had changed since she’d signed up for the Corps. Back in the States she’d been a vegetarian, toying with veganism, and had initially been offended, betrayed even, that a progressive institution like the Peace Corps wouldn’t accept those unwilling to put aside their
dietary restrictions for the duration of the service. She'd thought the policy discriminatory, another example of official support for a culture constructed upon cruelty toward animals and wasted resources. Now she ate steak when she could get it, chicken, pork, whatever. Goat, sure. She needed her protein. Opinions about how things should be, she'd learned, were a luxury. Soyburgers were an extravagance. The notion that she could aid the world by avoiding a certain aisle in the supermarket, unimaginable opulence.

A bus approached from the south, the direction from which a visitor new to the country would arrive. It pulled over. Marilyn recognized Don and Doña Tzoc exiting after their three children, each carrying a basket of the woven shoulder bags they sold at Cuatro Caminos. A couple of locals climbed in and the bus pulled away. Marilyn exhaled and realized she'd been holding her breath. Thank you, Cash, she thought, for bringing back the old desperation. Hadn't seen him in a year and a half, and after one postcard with a couple dozen words scrawled on it he already had the advantage. Probably he wasn't even coming, just thought he'd mess with her mind to show her he still could.

Ah, the old role. She remembered it well. Her own position as university student, communications major with perhaps some kind of plan for herself, had been mere ornamentation, something to do while she waited for him to make it big, whatever that meant. And later, as the band found local fame and Cash grew full of himself, he began to resent her, to see her as a barrier between him and the perks he'd worked so hard to attain. Their sex life had become self-consciously X-rated during...
this phase, and Marilyn, wild to please, had gone along, to her shame. They’d purchased toys, magazines, movies. On the internet they’d found want ads documenting every imaginable want. They’d contacted a woman once, and arranged to meet a traveling saleswoman who lived what she called “the lifestyle.” She’d stood them up, thank god, and Cash wondered if she hadn’t actually been a male hiding behind a bunch of phony pictures. But there were plenty of sexual humiliations left to try. Please, she thought, not now. To drag her thoughts away from the mean-spirited sex leading to the breakup, she indulged memories of the time after, the pitiful and excessive phone calls, the pleading, the hiding in the room, the weeping. These unhappy thoughts spawned others, unrelated to Cash. She found she’d been chewing on a canker inside her mouth.

How long had it taken before the routines of life began to fill in the vacancy Cash had left? Weeks to find the energy to shower, months before she’d get through a single day without the desire to cry. And now the feeling returned, an empty place in her gut ringed by festering nerves. She should be thankful, though. She’d probably never have joined the Peace Corps if he, or someone else, hadn’t emptied her, left her barren enough to wander into the wilderness. And hadn’t that made all the difference? She had thought so, but now she wasn’t sure. Apparently, she was still the same person she’d always been.

She bit the sore in her mouth hard enough to bring the salty, iron taste of blood. Then she was back, between two shorts rows of open air market stands: a bit of bloody meat, humble bins of potatoes, onions, calabasas, three or four wizened
mangoes. Her turn of thought had killed her appetite, though, and she kept on walking, through town toward the hill she climbed every day. Her feet were dirty, unfeminine in her Tevas, but the muscles in her calves propelled her forward with power she hadn’t known before Guatemala. At some point her body had grown strong. Unable to contain her energy, she burst into sprint for a dozen yards, then capped her run with several leaps. How much weight had she lost since Media? she wondered. Ten, fifteen pounds? She certainly felt light, so light she sometimes felt she might just float away.

The girl was going to interrogate him. That was the slightly imprecise word Max's new Spanish teacher used, a word she must have found in the dictionary. The goal of this first lesson, she explained, was to discover the limits of his Spanish. And so Max Ash, handsome but for faded acne scars and troubled eyes, sat at a painted table with his new teacher, Gabriela Aria Valle, in the courtyard classroom of Instituto de Idiomas Alta Plano, among palms that grew from fat terracotta pots to shade half a dozen student-teacher pairs and as many empty tables. An eight foot plaster wall hemmed them in. Shards of glass jutted like shark's teeth from the top of the wall. “Bien,” she said. ¿Donde aprendiste el Espanol?”

“At work,” he answered in Spanish. “A little in college.”

“And where did you work?”
“Construction, restaurants, bars, other places.”

“Good. What was your last job?”

“Bartender,” he answered in English.

“Cantinero,” she supplied, prompting a vision of the besotted West: sombrero-capped men crossed with shells, poker at a scarred table, whores upstairs, a body on the floor. The sordid romance of the scene cheered him.

“Soy cantinero,” he said.

“¿No eres capitán?” she asked, grinning and humming the famous tune.

“No,” he admitted, and he felt his brow relax. “Not the captain. Only a…” he searched for “humble,” but couldn’t find the word in Spanish. “Only a sailor.” She laughed and tapped his hand with the pencil, whose eraser she had a habit of placing into a dimple under her bottom lip, where it fit perfectly. He liked her wide, active mouth, the way the thick lips wrapped around the pretty-sounding words.

“Hello?” she said in English, waving the pencil in his face. “¿Estas poseído?”

“Possessed?” he asked, mildly shocked by the notion. “As in, by the Devil?”

In his younger years he saw—thought he saw—the Devil on a regular basis, in the flesh, standing on the corner of Main and Cotton, getting a trim in Nick’s barber shop, behind the counter at 7-11, staring from the open doorway of The Chaparral Bar and Grill through a veil of cigarette smoke. Back in Max’s Believer period, he thought he saw all kinds of things.

“It’s a saying. Un dicho. It means wake up.”

“What was the question?”
“Your parents,” she returned to Spanish. “What work do they do?”

“My mother is a hospital secretary, and my father, I don’t know.” In fact, he did know. His father was in jail, awaiting trial for murder.

“Don’t know?” she asked, skeptical. He wanted to tell all just then, the father’s crime nearly twenty years before, his mother’s escape into religion and his father’s flight from justice, the fugitive years, the recent capture and incarceration. And what would he tell this cute Spanish teacher he’d just met? That he was pissed off and disappointed? That was, he admitted, the crux of the situation.

“Why did you come to Guatemala?” Gabriela continued.

“I don’t know,” he said. He’d been asking himself the same thing.

“No.” She batted his nose with the eraser of her pencil. “One ‘I don’t know’ is the limit.”

He couldn’t help smiling, even though her question invited unwelcome thoughts. His father’s capture a month before had prompted to initial move—that much he knew. The phone had rung; he had answered. “They have your father,” his grandmother said without salutation. Then she explained that Duncan Ash, who went by Dunny, had been arrested on an island in Indonesia and transported to California, where he waited in county jail for the legal process to begin, ponderous gears, Max had imagined, a machine built to grind bad men down, to process them into a uniform consistency. His grandmother had no more information, and besides, she’d whispered, “we shouldn’t discuss this on the phone.”
“I see,” he said, then told her goodbye and set the receiver gently back into the cradle. He stared at the phone for a moment, and began to nod, as if reluctantly persuaded by its logic. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his then girlfriend watching him from across the room. He felt curiously elated by the storm brewing inside, and he began to smile, still nodding, with his lips pressed together. He’d entertained a fantasy over the years. A message would arrive by mail, containing a coded map leading to Dunny Ash’s tropical hideout. They’d reunite. They’d surf together. Eat fish they’d caught, mangos and passion fruit plucked from trees. “Are you okay?” his girlfriend asked, approaching warily.

A roaring sound like jet engines grew in his ears and began to vibrate through his body. He turned to his girlfriend. She came closer, dripping pity. “Get away from me,” he said, low and slow and toxic. She went away.

“To go on excursions?” Gabriela prompted, eyebrows rising. Someone laughed at a nearby table, a Dane named Nathan that Max met earlier in the day. Gabriela’s face grew placid, smooth and oval as a beach pebble.

“To learn Spanish,” Max said. “And to work.”

“Work?” she asked. “True?”

“I need money,” he stated, the one persistent fact of his life.

“No one comes to Guatemala to work. We go north for that.” She twirled a finger around her ear, apparently a universal signal. “Maybe are you crazy?”

“Probably,” he replied. “I have a little money, but I need to stay. Six months, minimum.” The specificity of the number offered some satisfaction.
“Why?” she asked, a reasonable question.

“Six or more. Maybe a year. Or,” he said—propelled by a wave of recklessness, an sensation that tended to result in his very best and worst decisions. “Or forever,” he concluded, certain for half a moment that he was serious. The fact was that he didn’t know precisely how long he needed to stay, only that he couldn’t imagine going home, not now, not as he was. He didn’t want to visit the old man in prison, for one thing, didn’t want to follow the trial in the newspaper, didn’t want to speak to his grandparents or his mother on the phone, didn’t want to think about it.

Gabriela stretched her arms over her head and clenched her hands into small fists. She twisted in her seat and uttered a tiny squeak of pleasure, before dropping her arms and taking up the pencil again. “Now, how do you say, the tables turn. I need to know how good you hear. So, you ask me questions now.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” he said. He’d been wondering.

“No,” she answered without the blushing coquettishness he’d expected. “Not currently.”

“Why not?” Too late, he recognized this as a stupid question.

“I have other things on my mind,” she replied. For a moment her expressive, dark eyes narrowed with worry. Then she smiled and waved the pencil before him like a magician with a wand. “Boys don’t matter,” she said. “Even tall blond gringos with light eyes.”

“Okay,” he said, quite disarmed. He didn’t consider himself tall or blond. Such designations relied on context, he supposed. “What work do your parents do?”
he finally managed to ask, stealing her script. She told him that her mother taught history, and her father ran an organization that had something to do with the indigenous of the area. His Spanish wasn’t strong enough to fully understand, and when he prodded, her face turned into the beach pebble, marred by one flaw, a troubled wrinkle creasing her brow. Then she launched into silly, irrelevant prattle and flirtation, a way of keeping him at arm’s distance. “But he helps them?” Max asked, more to interfere with the frivolous girl act than to learn the answer.

She shrugged dismissively. “Food, education, water. Simple things,” she said. Now he suspected she too harbored resentment, and so he dropped the subject of fathers.

“Can’t you think of better questions?” she asked after a moment. “For example: what do I like to do on the weekend?”

Over the next hour he learned various facts about Gabriela Aria Valle. She was Catholic, liked to dance, did not drink alcohol, loved coffee and cake. She enjoyed all sorts of popular music, as well as the romantic ballads from the past. She was nineteen years old and had had three boyfriends so far, none of them serious. And her favorite place in the world was the ruined city of Tikal, near which she dreamt of moving someday, to build a farm amid the jungle, where all her friends would be welcome to live, with her and her future husband. “What kind of man do you want to marry?” he asked helplessly, stunned by a powerful and wholly unaccountable sense of yearning.
She placed the pencil eraser in the dimple under her lip and considered his question. Then she gave up and sighed. "No se," she said, looking out over the amber and green shards at cottony clouds drifting by. "No se." This time she didn't bother to cover the turmoil with foolishness.

After the four hour lesson, Max said goodbye to his teacher, until tomorrow, and caught a bus heading a couple of miles out of town to Cuatro Caminos, a zone of unchecked capitalism whose teeming life had impressed him when he drove through on his way to Quetzaltenango. As the bus pulled away, Max noticed the assistant, a skinny kid with an overbite, running along outside, carrying a cardboard box on one shoulder. The driver moved from second to third gear, and seemed ready to leave the boy behind. They entered the highway, lurching into fourth gear. Shortly after, a pair of legs thrust through an open window two rows ahead of Max, followed by the rest of the assistant, who whipped himself inside and balanced on the bench between two apparently unimpressed Maya. He approached Max for the fare. "Good move," Max said in Spanish, handing him a single quetzal and pointing to the open window. The boy didn't appear to understand Max's appreciation.

Ten minutes later, Max debarked at Caminos, a camp of makeshift stalls sprung up around the only major intersection of the area. While he searched out an eatery among the dozens of stalls, he caught glimpses of the life behind the commerce: clothes hanging over a line strung behind two pines; a family of Maya huddled around a cook fire, one of them fanning the flames with a stiff section of
cardboard; a woman asleep on a blanket with two small children pressed to her. Hills rose behind the vendors, and across the street, men played soccer on a large grass meadow, incorporating the cattle grazing there into their tactics.

He found a spot on a bench made of a two-by-six supported by stacked cinder blocks, where he ordered a plate and a Cabro beer from the woman behind the plywood counter. She scooped a spoonful of beans from a witch’s cauldron resting over an open flame, and used a cleaver to whack a grilled chicken into bits. She slid the meal to Max and plunked down a beer, wet from the ice tub. Max thanked her and she removed her glasses, wiped them and her face with her apron. The stand’s only decoration was a calendar stuck on December, featuring a girl in a bikini holding a bottle of Imperial beer and staring out at the world as if she might bite it.

While Max ate, the jockeying busses groaned, wheezed, and coughed around him, announced by the cries of the assistants. Max, meanwhile, turned his mind to the problem of money. At first he thought he might employ his native English and flimsy Spanish in some gainful way, guiding tours, perhaps. But so far he hadn’t found the barest sign of opportunity, no tours, no tourists. As a fallback, he’d imagined he could find work bartending, but again he’d found nothing that could be called a proper bar, only dank sheds where old rancheros hunched over quarts of beer or glasses of the local rotgut. No money in that, even if he could get the job, which he couldn’t.

“Guate!” one of the bus assistants shouted behind him. The shouts kept drawing his attention. “Toto!” another cried. Momo! Huehue! Chichi! Max recognized this last from a map. Short for Chichicastenango. Music in that name, he
thought, and paid for his meal. He ordered another beer, standing to let a new
customer take his spot. “Deposito,” the woman said. Max pointed to a nearby patch of
crab grass, indicating that he would drink the beer there, that her bottle would be safe.
She reluctantly sold him the beer.

The busses arrived and departed in clouds of greasy smoke, bringing to mind a
circus traveling to the music of grinding gears, shouts, the slap of loose pistons,
squealing brakes, and occasional, strange patches of silence. The assistants were the
masters of ceremony. Mostly teenagers, a few young men, an older fellow or two,
they flung their bodies from bus to earth and back again. They dressed in flashy,
ragged costumes: open shirts that trailed like capes, baggy pants ragged at the hem
and cinched with belts, crucifixes bouncing on chests, piratical swaths of native fabric
fluttering. One assistant’s left arm terminated in a puckered stump at the wrist, and he
hauled his boxes and baskets by skillful use of his forearm.

The vessels were a sight to behold as well, old Bluebird busses transformed
into rolling works of art. A jungle scene of knotted vines, flowers, jaguars and
ubiquitous long-feathered quetzales. Figures standing as one to suggest resistance,
mallet fists hoisted. Jesus Christ’s aura spreading in multicolor ripples to join the
Virgin of Guadalupe’s swelling halo, forming in the center a dark purple overlap of
sanctity. The assistant of this last bus, looking far from holy with a scraggly boy
mustache and cigarette pack in his breast pocket, hopped out of the front door.
“Todos! Todos!” he cried, herding passengers, shoving them back to make room for
more. He jumped out the back door and ran to the front, where he accepted a dish-
shaped basket from a woman boarding. The bus picked up speed while the boy jogged along with the basket balanced over his head. He leapt for the ladder in the back and climbed up with one hand. At the top, he dropped the basket and stood casually like mellow surfer until he sunk into a dip in the road.

Max sipped his beer, giddy as a child, and asked, why not? Really, why not? He could handle the job. The unlikely notion took shape in his mind. He entertained a growing desire to swing from the roof into a window at fifty miles an hour. Surely no gringo had been a bus driver’s assistant in Guatemala. Ever. He could be the first, a feat to carry the rest of his days, no matter how else he might fail. He swallowed the remains of his beer and recalled for the first time in years his earliest professional ambition. He’d been four, and just home from the Barnum and Bailey Circus. With conviction he’d not known since, he’d decided to devote his life to the flying trapeze.

Norman Caruthers, Panajachel’s resident gringo bus driver, listened halfheartedly to Ick the bartender rant about injustice, as if he’d only now discovered its presence in the world. As Ick spoke, his Adam’s apple bobbed on his long neck and Caruthers decided that Ick must stand for Icabod, the famous character whom he somehow resembled. The insight amused Caruthers, until he detected in it a hollow, echoing quality. His thoughts these days, when he had them, sounded naggingly familiar in his
head, a permanent condition skirting déjà vu. When had he lost the ability to
distinguish what he’d done from what he’d thought, what he’d said from what he’d
heard, yesterday from twelve years ago? He didn’t know. He didn’t even remember
the question.

“It says here she was an ‘amateur journalist,’” Ick said, spreading the
international edition over the bar. “Now what the fuck is that?”

“Well, I expect it means she wrote but didn’t get paid,” the man beside
Caruthers said, a newcomer with an unknown source of funding. “Like it’s a hobby,”
he added. Some speculated that this man flourished on a hefty trust, which prompted
folk to fluctuate between stabbing his back and kissing his ass. Caruthers plain didn’t
like his ratty face, the close-set, black eyes, the pinched features and patchy beard.

“Or was a hobby, I guess. Now that she’s brain dead and that.”

Ick turned the page, lips pursed with disgust. As he read, he absently slid the
rubber band from his long red ponytail, pulled his hair back tight against his skull and
snapped the band back into place. “Ever notice,” he said to the paper, “that it’s always
the do gooders that cause all the trouble?” He looked up at Caruthers. “She deserved
to have her brains bashed out.”

“Jesus, Ick,” the rat man said, but Caruthers understood Ick’s position. Ick was
moderate by nature, slow to anger, and the residents of Pana depended upon him for
this quality. Sleep it off, he often counseled his drinkers when they worked
themselves into fits. But everybody—the tour guide scammers, the drug dealers,
tipica merchants, and artifact poachers—everybody was on edge lately. The effects of
the travel advisory had kicked in, and five weeks later the papers were still writing about the attack. Plus two more since. So the tourists ran off, toting the economy with them. With no fresh meat, the locals were turning on each other.

Until recently, Caruthers thought he’d dropped out of the food chain, that he’d be left to sleepwalk through what years remained. But he’d been wrong. First came the wrench in his financial gearings, then the sweet poison letter from his first born son. Caruthers’s impulse had been to hop in the bus and drive south toward wherever. He’d escaped before, but he’d had some insulation money then, and time. Now he realized that he’d just have to dig in. Eventually the kid would leave, the tourists would return. The only question was whether he’d still be standing by then.

Not that it mattered. Life was a dress rehearsal for a cancelled show, Caruthers figured. For instance, that melodrama his family had enacted thirteen years back hadn’t changed anything in the real sense. You’re killing yourself, they’d insisted. You’re ruining your children’s lives. You’re ruining all of our lives. Boo hoo. He’d cried, promised. Everybody hugged and blew snot into tissues. But by lunchtime the next day he was furious, humiliated, betrayed. Mouth dry, joints aching, he walked out forever of Pop’s auto parts store, to the bank, where he emptied the savings of twelve thousand dollars. Pam could keep his retirement money, if she could figure out how to manage the papers. Otherwise, they could all go to hell. By that evening he was on a bus heading south, nursing the anger, nursing a bottle of whisky. He crossed the Mexican border with a sense of endless possibility. For a moment, he felt certain he’d done the right thing.
Four years and $10,000 later, he was holed up in a dirty room in Guatemala, close enough to the end to smell it, but too weary to change course. A couple of hours a day he recognized the future, and was afraid: broke in a friendless land, he’d be kicked out of the room to wander the streets, where he’d soon enough collapse and die. But four or five beers in he’d not mind so much. Everyone had to go sometime, and he’d made a good run of it. Then, a random encounter: two young men from Guatemala City sat beside Caruthers at Ick’s bar, brothers mourning their pop’s death. Their father, they explained, half in English, half in Spanish, had left them a passenger bus and the local route that went with it. But they had jobs and families in the capitol, and wanted to sell the thing as quickly as possible. But who had that kind of money in a Podunk like Pana?

An hour later, Caruthers dug two grand U.S. out of the stash he’d built into his bed, and just like that—more on a lark than any reasoned decision—he was a bona fide small business owner. Just like Pop. It took some time for the locals to accept the gringo driver, and it was longer still before Caruthers learned to handle the order the bus imposed on his life. But eventually he settled. Maintenance was the new game. He drove four or five hours a day, sipping on a thermos filled with rum and coffee, keeping nice and high, keeping the bus on the road. He earned enough for gas, his ayudante Seba’s wage, a few scraps of food, occasional repairs, and his tab at Ick’s place. Before long he’d cut himself a nice groove, and the groove grew deeper in time, wide enough to sleep in and deep enough to keep out the light. Nine years he’d been dreaming in his little pit, but now they were coming to drag him out.
Ick shuffled the paper and tossed the sports section to Caruthers, who opened it to a spring training preview. Caruthers still rooted for the Orioles after a fashion, just about the only thing he cared about anymore, if cared was the right word. Actually, he took a bitter kind of pleasure in the O’s’ inevitable poor showing, and he’d taken to calling them the zeros. Long ago, however, he’d invested something like love in the team, back when Cal Ripkin was a young man. Endurance, he had. The one vital quality, Caruthers thought then, and still thought now. Of course, Cal had long since retired, and year after year the players were less appealing, spoiled brats in their $50,000 necklaces who thanked God himself after home runs or big pitches, believing not so much in a creator, but in their own special relationship to that creator. Believing in their young hearts that their accomplishments merited the direct attention of He Who Made Us All. Caruthers despised them.

“You okay?” Ick asked. Caruthers, unaware that he’d uttered any sound, cleared his throat, and motioned for another Cabro. “What are you moaning about?”

“Ah,” Caruthers said, “my oldest boy, who I don’t know from Adam, plans to truck his family down here, bring God’s message to the savages, namely me.” He guzzled the new beer and pulled a local non-filter from a soft pack.

“How’s his Spanish?” one of the drinkers at the bar asked. “You know that son of a bitch that ran out on the woman who got beat was a missionary? They’d have killed him too if he didn’t know the lingo.”

“Well, the Mormons have got the missionary thing wired here anyways,” another put in. “Your son Christian?”
“I don’t know what he is. Born Again of some brand.”

“Born Agains are the worst,” the rat man offered. “I wouldn’t want one of those assholes coming to visit neither.”

“Hey there,” Caruthers said, fed up with the talk, especially since he’d started it. “I been sick of your shit since before you even arrived. Probably before you were even born. You don’t say one fucking word about my son. Or anything else for that matter.”

The newcomer scooted his stool away from the bar and glared at Caruthers. Red splotches like spilled wine broke out over his face and neck. “Lo siento, hombre,” he said, enunciating like a spaghetti western cowboy.

Caruthers laughed. He made no claim to bravery, only that, in the truest sense, he didn’t give a shit. “Speak American, asshole. We’re in an American bar.”

“All right,” Ick said. “Enough. Norman, if you’re going to cause trouble you can take it outside, and if you have to then you might as well stay away for a week. I don’t need this. Today or any day.” Everyone remembered when Caruthers stuck that smuggler with a steak knife during dinner at Alphonso’s, everyone except Caruthers that is. He only recalled waking in jail, and the expense and hassle of getting out. Afterward he decided to refuse all dinner invitations, which was simple because he never received another—except from Chucho Cruz. The gangster liked to practice English, and Caruthers, the town drunk, the gringo bus driver, amused him. Even the incident at Alphonso’s tickled Cruz, who sometimes whipped out his blade and waved it riotously in Caruthers’s face.
“Sorry, Ick,” Caruthers said after a moment, remorseful now. He hated to disappoint a bartender. “Just a joke. How about a round on me?”

Ick lined up four glasses and the men drank, wiped their mouths. The newcomer patted Caruthers’ back, causing Caruthers to flinch like a dog.

He drank, and after a time found that he’d been messing with something in his pocket, a piece of paper he kept worrying with his fingertips. He took it out and smoothed it on the bar. He opened the envelope and removed several sheets of yellow lined paper. Dark blue script looped across every sheet. He squinted his eyes at the paper, and saw it as through a misty tunnel. Around him blurry shapes moved listlessly as clouds, accompanied by the underwater groans of whales. “Dear Father,” he managed to decipher, and swallowed some phlegm caught in his throat. The words pissed him off. “Dear father,” he mocked the sarcastic snarl in which the letter was written. He wasn’t no dear; he wasn’t no father. He glanced up and there was Ick, wiping a glass and regarding him skeptically. “Sokay,” Caruthers slurred. “Just…” he searched through a panicky emptiness for what to say next until Ick turned away. “Just talking,” he said quietly. He grinned, found the glass in his hand and slugged back a mouthful of rum. “Just talking to my son,” he shouted. “Anybody have a problem with that?” He turned to the rat man, who pretended to be interested in something far away. Ick returned, shaking his head wearily. “Sorry,” Caruthers said before Ick could speak. “Sorry,” ducking his head as he chanted, “sorry.” He brought the glass to his mouth to hide the sneaky smile. He wasn’t sorry at all. He drank and
spilled down his chin. “I hope we all die,” he whispered, chuckling behind his drink, crunching through an ice cube.

Though she’d been expecting it for days, the knock on the door just about floored Marilyn. She froze, holding her breath. It was him. Nobody in Alto would pound like that. She examined herself: canvas pants cut off at the knees resting low on her hips, a threadbare tee that clung to her belly. About to build a fire, she clutched a heavy log in her right hand. She looked wild, grubby. It was a cool night, and her nipples pushed at the material of her shirt, a fact that had not concerned her for months. To the Quiche, breasts were for feeding children, and the women traditionally bathed topless in the river. But Cash was here, hauling a backpack full of ideas that even yesterday had meant nothing to her. He knocked again.

She opened the door and there he was, six foot three and got up like a post-apocalyptic survivor. He smiled and touched the brim of his hat like a gentleman cowboy. The gesture came off flat, rehearsed. “Well, well, well,” she said, stepping back to invite him in, “if it isn’t the famous Cash Platt.” She looked at the firewood in her hand and back at him. Her body wasn’t working quite right. The muscles jerked like they were powered by rubber bands.

“You expecting an intruder?” he asked. She shrugged and tossed log into the floor beside the small iron stove. He lugged in a backpack—yellow and black as an
emergency road sign—and leaned it against the wall. Its newness irritated her for some reason. She imagined what the people of Alto thought. They’d be discussing his visit now, hustling from house to house to spread the news.

He wore the hat he’d bought at a funky-punky store in Philly shortly after joining the band. It was an undersized cowboy hat of black leather, with a brim that curled tightly at the sides and jutted down into a point between his eyes. The hat itself was stupid looking, but worse, its purchase coincided with a brand new shitty attitude. Marilyn had secretly named it the asshole hat. Now she wondered why on earth she’d kept the name a secret.

“Well, what the hell?” he said, moving in to embrace her. She kept a fist-width of space between their bodies and patted his back. Even so, the smell of sweat-seasoned leather mixed with his particular scent dragged her years back. She recalled being so in love she thought the happiness flailing around in her chest might blow her to bits. She backed away. Under the hat he’d cultivated his hair into thin, matted twists of dreadlocks tied with pieces of metal at the ends. He wore a faded black leather biker jacket and tight jeans that showed the knobs of his knees and his balls. He’d become even more MTV since she’d seen him last.

“It’s really great to see you,” he said. “But it’s a trip too.”

“Yeah. Definitely a trip. To la la land.” Her voice and words sounded foolish, and she admonished herself to quit noticing everything.

He looked the room over, the floor covered by the *tipica* rug, her students’ drawings on the mud walls, the plain couch and chair and her narrow cot, a candle
guttering on the box that served as nightstand. “Nice crib,” he said, and fixed his eyes on her. He had olive colored skin, which showed off big green eyes with long, girlish lashes. “It’s so wild you’re in Guatemala. I mean, Guatemala. I’d never thought of this place even once in my life before you came here. You’re like a girl Indiana Jones or something.”

“Just wait to see what it’s really like. Nothing so exciting. Just dirtier than we’re used to.” She pulled her hair back with both hands and stretched, felt the shirt creep over her navel. A pleasant sensation, that flat bit of skin exposed to the air and Cash’s eyes. “I’d give you the tour but you can see most of it from here.” She dropped her arms. “This is the living room and bedroom, and here’s the kitchen. I’ll let you explore the outhouse on your own.”

He sat on the couch, looking spidery with his long skinny legs and shaggy head. Her kids would see him that way. He drummed his knees, and she remained standing. They watched each other and shared a patch of silence that nearly turned panicky. Nervous words bubbled up in her but she kept them down. Teaching had trained her to permit these spells to run their course.

“Damn,” he said at last, swinging his jangly head from side to side. “I still can’t believe it’s you. You look great. You’re skinny, and, you know, hot…”

“You look good too, Cash. Just like you did before, except your hair is longer and you’ve got crap dangling from it.”

He laughed. “What’s with the attitude?” he asked in a completely false and annoying hip hop tone of voice. She folded her arms across her chest and let her face
register the irritation. “Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “It’s okay. I’m sure I deserve whatever you got for me.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need your permission.” She turned from him and entered the kitchen, realizing at once that she had no business there. She snapped a heavy match against the striker and lit the kerosene lamp on the counter. She examined her fractured image reflected in the crinkled aluminum foil topping the bean pot. How odd, she noted, that someone’s presence would disrupt everything so immediately and comprehensively. Usually at this time she would write in her journal, devise a lesson for tomorrow and read until eight thirty, when she’d blow out the candle and sleep. She’d wake before dawn and run to the top of her hill behind the village, where she’d watch the land bloom all rosy green and brown while moving through a yoga routine she’d learned from a video tape ages ago. Each day was subtly different, and she felt the variation in her body. She was, after all, a part of the new day, herself a little changed too. When the sun crested the peaks and shot its spears into the valley, she returned home, cleaned up, ate eggs and bread, and left to teach. Cash had arrived two minutes before and already her morning hill seemed lonely and drab.

“So,” he said from the edge of the kitchen, “are you allowed to take off?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, turning to face him.

“You know, get out of town, see some live music, get a beer?”

“No, Cash, they lock me up at night. Guards are posted outside my house.”

She’d cultivated a knack for sarcasm over the months, principally from fielding the questions of backpackers, who the volunteers referred to simply as tourists.
“I just meant, can we go somewhere? Or do you have to stick around to work all the time?”

“Sure, I can go anywhere. I don’t even have to show up to work, really. Who would know? The parents don’t care. The only reason most of us do our jobs is because we don’t make enough money for anything else. Some volunteers,” she said, “have their families send them money and just travel around, report back every month and write up fake reports.”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m afraid I am.”

“All right then,” he said. “Let’s get you out of here, have some fun.”

“Me? Cash, you’re the one on vacation. I’m going to work tomorrow, not because I have to, but because I want to. The kids,” she said, closing in on insincerity, “they need me. I can’t go off climbing volcanoes.” She breathed deeply to dilute old bitterness. “I’d be glad to point you in the right direction. I do it all the time for the tourists I meet.”

He twisted a dreadlock between his fingers, shoved the metal ring up into the matted hair. “Listen. I thought we could spend some time together. That’s all.”

“Why’d you think that?”

“I came all the way from Philly, and you won’t even give me a chance? Is that what you’re saying?”

“You came from Media. Please don’t bullshit me, Cash. I know you.” He retreated to the living room, yanking that dread. She couldn’t help feeling a little sorry
for him. "The thing is," she explained in her soft voice, "you showed up without asking, and I don't know what to do with you." She thought of other things to say, thought of coming right out and asking whether they were supposed to get back together or what. "I have no idea why you're here, what you expect." She followed him as far as the threshold between rooms.

He leaned against the wall in a dark corner. "We can forget it, if that's what you want," he said, petulant. "I can go find a room and you'll never have to see me again." He stepped toward her. His eyes reproduced dancing blue lamp flames. "I just thought... I thought that things might have changed. I know I've changed, and I think you have, and I wanted to see. That's all. I figured it was worth a shot."

The words came from a script that she'd written and rewritten a thousand times during the dark days, but now they were months too late. Or were they? She couldn't help the happy feeling welling up, the ancient hope. "Okay," she said, relenting, sliding her border back an inch or a foot or whatever. "We can spend a little time together. Saturday. Come by around lunchtime."

He approached, too close; she leaned back and bumped the bean pot. "You sure you don't want me to stay?" he asked, suave little shithead that he was. Her laughter knocked him back a step. The basic fact of Cash Platt, she'd understood for years, was his good looks. He'd gotten most everything he'd ever wanted, with minimal effort, minimal skill. Too bad, because he wasn't an idiot, just lazy and ruled by self perpetuated entitlement.
“Yeah,” she said. “I hate to kick you out after all the travel, but I’ve got to get some sleep. Xela is a short bus ride. They’ve got a ton of cheap rooms.”

“Xela?”

“Quetzaltenango on the map. They call it Xela. The old Mayan name.”

“Sure,” he said, “I get it. Secret codes.” She walked him to the door, where he wrapped his arms around her. This time she let him pull her to his wiry body, enjoyed the uncomfortable poke of the zippers and buttons on his jacket. She pushed him back and told him to go.

He left and she pretended that tonight was like last night, and tomorrow would be the same, though she hardly slept at all, and moved through the next day restless and easily confused. Saturday, he arrived on time. She was sitting on a kitchen chair outside her shack, trying to read while he walked his curious, loping stride up the hill toward her. A silver chain securing his wallet to a belt loop tapped against his thigh as he moved. “You know,” she said when he stopped before her, “Guatemala doesn’t have pickpockets.” He frowned and twisted a dread between his fingers. “That chain won’t stop thieves. They don’t do sneaky crimes around here. It’s an all or nothing kind of place.”

Cash touched the chain lightly. He looked at her. She exhausted him. “It’s just for show,” he admitted. She hadn’t planned to be shitty, at least not so soon, but there it was. “So where do you want to go?” he asked.

She’d thought it out. “Hot springs, dinner, and a movie. Can you handle that?”

“Like a date.”
“Our first.”

“Starting over,” he said.

“No. We just never went on a date when we were together. You always came over to my apartment and watched TV on the couch.” She laughed to make light of the statement, but she didn’t feel light.

He stared at her for a moment, and turned toward the village and the highway below. “Sorry, Cash,” she said, and couldn’t help adding, “but it’s true.”

He looked directly at her, lip curled with scorn. “That’s not all we did,” he said, conjuring an image in her mind, a burning recollection of group sex after one of the band’s shows—the most extreme of several such encounters. She remembered, she often remembered, the lusty gleam in Cash’s gaze turning dull after his orgasm, replaced by disgust. Unfair, she’d thought, as the bodies bashfully separated and Cash left the room, asked if anyone wanted a beer. He had no right to despise her for giving him exactly what he wanted. Or did he have the right? Certainly she despised herself for just this reason.

Yet over the last months, an internal battle had begun, a strange, non verbal argument with herself over what to do with this period of her life. There was no doubt that the sex games sprung from weakness, the need to hold onto her fading boyfriend no matter the cost. But after a time they’d taken on a life of their own. She’d spent a fair amount of energy since coming to Guatemala denying her own culpability, but the sneaky fact remained, buried deep; the intensity of emotion triggered by the humiliation the fear of loss had thrilled her. Certainly it had been hotter than their
polite sex life prior to Cash’s budding mean streak. Never in a millennium would she have considered herself *kinky*. She hated the term. It made her think of partner-swapping nudists engaged in floppy volleyball matches. But if that’s what she was, then so be it. She met Cash’s haughty glare, emboldened now that she’d all but admitted that her worst fear was realized. He looked away.

“Are we going to do this thing or what?” he finally asked.

Marilyn grabbed her bag and started toward the highway. It was a thick, warm day. The rain hadn’t hit yet, but storms flashed over the peaks to the north and south. Windows sprouted eyes that peered from the edges of curtains. Don Tlotec paused in his slow splitting of sections of pine, his machete raised. “Adios,” he said, bowing at the two.

“I thought adios meant goodbye,” Cash whispered when they’d left Don Tlotec behind.

“It also means something like, ‘Hello, it’s nice to run into you but I don’t have time to talk so goodbye.”

Cash half coughed, half laughed. “Secret codes,” he said.

They rode a Toto bus a few miles south to Cuatro Caminos, where they searched out a westward transfer. A Mayan man hunched under a load of firewood passed, staring unabashedly at Cash. A machete dangled from his belt and a pink tee shirt reading “Care Bears” stretched across his chest. Marilyn considered suggesting that Cash tone down the Industrial-Metal-Gore-Punk image. The Boogeyman was real
in these parts, and Cash didn’t want to be mistaken for him. But she’d ragged him
enough today and couldn’t bear any more pouty silence.

Soon they boarded a bus, bypassed Xela, and hopped out on a lonely stretch in
sight of the poured concrete hot springs building. At the front office, paying the
heavyset teenaged girl working there, Marilyn wondered if the springs were primarily
meant for sexual liaisons. The thought had never occurred to her before, when she’d
come alone, but now she recalled that the swinging set in America often monopolized
public hot tubs for their sport.

Before entering the private room they’d rented, Marilyn stepped into a shower
chamber where hot water gushed from a wide pipe and crashed impressively on the
tiles below. Most often, she washed herself with cold water from a bucket, a whore’s
bath the volunteers called it, strictly pits and crotch. And if she was in a hurry, a nun’s
bath: face and hands. She stepped under the cascade. The water clenched her head like
large strong hands and enveloped her completely like a heavy robe. She lathered her
hair and rinsed. She shaved her armpits and her legs, and when she trimmed her pubic
hair to a tidy triangle she knew they would fuck.

Cash lay in the pool with his head against the edge. There were no bubbles or
jets, only a swirl that faintly distorted Cash’s long white body. She eased into the
water, hot enough to hurt. “Nice?” Cash asked. The word reverberated in the enclosed
tile compartment.

“Smells like sulfur.”
“Better than chlorine.” He moved to the center of the gently whirling pool and ducked under. The bits of metal in his hair—nuts and bolts, washers and links of motorcycle chains—clinked dully when he surfaced and shook the water from his hair. He floated back against the edge and boosted himself up. “Hot.” He wiped his face and lay back with calves and feet in the water. He wore thigh-length jockey shorts that showed his half hard dick. Marilyn recalled the last time they’d made love, minutes after he’d broken up with her, in bed, in the dark, for the final time. She’d known he meant it this time, and she lay crying with this knowledge until he put his arms around her and said something stupid like it’ll be all right. She came before he’d pushed himself all the way in. It was the breaking up, laying on the edge of loss, despair itself, that had caused the heat. If only they could break up every day, she thought, pushing through the heavy water toward Cash.

She stepped onto the seat, and climbed out, straddling him. Water dripped onto his belly, and he smiled without opening his eyes. She stepped forward, watching the dripping water tap his chest, his chin, his forehead. Then she slid back into the water. She’d been wrong. They weren’t going to fuck after all. Not today. The tension was too delicious to give up.

“What gives?” Cash asked, sitting up.

“What gives?” she asked, as if she’d never heard the word before. She considered his question obliquely. Teaching English and learning Spanish had put her in the habit of mulling the precise definitions of the words she used to take for granted. “Not me,”
she said, sinking into the center of the pool. He began to speak but she dipped below the surface and floated there, entranced by the rumble of her own blood.

Max didn’t agree to accompany the class to Diego’s field trip until Gabriela asked him if he’d sit beside her. On the bus, she started with the question game again. “I’m tired,” he complained in English, and he was. The mere sound of Spanish in the background caused his eyes to grow heavy.

“En Espanol,” she insisted.

Outside, the usual pines covered hills topped with peasant shacks. He sighed and collected his energy. “Where exactly are we going?” he asked in Spanish.

Gabriela made her eyes wide. “To the land of mystery,” she said, rather comic looking in a skirt and matching blazer set off by a thick red tie. In her lap, she held a plastic grocery bag full of mysterious items, among which he recognized small, crude candles. Otherwise, the objects looked like twigs, stones, and other rubbish picked up from the ground.

The ayudante walked up the aisle collecting fares, but Diego had paid for all the gringos. Max never felt more like a tourist, and the thought of asking the kid about employment caused him to shrivel. Not today, not in front of Gabriela.

“I meant to ask,” she said in Spanish, “what is your religion?”

“None,” Max said.
“Ah, gringos. You never went to church? Catholic? Protestant?” She gripped his wrist. “Buddhist? Hindu? Cannibal?” As she spoke, she drew his hand toward her mouth and softly chomped the meat at the base of the thumb. Two charms hung from chains around her neck: a formidable gold cross and a small disc embossed with one of those famous virgins. The Dane, who’d been traveling north from South America for three months and fancied himself something of an expert, had assured Max that the girls in Guatemala were very Catholic. They would sleep with you, he’d said, directly after the wedding reception. Gabriela released his hand. “Church?” she repeated. “Poseido.”

“Un culto,” he said, guessing at the Spanish. There was no other way to say it. His mother had become a religious fanatic after his father went away.

“No,” Gabriela said. “You’re joking with me.”

“It’s true,” he said. He hadn’t known it himself, not consciously, until a couple of years before, when a title jumped out of a library’s stacks at him: The Cults of North America. There, in the table of contents, he found “The Church of the Holy Ghost, alias, ‘The Passage.’” He read the chapter standing, his heavy book bag hanging forgotten from one shoulder. Names of people he knew appeared on the pages. The writer had most of the facts right, but he rendered the church more luridly than Max remembered it. Sure, Max’s mother had worked in the church-owned clothing factory without wages, while surviving on welfare. And yes, the church elders had arranged her marriage to Max’s stepfather. What the writer didn’t mention was that his mother, like all the church members, followed willingly. More than
willing, desperately. Max’s mother still attended services four times a week. Max couldn’t talk to her for more than a couple of minutes without God entering the conversation, so he kept the calls brief and infrequent, and felt depressed when he hung up.

Gabriela stared at him. “Yes?” he asked. “More questions?” She shook her head, probably wondering if they dealt in kidnapping, brainwashing, mass suicide. “We didn’t steal babies, if that’s what you’re thinking,” he said.

“Ah, yes,” she said, “the babies.”

“I was joking.”

“Funny. What you don’t know is that the baby stealing stories come from the government. Just at the moment when the right wing is about to lose control, the papers agitate the peasants with their foolish fantasies, and the peasants attack a couple of tourists—if that wasn’t fabricated too—and now the bourgeoisie are back to where they were, ready to re-elect the death squad people.” She continued on. Max admired her passion, though he suspected that she was at least partly paranoid. He didn’t believe groups of people were actually smart enough to enact conspiracies. Then again, this wasn’t his country, so he smiled and nodded and just for the hell of it decided to believe every word she said.

At Cuatro Caminos, the driver pulled to the side and turned off the engine. He lay back, draped a towel over his face and promptly sank into a nap. After a few minutes Max began to squirm. What galled him most was that no one else appeared to mind. Once again, he seemed to be the only reasonably pissed off person in the world.
Finally, cinched up and tapping his feet on the floor, he turned and addressed the Dane, who sat behind him speaking tortured Spanish to his teacher. “What are we doing here?” he asked.

“Waiting,” Nathan replied, and treated Max to a grin. He was a small man in his mid to late twenties, with a pointy nose, blue eyes and stringy blond hair. One of his front teeth was gray and slightly crooked. Yesterday after class in one of the nearby drinking shacks, Nathan neatly summed up his life’s philosophy for Max. “Earn in the first world, spend in the third,” he’d said, and went on to describe a pattern of working service industry jobs in European capitols and months-long budget vacations in Asia, then Africa, and now Latin America. When would it end? Max had asked. Nathan smiled and twirled his finger in a circular motion. A good way to kill time, Max thought, then wondered if time needed killing. Maybe it did, he concluded sadly.

Off in the misty distance some dark figures lumbered across a field, drawing nearer. Max recognized them as a herd of cows. A sort of pun occurred to him, so he idly set about translating it into Spanish. When the cows were close by, he cleared his throat and spoke out loud. “¿Estamos esperando para las vacas a regresar,” he announced, now shy at having gained everyone’s attention. “A sus casas?” he added uncertainly. The old saying about waiting for the cows to come home. An ancient woman sitting in front of Max, whose head barely cleared the bench back, turned and regarded him, black eyes baffled and hostile. Apparently the phrase didn’t translate.
“Wow, mate,” said Nathan, who spoke English like no one Max had ever met, “that went over like a dog fart.” Max stared out the window, oddly exhilarated by the loss of dignity. Gabriela held her hand over her mouth and began to laugh out of control. Mercifully, the driver removed the towel from his face and started the bus. There had seemed no reason for the pause, and now they resumed the journey in that same spirit of meaninglessness.

Twenty minutes later, the field trip participants were let off at the base of a forested mountainside that rose from the highway into a ceiling of dense white fog. The air smelled good outside: wet soil and pine, impending rain. They climbed single file up a trail of damp red clay cut like a jagged new scar into the forest. Max followed Gabriela, and wondered why she’d worn a suit. He sucked for breath by the time they gained an easier grade. Gabriela looked back at him and pantomimed wiping her brow. “Ay,” she said, fanning herself. He nearly reached out and pinched her ass.

Yesterday she’d surprised him by asking what kind of women he liked. “How do you mean?” he’d responded.

“How do you mean?” she hadn’t been talking about personality. “Chichonas?” she’d whispered, forming with her hands imaginary chichis even larger than her own. “Qualquiera,” he’d said. Any kind. Now he wondered what had prompted this dishonesty. He’d always had a type, pixies, but now he wasn’t so certain about what he wanted.
They entered the fog. The clay turned to mud, the air chilly and wet. Max’s lungs burned, as did his hamstrings and calves. Mud spattered the hem of Gabriela’s pants, and the soles of her flat shoes slid back at every step. Finally, the trail leveled. Max assumed they’d reached the mountain’s summit, though the fog was too thick to see beyond the trees that bordered the trail. Soon they arrived at a broad, grassy meadow, around which a couple dozen figures stood talking in small groups. Gabriela, Diego and Nathan’s teacher approached and mingled with several of the people there, women in traditional dress and native men in western clothes. Max hung back with the gringos, craving a cigarette but somehow certain that smoking wasn’t appropriate in this place. Max knew a church when he entered one.

A few minutes later, everyone formed a circle around a large cross worn into the earth. A dark, charred patch marked the center of the cross, and each of the four arms ended in a circle. They all sat in the damp grass, except for a man wearing a white scarf across his forehead, who stood in the northernmost of four circles and addressed the group in a strange language. Free from the responsibility of understanding, Max let the talk play like music. Gradually, the surrounding trees grew hazy and disappeared. The fog closed in like the walls of a shrinking room, and just as slowly withdrew. Now the room became a small arena, around the edge of which the trees emerged like dark, silent giants.

Max hadn’t been to church in over a decade, not since he refused to attend one day when he was thirteen. His mother had screamed and his stepfather had grabbed his arm and called him a little shit, but Max broke free and locked himself in the
bathroom. He still didn’t know why he’d taken a stand, that day or any other. In fact, he couldn’t even remember when he’d stopped believing. Only that over time he’d gone from singing the songs—so like the swords and wizardry books he loved as a child—to sitting in the back smirking at the Pastor of the day’s attempts to persuade the flock to follow with less and less abandon. The structure was so transparent, he’d grown to despise the followers for their blindness. Every year or so the Pastor would move to a larger church, while the most loyal Brother was put into power. The system was no different from how Max’s step father described his job at the phone company, but no one seemed to notice but Max. Maybe that’s why he finally refused to participate, to see if his mother, or anyone, would finally admit what was going on.

Or maybe Max was giving his young self too much credit. Surely, he’d never had such specific thoughts when he sat on the bathroom floor while his stepfather threatened to break the door down. Finally Max’s mother told him to forget it. If Max didn’t want to continue his walk with God, he could find somewhere else to live. They left, and he ran off to spend the night in a nearby orange grove, entertaining the notion that he could survive out there, on oranges. Most of the night he shivered, alternately rocking himself with his arms around his knees or wandering the dark corridors, dazed by cold and fatigue. The sky was blue-black and milky with stars, the moon a mere clipping arcing slowly by. Toward morning, he climbed a windmill, where he was able to see out over the sparse lights of Hesperia and across the black wash to an abandoned paper mill that stood like a ruined city against the northern horizon. The sight of the mill brought on an overwhelming sense of loneliness too.
great to belong to him alone. The feeling was not bad, or even sad. It was beyond such
categories. *Large, and correct*, were words he’d attached to the moment.

With the dawn, he ate two oranges and walked to a friend’s house while the
sky burst into a persimmon brilliance that shamed the trail of peels he left on the
sidewalk. His friend’s parents allowed him to stay a night before contacting his
mother. A week later, Max was home. No one mentioned that he’d left, and they
never invited him into The Passage again.

But in this meadow the formality of a man talking about God coalesced with
the trees and fog to form something more powerful and honest than what The Passage
could offer. He detected that same great correctness in the air, and thought that he’d
recognized it all along, known it so well, like his own face in a mirror, that it was easy
to ignore. Or maybe the Shaman’s language had enchanted him, flitting around as it
did like birdsong, full of meaning that he wasn’t privy to.

The shaman withdrew and sat on the grass so that another man could step into
a circle and speak. Soon this man too backed away to allow a third speaker, this one a
woman, to represent another of the four arms of the cross. After the fourth speaker
concluded, the congregants stood and tooted their curious little objects to the burnt
center area, where they piled the twigs and stones and candles and whatnots. Gabriela
opened the bag she’d been carrying and asked Max to choose between money, family
and love. Max’s fingers hovered for a moment and he selected a twisted stick
representing family. The decision lacked authenticity, he realized immediately. In his
most honest heart, he needed and wanted money, and next he’d love to throw himself
into Gabriela, or someone else soft and sympathetic to hold for a night or three, or maybe—who knew?—even a lifetime. He’d picked the family twig to impress her. No matter. Mere superstition, mere symbol. Aware that he was a gringo visitor, a tourist on a field trip, he self consciously approached the center of the cross and placed the twig in the pile of offerings.

The speakers of the four circles met in the center and touched the pile with flaming tapers. The mound slowly caught, then popped and sparkled. A strange, jumpy fire, in which even stones burned.

The fire smoldered, and the shaman spoke again, this time, Max noticed after a moment, in Spanish. He was addressing the gringos, whom he called guests, enunciating slowly so that Max was able to follow. Maiz, was the subject. The creators fashioned it of many colors. Blue, yellow, white, black. Yet all colors nourished the same. Just so with our brothers and sisters around the planet. Many colors, but all are meant for good. The four directions of the universe—the sky, the earth, where the sun rises and where it sets—encompass all manner of human and creature, created to work to a singular function, a whole that we, small part that we are, cannot see but feel in the grass under our feet.

A wave of emotion rushed from Max’s chest to his face, as classical music in movies sometimes wrested feeling from him unexpectedly. He pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes. When he removed his hands the fog had drawn closer again. The slow movement of the milky walls brought to mind respiration, enormous lungs of fog.
He filled his own lungs with the cool air and exhaled a small cloud of mist. Just then he saw a woman smack her toddler son gently on the head. The child had been tormenting her all through the service, Max had been absently noticing. Now the boy’s face clenched, ready to burst into tears. The mother gave him a hard look and stuck her finger in his face. He closed the lid on whatever storm brewed in there. Nearby, an old man stifle a yawn. A teenage boy kept glancing at a girl across the circle from him, who saw but pretended not to see. The three-year-old began to nag again and the woman carried him away from the circle. In this way, the ceremony resembled every other religious service he’d attended, regardless of the name. The shaman was right about corn and people, and probably about a lot of other things Max’s language prevented him from understanding.

As far as Marilyn knew, the town of Totonicapán housed the only Thai restaurant in Guatemala—outside the capitol’s mall-like embassy district, which didn’t count. In her early months with the Corps, she’d taken half a dozen travelers to the Thai joint; as a gift, yes, and also to portray herself as a certain kind of person, the Lady in the Know. Unfortunately, the backpackers never sufficiently appreciated the weirdness of the place, so she’d dropped the habit, and soon gave up speaking to tourists altogether. She had no energy, finally, for such transient acquaintances.
Across from Cash—sharing the dining room with a *Quiche* family of four—she absently wondered how the owners of the restaurant ended up in Guatemala. Surely no one ever planned to come here. Marilyn herself never pictured the Guatemalan highlands when she’d signed up for the Corps. Her visions had all involved bamboo and beaches. “What are you having?” Cash asked. The subtle complaint in his voice shifted her mood for the worse. She’d nearly forgotten that Cash was a picky eater. And he hadn’t removed his hat for dinner.

“*Pollo en coco,*” she told Cash. “It’s their version of curry.”

He stared at the menu, as if he could read it. “I have another question,” he said without looking up.

His voice sounded scared, and so Marilyn was scared for him. She felt certain he was preparing to say some bold, stupid thing that she’d have to react to. She began to drum her fingers on the nearly empty beer bottle, an action that apparently summoned the Thai wife, who plunked two fresh bottles on the table. A radio played in the kitchen, an ubiquitous romantic accordion song whose popularity would last perhaps another month. The wife, middle aged with a face that never displayed a trace of emotion, removed a pen from the bun of her hair and held it to a pad. Cash pointed to something on the menu, and Marilyn asked for the curry dish. The woman stabbed the pencil back into her hair and slid away.

“Some service,” Cash said.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. I was admiring it.”
“You were being sarcastic. Weren’t you? Some service means shitty service, doesn’t it?”

Cash thought about this question for a while, tugging the little brush of hair under his lip he called a soul patch. The song in the kitchen ended and a D.J. shouted about an upcoming Banda Dance in Xela. “I could have meant some great service,” he said, “but really it’s just that I’m used to waitresses asking me if I want another beer being bringing me one. But I don’t mind having it, so no foul. Maybe she read my mind.”

Marilyn considered telling him that she’d read his mind, too, regarding his looming question. Instead she blurted out, “Ancient Chinese secret.” Cash looked surprised, and Marilyn was surprised as well. She didn’t do voices, and didn’t find funny this brand of humor. “Man who finish one beer fast want one more,” she continued helplessly. Cash laughed, and she laughed too. It felt good to be bad and stupid just this once, far from anyone who would care. “Man with big dark secret question drink many, many beer,” she said, and the laughing ended. One joke too many, she thought.

Luckily the Thai wife banged through the kitchen door at that moment and slid the plates onto the table. “Some speedy service,” Marilyn said, but Cash didn’t get the joke. He was staring at his food in wide eyed horror. The dish, called fried shrimp on the menu, rose from his plate like an enormous pink afro. What the menu called shrimp were tiny mud bugs dredged from the bottom of Lake Atitlan, more feeler than
anything else. Customers ate them like popcorn. Perhaps Marilyn should have warned
Cash.

He sighed and picked up one of the bugs by a feeler. “Looks like a
cockroach,” he said. Marilyn’s food, meanwhile, was sweet, creamy, and hot enough
to cause her face to break out in sweat. She doused the fire by gulping beer, which
again summoned the psychic wife with two more, clunking them onto the table so that
foam erupted from the tops. Marilyn thought she might have detected a hint of a smile
on the woman’s inscrutable face.

“You’re falling behind,” Marilyn said.

“Freaky,” Cash said, swinging the shrimp on its feeler

“Just put it in your mouth, Cash.”

He lifted his face and she saw his pretty eyes. He seemed sad, had always
seemed sad, she realized just then. “I guess you’re right,” he said, and popped it into
his mouth. He chewed and washed the bite down with beer. “Not so bad if you don’t
look at them.”

Marilyn wiped her forehead and her eyes with a cloth napkin. “You look like
you’re being forced to eat your own tongue,” she remarked.

“Mmmnnn,” he said, chewing the protruding muscle. “Not bad,” in a distorted
voice.

Marilyn wasn’t going to like him any better than at this moment. “Enough
suspense” she said, bracing. “What’s the big question?”
With difficulty, he speared three shrimp on his fork and shoved them into his mouth. He chewed and drank the remains of his second beer. “I wasn’t quite sure if I was actually going to ask, and I got the feeling that you weren’t too receptive.”

Marilyn waited, heart quickening, breathless, alive. She had no idea how she would feel in a matter of seconds. “I was about to write this trip off as a mistake,” he said. Then the door swung open and two gringos walked in, speaking English loudly. Marilyn hardly believed in them. The man was dressed like a court jester in red tipica pajama-pants, a purple vest over a white pressed dress shirt, and a floppy blue hat partly covering a burst of pure white hair. His eyes were pale and his skin almost translucent. If he wasn’t an official albino, he was close. His companion was a short, pretty girl with bobbed auburn hair resting against cheeks round and red as plums. They were both scrupulously ignoring Marilyn and Cash. “Hola,” the albino said to the Thai wife in the worst gringo accent Marilyn had ever heard. “Como estas?”

The wife fetched two beers and set them on a table near the Quiche family. “Francisco. Estas bien?” the girl said to the Quiche father. Her pronunciation was fine. Francisco, a small, wiry man wearing a Foo Manchu mustache, returned the greeting unenthusiastically.

Between the albino jester and industrial rock Cash, the place had become a gringo freak show.

The albino began to speak quietly to Francisco. Marilyn didn’t get the gist, but was annoyed to find that in spite of the accent, the albino spoke Spanish glibly enough. The outrageous pronunciation was willful.
"I feel like we should say hi, because we're all American," Cash whispered.

"No, the trick is to pretend like we don't notice. We're above that, see? We don't recognize the difference between them and us."

The presence of the new gringos killed their talk, and reminded Marilyn how easy it was to take non English speakers for granted, like the help, or pets. They ate quickly and both stood without having agreed to leave. Before stepping out the door, Marilyn incidentally connected with the girl, and they exchanged sympathetic, embarrassed smiles.

"Do I look as goofy as that guy?" Cash asked a block down the road.

"Worse," Marilyn said, and took his hand. It felt good to be tipsy. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and they walked down the dark cobbled way toward a small building where pirated video tape movies played on a television, before rows of folding chairs. Like it or not, it was el cine. Marilyn and Cash fell into a comfortable stride. She'd often thought they walked well together. This fact had been one of the hundreds of details she'd mentioned to him over time, fishing for some acknowledgement that they were truly a couple, confirmation that he valued her, cherished her, loved her, whatever. Some verb he would never use, some feeling he would never have.

They walked in a silence that grew tenser by the step. "You want to get back together," she surprised herself by blurting out. "Isn't that it, the big thing?" They stopped walking halfway down an unlit block. His arm fell from her shoulder and a foot of space opened between them. She stood with both feet together on a cracked
triangle of sidewalk. Doomed weeds would grow from that crack as soon as the rain came, and then they'd die.

“You got me,” Cash said. “Guilty.” She instructed herself to consciously experience the sensation of the moment of getting what you wanted after you no longer wanted it. The decision to live in the moment brought a curious objectivity to the situation, and she felt removed, watching Cash explain himself from a dozen feet away. He told her how everything had gone bad for him after she’d left. First, Gregory, the singer, guitar player and songwriter of the band, had moved to New York. Cash planned to follow after he’d saved some money, but before that could happen Gregory formed a new band, with a new drummer. Cash, on the other hand, couldn’t find another Gregory. He finally came to the conclusion that he was not special, just a mediocre rock drummer, who moreover didn’t like playing drums that much. He’d wanted to be a star, not a musician. Now he didn’t even know what he wanted.

He carried on. His whole life had gone bad after the band broke up. The people at the clubs forgot him in weeks. And girls. No one had been able to replace Marilyn. He realized, too late maybe, that he’d loved her, that they could have been perfect together. If only he’d recognized it. He’d been too young, and so had she. That’s all. That was the only problem. Too young. But now, maybe they’d both grown up.

“What about the sex?” she asked. “The kinky stuff. Did you keep that up, without me?” She was curious but sounded jealous.
“No,” he said. “It was no fun after you left.” She recognized the lie. He’d been on the kind of roll you don’t quit until you bust. What had happened was that he never found another partner as willing as she was, and that sort of life closed its doors on men without women. In essence, Cash had simply failed after breaking up with her. In every way. She’d dreamt vengefully of this precise moment, but now that it had arrived she only felt sorry for the ridiculous man standing before her empty handed.

“We’ll see,” she said, considering that maybe they would see. Why not give him a chance, harmless as he now was?

He took her hands and drew near. “What does that mean?” he asked.

She stared at a button on his jacket that reflected a porch light down the block. The leather smelled good. She decided she didn’t need to decide everything or anything just now. “It means we have a movie to catch.”

They continued on until they came to a group of men standing around a plain building, el cine. The men grew silent and nervous as Marilyn and Cash approached, shuffling aside and turning their backs to the gringos. When Marilyn managed to get to the front she saw the problem. “NO MUJERES,” was written in block letters both under and over the pornographic titles of the evening’s films, titles which, ironically, all concerned women quite particularly.
For a moment, Caruthers considered gunning through the barricade, but the soldier standing off the road in the truck’s bed, behind a mounted automatic, cooled the impulse. This was no local shakedown, but the real deal. The soldiers in the street waved through the car in front of Caruthers, a jalopy, one of whose back wheels was larger than the others, so that it loped ahead to freedom. The boy in fatigues carrying a clipboard—to his partner’s machine gun—presented his palm and Caruthers rolled to a stop. The boy scribbled down Caruthers’ license plate number, while a mustachioed soldier with greasy skin and a fat, purple mole under his eye entered the bus. Caruthers wiped his hands on his chinos. The soldier would be considering various angles: gringos were the enemy, gringos were rich, you didn’t want to fuck with a gringo, you wanted to kill the gringos. Who was this gringo, why was he driving a bus, who did he know, who didn’t he know? Caruthers’ job, meanwhile, was to stare straight forward and betray no fear. He wandered to Norm Junior’s letter, a newsy missive. Caruthers’ younger son, Donny, was in prison, and Caruthers wondered whether the kid had learned the humble bit yet, or if he wasted his energy fighting the irresistible forces. “Papeles,” the soldier said, the worst word possible.

Caruthers offered a smile and dug under the seat for the locked and chained box containing the documents. Another soldier entered the bus and ordered all the males out. Caruthers managed to open the box and fumbled with the papers, flopping several leaves to the floor in his clumsiness, including Norm Junior’s letter, which he’d transferred to the lock box that morning, for no good reason. He smiled up at the
soldier like a good little doggie as he gathered the papers. His thermos sat bewitchingly nearby, but he didn’t dare take it up. Finally, he got the mess under a semblance of control and handed his passport to the soldier. Its visa, he knew, was over a month expired. Sifting through a dozen worthless scraps, he located the letter of title to the bus, written by the former owner in black ink and notarized with a blue stamp. He offered this note to the scowling soldier and delved back into the stack. Where the fuck was Cruz’ letter? Expired or not, it was his most valuable pass in these parts.

Seba, meanwhile, left the bus with the other men, offering his jefe no eye contact. The soldier leafed through the passport, and Caruthers returned his attention to the papers. He’d been meaning to organize the box, reduce the clutter. He found a gum wrapper bearing a U.S. phone number of unrecognized area code with no name provided. “Que mas?” the soldier asked, irritable. Finally Caruthers found the letter. He removed it from the torn envelope and handed it to the soldier. The man unfolded it and Caruthers watched him read. Typed in Spanish on letterhead identifying the office of the Chief of Police, Panajachel, the text offered the bearer, Norman Vincent Caruthers, of the United States of America, license to operate a passenger bus for profit for a year following the letter’s date. Caruthers hoped the name on the letter would be sufficient.

A soldier who looked about fourteen entered the bus and walked down the aisle, sizing up the women, who stared at their laps or made busy with their children.
He nudged open a shoulder bag with his machinegun’s barrel and examined the contents with slight interest.

“Visa, no good,” Caruthers’ soldier said, smiling, proud of his use of the English language.

“Lo siento,” Caruthers replied. “A mistake, is all. Everything’s okay. Muy bueno. Uno problema with the date. The fecha. Nada mas.” The soldier, whose mole appeared to swell and darken along with its host’s ire, ordered Caruthers out. The male passengers stood shoulder to shoulder against the bus, subjected to a pair of interrogators. He heard the word terrorista repeated to a peasant shod in tire tread sandals, who defended himself by shaking his head in silence. The soldier led Caruthers to the passenger side of the gun-mounted pickup, where a white haired gentleman in a uniform sat reading a newspaper. Caruthers saw Seba being led toward a military step van. “Hey,” he said to the man in the pickup, pointing, “that’s my ayudante.” The gentleman lowered his paper and a fierce white light invaded Caruthers’ vision. The earth came up and slapped him hard. He tried to rise against the pain at the back of his head, but a new detonation between his legs sent his face to the dirt, where he lay curled in a fetal position with no will to rise again. After a moment, eyes closed but still possessed by the white blindness, he wondered if his skull were cracked, and, continuing the self evaluation, decided that that he’d been kicked in the bony area between his nuts and asshole. He didn’t feel lucky though.

“Arriba,” the soldier told him. Caruthers touched the back of his head and felt an enormous swelling, but no blood. He risked opening his eyes, and saw a blurry
representation of dirt and a military boot. Collecting his power, he clutched the truck's tire and struggled to his feet, bent under the pain between his legs.

He faced the man in the truck. A phalanx of decorations spread across his chest. “I’m sorry,” he told the man. The soldier gave the officer Caruthers’ documents. He examined each in turn and looked Caruthers over.

“Late,” he said, and returned them to the soldier. He wore ludicrously gilded glasses, and a waddle of fat hung from his chin. A gold, class-style ring set with a black stone decorated his pinky. Surely no death squad leader, Caruthers hoped. The man resembled the manager of a sales team. Then again, Caruthers didn’t know what death squad leaders looked like in person. Very likely they had much in common with salesmen.

“Please,” Caruthers said, massaging the back of his head, “I’m only a little late. Is there a fine? I’ll pay the fine.”

“Fine. Yes.” The officer picked the newspaper off his lap, a tabloid fronted by a drawing of human organs set out for sale on a bed of ice like fresh fish, each labeled and priced to move. “1000 quetzales,” the officer said. According to the headline, the organ stand was located on a street in New York City.

Caruthers coughed and the soldier raised his baton. Caruthers considered pointing out that he could buy a new heart for that price. He used to be funny, years before, and now sometimes experienced flashes of the old talent. “Por favor,” he whined. “I only ganar 100 per day. I have to eat, have to buy my gas. You know, gasolina.”
The man turned a page, and spoke through the paper. “You want to see el inspector? Okay, you can see el inspector.” The boy who’d searched the women on the bus appeared, holding Caruthers’ little .22 pistol by with the tips of two fingers, like something infectious.

“There,” Caruthers exclaimed, in a burst of quick thinking. “You can have all my money, plus *la pistola*.”

In the end, Caruthers plead and cajoled, and gently hinted that his good friend Chucho Cruz wouldn’t appreciate hearing about how he’d been mistreated—to which the officer informed Caruthers that Chucho Cruz might never hear of him again—until finally his captors accepted Caruthers’ best offer, no doubt realizing they’d get nothing else out of him but a prisoner they couldn’t keep without eventual trouble. The paddy wagon had meanwhile hauled off several of the men who’d been interrogated, as well as Seba. Most of the remaining passengers had trod off on foot, but a few had returned to the bus. He started the engine and drove through the roadblock. A woman wept somewhere in the back. Thirteen years, he thought, gulping the cool coffee and forming connections that explained how he’d forgot to get his fucking papers in order, a blunder he’d never committed before. Thirteen years of smooth sailing and now this. The kid, his son, was a harbinger of ill fate, Caruthers thought, developing on the spot a taste for superstition.
Max arrived early to his date with Gabriela, if date it was. She had invited him *ir por café* after their final lesson. He’d answered that he only drank coffee in the morning, so she’d explained that *ir por café* didn’t actually mean to drink coffee specifically—any beverage would do. So Max agreed to meet her on Saturday, and learned that coffee in this instance stood for dancing, which is why he was standing in shadows outside an enormous warehouse plastered with posters exclaiming “¡Baila!” He had cold feet. The last dance he’d attended took place in junior high, a humiliating experience he’d vowed to never repeat.

He spotted a drinking shack across the street and moved that way. He entered and fended off the idle glances of three solitary drinkers and a bartender, all middle-aged ranchero men common to these places. He crossed the room over the shifting plywood floor and ordered by candlelight a quart-sized Cabro, what they called a *ballena*. After paying the bartender three quetzals, he claimed a plastic chair in the one unoccupied corner, under a poster of a woman in a bikini embracing a huge, spurting bottle of Bacardi.

He filled his glass, drank it down, and poured another. Here’s to the *Instituto de Idiomas Alta Plano*, he thought, to completing one week’s intensive instruction in *Espanol*. He tipped his glass toward an imaginary companion and knocked half of it back. The old question arose, to face the unpleasantness at hand or to run off? On the one hand, he liked Gabriela, and thought that she might feel the same. Who knows
where the dance could lead? On the other, the dance itself was unpromising in the extreme, and would cost him ten quetzales just to enter.

He savored the familiar tang of cheap beer, and revisited the path of his touchy relationship with money. For the last two years, he’d spent as he pleased, and happy years they’d been. The bartender gig kept his pockets full, and he was never without a companion for long, never far from a cool buzz and harmless blather. What did he care that his apartment lacked grace, that the accoutrements of his life were minimal and rough? He was never at home anyway.

The early years had been tougher. He suspected he’d never quite shake the bleak Hesperia days of welfare, the era of the famous last dance, around the time when he’d gradually come to understand that to be poor in junior high was to be despised. So he would escape tonight’s dance, he decided just then, avoid the complications and expenses that Gabriela would cost. Easier to spend the evening nursing a second ballena—at three quetzales total—and off to bed. He’d never see her again, and she’d certainly forget him in two point five seconds.

He drank and refilled his glass, unsatisfied with his decision. The old men taking up the other three corners had their own things going with their own drinks. Their proximity made Max lonelier still. And so wont of company helped him to change his mind. He would face the dance, fortified against humiliation with a to-go bottle of the local moonshine.

The warehouse doors had opened, releasing the marching-band snare drum, trumpets and tortured vocals of banda, Guatemala’s sound d’jour. The songs were
manic and tedious, "Pop Goes the Weasel" loud and repeated forever. Underdressed in forest green chinos, hiking boots, and a plaid flannel, he joined the cluster waiting to enter.

He parted with the cover charge and entered the dark, echoing building, already nostalgic for the peace of the tin shack. Dark figures filled the hangar-like room, and rays of light sliced overhead through air curiously free of smoke. These were good kids. No one was drinking or smoking. Except me, Max thought, and threw back a mouthful of the firewater called Quetzalteca. Walking along the back wall, he began to doubt he'd even find Gabriela among the thousand plus attendees. In a dark niche, he came upon an old man selling liquor and cigarettes behind a table, around which the bad element gathered, drunk boys roughhousing and projecting their voices, cat calling any women who happened by. Poorer than the sparkly cowboys filling the rest of the hall, these kids wore tee shirts and jeans, and ranch boots roughed up by work. Max treated himself to a can of beer, lit a cigarette and found a wall against which to lean.

The recorded music ended, ushering in a moment of quiet before the stage burst like a fireworks display and the band broke into their rowdy set. A banner reading "¡Banda Roja!" stretched over the group, which consisted of several stocky men squeezed into glinting gunslinger outfits a seven-year-old would like. The crowd shouted with delight.

A fugitive light beam stopped on Max for an instant, exposing and blinding him. Before his vision cleared, hands grasped his arm, someone drew near. "Poseído,"
Gabriela squealed in his face. “I guessed I would find you here, by the drinking.” He slid his arm behind her back. She smelled of rosewater and she radiated heat.

“Come,” she said in Spanish, pulling him into the center of the mix. Once there, she placed her hands on his hips and rocked back and forth. Still holding his beer, he awkwardly mimicked the swaying of those around him. He felt like a prosthetic limb attached to her.

Max saw that he shared the dance floor with another gringo, a conspicuous fellow having a wild time on his own, unhindered by self consciousness. He danced alone near the stage in strange lurching motions, an imitation of modern dance by someone without benefit of training or rhythm. He wore a matching shirt and pants of red tipica, and his pure white hair flashed in the lights. Sometimes his dancing took on a military air, marching erect in place, then he’d lunge into ballet leaps and spins. Max wondered if he weren’t enacting a comedy routine. A circle of cheering spectators formed around the gringo, prompting him to dance all the more feverishly. Max nearly admired his courage.

Gabriela took Max’s empty can from him, set it on the concrete floor and stomped it into a disc with the ball of her high-heeled shoe. Max was impressed. He placed his hands on her hips and shuffled to the music. She clapped her hands, at the effort, if not his skill.

“I won’t torture you anymore,” she whispered when the song ended. “Let’s go.” She led him off the dance floor and introduced him to some of her friends, a dour group of three men and one woman, plainly dressed for the occasion, and clearly
suspicious of Max. One of the men was older, in his forties maybe, and wore his hair long. Max couldn’t be sure in the disco light, but he thought he saw a long scar cutting through his beard, from ear to chin. The man exchanged words with Gabriela that Max couldn’t follow in the noisy hall, and for a moment he imagined he heard something like the Mayan language of the forest Shaman. In any event, the man and Gabriela seemed to be engaged in a muted argument, so Max found somewhere else to look. He edged away, and considered slipping into the crowd. Soon, though, Gabriela returned and pulled him away from her friends. “Bored?” she asked, pressing agreeably against him.

“Tired,” he answered. Speaking Spanish was wearing him out, and his abilities seemed to be declining rather than improving. She led him by the arm out a side exit, into cool misty air. His head began to clear. “What now?” he asked. They stood alone in an alley.

“En Español,” she replied.

“Please, no.” he said. “My mind is so tired.”

“No escusos,” she said, leading them to the main road.

“Okay,” he said, “¿Que quieres hacer?”

“Tengo sueño.” They walked away from the dance hall. Groups of boys and girls talked under streetlights. Couples embraced in shadows. He enjoyed being led, to not have to choose his own path for once. “¿Que hora es?” she asked, to which he replied that it was a little after midnight. She cursed and halted. “Ya se fue el camioneta,” she exclaimed. She wore a black dress, slinky under the streetlight. Her
hair hung around her face and Cleopatra eye makeup had transformed her. She’d replaced the Catholic icons with a silver choker studded with black stones.

“You missed your bus?” he asked.

They continued walking, and now he led the way, toward his room. “Want to stay with me?” he asked when they came into view of the hotel sign.

She shrugged. “Maybe. How many beds?”

His shoulders drooped and he admitted that there were two beds in his room. They crossed through the office, where a security guard slept on a folding chair, into the open courtyard, and to his room. He decided that he was glad for the company in any case.

He flicked on the light to reveal the shabby, bowed beds and dirty plaster walls. He turned to her, shrugged, and stripped to his boxers. Gabriela asked him to face the wall, which he did, climbing into bed with his back toward her. He was past drunk and tired, perhaps enough to fall right asleep. Before nodding out, he stole a look at her and was rewarded with a vision of a black bra and an expanse of smooth skin. She climbed under the blankets. He got out of bed to turn off the light, returned and lay awake, running through his mind unlikely pretenses to wake her, join her. He’d begun to drift into sleep when she resolved the matter by climbing into his bed.

“Dreams,” she explained, and they were kissing, tentatively at first, but soon with open, hungry mouths. Her lipstick formed a waxy membrane between them, and the taste of it excited him, as did the image of dark red spreading across his lips and chin. Happily drunk one night, a girlfriend had helped him balance so that he could
pull on her stretchy, satiny hot pants. They'd been laughing, at first, but the silky tight
sensation had immediately driven him wild. The next morning the sight of the pants
crumpled in a turquoise ball on the floor consumed him with a titillating kind of
shame. He never imagined that he'd get off on women's clothes, and never had the
urge again, at least not sober. Gabriela's lipstick touched off that same, hidden desire,
and did the brush of her bra against his chest. He made no attempt to take it off.

The blankets fell away, and now they lay covered in the smell of rosewater
and sweat. She whispered into her ear, causing chills to run along his spine. "I don't
want to have a baby," she said. For a moment, he was so far gone, pushing
rhythmically against the cool material of her panties. "Condones?" she whispered, and
he stopped. Somewhere in his pack, a box of condoms waited.

"Momento," he told her, and began to climb off, but before he could get
anywhere she pressed with a secret handshake a condom into his palm.

He finished with his mouth on hers, gripping her upper lip gently between his
teeth, breathing hard and taking in her breath. "Wow," he said after a moment,
propped over her, panting. She smiled and closed her eyes. He was nearly certain she
hadn't shared the orgasm, but she appeared content, and he didn't have the nerve,
didn't, finally, know her well enough, to broach the subject, tonight at least. He hoped
there would soon be other opportunities to make her feel as good as he was able, as
tingling and free of anxiety as he now felt. Tomorrow, he thought, and drifted off.
When he woke in the morning she slept in the other bed.
He rose nude to drink from his water bottle. She pulled the blanket over her head. “Disgracioso,” she called from her fortress. “Niño sin verguenza.” He jumped onto her bed and attempted to enter her grotto, to coax her into clear-headed love, but she turned serious and insisted that she had to go.

He walked her to the bus stop along silent, foggy streets. He asked if she’d like to take a trip with him to the Pacific coast next weekend. She cut her eyes at him as they walked side by side. Something seemed to trouble her for a moment. “I have something to do,” she said.

For an instant, Max felt the presence of the long haired, scarred man in Gabriela’s thoughts. “I’ll pay,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, happy again, “qué caballero.” Her hand reached across the space between them and touched the small of his back. “In that case, I’ll go. Why not.” They agreed to meet in front of the school at eight a.m. next Saturday. She was thinking about taking Monday off anyway. “Maybe after the coast,” she said, “we can move to Tikal.”

He wasn’t sure how to translate the verb or the tone. Was she joking? Had she suggested a vacation? A life together? He was scared of her, and happy. Certainly he wasn’t going to ask for clarification, not now. Instead he considered the possibility, the fantasy really, of settling in a strange land with a lovely, strange woman. He’d be an entirely different person, and all he’d have to do was say yes.

They arrived at the bus stop, and Max realized that Gabriela didn’t live in Xela. A Toto bus pulled up and she ran for it. “Wait,” he called, catching her. She
looked sweet and vulnerable in her short-hemmed evening dress among the Sunday morning indios. He pulled her in for a kiss, but she turned her head and offered her cheek. He placed his lips against the smooth flesh there and smelled sex. She stepped back, clutching her purse to her belly. “Not in the daytime,” she whispered, and climbed into the bus.

On payday Marilyn left Cash Platt at home. She didn’t need to truck him out for management’s disapproval, management being another name for Jonathan Stubbs. The West Highland regional office took up the second floor of a building that resembled a parking garage. Climbing the steps outside, she met with the smell of incinerated elements given off by the blacksmith on the first floor. She slipped into the mail room, which was located near the door, and hoped to snatch the check and escape without attracting attention. The bi-monthly check, endowed with the pitiful sum of 200 quetzales, sat in her otherwise empty slot. “Hi stranger,” Jonathan said, just as she took possession of her pay.

“Jesus,” she said, whirling on him. “Sneak up on me why don’t you.”

“Sorry.” Indeed he looked sorry, a froggy man, short and barrel chested, hiding his bald head under the eternal Oakland A’s cap. The affair had lasted three months almost to the day, when she’d left him devastated—as he put it. She got out of
the entanglement feeling guilty and embarrassed, but she could handle that. She’d arrived in country desperate, broken hearted and freaked out by Guatemala’s poverty and simmering violence. Jonathan had exuded a certain competence; at least he wasn’t afraid, and his fifteen plus years on her felt right after Cash’s boastful immaturity. Moreover, women intimidated him, which put her at ease. Effortlessly, she’d made the first move by asking him to drinks, and later she’d followed him to his apartment. When they kissed she told herself that within Jonathan hid a secret passion, but when she began to unbutton his shirt he recoiled and turned off the lights to undress in the dark. Such bashfulness did not become him, or any man, especially in bed. When they did embrace, naked under blankets, his nearly hairless, soft body, the womanish pouch over his genitals, positively repulsed her. The best she could say was that they successfully copulated, on a technical level. Poor man, she’d thought immediately after, itching to escape.

But before she could concoct an excuse to get away, he began to confess to a long-term loneliness, a speech that lasted hours. But the bed was comfortable, she’d thought; resigned to his droning voice, she nestled into the pillow and hovered near sleep. He’d never before, he told her, in his eleven years at the job, broken the Peace Corps ban on sex between volunteers and administrators. She wasn’t impressed or complimented. She hardly cared. His tale went back to when he’d originally abandoned his career as a substance abuse counselor, on the tail of a divorce from which he’d still not wholly recovered. No way, she thought while he recounted, with
something like masochistic zeal, his former wife’s betrayal of him for another
counselor, no way I’ll be like you. She fell asleep before his story was over.

The next day, he wrested a promise from her for a date the following weekend.
Then he called her a taxi and paid the driver for the rather expensive trip from Xela to
Alto. As bad as it, the sex, had been, she saw him the next weekend. She wasn’t able
to summon the chilliness of spirit necessary to turn him down. Out of pity quickly
turning to contempt, she spent the night after dinner. Later, she’d prolonged the affair
by utilizing two techniques: she focused on his kindness, warmth, his generosity, the
fact that he’d dedicated his life to helping the neediest of all people, a calling she
herself wished to cultivate but didn’t in fact feel deep down; and she compared his
thoroughly livable apartment to her cold shack. Finally, her tank of tolerance ran dry,
and she broke off the relationship, which had not included sex for nearly half its
lifespan, by leaving a note in his mail slot, a bullshit letter suggesting vaguely, falsely
and cravenly that she didn’t want to endanger their professional relationship. Though
she’d not allowed herself to understand it at the time, she now recognized a subtle
threat of blackmail between those double spaced, cursive lines. He’d visited once
after that, and they spoke for two hours in her place. Finally, with dry eyes but a
drooping mouth, he agreed to “respect her decision,” on the condition that she keep an
open mind and open heart. He’d take her back any time. Since then she avoided him
as much as possible, while he in turn took advantage of every opportunity to display
the most pathetic facial expressions possible. “Sorry,” he repeated. “Didn’t mean to
startle you.”
“No need to apologize.”

“Actually I just wanted to make sure your friend found you.”

“Pardon me?”

“Your friend. Tall guy wearing a hat? Cash, I believe was his name. He came by looking for you. I wasn’t sure I should tell him where you live.” Jonathan sighed at his hopelessly good and trusting nature. “He said he was a good friend, so I gave him the address.” He slicked down the hair tucked behind his ears. “I probably broke some rule, but what the heck. Not the first time I’ve broken a rule for you.” He laughed miserably.

“No,” Marilyn said, flushing. “Not the first time at all.” At the point in the affair when she required excuses to avoid sex, she’d told him about Cash, about the degradation, some of the sex, and had claimed that the “emotional abuse” had damaged her libido. The lie had worked at the time. She’d never expected to have to pay that particular bill. “No problem,” she said, and stuck her check in her front pocket. Jonathan stood in her way, lost in thought, squeezing together his cleft chin.

“Can I help you with anything else?” she asked.

“Of course not.” Jonathan made way for her. “I just worry about you.”

Marilyn folded her check and slipped it into her back pocket. She made for the door. “No need to worry,” she said.

“I know I shouldn’t,” he said, a wistful, breathy proclamation as she walked out to the sound of a steel hammer striking molten lead. “I just I can’t help caring.”
The ayudante sat Max beside a woman holding two small children on her lap. The child nearest him, a girl of three, stared at him with open curiosity. “Hola,” he said, offering the girl and then her mother a benign smile. The girl broke into a delighted grin and hid her face against her brother’s shoulder. No wonder the postcard people took so many pictures of the Mayan children. No wonder everyone was in such an uproar about stealing them.

The bus drove west out of Xela on a road that eventually led to the coast, the same route Max would take with Gabriela after three lonely days. He wondered if she’d ever taken up with a student before and hoped not, liked to imagine that he was the first, that some quality he alone possessed had broken through the usual barriers of taste and chastity. But now was not the time to moon. He had work to do, work to find at least. As a way to prepare, he visualized his body rising, walking down the aisle and asking the squinting driver if he knew of any job openings in the ayudante line of work. Sweat shot from his palms at the mere thought. He was an idiot. The driver would think Max was making fun of him, would take offense, likely kick him off the bus. Just the same, Max felt strongly that he owed the world a certain degree of...of what? Humiliation? Surely not. Perhaps the matter concerned Gabriela after all. If he were actually going to andar with a local woman, he’d need to prove—to
himself, to her—the ability to accomplish something in her country. He at least required the balls to walk up and ask someone for a job, without which balls he might as well hop on a plane and go home, visit the old man in the joint, join his mother for Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday services, like the good old days. The bus pulled over and several new passengers entered, clogging the aisle and offering Max some more time to anticipate the minor crisis he was about to actualize.

The ayudante asked where Max was heading, to which Max replied Zunil, a small village chosen from a map more or less randomly. The ayudante asked for a single quetzal, which meant the trip would not last long. Max felt a tug at his shirtsleeve and turned to the girl beside him. She was plucking flirtatiously at the fabric over his biceps, partially exposing an old tattoo of a dragon braided around his arm. Max lifted the sleeve to show the entire tattoo to the girl, who gasped. "¿Qué es?" she asked, touching it gingerly, fearfully.

"Una marka de naciomente," Max replied, having looked the phrase up at one point. The girl pulled her hand away as it had been burned. Max tried to show by smiling that he'd merely been joking about the birthmark, but the girl, for whom the Devil lived and walked the Earth and might very well resemble Max Ash, was terrified. Her mother glared at Max and pulled her children in with both arms. Max stood, apologized, and made his way to the front. Might as well get on with things.

The driver's heavy jowls jiggled with the road's bumps. Perhaps he was a jolly sort, but Max doubted it. He was shaped like a beer keg, and stared at the road like he hated it. The dashboard and windshield bore none of the stickers and religious fetishes
that cluttered most buses. Only one thin cross with an emaciated Jesus nailed to it swayed from the rear-view mirror.

"Perdoname," Max shouted over the noise of the wind and the engine. The man shot up his eyes but offered no response. He was block-headed and mustachioed, would have looked comfortable in a police uniform. "Pardon me," Max iterated. "I am interested in working as an ayudante."

"¿Como?" The driver removed his eyes from the road and directed a hard beam of scorn onto Max.

Max repeated the statement, as bravely and with as much dignity as he was able to muster. The driver muttered at the road. Max kept at it. "Con permiso," he insisted, but the driver had adopted a new tactic, one familiar to Max and therefore even more infuriating than it might have otherwise been. He simply denied Max’s existence by whistling one of the maudlin tunes playing constantly on the radio. "Talk to me," Max finally demanded, resorting to the rather impolite imperative mood and thereby eliciting a brief instance of eye contact that communicated a mix of annoyance and pity for the deranged gringo. Exasperated, Max turned to the other passengers, searching in the wrong place for sympathy. Instead he was met with hostile expressions or indifference. He spent the rest of the trip silent, chastened, embarrassed, staring out the windshield at the world rushing at him, half expecting an attack from behind but too stubborn to look back.

When the bus arrived at Zunil, Max hopped out ahead of even the ayudante. He jogged across a small bridge over a creek and through an arched gateway that led
into a smudged pastel village of narrow, medieval pathways. After several turns, he felt lost in the labyrinthine kinks, hidden from the bus and the hateful passengers, if not free of a weird, misplaced shame. He wondered if he'd ever have the heart, or the gall, to try that move again, and he decided at once that he would. A whitewashed adobe wall that apparently enclosed the village cut off his path and his line of thought. Another venture into the center of the labyrinth showed him that he'd never been lost, nor could he be. The village was too small for that. Still he wandered, searching, he realized, for a drink. He passed food stands, and variety stores, but no cervesarias, no drinking shacks.

As if summoned by Max's thoughts, a beggarly man with a cloudy eye appeared from an alley and called Max forward in the Guatemalan style, a motion like patting the head of an invisible child. Max looked around to make certain the beggar was signaling to him and not some other. The beggar nodded his head excitedly. If Max had summoned the beggar, Max decided, then the beggar had in turn summoned Max. So he followed. In spite of everything he purported to disbelieve about the universe, he couldn't help but believe in signs from beggars with cloudy eyes that materialized from thoughts like dream figures.

The beggar led Max into the alley, unlatched and opened a four foot high door. A cloud of smoke or steam poured out. The beggar held one palm out and presented the thumb, index and middle fingers of his free hand, signifying the number three. From inside the building, a man's voice reverberated faintly. Max saw a slice of
darkness, the dim glow of candles. He dropped three coins into the creased, waxy palm.

The chamber was lurid and so smoky that Max nearly choked. He began to sweat immediately and profusely. Bodies crowded the room, flickering in candlelight. Max nearly stepped on a man writhing on the floor, moaning and straining toward a flattened pint bottle of Quetzalteca on its side, beguilingly out of reach of the tips of his fingers. Another man, this one wearing tasseled loafers, squatted to help the writhing man sip from the bottle before partaking himself.

Max’s eyes adjusted as he moved deeper into the chamber. Someone placed a can in his hand, but otherwise he was ignored. Gagging on the hot beer and vapors, he passed an obese woman seated on the floor with her back to the wall, puffing a thick, hand-rolled cigar of reeking tobacco. Six butts lay on the concrete to her left like crushed roaches. Four whole cigars remained at her other hip. She spewed smoke and cackled like a bad actor playing a lunatic.

Max made his way steadily toward the glow deep in the chamber but didn’t seem to be drawing nearer, as if the dreamy room were elongating as he moved. But this of course proved to be an illusion, and he came to the edge of a city of burning candles rising from a lake of glistening wax. Beyond, a man wearing a collared shirt over a striped tipica kilt gestured wildly and shouted in some Mayan language. Beside the man a still figure reclined in a rocking chair. This figure, Max noticed after a moment, was not a man, but an idol of some sort. The brim of a Houston Astros baseball cap shaded mirrored aviator sunglasses. A scarf, bandit style, hid the mouth
and nose, and a wide-lapel sport's coat from the seventies, a dress shirt accented by a thick tie, and slacks tucked into knee-high, furry boots designed for ski vacations completed the outfit. This icon, Max realized, was a department store mannequin got up in thrift store duds. Members of the audience, the congregation, as Max now understood them, set money, cans of beer, cigarettes, and bottles of Quetzalteca on the floor before the candles. The priest upended a fifth of Quetzalteca and filled a short glass with the clear liquor. He spoke in a husky voice, then rocked the figure back in its chair, slipped the bandana from the face with the grace of a breastfeeding woman, and fed the alcohol to the mannequin.

Max mused that if his own church experiences were as picturesque and surreal, he might still be a member. He recalled the day he'd been introduced, back when he was a child of seven. A few months after his father disappeared, a man and woman that Max didn't know drove him, his mother and brother for an hour on the freeway and parked outside a one-story building somewhere in the sprawling suburbs of Los Angeles. Inside, they joined a group of men and women his mother's age who stood in a circle, shouting in turns at the floor and the ceiling. After a time, Max understood that everyone was angry at the devil, and the shouts were declarations of war. The Devil was everywhere, Max gleaned, in the people, the buildings, the businesses and schools of California and beyond. This new perspective alarmed Max, and awakened in him a desire he'd long entertained: to hack to pieces some deserving individual with a gleaming sword, to pull a bad man's arms off with Karate techniques, to blow away with an automatic pistol a kidnapper trying to hijack a
school bus. He was a strange, quiet boy, “a passive underachiever” in class who spent more time than usual entertaining violent fantasies. One counselor suggested that Max’s here today gone tomorrow father, and too young, shell shocked mother were to blame. There’s been talk of moving him to foster care. Tears. Promises. He’d been too young to recall any details, except that invisible demons lived everywhere in those early years of the church, taking the shape of people that Max knew. Only bashfulness kept him from shouting along with the grownups that first day, and soon after the church opened for him a social outlet. He was a quick favorite, and spoke of church matters with the seriousness and fluency of adults. Eventually he realized that he’d been merely cute, the little boy using grown up language, an amusement like a dancing monkey.

After the shouting portion of the service, members of the circle took up musical instruments, and sang rock and roll songs about Jesus and the Devil. Most of the lyrics were lost on Max, but to this day he remembered one line in particular: “the fig tree that bore no fruit is gone.” He’d heard in those words the ghost of a threat, and he heeded.

After several songs the congregants raised their arms and began to moan a formless kind of music that ebbed and throbbed along with the organ notes. Now and then someone’s voice rose above the general hum, babbling nonsense. Someone fell the floor and began to flop. Max cried a little, but hid the tears from his mother, an easy task. She was long gone by then.
He lit a cigarette, and added one to the offerings. A mouthful of warm beer went down a little easier. The priest lit a cigarette too, and held it to the idol's mouth. A plume of smoke shot through the bandana, and Max nearly applauded. He appreciated a good show. Maybe that's what finally turned him against the brothers at The Passage. The scam was finally too transparent, and Max had been bored, insulted even. He didn't appreciate being taken for such a sucker. If pies in the sky were the product, he would have appreciated a little earthly razzle dazzle in the meantime.

A man and woman escorted a teenaged girl, their daughter clearly, around the candle lake and kneeled on velvety pillows. The priest continued to shout, though his voice had gone hoarse. He approached the girl, waved the bottle, drank, then shot forward at the waist to jettison a mist of liquor onto the girl's left breast. The girl, perhaps thirteen, knelt with eyes closed, her face as passive as a carved saint's. The priest orated, filled his mouth again and wetted the girl's other breast. The parents interlocked their hands under their chins and watched with bliss that managed seemed at once melodramatic and earnest. Max couldn't quite get his mind around the nature of the ceremony. He was aroused, certainly, and troubled by the arousal.

The priest slowed the process down, worked everyone up with his gestures and shouts before spitting between the girl's legs. Her filmy skirt formed to her thighs and crotch. Max felt drunk on half a beer, and sick with lust and a touch of self reproach. This was a girl, he thought, but no. Not anymore she wasn't. She was a sexual being. The priest offered the idol another drink before concluding the ritual by spraying the girl full in the face. She accepted the blast by squeezing shut her eyes for
a moment, and then she resumed her composed expression. Mist from the liquor hung in the air, twinkling in the candlelight.

Dizzy to the point of falling and short of breath, Max struggled toward the exit. He stumbled, and many hands caught him by the shoulders and arms, and helped him on his way. Hands touched his head, his back, his chest. Someone fondled him. The smoking woman chuckled, having finished her cigar and started on another since Max had seen her last. The drunk at the entrance still twitched toward the impossibly near and unreachable bottle. Max, clothes saturated with sweat, kneeled beside the man and placed the bottle to the cracked lips. Max drank as well, then capped the bottle and returned it to where it belonged, just out of reach. He burst through the door and discovered a world outside brighter than the one he'd left. The sky had never before been so blue. The air he gulped tasted thick, cold, and sweet as nectar.

Caruthers stared into the mirror at a face the color of meat set off by thick white hair. He pressed his nose back with his thumb, transforming himself into the high school nickname, then narrowed his small, red eyes. Oink, he said, and sighed. He was too old to be indulging this sort of perverse self scrutiny.
The faucet squealed when he cranked it, and cold water gurgled down the sink’s drain. He threw a handful onto his face and scoured himself with a dirty cake of lye soap. There were no towels in Ick’s bathroom, so he flung the water from his hands as he shouldered through the door.

“You fall in?” Ick asked.

“Wouldn’t have been the first time,” Caruthers said, and began to pat his face with a stack of bar napkins. Caruthers enjoyed talking to Ick when no one else was in the bar. Reminded him of the times when his pop took him driving without his brothers. He’d mention sometimes that Ick was the father he’d never have, to which Ick always reminded him that Caruthers was the elder of the two.

“You know those things ain’t free,” Ick said.

“Neither is the booze I spend eighty percent of my gross income on.”

“Fair enough,” Ick said, clearing the wet napkins off the bar. “Speaking of fair, you visited that kid yet? Not a bad looking boy. I seen him. Looks just like you except not so pickled. You should say hi.” Ick lit a cigarette. His Adam’s apple dipped and he blew out smoke.

“Out of all the people in the world, I don’t need you telling me what I should do.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Everybody’s just saying. What does that mean anyway? Isn’t it clear that you’re just saying, since you just said it?”
Ick straightened up and set his cigarette in an ashtray, slowly shaking his head. “It’s a testament to family bonds that this kid came all the way out here to visit a nasty son of a bitch like you.”

Caruthers snorted. “He just doesn’t remember. Trust me, he’ll kick himself in the ass for making the effort once he meets me.” Ick stroked the copper stubble in his chin, probably searching for some honest way to disagree. He gave up and sat on a stool at the end of the bar where he could see the television. Caruthers wished Ick had tried a little harder, but that was him all over, telling everybody to fuck off, then feeling sorry for himself when they obliged. “You’re probably right,” he said, as a way to repent. “Might as well get it over with. Besides, I got just about the right buzz on. Best to see him on my terms, rather than wait until he comes striding in here when I’m not ready.”

“There you go,” Ick said. “Show a little hair for once.”

Caruthers finished his beer and walked out, deciding that he was right to take control of the meeting. He’d gotten to good at drinking that it rarely caused him trouble these days. For one thing, he could easily recognize when the time for talk had passed, and so either ignored all other humans from that point on, or ambled home to stare at the drink-shimmered ceiling until it all went black. He’d get away from Junior well before the inarticulate stage, which was, he well knew, not pretty to see. The least he could do. He could also take a shower. Not too much to ask. Though no soap could ever removed the perfume of rum from his flesh, he kept himself and his garments, his apartment and his bus even, well scrubbed and ordered. There were
levels and there were levels, and he would just as soon not sink to where a man gives up wiping his ass. That’s when they kicked you out of the bar for good.

After a shower, he slid a half-pint into his back pocket and carefully climbed down the stairway that led from his second-story room to the street. He’d tumbled top to bottom a couple of years back, and the broken leg still troubled him occasionally. Out beyond the strip, the sun had just dipped behind Volcano Atitlan across the lake. The air felt humid and mild. The steely blue waters lay placid but for a wake cut by an Indian paddling his canoe. As Caruthers approached the shore, the volcano’s smoky emission grew rosier by the minute. At times like this Pana appeared staged, Disneylandia they sometimes called it. Even the Indian could be paddling across a corporate office poster over script reading, “Persistence.”

Caruthers splattered a blood gorged mosquito against the hairless back of his hand, the only spot where they ever got him. He wondered idly if a mosquito could appreciate a view, if an Atitlan mosquito was more content in some unconscious bug way than a mosquito living in a garbage dump. Of course not. But other animals maybe. How about a squirrel? Or a coyote? The idea of happy animals appealed to him, but he finally couldn’t believe in an animal with a sense of aesthetics. He himself hadn’t noticed the beauty of the place in years, and only detected it now through the eyes of his son.

The Pension Carlito sat back from the strip a few dozen yards from the pier, a shabby two-story colonial that smelled faintly of sewage. Caruthers had stayed at Carlito’s many times off and on during the years before economics nudged him into a
monthly rental situation. He stood outside the entranceway and swallowed enough
rum to bring tears to his eyes. He exhaled fiercely and walked in.

A young boy at the front desk offered Caruthers the room number without
question. Caruthers climbed the stairway and entered a musty hall illuminated by two
bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. A halo of greasy handprints orbited the doorknob
to room fourteen. For a moment, Caruthers listened to the silence within. Perhaps they
were out, he thought, hope fluttering in his chest, before a child’s scream and cascade
of giggles squashed it. He rapped on the hollow door as one leaps into cold water, that
is, quickly and without thought. The giggles stopped and the door opened. He
recognized his son, a heavier version of the fourteen-year-old he’d last seen, but
otherwise hardly changed at all. A tall, large man, Junior filled the doorway, holding a
young girl with shocking black hair and pale skin. They all claimed Junior favored his
father, but Caruthers saw his ex-wife’s eyes stuck into the boy’s doughy face, pretty
blue as marbles and about as expressive. “Hi, Dad,” he said, and hugged Caruthers
with his free arm. Over the boy’s shoulder, Caruthers viewed the wife, dark-haired
and wrapped in a plaid dress buttoned high and covering her ankles. He wished he’d
brought something, flowers, or cake. Maybe next time, he thought, and reflected that
there were never any next times, only this one, and it was always too late.

“Hey kid,” Caruthers said, patting the boy’s back, “you’re looking healthy.”
Junior did appear healthy, pudgy, but healthy. He resembled what he was: an ex-high
school quarterback, second-string because his mind wasn’t as quick as his feet.

“Come in, meet my family. My wife Patricia.”
“Guess you’ve all heard about me,” Caruthers said, entering the room, one 
he’d never slept in, the only three-bed job in the place, he supposed. 

“Yes,” the wife said, extending her hand. “Welcome.” She wasn’t bad 
looking, pronounced cheekbones and gently waved hair covering her shoulders. Pretty 
except for the lines that pinched her forehead and radiated from her eyes, suggesting 
chronic irritation. She, like Junior, had blue eyes, but hers were quick with the worry 
that plagues thinkers. He wondered what their arguments were like. “This is Rebecca, 
and this is our youngest, Sarah.” The girls smiled, the younger one meeting Caruthers’ 
eyes and the other staring down. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Caruthers,” Rebecca said, 
lifting her face to him. She was skinny and tall and her hazel eyes, too large for her 
face, held the same worry as her mothers’. She seemed already to have surpassed 
Caruthers in maturity, and he was a little afraid of her. 

“Hi,” Caruthers replied, rocking from foot to foot, viciously scratching the bite 
on his hand. The consciousness of the fact that he wasn’t allowed to sip the rum in his 
pocket was driving him wild. “Great,” he said in a loud voice. “Glad to meet you all. 
And Junior?” he turned to his son, who seemed to guard the door. “You’ve got a great 
looking family here. Thanks for coming to see me. It’s meant a great deal.” He placed 
a hand on Junior’s shoulder and began to turn him away from the door like they were 
dancing partners. 

Junior smiled and grasped his father’s arm at the elbow, but the smile 
collapsed when the gears clicked into place. “You’re not going, are you? We’ve got a 
lot to talk about.” Caruthers’ hand found the doorknob but Junior leaned into the door
with his hip, adopting a hurt, stubborn expression that Caruthers recognized from 30
years before. “No,” the boy said. “And they don’t call me Junior anymore.”

Caruthers backed off and began to perform his drunken fool act. He slapped
his hands together at his belly and scratched the bite. “Kid, it’s like this. I can’t take
this scene. No offence, Patricia, girls. You all seem great. But it’s too much, too many
little girls and wives; it’s all this family stuff crammed in this room. I’m better at
getting to know people one by one, see? Really, I’m much better not getting to know
them at all.” He laughed alone.

“That’s all right,” Patricia said, holding the young girl and resting a hand on
the other’s shoulder. “It’s a lot to take in so suddenly.”

“Yeah, thank you for understanding. Son, if you want to talk to me you’re
going to have to meet me at the bar. That’s where I talk best, and I’m there every day
from around two p.m. to ten.”

“I don’t drink,” Junior said, his voice high, petulant.

“Yes, but I do. I’ll buy you a fucking ginger ale.”

“Mr. Caruthers,” Patricia said. “Please don’t speak like that in my daughters’
presence.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He felt his head sinking into his body.

“So we come all the way down here, thousands of miles, after you’ve been the
crummiest dad in the world, and we have to do everything exactly your way. I don’t
like bars. They smell and they’re spiritually dark.”
Caruthers about informed Junior that he'd never asked anyone to travel anywhere, but Patricia stepped up to Junior and wrapped an arm around his back and started rubbing. She turned to Caruthers and placed her other hand lightly on his forearm, avoiding his clasped, scratching and scratched hands. He was prepared to take her smile as that of the religious numbskull. The phrase the kids were using these days, “it’s all good,” always at that point where everything was definitely not all good. But she confronted him with disarming sincerity. Perhaps she was one of those rare zealots who truly feel and believe in the ideas expressed in their churches and bibles. Unlike the rest who are drawn to religion out damage, fear and ignorance, like his son. Or worse, those who prey on the likes of Junior. Caruthers figured Patricia would care for her husband, along with the rest of the children, for as long as they both shall live. Not everyone’s idea of paradise, but he imagined it lasting.

“Normy. Mr. Caruthers. Let’s breathe for a moment. You’ve both been waiting for this day for a long time, whether you know it or not. You have a lot to say to each other, but you can’t say it all right now. I hope I get the chance to talk to you, Mr. Caruthers, and the girls do too, but right now I respect that you need to get to know your son by himself for a while. We have plenty of time. And as for meeting in a bar, I understand that it’s a safe place for you, but I also think you should know that Norm used to spend a good deal of time in bars during his bad years, and they aren’t so comfortable for him. Now, I think you can find a location that both of you can accept, like that restaurant down the street with the patio. I saw men drinking beer at
one of the tables, and I also saw a very pleasant-looking family of Guatemalans eating lunch.”

Her speech ended abruptly. “Mom?” Sarah said. “I’m bored. When can we go?” She tugged lightly on her mother’s dress.

“Go where sweet pea?”

The girl rolled her large eyes as if her mother had asked the stupidest question possible. “Out!” She released the dress and turned to Caruthers. “Who are you?”

“Well, I’m Norman.”

“I know that.” She treated him to the same impatience her mother received.

“But who are you?” Caruthers looked to Patricia for help, but she merely gazed passively at him.

“I’m your grandfather, I guess.”

“No, I already have a grandfather. In America.” She seemed to ponder this absent personality. “He smells like barbeque sauce.”

“Sweet pea, don’t talk about grandpa like that. It would hurt his feelings.” The girl squinted, trying to process this mystifying information. “And Mr. Caruthers is right. He is also your grandfather. You have two.”

“Two,” she shouted, apparently thrilled. “Is that allowed?”

Patricia turned to Caruthers. “She likes board games,” she said.

“It’s allowed, dear,” Caruthers said. “Everything is allowed.”

“No it’s not,” Junior interjected.
“Okay,” Patricia said, gathering Sarah into her arms. “That’s enough for today, don’t you think?” Caruthers had been on the verge of going right at his son again, busting this whole reunion into pieces and getting it over with, but the woman had a good sense of timing. At any rate, he felt grateful to her for setting him loose, at least for the time.

“I’m sorry I allowed anger to get the best of me,” Junior said in a husky, emotional voice that Caruthers found affected. Apparently the kid got off on apologizing.

“Not at all,” Caruthers responded, happy enough to play along. “I wasn’t thinking. Sure, if you’re an ex-drinker you don’t want to hang out in a bar. That’ll get you right back into the juice. I know plenty of guys who used to drink. Gone on the wagon a couple of times myself.” Now he was rambling, threatening to extend this visit further. “But the point is we’ll be seeing each other soon.” He made for the door again, but his son took this as a movement to embrace. Caruthers patted the kid’s back. Aside from unease, there was no feeling in it. Junior wouldn’t notice though. He wasn’t acting on his own passion. He was doing what he thought the Lord wanted him to do, and therefore he wasn’t a legitimate person. For most of his life, Caruthers had lived a similar lie. It would be a drag getting to know him.
Saturday arrived, charged by anticipation. Max hadn’t spoken to Gabriela since they’d made plans a week before, and during the lapse he’d begun to fear that she would stand him up. He didn’t like this weakness. It reminded him of younger days when women, viewed for the most part from a distance, drove him wild with lust and at the same time scared him silly. But months of bartending helped him grow used to women, and he realized that potential lovers would never cease to ebb and flow through the bar doors. After a time, the women in his life resembled the men he ran with: amusing, interchangeable companions who offered little and required even less. Now though, he wasn’t sure where Gabriela stood in his estimation, only that, he grudgingly conceded, she had the advantage.

He reached the school eight minutes early, slid his pack to the ground outside the bolted front door and began to wait, the hardest work of all. Twenty four worrysome minutes later, a wild-haired, shirtless man appeared on the road. He fixed his eyes on Max, and began to approach eagerly, as if he’d finally found who he’d been looking for. Max tried to deflect him by staring into the brightening sky as if he didn’t exist, an attempt that proved ineffective. Two feet away, the man stopped and glared at Max. Eyes pale as ice lit up a face covered in grime, and sausage-like mats of hair lay on his shoulders, tinted calico by sun and shades of filth. He might have been 35 or 65. Max recognized him as the vagabond who’d dodged the bus a month and hundreds of miles back. He reached a crusty hand toward Max, more in the
attitude of bestowing a blessing than to beg alms. Max recoiled against the heavy, wood door. “Whatever you want,” Max said, “I don’t have.”

The statement appeared to upset the vagabond, who pulled his hand back. His face contorted, while cords of muscle grew taut around his neck and the sinews of his torso twisted under slack, tanned skin. Finally he relaxed and began a strange, pelvis-swiveling dance. He lifted his right leg and shook it—as if doing the Hokey Pokey, Max noted absurdly—until a small dark glob the size of a golf ball fell from the leg of his shorts. With alarming speed, the vagabond dropped to his knees, snatched the ball and smeared it across the top of Max’s boot.

Too late, Max hopped away and crouched like a goalie. Why? he thought but didn’t voice. There could be no answer. The vagabond rose to his feet. His chest rumbled and quaked as he coaxed something from the depths of his lungs. Then the mania burned out, and the vagabond stood blinking like he’d just woken, surprised to find himself here. He spit meekly on the sidewalk, turned and padded away as inscrutably as he’d come.

Max watched until he was out of sight. Alone again, he took stock. He’d been stood up, and his shoe was covered in shit. Not how he’d hoped to start the day. For an instant he took it in stride, but the inward chuckle stuck in his throat. He was pissed off, now that he thought about it, and Gabriela was going to hear from him come Monday. Max had the goods on her. Diego might be interested to learn that one of his teachers had slept with a student, and probably not for the first time. But even
as Max plotted to harm her, he knew he’d never tell. He’d learned one of the most basic rules early and well. Nobody liked a snitch.

But he had more pressing obligations than to plan for Monday, like cleaning his boot. He began by scraping as much of the filth onto the curb as he could, then he headed downtown for some soap and water. Few businesses had opened yet. The comedors were boarded up, the clothing shops and the tour agencies enclosed in their rolling grates. A yawning security officer cradling a shotgun stood before the entrance of the stylish Hotel Bonifaz, betraying no sympathy for the likes of Max. Finally, he headed for El Serpiente y La Manzana, a foreign-owned coffee house that catered to the few hippies left in town. Until now, Max had avoided this travel guide favorite, the cuteness of whose sign—which featured a green snake with sly, cartoon eyes wrapped around a bright red apple—annoyed him. But a wise man might very well have said that he who has shit on his shoe should be ready to compromise. Max entered to New Age synthesizers and the jangling string of bells attached to the handle.

A couple of backpackers glanced up from newspapers for a moment. A gringo wearing a beaded choker read a paperback behind the counter, a bowl of coffee steaming at his elbow. The place was decorated in whitewashed pine and primitive art. Max shed his backpack and entered the bathroom. Shutting himself in, he removed the boot and went at it in the sink with a crude bar of soap. As the residue drained away, he reconsidered the day’s disappointment. Was it possible that Gabriela hadn’t jilted him after all? A number of subtle evasions and silences came to mind,
certain topics she'd consistently avoided. Her father. How she used some unaccounted
spare time. The man with the scar on his face. Long term plans.

He sat on the toilet and slipped the boot on. When he’d laced up, he fantasized
about bursting into a Death Squad camp, pistol in one hand, machete in the other. In a
blood splattered moment he laid waste to a dozen of Gabriela’s captors, after which
he enjoyed mangoes in bed, wine splashed sheets, Gabriela’s lips at his throat. Later
he was speaking fluent Spanish to a couple of local farmers, who begrudgingly
accepted the hard working gringo into their community.

Outfitted with one clean and one dusty hiking boot, he left the bathroom. He’d
planned to walk out, but the barista caught his eye and the code of service workers,
coupled with the bewitching smell of fresh coffee, compelled Max to spend some
money. He ordered a large coffee and settled at a table with the morning’s Prensa
Libre. Old fashioned tourism, he conceded, breathing in the aroma and settling into
the padded chair, had its charm.

The paper featured a major development in the week’s main story—another
grisly disappearance and murder. The decapitated body found near the ruins of Tikal,
an area known for rebel activity, the paper claimed, had been identified as aid worker
and longtime advocate for indigenous rights, Juan Arias Guerrero, who had been
missing from his home in the Western Highlands since Wednesday. Max read on with
dawning excitement. Immediately he made a connection. Gabriela Arias Valle herself,
the same woman who grew uncharacteristically pensive when the subject of her father
arose, had explained to Max how Spanish surnames were passed on. Of course, Arias
was a common name. No doubt hundreds of men in the highlands area shared it. But Max didn’t doubt. He felt a familiar tingling over his skin, accompanied by a sensation of wakefulness: keener vision, clearer thought. He’d stumbled upon The News before.

He’d felt this way once before. Event began with a note summoning Max from seventh grade Speech class. In the office, he found his father leaning against a well near a plastic palm tree, almost as if hiding, Max had thought. Down a long stretch of freeway that connected the desert to the sea, the son to the father, they drove in silence. Normally Dunny was a sarcastic, talkative man, and often threw out snide witticisms or baffling mystical-philosophical adages, which Max was supposed to field and return, a challenge that Max hated but somehow never remembered until his father picked him up again. So he allowed the quiet to last as long as it would.

Twenty minutes into the trip, wrapped in the dark scents of the dairy farms outside of Diamond Bar, Dunny Ash began. “I figure you should hear it from me before someone else tells you,” he said, and the rest of the story flooded out, gaining power, as water through a breaking levee. Over the years, Max filled the story in with what he had learned from other sources, and from his own imagination. Lately, he’d adopted a less charitable interpretation from inside Dunny Ash’s head.

The tragedy began in jail. Ash woke with no recollection of the past several hours but a terrible feeling. Fueled by cocaine, whiskey and fear, Ash hadn’t slept in weeks leading to the crime. He’d been living with his old school friend, Mark, drug dealer, weapon collector, practitioner of martial arts, and trainer of Doberman
Pinschers. Sunrise after tragic sunrise found Dunny chopping coke while Mark carried on sentimentally, declaring that he couldn’t trust anyone but Dunny anymore. You make some money, he complained, buy a Porsche, some good clothes, and everybody changes. Then he confessed a darker secret. He had reason to believe someone had put a hit out on him, and he lived every moment in fear. Dunny, an athletic man known to occasionally participate in fistfights, offered to act as Mark’s body guard. They spent every day together anyway. Soon he had a loaded pistol secreted in the inside pocket of Mark’s pure white, silk sport coat. He moved permanently into one of Mark’s bedrooms, and accepted weekly pocket money and all the coke he could handle. In his clearer moments, Dunny suspected that Mark was suffering from fits of paranoia and self aggrandizement. Nobody cared enough about the small time hood to knock him off, but Dunny wasn’t going his way out of a job. It was the sweetest gig he’d found in years.

Trouble began with a woman. Dunny accompanied Mark to meet with an associate at a Japanese restaurant. After pleasantries, the associate asked Dunny if he wouldn’t mind taking a hike. Dunny skulked off to suck on a Kirin at the bar and nurse vengeful thoughts. A woman entered and sat one stool away. It was lunchtime and they were alone. She ordered vodka and struck up a conversation. When she asked him what he did, a bullshit capitalist materialistic question that always infuriated him, he evaded with a newfound confidence. Decked out in the sport coat, the heavy gun snug against his ribcage, Dunny told his new acquaintance that he was a businessman, but beyond that she’d do well not to ask.
He took her to Mark’s place, and was surprised to find that the three of them got along like the best friends ever. Mark was temporarily off women. His ex wife, who knew too many of his secrets, was blackmailing him, and he found his loving at a high class strip joint. The deals he arranged at that institution were downright honest after the hypocrisy of dating and marriage. Just shell out the cash upfront and get it over with, he figured. But he didn’t mind Dunny’s new girl moving in. Within days the three of them settled into a kind of family dynamic, brothers and a sister with no parents at home.

But then Dunny began to detect invisible, barely there secrets floating through the hall, subtle codes sent and received whenever he turned his back. Around this time, Dunny’s role as body guard shifted. Mark sent him on the first of many errands all the way out to Bakersfield to hand deliver envelopes to be slipped under the doorway of a tract home mansion. Those lonely hours on the road afforded time to wonder, time to speculate, time to connect the dots. Jody had never once offered to accompany him. Sure, she had her job as a veterinary’s assistant as an excuse, but Dunny wouldn’t be thrown off the scent of betrayal.

Then came the big negotiation, a deal which would result in more money than Dunny needed to know about. So the two drug dealers and the one body guard met for dinner at an Italian restaurant, just like the movies, Dunny thought, sucking Scotch from the ice at the bottom of his glass.

While the men discussed matters beyond Dunny’s scope, he drank and fixated on Mark’s thin upper lip moving like a slug under its shabby blond mane of a
mustache. He was a monster, a ghoul, a fiend. And Dunny was his loyal henchman, helping him poison the children of southern California. How man lives had this man ruined? Choked by emotion, Dunny excused himself to the bathroom. The swollen and bloodshot face in the mirror confronted him, a cynical, reproachful visage, worn beyond its years. Cold water didn’t rinse away the regret permeating the swollen flesh. He sniffed a blast off the end of his car key and decided that he wasn’t going to be Mark’s stooge anymore. Armed with a .38 pistol, a bellyful of despair and no plan, he returned to the table.

He watched Mark’s upper lip spew out the shit until he filled with the joy of rage. He drew the pistol and pointed it at Mark’s face, a face Dunny would look on for the rest of his life: a slight smile of disbelief under that shabby mustache, growing outrage around the eyes. The gun roared and a black circle appeared just to the right of the nose. For half a moment the world froze, then Dunny squeezed the trigger twice more because he couldn’t take the silence. Amid screams, the restaurant emptied, except for Dunny and his high school friend, both of whom dropped their heads to the table and slept.

“You can cry if you want,” Dunny had said. But oddly, shamefully even, Max didn’t feel in the least like crying. He stared out the window at the suddenly sparkling scrubland, looking away from his father to hide the truth. He felt terrific, more alive than ever before. Just as he’d always suspected, something was happening. He’d been chosen.
This illusion had sustained him for years, but the piper finally exacted his fee. And here Max was again, sucked toward someone else’s ruin by the thrill of claiming it as his own. Had he learned nothing over the past fifteen years? Surely no good would come of meddling in Gabriela’s mess, in the mess of this country that was not in any way his home.

He read on. The story made no mention of the victim’s family, probably a standard policy, Max figured, a matter of protection. He wondered if Gabriela was hiding. Was she captured? Was she dead? The article contained the standard, cynical line: “federal police were unavailable for comment.” Max revisited the rescue fantasy and found it transformed. Outgunned by men meaner than he could ever imagine, he’d be killed, likely tortured, were he to throw himself into their clutches. Still, he could at least drop into the school on Monday, just to satisfy his curiosity. Maybe Gabriela would be sitting at her old table across from a new gringo. If so, Max would politely ask after her health, explain that he’d worried, and leave it at that. She’d feel guilty—as well she should—and he’d walk out the bigger of the two of them. That is, if she were there.
Marilyn hated her job. That’s what ran through her mind as she focused her displeasure on the four students who’d actually shown up to class. Even Laura was absent, and how could Marilyn blame the poor girl? She was stuck in her life, as were all the students. And no amount of English grammar was going to free them. Marilyn had only given them a glimpse of another world they’d never get the opportunity to see with their own eyes. A year and a half’s worth of work would result in a $2,000 check, a line on her resume, and nothing for the people she was supposed to be helping.

But she had to get through the day just the same. “Good morning, scholars,” she said, manufacturing a pleasant face. The introduction, borrowed from Ms. Rosenstein, the middle school teacher who’d first taught her to take her thoughts seriously, always emboldened her.

“Good morning, teacher,” was the listless reply.

“Today,” she said, “we have a guest. Some of you have noticed that I have a friend visiting from the United States. Well, he’s coming to our class in a few minutes.” To confront the speculation, she’d invited Cash to class. Perhaps they’d like him. Anything was possible. “You can ask him questions, or just talk.”

Angel raised his hand. He wore a polo shirt embossed with the logo for Enterprise Rentals over the pocket. Some of the more fashion conscious kids picked through the Goodwill piles, searching for brand names. It didn’t matter which. “Can we ask him any question?”
"Yes and no," she said. "Some things are rude to ask, private things. Anything else is okay."

"How will I know if it is too private?"

"I'll tell you," she said. He'd been pushing her buttons even more than usual lately. A sharky boy, he probably sensed her weakness. He'd make a good American, and out of all her students, he had the best shot at finding a way north, if he wanted to. She actually had no idea about Angel's ambitions. He rubbed her the wrong way, so she avoided him outside of class.

Cash walked in. "Hi," he said, ducking under a rafter.

"Hello," Angel, and only Angel, replied. The boy's eyes lit hungrily on Cash, and Marilyn mistrusted this interest.

"Everyone," Marilyn said, edging away to give Cash the floor, "meet my friend from home, Mr. Platt." He smiled and shoved his hands in his coat pocket.

"Cash, why don't you tell them a little about yourself. I'm sure they're curious."

"Well," he said, aiming his voice slightly over their heads, "I'm from Pennsylvania, same as Miss Gold. You know that though. I ride a bike, a motorcycle. I play drums." The door swung open. Laura rushed in and froze at the sight of the stranger. Her eyes darted around and fixed on Marilyn. She clutched a tiny bouquet of yellow daisies in her fist.

"This is Cash," Marilyn told her. "Have a seat, dear." Laura approached the bench, paused, and shoved the flowers toward Marilyn, who took them and sniffed deeply. They had no clear scent.
Angel raised his hand. "¿Está tu novio?" he asked.

Marilyn laughed, entirely uncomfortable with the question. "No," she said.

"Are you her novio?" Angel redirected the question to Cash. "Her boyfriend?"

Cash turned to Marilyn and the question in his eyes was apparent to everyone in the room. "I don't know," Cash said. "We're trying to figure that out."

"We're friends," Marilyn said.

"Why is he here?" Laura asked. The hostility in the question surprised Marilyn. Up until now she'd seemed incapable of anything but passive sweetness.

"Ask him," she said, mildly annoyed. "He's right here." Laura didn't repeat the question, so Marilyn translated for Cash.

He tipped his hat back and rubbed his mouth. "Why are any of us here?" he replied without conviction.

"Miss Gold is here to teach us," Laura said.

"He wants to rob the babies," Angel said in conspiratorial Spanish, grinning at his audience of three. Cash stood up there, helpless and too tall to miss while the kids mumbled and laughed. Marilyn considered ways to proceed. She could draw pictures on the board, of a motorcycle, of drums. She could facilitate a whole list of new vocabulary. But even the thought of actually teaching exhausted her. A soft sound from the front row drew her attention. Laura was sobbing silently. Tears welled up and burst down her cheeks. The stem of one of the flowers in Marilyn's hand had bent, and the head dipped as if embarrassed.
"What's wrong," she asked when Laura's crying quelled the other children's mirth. Cash squatted like a bullfrog and looked longingly toward the door.

Laura squeezed the last tears from her eyes and wiped her face. She explained that this morning her mother had forbidden her to come to classes anymore, and had locked her in the hut. As soon as her mother left to wash the clothes, Laura escaped through a window. She began to cry again. "Then I got here and he was in front of the class instead of you," she told Marilyn.

Marilyn's head was spinning as the implications settled in. "You ran away from home to come to class?" she asked.

Laura nodded, sniffling. "I didn't want to miss anything," she explained.

"Sweetheart," Marilyn began, but couldn't continue. She needed to tell Laura to go back home, to stay away from San Francisco el Alto. She would cause trouble not only for herself, but for Marilyn and the Peace Corps. Maybe for gringos all over the country. But how could Marilyn ask a girl who actually wanted to learn to give that opportunity up, to quietly retire to illiterate peasantry like the rest of the girls in her village? The desire to protect herself and her institution bumped against something in Marilyn she hadn't known existed, an immovable wall of conviction. Damn the torpedoes, she wouldn't send Laura away.

"What kind of motorcycle do you ride," Angel asked in English, apparently unimpressed by Laura's troubles.

Cash dragged his eyes from the doorway and lifted his head. "A '74 Harley Sportster," Cash said. "1000 ccs."
“Harley Davidson,” Angel incanted. Cash began to tell a story of his road trip across the country, when the kick starter broke from its housing and he had to bump start the bike halfway across America. Marilyn remembered the bike well, a piece of junk that rattled her teeth when she rode on the back. Once she’d waited with saddlebags full of groceries in a parking lot for forty-five minutes while Cash kicked at the starter, cursing with every ounce of fury he possessed. She felt sorry for him, and a little frightened. Finally she’d called up a friend, who picked her up. She glanced over her shoulder as they drove off. Cash was too intent upon screaming at the machine to notice she’d gone.

“That’s right,” Cash said. “There’s nothing as free as the open road.”

“Free?” Angel asked. “I thought it meant something else.”

Caruthers woke early to see Chucho Cruz about the documentos. He opened his safe, and counted the money there. The checkpoint episode had cost him more than just a beating. Paying off Chucho Cruz would eat up every last penny, an even thousand quetzales that he counted, folded once and shoved into his front pocket.

Chuco Cruz worked out of an office above a tipica vendor across the street from Ick’s, where in busier times he’d pop in to receive a free drink, chat up traveling
girls, and generally make everyone tense. Caruthers, tense even now, entered the store
and climbed the back stairway to a door painted with block letters spelling “Policia.”
He pushed through and confronted the stern matriarch who manned the front desk.
Rumor had it she’d been one of Chucho Cruz’ favorite prostitutes decades before. She
blinked at him as an owl might, pursed the thin lips painted a burgundy that verged on
black. “Estoy aquí para señor Aguilara,” Caruthers told her, though no doubt she
recognized him and knew his business. She wore her black hair piled on her head in a
foggy column, and her dusky skin hung slackly from her face. She held a comic
pamphlet featuring a blond damsel with unearthly cleavage fleeing from a knife-
wielding shadow.

“Hay un gringo,” she called, and Chucho Cruz appeared at the doorway behind her, chewing on something.

He cleared his throat and squinted while searching for his English and perhaps
Caruthers’ name. He swallowed. “My good, good friend. How are you?” he said,
waving Caruthers forward. As always, Caruthers felt somehow embarrassed to be
several inches taller than Chucho, who embraced Caruthers around the waist,
squeezed hard enough to hurt his kidneys. Caruthers, not a hugger, couldn’t help
squirming. “What’s the matter,” Chucho Cruz asked, stepping back and contorting his
blockish face into an expression of distress. “You think Chucho Cruz is a maricón?”
Caruthers began to deny the accusation, but Cruz laughed, embracing Caruthers once
again and kissing him lightly on the cheek. “No, senor, I can tell you I am no maricón.
You think?”
“No, nada, nunca,” Caruthers agreed, and followed the chief of police into his office. Cruz wore black jeans, tight over his huge hips and thighs, a silky shirt tucked in, cowboy boots. A gold watch pinched his fat wrist, as several rings did his sausage fingers. Yet his shoulders sloped like a woman’s, and his neck seemed too thin to properly hold up his large head. He sat his desk, which angled off a corner of the room. The room’s window looked down on the strip, right into Ick’s bar.

“I feel sad my good friend is not come to see me,” he claimed, indicating that Caruthers should sit in the wooden chair before the desk.

“Sadness doesn’t adequately describe my emotions over the state of our relationship,” Caruthers risked answering. Cruz appeared not to have listened, his tactic for covering the voids in his English. Caruthers removed the expired letter from his back pocket and handed it across the desk. He had no idea of he could actually go to the capitol and legally procure the papers he needed to live and work in Guatemala, and even if he was able, it was far too late to go over Cruz’s head. Chucho studied the letter while caressing his thin mustache.

“Marta,” he called. His secretary appeared and after a brief exchange, she accepted the letter and returned to her desk. Outside, two children chased a dog down the street, laughing and flinging stones. A vendor joined in by launching his own stone at the distracted dog, which yelped and continued to run with its ass tucked to the ground. Caruthers removed his passport from his pocket and opened it to the page with the expired stamp. “Otro,” he said, having forgotten the word for stamp. Cruz collected the passport. The sound of slow typing came from the other room, an odd
little song whose rhythm Caruthers could almost feel. "Mind if I drink?" he asked, removing a flask from his coat. Cruz glanced up from the passport and smiled.

"Senor Norman, you have many pockets, many alcohols."

"Verdad," Caruthers said, and drank. He offered the flask to Cruz, who shooed it away.

"Enjoy," he said. "I'm working." The typing picked up speed. Cruz stared at the passport for one more moment, and retrieved a stamping contraption from a desk drawer. "One thousand quetzales for the license; five hundred for the visa."

Caruthers felt sick to his stomach, and his face prickled with hot pinpoints. "But," he started, and faltered at Cruz' frown. Caruthers was reminded that he was looking into the eyes of someone who'd kill on a whim.

"Some problem?"

"No," Caruthers said, and unfolded the bills onto the desk. "No, nada, nunca problemas."

"Ah, excellent," Cruz said, his former good cheer restored.

"But I only have one thousand right now." Cruz raised his eyes to Caruthers and offered a look not entirely threatening. "What I paid last year," Caruthers concluded.

"Well, senor, what do you call it? Inflation." He displayed an expanse of square teeth. The secretary entered the room with the letter. "Okay. No problem. One thousand for the letter," he said, glancing over the print and signing with a flourish, "and you return for the visa." He put away the stamping machine.
"How about I buy the stamp today, and come back for the letter?" Caruthers asked. Cruz regarded Caruthers for a moment, then looked up at the ceiling. "Aye, yi, yi," he muttered, exasperated.

"No," Caruthers quickly put in, uncapping his flask. "You are totally right. Excellent plan. Perfecto."

Cruz rubbed his face, unmollified, but patient, like one dealing with a troublesome, favorite child. He counted the money and folded it into his breast pocket before shoving the letter to Caruthers. "Thank you," Caruthers said, standing. He turned, paused, and again faced Cruz. "Excuse me," he said, a submissive grin smeared across his face, "el pasaporte."

Cruz looked at the creased, blue booklet, picked it up and tossed it to Caruthers, who fumbled and dropped it to the floor. "Careful, you. You can find much problems without a visa."

"I'll come back as soon as I make the money," Caruthers promised, stooping. At the door, he curtailed the urge to complain to Cruz that he’d been shaken down already, the same impulse that moves children to try to set one parent against the other. Caruthers recalled from his own brief history as a father that the tactic never worked for long. The powerful inevitably stuck together against the powerless. He escaped the office of the Chief of Police and practically ran to Ick’s place for a quick one before his route. Ick would spot him a drink or two.
Monday morning, Max paused a moment at the school’s gates. He feared two things: that Gabriela had simply changed her mind and he was about to create an awkward situation; or that something terrible had happened, and he was walking into it. She wasn’t in the courtyard. Diego, speaking on the phone in the office, held up a finger to signal for Max to wait. In a moment he hung up. “Señor Ash. ¿Qué pasa? You seek more Spanish?”

“Actually,” Max replied, “I’m looking for Gabriela.” Diego considered Max for a moment, eyes large behind the huge, horn rimmed glasses.

“She quit,” he said at last. “Ya se fue.” Max followed him out of the office, where Diego called together the teachers and students in the courtyard. Apparently they were about to embark on another of Diego’s field trips.

“Is she alright?” Max asked.

“Ah, yes, sure,” Diego said. “No problem.” He didn’t seem to want to talk about it.

“So you know where she is?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know she’s okay?”

Diego laughed. He removed the glasses, and his face without them looked worried and young. “You gringos are like lawyers, no? Always thinking that there’s a
lie.” He found a worn machete laying in a flower bed and handed it to Max. “Come with us. I need extra brazos, arms. Maybe you’ll learn something.”

“I really need to find Gabriela,” Max said. “I don’t have time for church.”

“No, no. The last one was religion, this one is work. Two of the necessary things in life.”

“One of them is necessary at least,” Max countered, and Diego only smiled.

“How about a bargain,” he said. “Americans love a good deal, no? You help me today and I tell you where to look for Gabriela. Justo?” Max agreed that it was fair.

The bus bore “Momo” on its marquee. It took them through Cuatro Caminos and deposited them a mile past the town of San Francisco el Alto. The day was gray and bright, and the sun invisible. They hiked into a pine forest. Max hacked at a limb with his machete, as he’d seen jungle adventurers do on television. He’d done it in a spirit of irony, but he still felt foolish.

The path leveled off and brought them to a village of mud huts with tin or tarpapered roofs. They’d come, Diego announced to his group, while the curious villagers gathered around, to install brick stoves with chimneys in the huts. The tribe had been dying off in significant rates from carcinogen-induced disease, especially emphysema, caused by cook fires without ventilation. Max was depressed by the shabby surroundings.

He was put on brick sawing duty, transforming large blocks of adobe into small blocks of adobe by rasping slowly through with the dull machete, greatly
diminishing the romance of that tool. The work was tedious, and appeared unappreciated by the huts’ owners, tall, thin men who stood bare-chested in sandals watching with arms crossed.

Occasionally women would hustle by to capture a look at the visitors before disappearing into the pines. A pair of young girls appeared at the edge of the forest, giggling coquettishly until the men of the village shooed them away. For lunch an old woman passed around a hubcap filled with stunted yellow apples.

Max gnawed two apples and wandered away from the work area, wiping dust onto his pants. He cut around one of the outlying huts and almost ran into a young man who sat in a wooden chair with a book open on his lap. “Con permiso,” Max said, retreating.

“No, it’s okay,” the villager replied, closing the book but saving the page with his finger.

“You speak English?”

“No, no much. You Espanish?”

“Un pocito.” Max stared at the man, wondering what came next. He wore a polo shirt, a pair of jeans and sneakers, and regarded Max with wide-set, friendly eyes. Max recognized the book on his lap as the ubiquitous: Yo Soy Rigoberto Menchu. Max had been meaning to pick up a copy, but deep down he feared it would oppress him with demeaning labor and pride in one’s traditions. “Tu libro. Está bueno?”
“So-so.” The man smiled, exposing a silver front tooth. He stood and opened the door to the hut. “Come,” he said, beckoning Max into the dark room. Apart from the usual necessities, a clock disguised as a three-foot long gold watch hung as a wall decoration, along with a poster of the pop star Madonna, and a framed document, a diploma, upon closer inspection. The young man read, and appreciated pop music, yet here he languished in a subsistence farming community. Max wondered how this situation had come to be. “Nice,” he said. “I like the room.”

Outside, the man, who introduced himself as Esteban, brought out another chair and invited Max to join him, overlooking a young corn field and beyond, a gray strip of river where several women beat fabric upon rocks. Communicating through a mix of Spanish and English, Max learned that the village had pooled its resources to send him alone to eight years of Catholic school to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic so that he might act as an ambassador to the outside world. Max later admitted he hailed from California, embarrassed by his luck to be from such a storied land. He tried to convey the vacuous oppression of Hesperia, christened “hysteria” by high school cynics. “You know Hollywood?” Esteban asked.

“Mas o menos,” Max replied, thinking of the Guatemalan tabloids, which, when not inventing stories about blood sucking mystery creatures or baby-stealing gringos, wasted their paper on the minutia of the lives of celebrities. “It’s no big deal,” Max said, but Esteban didn’t seem to follow. In Spanish Max suggested that Esteban could visit there one day.
Esteban swiped his hand through the air as if a mosquito had buzzed his face.

"No," he shook his head, smiling rather bitterly, "no."

"Why not? Anything is possible."

Esteban turned his eyes on Max. He wouldn’t be visiting California, or anywhere, Max understood. His village had sent him to school at great expense and he had a duty to them. Education hadn’t given him opportunities, only the desire for those opportunities, and weighty responsibility. Max had gone to college because the state of California had offered to pay tuition and it had seemed like a good excuse to move away from his hometown. The thought had never occurred to him that he owed anyone anything for his education. In fact, he’d felt the opposite. The world owed him for his studies. “For you, maybe,” Esteban said. “Anything is possible. I have to stay.”

Max felt guilty around Esteban, and bade him farewell. Diego had apparently worked through lunch, having taken up Max’s machete duty. “You back?” he asked without looking up from the disintegrating brick.

“No,” Max said. “But I think I’ve done enough. How about you tell me where to find Gabriela now.” Diego kept sawing.

“Friend,” he said, and set the machete down, “my advice is to forget her. She’s not going to be your girlfriend. I’m very sorry, but when people are gone in Guatemala, they’re gone.”

“She’s disappeared then. She’s been captured.”

“No,” he said. “Not exactly. Don’t trouble yourself. She’s safe, I think. But you’ll never see her again.”
“Is she still in the country?”

Diego threw his hands skyward. “Please, amigo, déjame en paz. I’ve already said far too much. Please don’t ever mention her, or me out loud. Ever. I mean it.”

“I’ll leave you in peace. Just give me something, anything. You said you’d tell me how to find her.” In fact, Max wasn’t certain he wanted to find her anymore, or even look, but the negotiation with Diego had taken on its own life. Max didn’t want to let him off the hook, didn’t want to lose.

Diego resumed scraping. “She lived in Totonicapán. I don’t know the address, but she taught English and Spanish at a factory owned by gringos. Maybe they’ll remember her. I don’t know any more.”

“Thank you,” Max said. “I’ll never mention your name or repeat anything you’ve said.”

Diego cut his eyes up at Max, and extended his free hand. “I hope you mean it. This is no game.” Max shook his hand. The fine brick dust felt silky, and for the second time in minutes he was ashamed, first because of what he couldn’t do, and now because of what he could do, but wouldn’t.
Jonathan Stubbs showed up unexpected at Marilyn’s door. He stood with hands in pockets, draped in the customary self-deprecation. “How’ve you been?” he asked.

Cash stood behind Marilyn, eating a sandwich. “I’m sorry to barge in.”

Marilyn shrugged. “Enter,” she said. She’d never been in the same room with two former lovers before, not like this. She didn’t enjoy it.

Jonathan removed a bandana from his back pocket and wiped his face. “I’m here in an official capacity.”

“Honestly?” Marilyn asked. She suspected otherwise.

“Do you want me to give you two some space?” Cash broke in.

Jonathan folded his bandana and returned it to his pocket. “Maybe.”

“Stay,” Marilyn said. She didn’t want to hide anything. It was too much work.

Jonathan cleared his throat and withdrew a folded paper from the breast pocket of his polo shirt. “One of your students, Laura Kukumatz Trujillo,” he read from the paper.

“Laura?” Marilyn asked, only surprised for a moment. Of course Jonathan was here about Laura. What else?

“A young man from her village visited our office, a community representative of sorts. Apparently the girl had taken to running away from home to attend your class.” Jonathan directed this information toward a plaster, knockoff Mayan calendar fastened to the wall over the couch. “The mother is angry and superstitious. She’s accused you, repeatedly and to anyone who will listen, of brainwashing her daughter, of casting spells. She calls you a witch.” Jonathan adjusted his ball cap and pulled the
bill down over his eyes. For a moment he was Cash’s twin. “The young representative was sympathetic to our side—he has some education—but he warned us that this woman could cause trouble.”

“Heavy,” Cash said.

Marilyn snorted. “A witch? That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, sure, but that’s what she believes, and we have to respect that.”

“What about respecting a girl who wants to learn something. What’s that worth?”

“Should we really be in the business of urging native peoples to abandon their traditions and seek out a western style way of life?” Jonathan said. “Your classes were meant to serve the citizens of San Francisco el Alto, an appropriate population for training. And furthermore, what do you think becomes of ninety nine percent of native peoples who move to the city, any city? Especially girls. Have you seen the red light area outside the embassy?”

“No, have you?”

Jonathan laughed. “Of course not. Not in that way. But I’ve seen the prostitutes walking the streets, and most of the girls in the clubs are of Mayan descent, statistically. That’s my point.”

“But what if a kid wants to move to the city?” Cash asked from the couch. “You know,” he continued, uncertain now. “What if a girl wants to be a prostitute?”

“Jesus, Cash,” Marilyn said, “nobody wants to be a prostitute.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant to say.”
“None of this matters,” Jonathan broke in. “The girl’s parents are serious. I didn’t come to negotiate. If she returns to your class you are to contact me immediately. Under no circumstance should you teach her anymore. This is not the right time to be accused of casting spells on little girls.”

“Goodbye, Jonathan,” Marilyn said, and opened the door. “This conversation is over.”

He looked at her with that hangdog expression firmly in place. But he was resolute. She rather respected him for that. It somehow freed her of responsibility to him. “I never wanted to cause you any grief,” he explained.

“I mean it. Time to go.”

He folded the paper and placed it back in his pocket. At the door, he turned his hurt face to Cash, casting a signal that way. Marilyn really disliked him.

“What was that all about?” Cash asked when the door had closed.

“What was what about?”

“That look. Everything about that guy.”

“Please, Cash, not you too.”

“Me too what?” he asked, and Marilyn locked her fingers in her hair. One more word and she would scream. “Did you fuck him?” he asked, and that did it.
Caruthers put the bus in neutral and coasted the final stretch into Pana. The BDM he called it, Big Drift Maneuver. “Baja,” someone yelled from the back, so Caruthers stepped on the clutch and brake, downshifted and pulled over to let the passenger off half a mile from the city. Where do these cats go, he wondered, as the young Mayan man disappeared off the steep ridge at the edge of the road, into the tropical salad surrounding Atitlan. He got the bus back up to speed and popped it out of gear, but now the red light at the edge of town blocked his flow once again. Not a good day for momentum, he decided, which was a shame since he had to meet his son for what Patricia called a “late luncheon.”

Normally, he didn’t “do” lunch—breakfast or dinner either for that matter. And he never missed the communal ceremonies attending these meals, or any of the formalities of his old life, times that had always highlighted the fact that he never felt the way he was supposed to feel: happy, or at least content. Maybe all men who married and had children, took a job when they were supposed to, felt as Caruthers had, but if so those others hid their disappointment more successfully. He dropped off the last passengers in Pana, and parked in his alley. “Well, Seba. Another day. We’re still alive.”

“It’s true,” Seba replied in Spanish. Caruthers counted out fifteen quetzales and placed them on Seba’s palm. “Thanks, patrón,” said the ayudante, and walked off into the afternoon. As he’d done when the Mayan hopped off at the edge of nowhere, Caruthers tried to imagine how Seba used his spare time, but he couldn’t picture him
anywhere but the bus. Failure of the imagination. The guy might be king of the United Association of Ayudantes for all Caruthers knew.

He exited and hobbled down a narrow walkway between a launder and a recently defunct travel agency. Soon he emerged onto the strip, walked inland half a block and climbed the stairs to his apartment over El Jacal, a breakfast and lunch joint whose fumes of garlic and roast pork had set permanently into the walls of Caruthers’ room.

He pulled a beer from the fridge for the walk to the restaurant, recalling the day he’d sat down, drunker than usual, and told his wife for the first time that he wanted out. She’d melted before his eyes, total shock. He’d initially felt sympathetic and wished to take his words back, but soon he felt scorn for a woman who refused to see the world before her eyes. But he’d married her, this person whose vision conformed perfectly to her wishes. He’d sensed the betrayal of Self from the beginning, and for one week he’d taken a stand by breaking off the engagement. In the end, though, after talks with his father, his mother, the pastor of their church—people he had scant respect for—he and Pam reconciled. That compromise resulted in a fat lie in the center of his heart, and like an ant queen it spawned endless little lies that grew up large and strong and left the nest to wreak havoc on everything around him. No way to make up for the mistakes of the past, he thought, but he’d at least be honest with the kid, for whatever that was worth.

His son sat at one of the tables in front of El Patio, sucking on a straw protruding from a bottle of Coke. A couple of tables away, Ick listened passively to a
guy named Frank, a Viet Nam vet with two prosthetic arms starting at the biceps and ending in steel pinchers. Frank gestured wildly with these impressive pink tools. A large white gauze pad with a blood stain on the center decorated his big dome of a bald head, angled slightly off center, like an artist’s beret.

Junior stood and shook Caruthers’s hand before he had a chance to sit. “It’s times like this,” Caruthers whispered, squeezing as he cast a glance over at the other table “that I appreciate my hands.”

“That’s not funny, Dad.”

“I know, I know, nothing’s funny to a Christian.”

“You don’t know about my sense of humor. You don’t know me at all.”

Caruthers looked away and scratched the bug bite on his hand, which had just flared up again. “Fair enough,” he said. “Just trying to start things off on a light note.”

“Well, I appreciate that, but this man’s been through things neither of us can imagine. He’s disturbed. I’ve been listening.”

It was difficult to avoid. Frank was positively frothing. “With a rock,” he said, clamping his pinchers. “That fucker Mario and his puto friends hit me with a rock. I know it’s him. I know that son of a bitch. And I know you know where he is, Ick. Don’t fuck with me.”

Ick sipped his beer. “He didn’t come to work last night. If I see him I’ll tell him you’re looking for him.”
“You don’t need to tell him jack shit, because that little fucker is a dead man. Fifty U.S. dollars. That’s how much it’ll take to wipe him and his friends off the face of the planet. And you know how much money I’ve got in my pocket right now?”

Ick raised his eyebrows. “You carrying cash after just getting rolled?”

“Yeah, and that’s not all I’m carrying. I’m sick of the abuse, Ick, the blatant lack of respect. I’m going to do something about it.”

Ick nodded very slowly, as if on the verge of an idea. “You sure you just didn’t pass out and hit your head last night? And some bum went through your pockets, or maybe you just spent all your cash and don’t remember?”

“No Ick. I know what I know.” But Frank didn’t seem so sure anymore.

“I’m just thinking it would be a shame to spend all that money getting a kid killed who might not have done anything. Not to mention you maybe getting tagged for it. The cops get lucky once in a while, and I’m not sure if you’d have the money to get out of it. Chucho Cruz is back in town, too. I seen him yesterday. You don’t want that guy up your ass. And me, why, I’d have to find a new cleaning boy. I’ve got Mario trained and all. That’s a major pain in my ass that I don’t currently have to deal with. A lot of hassles, is what I’m saying.”

Frank clipped a beer with a pincher and chugged. “No. That’s all I’m saying. No to your bullshit. I’m not listening.”

Ick sipped his beer and the two drank in silence.

“Jeez,” Junior said, leaning across the table, “do you think we should do something?” He seemed animated, a new kind of person from the other night with his
family. He bet Junior read crime novels. He wondered if the kid ever spanked his wife, and hoped that he did.

“Do what?”

“I don’t know. Call the police or something.”

“No, Junior. I don’t think even God loves a snitch.”

A stormy expression came and passed from the kid’s face. He smiled. “Well, God loves everyone, but I get your point.” He sucked on the straw until the Coke gurgled. “But we can’t let him get an innocent child killed, can we?”

“Mario isn’t what you’d call innocent. None of us are in my opinion. But I don’t think Frank’ll do it. He’ll spend all his disability check on booze before he finds a hit man, and in a couple of days he’ll be outraged at something else.”

“Are you sure?” Junior asked skeptically.

“Not sure about anything, but I think I’m right. You seen a waitress?” Junior looked over his shoulder toward the kitchen. The place was pleasant, would have been more so if the fountain in the center were functioning. Caruthers hadn’t been here in months, years maybe. Just tended to forget what was outside his circuit. Finally a waitress with a pretty, mestiza face and pear-shaped body came around and stared darkly at Caruthers’ empty beer bottle. “Cabro,” he told her.

“Imperial,” she countered, scratching in her booklet. Junior ordered a plate of food, and after both he and the girl focused their negativity on Caruthers he ordered the same.
“Just to be sociable,” he added in English. The girl finished her note-taking and wandered off. Frank started laughing. Two boys in army fatigues and M16s slung over their shoulders sauntered by on the road and paused to stare unabashedly at him.

“What are you lookin’ at?” Frank muttered, but not loud enough for the soldiers to hear.

“Do you ever get scared?” Junior asked casually. The girl plopped Caruthers’ beer down, causing the foam to boil over onto the table. She didn’t bother to wipe off the mess.

“Scared of what? You mean in a church-like way. Scared of the great empty sky and all that? Or scared of one of those army gremlins putting a bullet in my head?”

“Either one, I guess, but I was thinking of just plain living here in Guatemala, during a civil war.” Junior dropped a straw into his new Coke, and Caruthers managed not to tell him to drink it like a grown up. “I have to admit, I’ve been nervous, before coming and now that I’m here. Not for me, but for the girls and Patty.”

“You don’t have that thing where you trust in God and don’t care about dying?”

“I do trust in God, but He makes us afraid for a reason. He’s got us here for a purpose, and we’re not supposed to get ourselves killed before doing our work.”

“Some of these bus drivers, the really religious ones are a menace precisely because they don’t care about death, theirs or any of their passengers’. They got these
stickers, ‘Dios es me guia’ or ‘Confio in Dios.’ Say what you will about His all-powerfulness, I don’t let God drive my bus.”

Junior seemed to consider his father’s words. “He doesn’t drive the bus,” he said, “but He teaches us to drive.”

Caruthers was bored, and regretted bringing God into the picture. “How’d your brother get locked up?” he asked, to change the subject.

“Drugs.”

Caruthers waited a moment, but Junior didn’t expound.

“That’s too bad,” Caruthers said. “Where’s that girl? My beer’s been dry for a half an hour.”

“More like half a minute.”

Caruthers managed to flag down the waitress, who brought him another beer without being asked. She wasn’t so bad after all.

“So, you never answered my question. Are you afraid?”

“Not so much. The military have the upper hand and they don’t bother the Americanos. Not much anyway,” he said, “unless you fuck up. And the rebels, I don’t see them around. I don’t know if they really exist, and if they do they never bother me.”

“What about the baby kidnapping? The attacks?”

“The peasants only attack women, and I’m a man.” Caruthers thought he might have more to add on that count. He had doubts about the veracity of the assaults, and wasn’t immune to not-so-wild theories about faked atrocities, military
men raping and pillaging disguised as rebels. Corruption of the media. In the case of
the baby robbing violence, the timing was convenient, occurring with full color press
and even a stretch of sickening video just at the point when the middle class was on
the verge of ousting from office the present wave of American puppets. The coverage
of the peasant violence sent a shiver of fear down the collective spine of the voting
public, shifting the country heavily back to the law and order Right, back to the days
when Death Squads were acceptable. But this type of speculation only made
Caruthers angry, and so he avoided thinking or talking about injustice and politics.

"Isn't that," Junior paused, "selfish?"

The careful manner that his son posed the question irritated the hell out of
Caruthers. He wished the kid would just come right out and accuse him, if that's what
he wanted to do. "First off, I was only stating a fact about my personal danger level to
answer a direct question. But to answer your second question, hell yes I'm selfish.
Haven't you figured anything out about me? Everybody is selfish, especially, in my
opinion, those who think they have the one big answer and are always out trying to
convince everyone else of it. They get so caught up meddling in everyone else's
business they forget to take care of themselves. No more self help for me. And
especially no more helping anyone else. Here I am," he presented his palms to Junior
as if surrendering, "corrupt, drunk, failed, et cetera, and I'm not getting any better.
Take a look around. This place is a nightmare. Do you really think trying to talk these
hybrid Catholics who really still believe in their old corn gods into a new kind of
Christianity is going to help the situation?"
The girl dropped two plates piled with beans, rice and chicken onto the table. Caruthers asked her for another beer, which she pulled from the pocket in her apron and plunked down before him. "We do more than convert," Junior said when she'd left. "We feed the poor, teach them to read and write. And maybe we can't ease all the pain in the world, but at least we try." Caruthers wished he'd just kept his mouth shut.

Junior began scooping spoonfuls of beans into his mouth, while Caruthers pulled a string of sinew from his chicken. Ick stood, dropped some bills on the table and departed, glancing over at Caruthers, shaking his head a little. He'd heard Caruthers' rant, and no doubt had an opinion about it.

"So back to my first question, you don't ever get scared?"

Caruthers thought about it and concluded that no, he did not. "I only have two emotional states these days. Most of the time I'm numb, just watch the world roll under me, driving on auto pilot. And sometimes when I catch the news, or hear some talk I get pissed off. What really gets me is the Americans. They haven't changed at all. Still supporting a bunch of murderers so the super rich can get even more rich. Meanwhile, the tourists buy the Indian blankets and think the kids are so damn cute, go back home and vote for that halfwit of a president. The hypocrisy drives me crazy. These tourists, these voters, are practically slaughtering the Indians themselves, but they sit there so smugly with their cups of coffee and their half-assed Spanish. I feel like slicing their throats." Caruthers was aware that he'd raised his voice so that even Frank seemed alarmed, but he couldn't cool down now. It felt good, a replacement for sex, to be angry now and then. "They actually think that chimpanzee is some kind of
hero, and he thinks he is too."

"That's the president you're talking about, I suppose."

"Of course," Caruthers said.

"It's not that simple and you know it. Communism is real, and it's evil. Terrorism is evil. I don't know all the history of Guatemala, but the Berlin Wall came down and Democracy is spreading all over the world. The president is doing the right thing, taking America in the right direction. And he's a whole lot better than that pervert we had before him."

Caruthers loathed his son, the stupid, glib look on his doughy face. "I feel like smashing this bottle over your head. You know that?" Caruthers pushed away his plate, and chugged some beer. He relished the transformation of Junior's face, the slow movement to surprise, outrage, then bratty defiance.

"You think you could take me?"

"Oh yes. You're just a ball of play dough."

Junior leaned forward aggressively and showed his height. Caruthers guessed he'd never been in more than a shoving match in his life. Ten days in county—which one, Caruthers wondered. "You, you can hardly get out of that chair, you weak..." the boy searched, "weak man."

"But I'm meaner than you, son." Caruthers said this in a quiet voice. He was no longer mad. Rather, he felt somehow satisfied to have rattled the Christian. "Much meaner than you can imagine."
Junior stared at him for a few beats, and looked away. “I should have known. I really shouldn’t have hoped for anything. But at least I didn’t expect to be physically threatened. I’m done,” he said, and dropped a balled-up paper napkin onto the table. Caruthers experienced a tweak of guilt as the boy walked off, and he wondered if this would be the final vision of his son. Frank, who had been listening, chuckled. “Care to join me for a drink, Norm?”

“Sure,” Caruthers said, climbing to his feet. “I’ll drink with anyone.”

Max bought fried chicken and limp fries from the only vendor working Totonicapan’s central plaza. The city had a desolate feeling, enhanced by the damaged church tower rising above the square. But the chicken was good. “Delicioso,” he said, as a way to ingratiate himself to the vendor.

“Manteca,” the man replied, and said no more. The word meant lard. The vendor’s saggy eyelids made him look sleepy, and he otherwise didn’t seem to welcome conversation. Max enjoyed for a moment another ironic twist resulting from his travels. Like most American males, he’d always played to the stereotype of his kind by refusing to ask directions. But now, after having shed that prideful resistance to help, he found himself surrounded by locals who hoarded their words, toward strangers at least, like gold. Perhaps what they knew and he didn’t was as valuable as gold.
“¿Sabes que si hubiera una fabrica de gringos por aquí?” he enunciated, suspecting by the end that he’d technically asked after a factory that made white people.

Without pause, the vendor pointed a knobby finger south, and raised it to a hill outside of town. He knew very well where they fabricated the gringos. Max navigated started in that direction. After a few blocks, he came upon an accident involving a jalopy and a junk cart. A small crowd watched two men argue over the rusty things scattered across the road, while the burro attached to the cart stood with its back to the ruckus, as if above such trifling. Oh, to be that burro, Max thought, weaving through the trouble.

The road led to the top of the hill, where a dirt drive separated two steel warehouses. Back the way he’d come, Totonicapan radiated out from the central plaza in the shape of a spider’s web. The church with the damaged tower sat in the center. On the other side of the hill, a shanty bunched against the slope like scraps blown into a fence. Max faintly heard blades moaning through lumber. An old Chevy pickup, clicking and pinging as the engine cooled, was parked in the drive. He opened the door to the nearer building and stuck in his head. An old man wearing something resembling a fez brushed varnish onto a chair painted with all manner of primitive designs. “Hola,” Max said. The worker didn’t respond, so Max stepped into the busy room. A young woman and a man standing in the far corner, surely Americans, turned toward Max. He recognized the man as the pale gringo who’d been dancing at the banda show. Dressed in a floppy típica sun hat and a pinstriped business suit that was
much too large on him, he’d hardly tamed his look. “Can I help you?” he asked in English. Max was nearly ready to be won over by the crazy get up.

“Maybe,” Max said. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Aren’t we all,” the pale man said to his short, pretty companion.

“Be quiet,” she said, and slapped him playfully on the shoulder with a clipboard.

Max approached, sidestepping a boy wearing a California Angels cap dabbing paint onto a trunk with a pencil thin brush. “Livermore,” the man said, extending his hand. “Kenneth, but you can call me Ken.” Max introduced himself and participated in a limp handshake. “This is Ms. Cindy Farmer.” The young woman shook Max’s hand, a pleasant experience. She brought to mind circles, a curvy body and a round face distinguished by pink ovals on her cheeks and rimless glasses.

“You here for the job?” she asked.

“No,” Max said. “I didn’t know there was a job. I’m looking for a young lady named Gabriela Arias Valle, a Spanish teacher.”

“I remember Gabriela,” Ken Livermore said. “A pretty gal. I’m sorry it didn’t work out with her.” Livermore whirled suddenly. “Pick it up,” he shouted in ugly Spanish, miming the action of carrying something. The boy with the Angels cap had been sliding a table across the floor. He paused for a short bitter moment and lifted the table.

Max decided not to examine the incident too closely. “You don’t happen to know where she lived?” he asked.
Livermore looked Max over. “I don’t think I can give out that information,” he said, then laughed. “I’m just kidding,” he said. “But really, I don’t know. She worked here a while ago. She lived in town, with her parents I think. I might have the old address in my files.”

“I’d really appreciate the information, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“I thought for sure you’d be here for the job,” Cindy Farmer put in. “We’ve got flyers up all over the traveler spots in Xela. But we haven’t seen much interest yet. I think everyone’s left the country, because of the attacks.” A thin man with a drooping mustache looked up to check out Max. He bent back to his work and dragged a tool that looked like a homemade comb across a field of glistening maroon on the side of a large trunk.

“It’s a traditional technique,” Livermore said. Though no older than Max, he stooped like an old man, and tended to rest his hands on his ribcage with arms akimbo. He flung one of these hands out toward the painter and snapped it back in. “Francisco takes his tools home every night, like they’re some national secret.”

“They are,” Farmer said. “His father passed them down.”

“We could replicate those tools in two hours if we wanted to,” Livermore countered. He turned to Max. “I just think it’s right to hire legitimate traditional painters. There’s the marketing side of it, of course, but we’re not just here for money.”

“What’s the job?” Max asked, and before he knew it, he was touring the shop, shaking hands with employees. Livermore introduced the old man in the fez as
Rigoberto, a varnisher, the lowest ranking position in the factory, Livermore told Max. “You’ll have to watch him if you take the job,” he continued. The old man didn’t appear to have any interest in the gringos’ talk. “He’s a drunk, misses work most Mondays, some Tuesdays. If he doesn’t show on Wednesday, you may have to hunt him down.” Then Livermore, with Cindy at his side, launched into a detailed explanation of the factory’s process, listing the names of every product and possible color scheme and design, all the U.S. cities where the product was shipped. Max began to wonder if a job so easily secured could be worth having. On the other hand, who else was hiring? The ayudante market certainly wasn’t looking rosy.

Soon the information pouring from Livermore took on the easy senselessness of a bubbling fountain. Max felt slightly high on the paint fumes. He stared at the paint-splattered floor and wiggled his toes to make small movements on the tops of his boots. Meanwhile, Ken’s dress shoes tapped, fanning their tassels at Cindy’s expensive hikers. Hello, Miss Gor Tex, Max thought. Did you know Mr. Loafer is in love with you? No? He’s not your type? Well then, allow me to introduce myself…

“I’m sorry?” he said. Livermore had apparently asked him a question.

“I said, do you want to see the house, talk some turkey?” Livermore repeated.

“Why not?” Max replied. “I’m fond of turkey.”

Livermore laughed, three sharp barks. “You’ll fit in great here,” he said.

“We’re always messing around, aren’t we Ms. Farmer?”

“Excuses me?” she said. She’d been scribbling on her clipboard. They left her to tend to the shop and hopped in the pickup. Livermore drove like a madman,
blasting his horn before charging through blind intersections. His side mirrors nearly clipped every parked car they passed. “You’ll get used to driving around here,” he shouted, a response to Max’s terror. “The capitol is even worse.”

They parked in a driveway beside a one story bungalow made of stone and concrete. The house, cool and dark inside, was simple and pleasant, with Spanish tile floors and local embroidery decorating the walls. It was a leap above anywhere he’d slept since his arrival. Livermore showed him what would be his bedroom should he take his job, and mentioned that they employed a maid. Max could barely hide his growing happiness. He’d never imagined that he would enjoy the services of a maid. And all he’d ever had to do was move to a developing country.

In the office, a small room equipped with a computer, a printer, a fax machine and a phone, Livermore leaned into a rolling chair and handed Max a contract. The position paid approximately $100 a month—which wasn’t bad for Guatemala, Livermore assured Max—and included room and board; for which compensation Max would work forty hours a week, and had to agree to stay at least three months. The last stipulation nagged Max. Three months was suddenly a long time, and though he could seek out Gabriela’s family from this vantage, he’d be stuck if she were elsewhere. “Don’t think about it too long,” Livermore joked.

“It’s a bigger decision than I first thought,” Max said.

“If you want to work, this is about the only game in town.”

Max reasoned that, if worse came to worse, he could always run out. He’d burned bridges before, and always felt terrific at first, until the reality settled in that
he’d only have to find another job anyway. After high school he’d worked rolling out huge swaths of material in a furniture factory that supplied low end department stores. He’d gone to lunch one day and decided to get drunk with his rollout partner rather than return to work. At first he’d thought the decision rash, but later he understood that he’d been building to it for weeks. The job had, for the first time in his life, allowed him a dimly scary glimpse down the long road of his life, all the way to the end. This road was nearly featureless, and straight as a ruler. Max had never regretted hopping off that road, in spite of the troubles it caused him, but from time to time he remembered collecting his final check, his supervisor’s disappointment, and the realization that his old friends had worked overtime to make up for Max’s freedom.

He signed the contract.

“Welcome aboard,” Livermore said. “You’ll start Monday.”

Max shook Livermore’s weak grip again, and left the bungalow. Piles of trash smoldered before every house down the street, and the air was sooty and gray. Max had seen this form of waste management before, in the poorer neighborhoods. He felt mildly ashamed, and only after searching did he locate the source in his father. If Dunny could do twenty five to life in a penitentiary, Max could handle three months carrying around a clipboard. He recalled a joke his father had written him, a grim little sample of prison yard humor. An old man is sentenced to eighty years. “But Judge,” the man complains, “I’ll never live that long.” “Don’t worry,” the judge assures him. “You’ll do your best.” Thoroughly depressed now, and beset by foul smoke and the stupid relentlessness of, of being alive, Max cast about for a way out of the funk, and.
He lit on the kid with the ball cap, and the feeling the boy inspired felt promising. The image of him dabbing paint, enduring Livermore's abuse, sparked an idea, a purpose, and like that, Max felt better; righteous anger replaced the mopey pathos, a welcome exchange. Next time Livermore wouldn't get away with shaming the boy. Max would make sure of that. He'd also defend the old drunk in the fez, the mustachioed painter and all the employees from Livermore's condescension. Max slid to the center of the road, ducking under the hovering smoke. Had he ever done anything for someone other than himself, he wondered, and was dismayed to find not a single instance. He began to run. His eyes were streaming by now, and his lungs burned. He rounded a corner, and found still more smoke and dirty fire.
The Rainy Season

Marilyn woke, alarmed by noise and quaking such that the world might have split asunder. She bit the web between her thumb and forefinger, a spot she used to suck on when a child. A moment later she recognized the sound as thunder, followed by the season’s first deluge, tattooing her metal roof as if every star in the sky had plummeted to earth. The night is mad, she intoned, half in dreams, half in a body pulsing with fear.

It was entirely dark, and late, after midnight, before dawn. The madrugada, they called it in Spanish, a word with no English equivalent. Cash shifted in his sleeping bag on the floor. She recalled a time, being towed in his car into a carwash, the windows a riot of spraying water, soapy rags lashing. With a smile for warning, he’d ducked to her skirt, pulled her underwear aside and tried to get his mouth on her.
Eventually he’d succeeded by lifting her off the seat with his right hand while she chuckled and tried to cooperate. Later, he’d explained that he’d always felt it unfair that only men got the auto head treatment. “Cash the feminist,” she’d commented.

She threw off the blankets, stepped out of bed and found him with her hands. He was sitting up, and without a word they embraced and kissed deeply. Thunder wracked the hut and the rain fell more insistently still. Marilyn wriggled out of her panties, and hooked the band of Cash’s shorts, worked them off his hips and with her toe pushed them to his ankles. She climbed onto him, enveloped him, still engaged in their initial kiss.

A moment later, bucking more and more wildly, she sat up, gripped Cash around his neck, dug her nails into the flesh surrounding his spine. He grunted and thrashed his head side to side. A bestial energy consumed her, and she yearned for a moment to taste his blood. When he came she continued to grind against the bone there, managing an orgasm before he went soft and slipped out. Drained and shivering, she collapsed on his chest. A calm satiation replaced the wildness in her.

The rain seemed to fall more gently. “I love you,” Cash said. “I always have.”

She felt she might break into tears, though she could not name the emotion that fueled the impulse. Not sadness, surely. “Yes,” she told him, and with this affirmation of nothing came a delicious sense of surrender. “God yes,” she said, and wept softly with relief. He held her, and in minutes slept. The storm raged as violently as ever, and hadn’t, she realized, ever abated at all. She did not follow Cash into sleep. A sense of dread, as indigestible as rocks in her belly, weighed her to his
shoulder. Her legs squirmed as if infested insects, yet she couldn't move. She realized she’d passed into a dream that held her paralyzed with terror, but the knowledge did not break the spell. In this state, she endured the remainder of the night.

The family clustered at the end of the wharf, a nice little flock waiting for hobbling Caruthers. He waved, and the group waved back as one. This would be Caruthers’ last duty to the religious fanatics, he figured. They’d move the operation to Antigua soon, to set up their brainwashing station. To deal with his son, Caruthers had chosen the path of least resistance. To drive the kid off, Caruthers calculated, would cost more effort than to simply play along. This short trip would probably turn out disastrous anyway, like the reunion in general so far, and maybe that’s what they all needed, a big fucking catastrophe to teach them to mind their own business.

Junior had suggested a day trip of some sort, and Caruthers had offered to conduct a bus tour of points of interest in the area, stop for lunch, whatever. The girls would have gotten a kick out of riding in their own private bus. Always a minor thrill to drive by a knot of hopeful passengers on the side of the road. Nothing like the suffering of others to make you appreciate what you have. But Junior had ixnayed that plan on account of Caruthers’ drinking while driving.
Caruthers had explained that drunk driving wasn’t even a crime here, and besides, he was a better driver drunk than most of those maniacs sober. Junior would have none of it though, and had adopted a stern, dumb face. Probably something he practiced in the mirror while reminding himself he was the man of the house. In the end, everyone had agreed to hop a ferry across the lake to the village of San Pedro, just another dusty town at the foot of a volcano, but Caruthers recalled a cervesaria near the beach, so he wouldn’t have to worry about running dry.

He joined them, near the squatting lancha captain, who held the bow line in one hand. “So,” Caruthers said in the expectant silence. The captain cleared his throat and stood, leaned his head back to examine the dark sky above. Last night the first rain had hammered the land, but the clouds had backed off so far today. Sometimes the rainy season appeared in increments, other years it came like a barbarian horde. The captain took Patricia’s hand and helped her into the rocking boat, then repeated the process for the girls, who sat on either side of their mother on the front bench. Caruthers and Junior sat behind. As the captain yanked on the outboard, the younger girl, Sarah bounced like a rubber ball, jerking on her mom’s shirt with each descent. The other one, Rebecca, turned in her seat and regarded first the captain then Caruthers with mournful, serious eyes so blue they verged on black. He noted, for the first time, how beautiful her face was, though something in her expression kept that fact from the casual glance. Caruthers feared she’d be unhappy in life.

Caruthers thought of Donny, in prison. He’d got the shit luck in a family of hard luck cases. For a brief moment he imagined bringing the wayward one down
here, keep him out of the American judicial system, at least. Of course, he thought, here they’d probably kill him, not just lock him up.

The engine caught and the front of the boat rose above the leaden surface of the lake as they cut through the chop. Sarah squealed and clasped onto her mom. She made eye-contact with Caruthers and yelled, thrilled by the velocity and bounce. Caruthers himself could barely take the abuse to his ass on the wooden seat. Holding onto Junior’s shoulder, he leaned toward his son and shouted into his ear. “That one, your daughter, she’s got spirit.”

“What?” Junior yelled.

“Never mind,” Caruthers replied, but the wind ripped that too from his mouth. Junior stared at Caruthers for a moment, his hair blasted back from his forehead, parted like an old time slickster’s.

A distant Indian fisherman paused with his net in his hands to watch the lancha approach. He dropped the net and clutched the rails of his hand-carved kayuka to absorb the wake. In ten minutes they thumped lightly against the dock at San Pedro and climbed out after the captain secured the craft. Caruthers accepted one of the plastic grocery sacks Patricia brought along and led them to a narrow beach, near a circle of young hippies kicking a leather nugget. “I swear these are the same guys that were here when I showed up thirteen years ago. And damned if they haven’t aged a minute,” Caruthers said, trying to help Patricia spread the blanket over the sand, but only getting in the way. His current beer buzz was of the fluent variety, which
afforded a certain charm now and again. He figured he’d make the most of it before he came down.

"Would you like a sandwich, Mr. Caruthers?" Rebecca asked.

"Why the hell not? Sure." Junior flashed a look from over his girl’s shoulder.

"Oh, jeez, sorry about the language," Caruthers said, annoyed that his son hadn’t noticed how hard he was trying.

"Just, please. Okay?" Junior said, putting on a patient face, the same as the sad face and the tired face.

"Sorry. Really." Caruthers addressed Patricia, fishing for an ally. "I had no idea how easy it was to take the Lord’s name in vain."

She didn’t pause from her work with the food. "I guess you wouldn’t," she said, having found Caruthers in no way cute. He recalled with a familiar sense of mortification the period of his life when he’d become no longer attractive to women but hadn’t realized it yet. Maybe now he’d reached a new level, where he couldn’t even pull off the endearingly drunk grandfather, on a good day.

"Honey," Patricia called the straying Sarah. "Don’t bother them." The girl pretended not to hear and continued to wander toward the hippies. Patricia dropped the sack of bananas and mangos she’d been unloading onto the blanket, rushed over and scooped her daughter up, who struggled for a moment and then froze into a stiff board in her mother’s arms.

"Oh, come on," Caruthers mumbled to himself, bummed out about everything.

"That’s no way to do it."

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“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Mr. Caruthers,” Rebecca said, presenting to him a ham on white resting on two upturned palms, “why don’t you love the Lord?”

“Excuse me?” Caruthers asked. The girl didn’t respond, only stared up at him with the sincerest expression of angst, assumedly over the palpable danger to his soul. He accepted the sandwich. “It’s not so much I don’t love the Lord. I don’t believe in him. You know what I mean?”

“Dad? Just leave off, please.”

Caruthers chewed and swallowed the dry sandwich. “Okay, I was only telling the truth. You don’t allow your daughters to confront the possibility, the probability really, that no invisible man actually lives up there in the sky?” Lightening flickered in the distance and a moment later thunder rolled over them in increasingly intense waves. “Holy cow!” Caruthers said. “I take it all back!”

The girl turned to her father, her eyes round with panic.

Patricia returned with Sarah, who stretched out stiff as a cadaver on the blanket. “In a minute we’re going to get soaked,” Patricia said. The hippies gathered their little kick ball and took off up the bank toward town.

“Should we turn back?” Junior asked. “Can we find another boat?” A spittle of rain fell on them. Rebecca helped her mother gather up the uneaten food and bottles of juice. Sarah found it difficult to remain paralyzed with drops hitting her face. She opened her eyes, and when she found no one was paying attention except Caruthers she sat up.
“It’s raining,” she said. As if she’d prophesied it, the clouds burst open and thick curtains of water fell upon the ground and everything on it. Caruthers took a long drink of rum, then used his hands to slick back his drenched hair.

“In moments like this,” he said to his son, “poise counts.” He made a show of straightening his collar, but Junior refused to acknowledge the joke. Caruthers led the way back to the stubby dock, reflecting that no boats would cross the lake in such weather. He pointed the family toward town and paid a visit to the cervesaria, a whitewashed shack with a thatch roof. He found it closed and locked. He knocked on the door, pounded on the door. To no effect. He rotated and rested against the unresponsive portal. This could be bad, he thought, but no. Not bad. He had a goodly bit of rum, and the café in town sold beer. A hippy, a lagging member of the kicking party materialized from the ether, ambled by holding a banana leaf over his head.

“Nothing left,” he said, pointing with a sparsely bearded red chin at the cervesaria.

“How’s that?”

“No beer, wine or liquor left in town.” He smiled. “We drained it last night, man. The party went off.” Caruthers calculated. Surely, he thought, surely they’d have restocked at some point today. For God’s sake, they only have to travel to Pana, fifteen minutes away. But why—he didn’t want to finish the question in his mind, but concluded before he could distract himself—why would the cervesaria be closed if they’d re-supplied? “You okay, brother?”
Caruthers aimed his eyes on the youth, assumed he hailed from middle-class parents like most of them, his ragged clothing a costume, everything about him an affectation. “You ain’t my brother.”

The kid expelled a shot of breath, lifted the banana leaf higher over his curly locks, and walked on. “Whatever,” he called into the rain. “It’s all good.”

Caruthers instructed himself to calm down. He reached into his back pocket and extracted the rum. A pint bottle, half done. The kid was a shit, but didn’t deserve such hostility, Caruthers thought.

The rain would let up. The boats would take him home before anything bad happened. The café, probably, had beer. It’s all good, he thought, and laughed through a mouth pasty with fear.

He found the Christians in the town’s only café, a place so bereft of the influence of imagination it didn’t bother with a name. The hippies, who’d “partied” away all the booze in San Pedro, had also set up camp in the café. In fact, they felt at home enough to push half the tables to the corner and continue their kicking game, the barefoot sons and daughters of Judas. “Can you help, Mr. Caruthers?” Patricia asked. “I can’t understand what this woman wants.” Caruthers summed up the problem in short order. The waitress, a lanky woman standing with arms folded across her chest, glared at Caruthers. The family sat around a table, munching their sandwiches and drinking the bottles of juice they’d brought for the picnic.

“She wants you to buy something if you’re going to sit in her restaurant.”

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"Well," Patricia said to Caruthers, as if he’d invented the idea, "we’re here because of the storm, not to eat. Tell her that we don’t have much money, and that we packed this food, and don’t want it to go to waste."

"I’ll tell her no such thing," Caruthers said, surprised at the prudish sound of his voice.

Patricia expressed her outrage by dropping her mouth and turning to Junior for support. Caruthers, meanwhile, requested a beer. The waitress executed a horizontal slicing motion with her arm, cutting the possibility of beer off at the waist. "Rum?"

Caruthers continued. "Whisky? Quetzalteca?"

"Nada," the woman said, displaying gapped teeth. "Coka. Fanta."

"Coke?" Junior put in, displaying four fingers. "You want one?" he asked Caruthers, who couldn’t summon a response. Patricia turned her attention to her sandwich, rebuked. Sarah watched the goings on with interest, eyes as bright as a wild animal’s. Rebecca focused on her sandwich, moving across it with identical crescent bites from left to right. The waitress left with the order. The hippies’ leather ball escaped them and bounced off of Junior’s chair. Caruthers retrieved it and handed it to the girl chasing after.

"Here you go," he said, placing it in her hand, formulating a plan or sorts. She wore a gypsy wrap around her head, and smelled of herbal smoke and body odor. Caruthers followed to her circle. She dropped the ball and kicked it with the inside of her foot. A boy juggled it expertly with his feet and knees. Caruthers clapped his hands. "Good, good." Some of the kids glanced suspiciously his way, and since they
were right to doubt the old square, he laid off for now, moving to the window to hit his bottle. The road outside coursed with brown rivulets, one of them as wide as a stream. The rain filled the air and showed no sign of slowing. The waitress lit candles against the dark. The hippie girl with the gypsy head wrap ignited a joint and passed it. Caruthers drank again from his bottle.

“Sandwich?” Junior asked him. He shook his head, but sat at their table glumly.

An hour and a half later the road out front had become a river. Caruthers dripped the last drops from his bottle into his mouth. The girl with the head wrap had a guitar and everyone, including Junior and Patricia, sang along with the popular rock songs he played. “When are we gonna go?” Sarah asked, hanging on her mother’s sleeve.

“Sing with us, sweetheart,” her mother told her, before rejoining the music makers. “Come in, she said, I’ll give you, shelter from the storm.” The guitar player had a small repertoire, and they’d sung that one three times so far.

Caruthers raked his fingernails over a long gone mosquito bite on the back of his hand, drawing forth pinpoints of blood from the torn skin. The song ended and Caruthers took the opportunity. “Hey, kids, hate to interrupt the jam. Great songs, by the way. But I wonder if any of you have a stash, some booze of some sort. They looked at him, a band of gypsies attempting to grasp the significance of the old man.
“Sorry, bro,” the girl said, and strummed a chord. “We drank it all last night. You should have seen us hassling the store people.” She laughed, but no one else joined her.


“We got some ganja,” one of them said.

“No,” Caruthers replied in an angry tone he couldn’t help.

“I thought you weren’t my brother,” the copper chinned boy said. “Now that you want something from us.” He grew shy at having gained everyone’s attention.

“We had an association earlier,” he explained.

“Dad,” Junior said behind Caruthers. “Please. Let it be. Can’t you go without for one night of your life?”

Caruthers faced his boy. “No, Son. I can’t. That’s the way it is.” Tears welled up in the older daughter’s eyes but didn’t fall to her cheeks. “It’s not fun, kid. It’s not a party.”

Caruthers left the awkward silence and barged into the kitchen. He found the waitress. “Lancha?” he asked her, glancing around for a sign of something to drink on the shelves. She made the same slicing motion with her hand. No. “I pay,” Caruthers said. “Money. More money,” he told her in awful Spanish. She watched him skeptically, caressing with her tongue the gap between her front teeth. He reached into his pocket and retrieved the stack of bills he liked to carry when away from town. He
counted off two hundred. Three hundred. Normal fares started around fifty. The
woman motioned him to follow.

"Where are you going?" Junior asked over a Grateful Dead standard.

"Home," Caruthers said, walking out.

"And you're leaving us," Junior called out the doorway. Caruthers thought to
explain that it was too dangerous, that the possibility of being struck by lightning or
swamping the lancha was high. But he chose instead to leave a martyr, misunderstood
as always. His guide led him along the edge of the road-turned-river, to a hut three
doors down. Here she negotiated on behalf of Caruthers with the resistant man inside.

After a short time Caruthers parted with his money and followed the man to a tiny,
private dock. Caruthers, saturated, felt his mood soar. Soon he'd either be home or
dead. Both possibilities appealed to him.

The boatman bailed his lancha, primed his engine, and after some effort
managed to start the boat. Nearly blind, they traveled over the pitted lake surface,
under flashes of lightening and grumbling thunder, through strange, gray air, as if
discovering on the spot some new element, neither air nor water. After a half an hour
they found a shore, which the boatman recognized as south of Panajachel. They
hugged the coast, visible only as ghostly trees, until they located Panajachel's
drenched lights. Caruthers climbed to the dock, and pushed through the rain, alone, up
the transformed strip toward home.
Preparing to sleep for the first time in the gringo house, Max discovered a pair of flimsy men’s briefs under his pillow, the sort of garment that might have had written across its front, “Mr. Big,” or “Here Comes Trouble.” A rosy vista of erotic possibilities spread in his imagination when he considered that Cindy might have left him the gift, but he soon doubted her. She’d given him no such vibe at all, and pretty women rarely resorted to such obvious methods of seduction. Another unlikely possibility was Doña Angelica, the middle-aged Quiche maid, a sweet natured, tiny woman, somewhat withered and gray skinned. Max knew nothing of the sexual lives of the Quiche, but he offered little credence to the idea of Doña Angelica shopping for revealing men’s briefs. And that left Livermore. A joke, Max assumed, a hazing. He tossed the briefs in a drawer and went to bed.

He woke as soon as he’d gone to sleep, it seemed. Rain pounded the window, bucketfuls. For a time he felt safe, sheltered from the elements, but eventually he grew restless and rose in the dark. Feeling with his hands outstretched, he ventured into the hall. Livermore’s open door offered the only vision, a rectangle almost imperceptibly less black than everything else. He wandered toward the living room, paused, and retreated back in the direction of the front door, to enter the office directly across from Livermore’s room. He closed the door behind him, plunging the windowless room into total darkness. Max found the switch and clamped his eyes
shut against the harsh bulb light. When his eyes adjusted, he stood before a long table
occupying the far wall, supporting a computer and a work area. A large calendar with
notes scribbled into the boxes hung from the wall, alongside a poster bearing the
image of lush greenery under the words “the bamboo that bends is stronger than the
oak that resists.” *Joyas del Bosque* bounced around the computer’s screen. He sat
before the computer and took hold of the mouse. He moved the cursor over the names
of the files on the desktop: Accounts, Orders, Pay Roll, Expenses. He clicked on a file
called “Cindy.” Feeling quite filthy, he dug a couple of innocuous levels down and
closed the window before he could find anything, or was caught. He opened Ken’s
file next, and soon found a folder titled “modeling.” Thumbnail photographs of a
slightly younger Kenneth Livermore filled the screen—advertisements of products
with Asian lettering. In one, Livermore wore a Speedo bathing suit and held aloft a
black canister bearing the image of a tiger and red lettering. A smug grin cracked his
face. His eyelids were pink, smeared by those frosty lashes. The body was fit, though
the white, hairlessness of it brought to mind a belly up fish. Rather shamed, Max
closed the file and opened payroll. He searched for a time for Gabriela Valle, but the
files didn’t go back more than a few months. He shut off the computer and
contemplated delving into the four-drawer file cabinet. The door opened, causing him
to swing around in the chair. “What time is it?” Livermore asked, shielding his eyes.
He wore only white briefs. Max couldn’t help notice he’d put on a paunch since his
modeling days.

“Late,” Max said, standing. “I couldn’t sleep.”
“Thought you’d do some work?” Livermore asked.

“I’m sleepy now though.” He waited for Livermore to move out of the doorway. “Excuse me,” he said after a moment.

“Sweet dreams,” Livermore said as Max passed.

When morning arrived, Max skittered over the chilly tile floor to the bathroom. The shower’s head protruded from a metal box sprouting bare wires that disappeared into the ceiling. The box had a temperature dial in Celsius and an on/off switch. Max flipped the switch and cranked on the water. He dropped his boxers and stepped under the thin drizzle, his first warm shower in over a month.

After washing he lingered under the anemic stream, entirely unsatisfied yet unwilling to brave the cold world outside. A knock sounded and the bathroom door swung open. “You’re not taking a dump, are you?” Livermore asked, poking his head in. Max informed him that he wasn’t. Livermore entered, his bare flesh through the opaque glass shone indistinct but bright. For a moment, Max feared his new housemate would open the door and join him, but Livermore only pulled something from the medicine cabinet and fumbled about. “Asthma pills,” he said, and left.

Max dressed and joined his colleagues for breakfast at one of Joyas’ own tables, a maroon and green traditional design, pretty, though scratched and wobbling. Doña Angelica spooned scrambled eggs onto their plates and produced a stack of warm tortillas wrapped in a cloth napkin. Max pushed his eggs onto a tortilla, shook bottled hot sauce over them and ate it as a taco. Cindy, adopting the local style, rolled
a tortilla into a tight wand and used it to push egg onto her fork. “Was I dreaming, or did I hear you two wandering around during the middle of the night?” she asked.

“I caught Max snooping through the office,” Livermore said, and snorted.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Max, for the second time, explained.

“Find anything interesting?” Cindy asked.

“No. I just thought I’d write my mother a letter, but then I felt too sleepy once I got the computer going.” Max drank coffee, marveling at the nonsense he’d gotten himself into.

Livermore pushed his eggs around, added hot sauce, salt, pushed again, and mashed them with his fork into tiny nuggets before transferring them into his mouth.

“He’s got a curious nature,” Livermore told Cindy. “Don’t leave anything out, unless you want him to find your secrets.”

“Ken, you know I don’t have any secrets.” Max ate while the two bantered.

Livermore hung on her words, his mouth writhing with happiness at the slightest attention. Cindy’s attitude, on the other hand, eluded Max. Was she ironic, patronizing? Or did she like the guy?

Livermore settled into the office to work, leaving Max and Cindy to drive through the gurgling streets to the factory, where Max began his career following Cindy around as useless, to use the phrase of an old waitress he once knew, as a prick on a priest. He met again the other employees: the solemn design painters, including the small, rather mouse-faced one called Cesar; the young base painters and sanders, the boy who fetched the bare furniture from the carpenter shop next door, the old
varnishier and Lucio, the accent painter with the California Angels perched over a
handsome wave of youthful hair. After introductions Cindy offered her frank
appraisal of certain workers. Lucio was a sweetheart, Rigo the varnishier a drunk,
Cesar a problem that Max would learn about later that night. When she turned him
loose, Max wandered, trying to force himself into a closed circuit. The workers
parceled out bits of their duties to him when he came by, as if offering coins to a
panhandler. Finally he took a seat beside Lucio, and assisted him slowly, so as not to
use up the work too quickly, and practicing Spanish while applying the small swirls
and dots to the designs that supposedly invested the primitive patterns with
sophistication. Max asked the kid if he had a girlfriend, and when Lucio turned pink
and hid his face, Max pressed harder, finally accusing Lucio of having an affair with
Maria, a plump base painter. Lucio turned these questions on Max, who eventually
told the story of his brief affair with Gabriela, and her subsequent disappearance.

"Gabby," Lucio said. "I knew her."

"I think I'm in love with her," Max confided, not entirely sure if he were
telling the truth or spinning a tale.

"Honestly?" Lucio asked, and whistled, a pitying tone. He dabbed his brush
into a tiny pot of red and applied a small heart shape to the center of his current work,
a small coffer lid painted with a checkerboard of diamonds. "For you," he said. "For
the lovers."

Max chuckled and they worked in companionable silence until Lucio, at once
shy and mischievous, asked Max how long he meant to grown his beard. Max had,
over the month in Guatemala, allowed the hair on his chin to grow a good inch and a
half. He stroked his chin at this, and responded that he wasn’t sure. Maybe down to
his belly.

Eventually Max nearly used up too much of Lucio’s work, and so moved to
another station. As he walked away, he heard a bleating sound from behind, followed
by a hushed chuckling. He whirled in the direction of the sounds in mock anger.
Lucio painted and began to whistle. Max turned and again the bleating sounds that a
goat might make. He laughed to himself. He’d not enjoyed working so much in years.

At dinner that night he shared his enthusiasm with Livermore and Cindy.
“Excellent,” Livermore said. “You’re in the honeymoon phase.” He dropped a cloth
napkin onto this plate and stood. “Enjoy it.”

When Max finished up, Livermore asked him to take a ride. They hopped into
the truck. “So,” Max said, “you taking me out to dream with the fishes or whatever.”

Livermore snorted. “We’re visiting Cesar, the head design painter.”

“Stop,” Max called. Livermore offered a quizzical glance. “Just for a second.”

Livermore braked, and Max hustled through the drizzle and stopped under the
cervesaria’s overhang. He ignored Rigo, the varnisher, who lounged with several
other middle-aged men against the smudged wall, and bought a six pack of beer at the
window. He returned to the truck. “A little visiting gift,” Max explained, and
Livermore smiled rather diabolically.

“Perfect,” he said. “Good thinking.”
They crested the ridge at the edge of town, where the cobbles ended and the road became a series of small ponds, surfaces pitted with drops. Livermore sloshed through the mud and water. Here and there warped boards or sticks bundled together with twine served as makeshift passages over the more treacherous pits. They continued downhill, back end sliding until they came to level ground at the edge of the barrio village. The headlights illuminated the usual cinderblock and sheet-metal shelters, and poorer shacks thrown together with scraps of wood covered with plastic or tarpaulin. A few windows or gaps in walls showed the dim flickering of candle light within. A cat, eyes turned demonic by the truck’s lights, froze in the entrance of a muddy walkway and pounced away into the dark.

Livermore pulled the truck to the side of the road and killed the engine. The rain tapped the windshield. Both he and Max were reluctant to leave the dry cab. Finally Livermore opened the door and hopped out. Max followed him down a dark walkway, carrying the six pack. They balanced along several pieces of lumber that sunk in the mud as they stepped. Mud caked their shoes by the time they arrived at one of the larger cinderblock edifices in the area, Francisco’s home.

Livermore knocked. After a moment the door opened a crack, revealing the face of a woman Max had seen on occasion with Francisco. “Hola,” said Livermore, smiling like a blackface performer.

“Buenas noches,” she said without enthusiasm. She had a flat face, decorated by a faint, irregular light patch on her forehead just off center. Max, now that he considered it, had never seen her smile.
“I brought beer,” Max said, hoping to sweeten the deal. The woman opened
the door a foot wider, enough for Livermore to push by her. Max tried to catch the
woman’s eyes, hoping to build something between them that would separate him from
his albino boss, but after Livermore gained entrance she simply abandoned the open
door. Max entered and closed it behind him.

Francisco appeared and shook Livermore’s hand with the same expression of
reserve he always wore. They stood in a room lined with two couches and a chair. A
low table stood in the center, and from the walls hung típica blankets of a
predominantly red and yellow striped pattern. Francisco silently directed Ken to sit on
a couch and then said something in Quiche to the woman. She accepted Max’s beer
and disappeared through one of the room’s three closed doors.

Max sat on the couch opposite Livermore. Francisco chose a plain wooden
chair. No one spoke. The woman, Doña Rodriguez, returned with glasses of beer on a
tin tray.

Livermore stood abruptly and began examining the walls. “Your house is
nice,” he said. Francisco stood close by while Livermore roamed along the walls.
Livermore paused before a door, stared as if there were a movie projected onto it.

“When will the rain stop?” Max asked Doña Rodriguez.

“Who knows?” she replied without taking her eyes from Livermore and her
husband.

“What’s in here?” asked Livermore, and opened the door.
“Children,” said the woman. Livermore peeked into the dark room and closed the door. Max was mortified, but Livermore displayed no remorse. He immediately moved to the next door and opened it without preamble. Francisco stood by. Livermore whistled, and stepped into the room.

“Very interesting,” he said. Doña Rodriguez turned her gaze from Francisco and regarded Max with disgust. Max saw from the couch that Livermore had discovered a room full of Joyas furniture, embezzled, Max assumed. He rose and peered in at the stacks of chairs, chests and tables, dimly illuminated by the living room’s candles. He reminded himself that he had nothing to do with any of these people, and would soon be gone forever. Livermore pointed, presumably tallying the furniture. At first glance the collection looked as incriminating as any warehouse full of stolen goods, but after closer inspection Max realized that the designs of the pieces were not identical to Joyas’. The cloudy night landscape had been rendered during the day. Every design had been comparably altered. Knockoffs, not duplicates.

Francisco kept his eyes to the floor, nodding as if he totally agreed with Livermore’s lambasting. Livermore spoke of wages. The word loyalty, fidelidad, cut through the harangue. Livermore was hurt, betrayed. The whole company, all the employees were damaged by Francisco’s treachery. Francisco took it all humbly and passively. Yet, Max noticed after a moment, this was a powerful, a bulletproof, passivity. Francisco, it became clear, had no intention of changing his actions. Nothing Livermore could say would alter anything, and Francisco refused to fight. Livermore eventually wore himself out.
“Goodnight,” said Max, still imagining that he stood outside the evening’s unpleasantness. Francisco returned the salutation. His wife said nothing. Ken steered the truck recklessly up the road, sliding and spraying mud behind. A heavy burst of rain blinded the windshield for a moment. “So what was that all about?” Max asked.

“He’s stealing our designs and selling them directly to the distributor cheaper than we can afford. That’s why our orders have been going down.” The tires spun, bogged down, halfway up the rise.

“Well, do you have a copyright?”

Livermore tried to rock the truck out of its hole, to no avail. “You can’t copyright them. They’re considered individual works of art. All he had to do was change one leaf and the design is considered new.” He put it in reverse, and backed wildly down the hill to try it again. They sped toward the hill, hit a puddle with the passenger side wheels, causing brown spray to cover the windshield before the wipers pushed it away into a light film, fishtailed and caught a board, which propelled them up, wheels spinning and engine revving hard in second gear, barely gaining the top before completely losing momentum. Livermore threw it into third gear and raced dangerously over the slick road. They traveled in frightening silence. Under the cervesaria awning, the drunks slept, scattered like battlefield fallen on the sidewalk, Rigo among them. When Livermore finally pulled the truck into the parking lot, Max felt safe enough to venture his opinion. “Doesn’t it strike you as fitting in a way, that you brought American capitalism down here, and now you’re angry because Francisco is…”
Livermore sat with his door open, rain spattering his plastered down hair.

"Yes?"

"Well, he's beating you at it, isn't he?"

Livermore slammed the door. In the hallway he continued the discussion. "I pay him 1,500 quetzales per month, Max. That's triple your wage. Until I came along these guys could barely afford to eat. Now Francisco is one of the richest men in his neighborhood. He'd never even heard of varnish."

"Then fire him. That's your right, isn't it?"

"Then he'd make the copies full time. And besides, all the other painters would leave with him. They're loyal like that." Both Livermore and Max stood at the doorways of their respective rooms, dripping muddy water on the floor of the hall.

"Well," Max said, "he's got you fucked, and that's the only reality worth anything." A noise like a punctured tire leaked from Ken's clamped lips. They went into their rooms to change into dry clothes.

An actual passenger, a woman with a child standing by and an infant in a sling, appeared in the wet gloom ahead. Not much call for the Guate route this afternoon—another bus must have been one step ahead of Caruthers. Course, what could he expect, veering from his normal route? He asked himself again why he had agreed to
shuttle the family to Antigua. The timing couldn’t be worse, given the recent drains on his profits. He pulled over and let the woman enter. The rain had plastered her hair to her forehead, and her fierce gaze captured Caruthers’ eyes for a moment. She lugged a cardboard box tied with twine, as well as the infant slung across her belly. Her other child, a boy of two or three, toddled up the steps before her, wiping his crusty nose. She sat in the front row, across from the Caruthers clan, who occupied the first two rows on the driver’s side. The toddler coughed, a grave-sounding rattle in his chest. Caruthers suddenly feared these apparitions from the muddy shoulder, didn’t want to catch what they had: despair beyond his ken.

He closed the door and moved on. The driver side wiper left a smudged arc across his field of vision, a drab little rainbow. Seba ambled forward from the back seat, where he’d set up camp to stay away from the gringos. The woman told him Guate, and Seba countered with Antigua. “Ocho quetzales,” he said, combing back his hair with fingers. The woman unfurled a tight roll from the fist not locked on the cardboard box. She stared at the pile for a moment, then counted a bill and three coins into Seba’s palm. Seba pocked the money and lifted his chin toward Caruthers, who handed him the thermos. He drank and returned to the back of the bus.

Ahead in the road, a clownish police officer wearing a uniform two sizes too small waved beside his parked moped, an old model that utilized bicycle style pedals. Caruthers blew by, gambling that he didn’t have a radio or bullets he was willing to use. The woman, he noticed, focused an inscrutable, intense expression across the aisle on Patricia and Sarah. “Hola,” Patricia said to her, and smiled decently.
“Bienvenidos.” Welcome? Caruthers thought, to a public bus? The woman’s stare evolved in some subtle way; her face seemed to rustle beneath her skin. Patricia squirmed out of the connection and fussed with Sarah’s barrettes. The woman finally spoke, Spanish words Caruthers couldn’t miss: “I’ll sell you the baby.”

Patricia failed to reattach one of Sarah’s barrettes. “What?” she asked in English, risking only the briefest glance at the woman, who repeated the offer. “Please,” Patricia said, clasping and unclasping the white plastic barrette. “Por favor. No.”

“It’s okay,” the woman said in English. “No me importa. Cien dolares, no mas.” Caruthers grew curious about the black wisp of hair sprouting from a crease in the sling.

Patricia steeled herself by summoning a deep breath into her lungs. “You poor child,” she said, though who knew to which of the three travelers she referred. “No me importa,” the woman repeated, a chilling sound, really. She seemed to mean it in the most profound way.

Patricia turned her attention again to Sarah’s barrette, and Caruthers had to concentrate on the road, which had begun to climb into the mountain pass separating the highland plateau and the desert plain that made up the southeastern portion of the country, a scary stretch, with tight curves, profound drops and frequent accidents, including plenty of head on collisions.

“Is she saying what I think she’s saying?” Junior asked his wife.
"The poor thing," Patricia repeated. The mother dropped twenty-five dollars off her original offer. Caruthers swung the bus around an almost 180-degree turn, and stepped on the brakes when he ran over a leafy branch, Guatemala's version of emergency flares. A flatbed sat stalled, overheated against the cut mountainside. Caruthers shifted into first, and pulled around, glancing down into a misty abyss before returning to the safe side of the road. He clicked on the lights, as they'd entered the clouds that had been raining on them all day. Visibility shrank to a dozen meters, and the road ahead appeared and disappeared. Two dull orbs grew larger, and a bus traveling much too fast fly by, horn wailing like a banshee.

"Are we going to buy a new baby?" Sarah whispered to her mother after the phantom vehicle had gone.

"No sweetheart," Patricia told her.

They climbed to the top of the ridge. The road leveled out for a couple of kilometers before continuing the more gradual decline on the other side. "What's going to happen to them?" Rebecca asked, leaning forward to speak into her mother's ear. "Where are they going?"

"Probably to the capitol to work," Caruthers offered.

"Maybe she has relatives there," Junior said.

"Maybe she can talk," Caruthers said, annoyed that he’d gotten involved in the first place. "Maybe if you’re so concerned you can ask her." He disengaged the transmission and began to sail down a long gentle strip of descending cutbacks. They dropped below the level of the clouds, and now seemed to drive under a vast roof.
Rebecca, the best Spanish speaker of the bunch, asked the woman where she was going, what she would do when she got there.

"No se," the woman answered to both questions. The boy coughed. She wiped his face with a piece of her baby's sling. They continued to sail through a quiet world of purring tires, confined in a cathedral-like intimacy. "I received a note from my husband today," she told Patricia. "Do you understand?" she asked, and Patricia said that she did. "They had him. He wishes to die, he told me. Be brave, he told me." The bus picked up speed, but Caruthers didn't want to harm the spell of the moment by applying the brakes. The woman turned and watched the land roll by. "He's gone now, God willing. This baby," she raised her voice, as if offering a challenge, "is not his." Caruthers stepped on the brakes as gently as he could, or they would have flown off the road. "A soldier raped me," the woman said without tears or other sign of emotion save the blunt resentment in her voice. "And now this," she said, parting the sling to examine her child. "No se," she concluded.

Marilyn had just about forgotten about Cash when she spied him over Colonel Fortunato Vegaz's shoulder, alone but perhaps not forlorn on the overstuffed chair. She tried to put the idea out of her head, how woefully out of place he'd be at such a party. Well, she thought, he'd wanted to go. She'd hoped to skip the party initially, a
corny sounding affair by the looks of the invite she’d received with her paycheck.

"Welcome to Joyas del Bosque’s (fine, hand painted furniture) Third Annual Rainy Season Celebration," the post card had read. She feared they might try to sell something to her, but a fellow volunteer who’d gone the year before assured her the only purpose to the party was for white people to get drunk together. Finally, she’d gone because she’d felt so claustrophobic lately with Cash, while on the other hand unwilling to tell him to go away. "Your friend tells me you write," the Joyas employee named Max said.

"Pardon me?" she asked. Cash, as if summoned by mention of his claim, stood and approached. Someone started again the same CD of Mexican rock that had been playing all night.

"He told me you write stories," Max explained.

"Stories, you say?" the one who she thought of as The Colonel asked. He smiled, suave in the typical Latin manner, but for his habit of leaning in so close when he spoke that he peppered her face with spittle. Even so, she rather enjoyed his citrusy cologne and his thick, manicured hands. "The urge to tell stories is fundamental to humankind, and those blessed with the calling should be revered among our most honored statesmen and women."

"I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re saying," Marilyn said lightly.

"Those Moon and Sun stories," Cash said, standing a good foot taller than the other men surrounding Marilyn.

"Please," she said. "I just make those up for my kids."
“You used to tell them to me back home,” Cash said, and the public announcement of this intimate knowledge embarrassed Marilyn. She’d told these stories exclusively in bed, always stoned. These had been good times, she recalled, and she hated her desire that no one assume she’d slept with Cash, that she was currently sleeping with him. That he dressed wrong these days, hadn’t yet adjusted to Guatemala life was not a large enough concern to justify her need to distance herself from him.

“Excellent,” The Colonel exclaimed, clapping his hands. “Please tell us one.”

“No way,” Marilyn said, rather testily.

“Yes, do,” Max echoed, and then Jonathan Stubbs, and soon every drunken person at the party, including the other two hosts, also called on her to entertain them. All her life she’d avoided public speaking with all her force; she’d practically faint before the few class presentations she’d been unable to get out of. The very pale host turned off the stereo and began a chant. “Story, story, story.” Some took it up, and Marilyn realized she’d either have to go through with it or make an even bigger ass of herself by refusing.

“Okay,” she said, and they applauded drunkenly. “Hold on,” she said, and downed her glass of wine. “Can someone get me another?” she said, while they laughed at what they thought was a joke. Cash and The Colonel fought to refill her glass. Marilyn recalled an old Native American myth she’d read somewhere, and figured she could wing her way through it. She gazed up at the light overhead and pretended she was speaking only to her class of children.
“Wait,” cried the white one. “Everybody that needs a drink or to use the bathroom, do it now, so we don’t disturb the story.”

“No, please,” Marilyn said. “That’s nice, but unnecessary. The story’s nothing special.” The partygoers rustled about some, and finally the room settled into frightening silence. The shaded lamp in the room glowed a warm color, and she focused on that.

“This one’s called ‘What’s this? My balls for dinner?’” The audience burst out laughing, and Marilyn felt that a roomful of drunks must be easier than even kids. “One day Sun, as desperate to please as always, invited his friend Quetzal to dinner, to impress him with Sun’s wealth and hunting skills. Also to impress him with his woman, Moon—her ability to cook, her beauty,” she smiled around at the faces surrounding her, “her obedience.” Several women in the audience groaned. “For the occasion, Sun had slain two wild chivo and had given their livers to Moon to prepare for dinner. Sun left the hut to hunt up some other luxury—” Marilyn drew a blank for a moment and felt the bottom drop out of the room. “I don’t know,” she said, laughing by herself, “a macaw, so he could decorate his hut with the feathers, thus leaving Moon alone with the food.” She found the story again. “One thing any fool should know is to never leave Moon alone with food, but Sun, overconfident as ever, was a fool. Moon, round of belly, round of breast, round of rear, fondled the two fat livers and wondered why her man had given her only two of them. ‘That selfish payaso,’ she exclaimed to the mice in the corners and the bats in the rafters, ‘he’s not
provided anything for me to eat. If he thinks I’ll sit in the kitchen and watch him act
the king with his no account friend he’s got another thing coming.’

“So she paced the kitchen, working herself into greater and greater rage, and
the angrier she became, the juicier, the more savory the livers appeared, dark and
fresh, veined with delicate white membrane like a lace wrapping. Finally she could
resist no longer and cooked one up and ate it all.” Marilyn paused and thunder
rumbled through the house. Some of the listeners chuckled at the timing. “The liver
tasted so good she reasoned with herself that since she’d be beaten anyway, she
should go ahead and eat the other as well. So she fried that one up too and devoured it
with her bare hands.

“At this point a knock sounded on the door. Quetzal had arrived early, no
doubt hoping to taste more than just goat’s liver while Sun was out. Moon had felt
Quetzal’s caresses before, and knew he was always up for some fun. He entered,
flitting his gorgeous tail feathers about and sniffing the air in the hut. ‘Scrumptious,’
he declared. ‘And you’re not looking too bad yourself,’ he continued, taking up a
great hunk of her rear end in his hand.

“‘Be quick,’ Moon said, in no mood for Quetzal’s roundabout ways. She bent
over and flipped her skirt up. Quetzal, always quick once he got going, wasted no
time and mounted her. It was over in a moment, and Moon sighed, hardly moved by
Quetzal’s administrations. Still, she thought, a little amusement is better than none,
and that Sun hadn’t been seeing to her lately.” Marilyn continued to warm to the
story, urged on by laughter.
“As Quetzal tucked his member back into his feathers, the problem of the missing livers returned to Moon’s mind. Then Quetzal himself offered the answer to her difficulties when he asked what she would be serving for dinner. ‘I’m starving,’ he explained.

‘Your balls,’ Moon declared, in an explosion of genius.

‘What say you?’ Quetzal asked, already backing toward the door.

‘Your balls! Your nuts! Your big hairy huevos! Sun is going to pull them off and I’m going to fry them in lard!’ This was quite enough for Quetzal, who took off running out the door. At this point Sun entered, clearly confused, and asked why his friend had fled. Moon shrugged and told him that Quetzal had eaten both livers and run as soon as he’d seen Sun approaching. At this, Sun cursed and chased after Quetzal.

‘I was going to give one of them to you,” Sun called.

‘If you catch me,’ Quetzal replied, ‘I suppose you can have both.’”

The audience broke into applause, and Marilyn had to dip her head to hide the tremendous glow of pleasure she felt rise to her face. Later that night, Cash told her he’d never found her more sexy. That she knew the comment heartfelt pleased her, while at the same time leaving her unsatisfied. A little drunk and very sleepy, she feared for a moment she’d turned a corner in her life, and that from that point on nothing would ever be enough for her, and then she fell asleep. When she woke in the morning, she didn’t remember the thoughts of the night before.
Shortly after the party Max discovered why he’d been hired. Cindy began a month-long vacation, back home to Canada to visit family and escape the rain, and Max took over the paint shop in her absence. His first supervisory challenge arose right off. Rigo failed to report to work, again. Max’s solution was to hustle through his own duties and enlist Lucio to help pick up the slack. Working near Lucio that morning, he began to slather the varnish to the rhythm of Lucio whistling, a clear, soft sound. Max had never been able to make much more than blowing sounds and random chirps. It had been a sore spot with him in elementary school. “Why no music?” he asked, pointing with his brush to the paint-spattered radio dormant in a corner.

“The bosses don’t like it.”

“Don’t like music?”

Lucio shrugged and continued to whistle. “Music,” Max said. “Right now.” Lucio stopped painting and whistling both. “Turn it on. Please.” Lucio glanced about the room. Everyone had halted their work. “I’m the boss,” Max said. “Am I not?” Lucio strode to the radio and immediately the most God awful jingle for the Highlands’ only grocery store chain assaulted the formerly peaceful air: “Lans, Lans, Laaaaaans, Lans!” Max had heard the advertisement a hundred thousand times. Guatemalan radio was made up of six commercials and twice that number of songs,
repeated eternally. The songs came in two categories: the civil war marching drum and trumpets of banda, and those songs of a style Lucio called romantico, slow country ballads featuring accordion and a yodeling singer. Max found he rather liked some of the latter, songs devoted to the concept that true love can never last. The banda, the shouting DJs, the commercials, and the incredible volume the workers preferred, rasped Max’s nerves, and he understood why radio had been banned. But what the hell, he thought. The workers were happy. The spirit of the room lifted perceptibly. Gringo repression of the airways had been overcome. ¡Viva la revolucion! All because of Max. Long live me, he thought.

He detected another new sound for the most part buried in the radio noise. Lucio’s goat noises had caught on, along with Max’s contemplative chin stroke. They’d given him a nickname, he learned. Cabro, they said, bashfully at first, gleefully later. He’d never had a nickname before, and had always secretly wished for one. Though he might not have chosen “Goat” for himself, the Spanish translation sounded okay, and he returned to the gringo house that night in high spirits.

After dinner he watched a horror flick on HBO Olé with Livermore. He felt easier around Livermore now that Cindy was gone. The film took place in a decrepit, industrial city. The standard good looking couple wandered through an abandoned factory. The large man who liked to kill people with a hook lurked in the shadowy foreground. In spite of his long habit of laughing off such movies, this one pushed Max’s buttons. He talked to dispel the spook. “So what’s up with you and Cindy,” he
asked Livermore, who sat sideways across the comfortable chair with a bowl of ice cream on his belly.

"Why? You think something is up?"

Max sipped his bottle of beer. His legs rested on the coffee table. The hook man had disappeared again. The couple discovered the body of one of their friends hanging upside down from a chain. "You're a guy, she's a girl. You live together here, alone most of the time. Seems you dig her. That's all."


"Death is one hell of a change." The male of the couple got the hook through his neck, and a brief chirp of terror sounded in the room.

"Did I do that?" Livermore asked, glancing about the room as if to discover someone else.

"I believe you did," Max said. "But I won't tell Cindy." Livermore chuckled and carried his ice cream bowl to the kitchen. He returned with a fresh beer for Max.

"What about your love life? I take it you have a thing for the local gals." For some reason Max was loath to discuss his feelings for Gabriela with Livermore. After a moment he realized that he was embarrassed. "A lot of Americans come down here and marry Guatemalans. Remember that lawyer?" The news of the American lawyer's hunger strike in Washington had taken over the baby robbing attacks over the last week. The woman had come to Guatemala to research a book on the peasant resistance, and had fallen in love with one of the revolucionarios. When he
disappeared, she made a big stink. Apparently the U.S. CIA was more involved than they wanted to admit.

"A lot of good it did her and him," Max said.

"One's hungry, the other dead."

Rigo didn’t show up to work on Monday, having missed an entire week. Max met him outside the door just before starting time. “Yes?” he asked, truly angry. A small group of early arrivals stood by.

“I’m here,” Rigo said.

“I see that.” Max threw the door open and waited until the employees had entered. Rigo stood by, rubbing a bare spot on his gums with a finger. “You missed a week,” Max informed him. “That’s too much.”

Rigo’s expression became rueful. He was a small man, nearly toothless and dirty from regularly sleeping outdoors. “I know you gringos don’t believe,” he said, meeting Max’s gaze directly, “but my wife visited the witch, over on the hill.” Rigo pointed southeast of the shanty village. “The next morning I couldn’t move.” His eyes grew intense, and he pantomimed the horror of paralysis. “I stayed in bed, frozen, all week long.” He relaxed and broke eye contact, became again the weary varnisher. “I couldn’t come to work,” he concluded simply.

“A witch?” Max asked, at a bit of a loss. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. My wife,” he said, drawing nearer and glancing over his shoulder. Two workers emerged from the brush behind the wood shop and proceeded to the
pintaria. Rigo clasped Max’s hand and led him around the corner of the building.

“My wife learned of my lover. I know. That’s why she visited the witch. She told her sister, who told her husband, and he told me.” He stood by with his thumbs hooked under his belt. He’d endured his punishment and told his story. The matter had departed his realm of control.

“Well,” Max said, because some final statement was obviously expected of him. “Don’t cheat on your wife.”

“No,” Rigo agreed quickly. “Never again. I promised.”

Rigo failed to report for work the next day. Max took his place at the varnishing table, viciously slathering it on. “Did another witch curse him?” Max asked Lucio, who obviously had no idea what Max was talking about. An old sander named Augustine approached and stood silently by. “Yes?” Max asked impatiently. Someone imitated a cat’s meow during a pause on the radio. The goat noises had expanded, grown into a cacophony of zoo sounds.

“Rigo’s not here,” said the old sander.

“Clearly.”

“He’s in the hospital.” The man made a chopping motion to his knees. Max set his brush down on a square of newspaper. “The bus, in the street.” He made the motion again. The older workers tended to speak Spanish to Max as if he were two years old, and they tended as well to fail to understand his pronunciation without several repetitions. After some linguistic work, Max understood that Rigo had passed out in the street and been run over by a bus, and would most likely never walk again.
“Stupid,” Max muttered, distressed that such a thing had happened to someone he knew, but even more so, perhaps, because now he’d have to make up for the careless drunk’s absence. “Lucio, tell your friends there’s a job available.” Lucio touched the bill of his hat to show he’d heard.

Marilyn woke early, dressed in the dark, and left Cash sleeping on the floor. She’d always loved mornings, especially after heavy rain. The mud she could do without, but the clean-smelling air lifted her considerably. The sky glowed orange at her back, faded gradually to dark blue on the other extreme. She left Alto and hiked along her usual path, searching out firmer ground to support her steps. Soon, her boots were covered in the slick, pungent clay, and she abandoned herself to the mess. She’d not seen the sky in days, and had been on the brink of murdering Cash just to make some space for herself. The clarity of the day seemed to work on her mind. Clutter dropped away, just as she stumbled to her knees in the soft mud. She chuckled and stood, smoothed the cool earth over her legs, drawing stripes with her fingers. Succumbing to whimsy, she painted a small “X” on her forehead.

She climbed as the sky grew lighter. The knowledge that clouds would soon roll in and camp added to the value of the moment. Since Cash’s arrival she’d lost her peace, no doubt about it. Of course, she’d also lost the loneliness that had become so
familiar she no longer noticed it. The brush scraped against her hips and sprang back playfully.

Watching the ground for footing, she only saw the men when she’d practically reached them. There were four of them, two sitting on a table-like rock, the others standing in the path. One of them smoked a cigarette. Stopping in her tracks, Marilyn noticed the non-smoker stumble drunkenly. “Con permiso,” she said, and walked by. The smoker lunged at her and gripped her arm just under the pit with painful strength. The weaving one laughed, and Marilyn twisted out of the grip. She dodged away from the lunging weaver, and the smoker moved in a blur, leaving her on her back in the mud with a flower of white pain and light burning through her left eye.

“Puta,” he said, and flicked the cigarette away. His partner laughed. She tried to push herself up, but the mud parted around her arms. The smoker stepped forward, a bowlegged man, clean shaven but for a faint shadow of stubble, with close-cropped hair, eyes wobbling drunkenly. Flakes of dried mud clung to the shins of his dark blue jeans. He looked down at her, and turned to his friends on the rock. One of them had hopped off, a mere boy of twelve or thirteen.

“Wait,” the man remaining on the rock said. Marilyn rolled to her side and managed to struggle to her knees. The smoker turned and approached the man on the rock, who jumped down. The two met in an embrace, and soon fell to the mud, wrestling. Marilyn stood. The boy watched her, unsure what to do. The weaver gripped her shoulder, and she screamed as she’d learned in a self defense class she’d
taken, shoved hard with the heels of both palms, connecting directly with his throat. He choked and fell. She ran.

The men were no longer in sight when she realized she’d gone uphill instead of down. She continued until she reached the top, where she found a stone and slung it back the way she’d come. It fell uselessly twenty feet away. She’d never played sports in school, and felt ashamed of her ineffectual arm. She found a gnarled club of oak, and swung it against a trunk to practice, shattering the punky wood. Breathing frantically, she found an alternate route down the back side of the hill, a makeshift path she slid down as fluently as water might, crying as she ran, consumed by murderous thoughts that encompassed so much more than the men who’d assaulted her, grew to encompass, it seemed for a moment, everything on the forsaken planet. By the time she reached the bottom, though, her mood had become triumphant. She only wished she’d have stuck around long enough to smash one of their heads open with a rock.

Norman Junior Caruthers climbed halfway down the ladder from the sleeping loft to the church’s back room and found what he’d deep down expected to find. A bundle of *tipica* blankets lay in the center of the worn plank floor. Soft murmurs came from the
little nest. The abused passenger had taken her sick toddler and left the infant. Junior
didn’t want to continue down the ladder. Somehow it seemed that the act of finishing
the short journey would implicate him in an irrevocable way. “Patty,” he called, but
she’d not woken yet and only mumbled. He resisted calling to his girls for help, and
climbed down.

He kneeled beside the child, and opened the blanket to reveal its face. He
didn’t know its sex, and its mother never called it by name, or referred to it at all. Its
eyes were open wide, and it ducked its chin at Junior, who guessed its age at a few
months. Junior presented his index finger and the child grasped it, a solid grip that
surprised Junior, as his daughters’ strength had also surprised him in years past. He
felt an enormous sense of weariness at the thought of learning how to deal with this
poor child. He had no idea what the laws were, what facilities and services, if any,
awaited the baby. At least he didn’t seem sick, Junior thought. How he’d avoided his
brother’s illness, he couldn’t guess. Temerity? Luck? God’s will? Junior asked The
Lord for strength, and to forgive his meanness. He’d wanted the woman to take her
problems and leave him be, but that is not what God had in store for Junior. He
prayed for the mother, for the sick boy, and for this small life.

Rebecca looked over his shoulder. She’d climbed down silently. “Are we
going to keep him?” she asked.

“No dear. We can’t.” He turned to his daughter, his serious, intelligent
daughter. She continually hurt him, the weight she carried. He wished he could take it
from her, somehow make her understand that she needn’t focus on the world’s
problems, that she was a child, and should have fun. “There are laws. Orphanages, foster care, something.”

She reached forward and touched its cheek. “Soft,” she said, and the infant flailed its arms in a helpless, frantic manner. “Can I name him?” Rebecca asked, and Junior dearly wanted to say yes, though he feared some rule must prohibit his daughter’s wish.

Max unlocked the shop and propped the door open with a bucket. Inside, he disengaged the latch of the rolling shipping door and hoisted it up. A few workers had arrived, but no one entered the building, merely stood in the mud and drizzle watching Max. Lucio, always early, hadn’t even shown yet. A delivery truck was to arrive at five o’clock, and they had plenty to do. “Time to start,” he said, with a sweeping gesture with his arm. The workers, mostly the older ones, ignored Max’s request. Finally the supervisor of the carpentería approached.

“We have a problem,” he said. A larger man than most of his workers, with a solid, block-shaped head, he addressed Max without looking him in the eye. “The army,” he said, “has taken the young men.” When no explanation came, Max asked where they’d been taken, and why. “To Guate. To become soldiers.” He listed the names of those in the carpentería who’d been captured during the night. Then he read
off the painters, Lucio among them. They'd been dragged from their families' homes, shackled with plastic bonds, and locked into vans. Within three hours the vans left the shanty, a short caravan of forest green vehicles carrying the youth of Toto to a military base outside the capitol.

"How can they do that?" Max asked, shocked. The supervisor did not dignify the question with a response. The workers stood in the rain. Everyone waited on Max, but he had no idea what was required, what he could do. He bit his thumb nail, lit a cigarette. Three old women in traje appeared over the edge of the hill behind the carpenteria. They approached, weeping. "Please," one of them said, huffing from the exertion of the climb. "Help us." She clutched his arm.

"What can I do?"

"Money," the woman said, and released him. She seemed to be addressing the whole group now. No one responded. An old sander removed a short-brimmed hat and shook the water from it, then set in back on his head.

Max sent them home. By the time he got back to the bungalow, he felt relieved. He couldn't help it. The responsibility he'd felt for the workers had left his sphere of influence. He was a free man again. His thoughts turned to Lucio. Max had given the boy his mother's phone number in California, because Lucio had confided a plan to move north, up into Mexico, finding work, pushing on to the border, across it. Max had promised to help the boy find restaurant work, and he'd meant it. He'd half joked about treating Lucio to an Angels game. Max had spent more than a few idle
minutes in the shop indulging in the vain fantasy of imagining how well groomed and impressive California would look to a boy of such humble means.

He burst into the office and caught Livermore speaking his rude Spanish into the phone. "We've got a problem," he said, echoing the super's language. Livermore used his palm to block Max out until he hung up the phone.

"Why aren't you at the shop?" he asked. Max explained the situation, momentarily swelled by his own importance. Livermore had begun shaking his head slowly. He threw his hands aloft and allowed them to tumble to his sides.

"So is this it?" Max asked. "The end of Joyas?"

"Of course not. This happened before, two years ago when we first started. We need to get the vital workers back, and hire some new laborers. It'll cost money and it'll cause delays, but we can do it. You're going to need to help." He stood and placed his hands on his hips with his elbows slightly forward. "So how many did we lose? And who? Did you write it down?"

"I didn't think about it. It was all so crazy. I sent everyone home."

Livermore sighed.

"How are we going to get them back?" Max asked. "I don't understand."

"Easy. Two thousand quetzales per kid. That's what it cost before, and it better not be more now. I won't pay it." The phone rang. Livermore placed his hand on the receiver, paused. "I have some calls to make. You go into the barrio and learn who's missing."

"Do you have addresses?"
Livermore regarded Max, phone at his shoulder. “There are no addresses. Just ask someone, anyone. They all know who got picked up, and they all know who you are.”

A few hours later, Max returned with the information that twelve boys had been taken. Livermore read over the list. “We only have to bail out three,” he said, cross checking the list with his own records. “Two carpenters and the young design painter.” Max stood beside the printer, resisting the urge to press random buttons.

“How are we going to do the job without the rest?”

Livermore leaned back in his rolling chair and locked his hands behind his head, an affected gesture. “Simple. We hire more.”

“So,” Max said, pushing a button that caused the machine to wheeze and click, “what’s going to happen to the others?” Livermore explained that they’d be stripped, tormented, humiliated, and finally comforted by a fatherly superior officer. When the brainwashing was complete, weeks or months later, they’d be dressed in smart uniforms and brought to the City for alcohol and prostitutes.

“What about Lucio?” Max asked.

“Who?”

“Lucio, the accent painter. Good kid, very skilled.”

“What about him?”

“We need him. Shouldn’t you add him to the list?”
Livermore was walking his fingers over the tabs in a file drawer. “Well, it only takes about an hour to train an accent painter. It’s just putting dots on wood.” He glanced over his shoulder at Max. “I hear you even learned to do it.”

“There’s more to it than that. He picks just the right color. And he’s fast.”

“I know, but he’s not worth two thousand quetzales. Bottom line. Would you leave the printer alone?”

“How long would it take to learn your job?” Max turning to leave. “It took me about fifteen minutes to learn mine.”

Livermore followed. “You think I’d bail you out for two thousand quetzales?”

“Likewise,” Max said, now entering the kitchen with no purpose. Doña Angelica leaned against the counter chewing on a carrot.

“Good. I wouldn’t expect you to. That’s just how life is.”

“You could afford one more, and Lucio deserves it, but just forget it. It’s not my business. Do what you like.” Max had a beer in his hand, a leftover from the party. It tasted cold and wild, as it had when his father used to let him sip from his icy cans of Coors when Max was a boy.

He emptied the bottle and walked into the drizzle. His flannel shirt hadn’t dried since the trip into the shanty, so he didn’t mind the rain. A plastic milk carton floated down the gutter, bouncing through miniature rapids. At the cervesaria he bought a ballena, wondering where Rigo had been run over. Max sat along the wall, but couldn’t find the necessary calm to stay put, so he ventured off, in full knowledge that the cops would harass even a local gringo for flashing such a big bottle away.
from the cervesaria. But he didn’t care today. Let them toss him in a cell for the night, pry a bribe out of him.

He came to the main square, deserted in the rain, and huddled in the entrance of the damaged church. The bell tower had collapsed during an earthquake a decade before, Max had learned. Relief agencies and the Catholic Church raised the funds to repair the damage, but the official in charge disappeared with the money. No further aid ever came. A similar incident, grander in scale, happened to the whole city of Managua, Nicaragua; an earthquake destroyed half the city and again an official absconded with the millions Donated for rebuilding. Today, he’d heard, the city still remained in rubbles.

He began to relax. It was the beer, like firm warm hands massaging his temples and the back of his neck. He sat alone, blank of thoughts, warm, three quarters through his beer and wanting more. He craved an all out drunk.

He walked into the gringo house well after dinner time. “So you didn’t run off after all,” Livermore said, perched sideways on the chair, watching television. Max, scornfully drunk, removed a pint of Quetzalteca from his back pocket and drank.

“Been drinking, huh?”

“I quit,” Max declared, leaning against the threshold between the hall and the living room, delighted with himself suddenly.

“What happened to a two-week notice?” Livermore’s face flickered pale blue from the television. Hollywood orchestral music swelled.
“Whatever happened,” Max said, but no witty retort occurred to him. “Fuck your two-week notice,” he settled for.

“You’re wasted,” Livermore said, his thin lips twisted with distaste.

“And you’re a sissy.”

The program Livermore watched moved to commercial. A male voice suggested in Spanish that Rolaids antacid worked better than competitors. Livermore sat with his feet on the floor and hands on his knees. “Okay, Max, calm down. You need to go to bed and sleep it off. I’ll forget what you just said. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I think I’d rather talk now,” Max said. Livermore aimed the remote control at the television and moved through channels, creating a stream of flashing color and fragments of sound, a backdrop to what Max had to articulate, everything that was wrong with Livermore. He was racist, creepy, physically repulsive with his dead white skin, squirming lips and mincing manner. He made Max sick.

Livermore’s face, for the most part, remained placid throughout Max’s onslaught. Now and then his left eyebrow rose, and his lip stretched into a half smile. “Max,” he said during a lull, “why don’t you bail that boy out you like so much?” The question hit the very source of Max’s anxiety and anger—like one of the deeply submerged acne cysts he’d borne throughout high school, a painful, barely noticeable lump that would inevitably rise to the surface and burst into a runny pustule. “You have two thousand quetzales. And if you don’t, I’ll loan it to you until you work it off.” He felt sleepy and knew already he’d not part with the money. Excuses he’d been secretly creating all day sprang to his defense: he hardly knew the boy, he’d have
to leave Guatemala months earlier than planned, maybe the army would be good for Lucio. He felt sleepy now, and Livermore’s smug expression flashing in the television light defeated him. He entered the room and fell onto the bed.

The digital clock read 3:42 when he next woke, parched, spinning, cold and fully dressed over the blankets. He stumbled into the kitchen and downed half a glass of water before running into the bathroom to vomit. Back in his room he undressed. The bottle, still in his pocket, clunked on the tile floor, but didn’t break. He climbed under the blankets and turned out the light.

Livermore opened the door to Max’s room at eight that morning. “You were drunk last night,” he called out to the still air. Max was barely conscious, sick and ashamed. “I’m willing to let it go for now. Stay for another week, until Cindy gets back. You know it’s the right thing to do.” He closed the door. Max listened to Livermore’s footsteps down the hall, heard the front door open and close. More faintly, the truck door slammed and the old Ford coughed and sputtered to life.

Livermore was right. Max owed him a week. He lay there repentant, but unable to climb out of bed yet, for fear of what would happen to the dull thrumming in his head once he moved.

Hours later he woke to find Doña Angelica applying an ice pack to his forehead. Smelling faintly of corn meal, she placed a glass half full of a cloudy mixture into his right hand. He drank the salty, acidic liquid down. “Poor thing,” she said, stroking his hair.

“It’s my own fault,” he said, after belching softly into his hand.
“No,” she said. “No blame. Only pain, only illness.” Max wondered where she, a woman who’d spent her life serving strangers who treated her as an appliance, found the compassion to pity him.

He forced himself out of bed and into the shower. The water dribbled over his head, onto his neck, never enough warmth to stave off the relentless cold. Soaping seemed an overwhelming task. He stretched his arms over his head and felt the muscles running down his sides stretch pleasantly. A force drove into his wrists, down his forearms, locking his elbows, his biceps, down into his torso to his spine, clamping his body around itself so powerfully he felt on the verge of snapping like a twig. He came to consciousness crumpled and panting on the floor of the shower. He’d touched the showerhead wires, he realized, had been shocked with electricity, in water.

A half hour later, Max entered the paint shop and found a boy who looked twelve-years-old in Lucio’s place. Livermore handed Max the clipboard and exited without words. The truck fired up and whined away in reverse. Max clicked on the radio and turned up the *banda* music until the sound distorted. “Come on,” he shouted hoarsely, clapping his hands. “Let’s have some fun.” The remaining employees, along with the replacements, regarded him warily from their stations. No one made the animal noises, no one sang and no one referred to Max by nickname or any other name.
October and November

Caruthers left the soft hearts to deal with the abandoned infant. Probably they lived for this kind of trouble. They certainly got to feel like the heroes of the day. Patricia at least. Caruthers swore he detected anxiety on his son’s face—and the little girl Sarah, forget it. She’d gone into full-blown tantrum mode when her mother began to feed the new arrival. But Caruthers had his own problems. Gas, for one thing. He was almost on empty and practically broke. Not to mention Chucho Cruz’s blessed papers. He slipped out of third gear and swung around a gradual left, hanging over a two hundred foot drop into the pretty blue water. Time for him to admit it. His transmission was slipping bad, and wouldn’t get any better. But the bus felt good out of gear. He’d always thought of it as an extension of himself, smoother and more powerful than the
two footed version. The sun had finally broken the haze, perhaps for the rest of the year. He drove faster than usual, free of passengers since the last hopped off two miles back.

He played the familiar game. The bus—which he'd secretly named Magdalena after his first local girlfriend—was him and so was the road, and so was the lake and the crater as well. Why not? His whole route extended from his body like tentacles. Repetition had connected him to it, had made him greater than a mere man. No wonder he'd never had an accident in spite of driving drunk every minute of every day on the road. “I am large, Seba,” he shouted, about the only thing he remembered from college.

“Yes,” Seba said, at rest on the front passenger-side bench. “This is true.”

Caruthers could always count on good old Seba to agree with just about anything. “You have an agreeable nature, my friend,” he told him.

Caruthers whipped right, toward the cliff side, and right again, veering out near open space, then abruptly stomped on the brakes. A gringo hauling a backpack flagged the bus from the edge of the cliff. He must have been walking from Solola, Caruthers noted, a good trek. He rode the brakes and shuddered to a stop. The kid, a basic type with brown hair touching his shoulders and a silly Van Dyke beard, hustled forward and swung himself up the stairs. Seba hoisted himself into a sitting position to check things out, but seeing that it was only an able-bodied male content to lug his own gear, he kept ass in contact with the cushion.
Caruthers let old Maggie roll while the kid shoved his pack onto a bench and approached the front of the bus. Caruthers didn’t like his stare. He feared an unrecalled history, some drunken borrowing of money, violence. He was capable of anything with the right kind of drunk on.

The kid opened his mouth to speak, but let it go. Instead he planted himself on the bench behind the driver’s seat. Caruthers guessed he’d been in country for half a year or so. He wore that affected heaviness in the shoulders of a young man who thinks he knows suffering.

“Excuse me,” the kid said over Caruthers’ shoulder. Caruthers pointed to a cardboard sign reading, in Spanish and English: “Please don’t talk to the driver.”

“Yeah, but let me just ask. I’ve been trying to get a job as an ayudante. I know it sounds weird.”

Nothing much surprised Caruthers these days, and though it was the first he’d heard of such a request, it wasn’t the strangest desire he’d been audience to. Still, he didn’t want to get dragged into some punk’s personal quest. “No hablo Ingles.”

“No?” the kid asked. “Entonces yo busco trabajo. Quiero que sepa ayudante.” The kid spoke glibly, show-offishly. He’d probably built the sentence from a text book before hopping on the plane.

In the mirror Caruthers watched the kid glance over and smile at Seba, who sat up and scowled. “Ya tiene ayudante,” Seba said, slapping his own chest.

“And besides,” chimed in Caruthers, “I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Come on man. Cut me some slack.”
“Slack? I can’t think of one reason on this green planet, in the whole universe of possible reasons, why I’d want to cut you something like that.” Caruthers applied the brakes to navigate the final acute turn, and then he let Santa Magdalena, named after his last girlfriend, a local lady he’d lived with for a couple of years in the early days when he had the desire, and physical ability, to enjoy the company of women, glide down the slope, his favorite stretch of road.

The kid squinted out the window at the passing strata where the mountain had been sheared away to make the road. “Why is everyone’s first impulse to be an asshole around here?” he asked.

“Because it’s Guatemala, man—last syllable, ‘mala.’ Can’t you feel the negativity? It’s like humidity. Sticks to you, gets in your hair and clothes. What’d you expect, a love fest? I bet you thought naked Indian girls were going to line up to suck your cock.”

Caruthers slowed to the intersection at the edge of town, stopped and turned right into Pana’s bland parade. “Yeah,” the kid admitted. “Maybe that is what I expected. Or maybe I just thought it would be more exciting, more like an adventure, more meaningful, not so much like work.”

Caruthers pulled Maggie to the curb. “Last stop, kid.”

“Hey, so. Are you done driving? Want to get a drink? I’ll buy you a beer.”

Seba stood and rubbed his face. “I don’t give a flying fuck,” he said, a stunning burst of English.

At Ick’s place, Caruthers made it a point to introduce the kid, one Max, to the bartender. He was always willing to take credit for extra business, curry the favor of those in charge of drinks. Ick popped a couple of Cabros and placed them on napkins before Caruthers and the kid. In honor of a couple of Scando-looking girls sitting with their unshaved legs cocked up on stools at one of the high tables, Ick had muted the television and played his old Warren Zevon cassette. He’d probably ply the girls with free drinks all night hoping to get laid, and maybe after spending twice the price of a whore he’d succeed. But paying straight out for love wouldn’t do the trick for Ick. Caruthers remembered the urge to bang girls met in bars, the need for the illusion that they wanted you just for the special poignancy of your you-ness. Never mind they’d have left with any of twenty different men given slightly different circumstances. We’re all so desperate for affirmation that we’re special, Caruthers concluded, precisely because we sense how ordinary we are. Especially after midnight. “When are you going to get those stools reupholstered,” he asked, squirming on the ripped fake leather.

“As soon as you buy a new bus,” Ick answered.

“I think I know why you drive a bus,” the kid, Max, said, squinting a bit at Caruthers.

“I doubt that.”
“It’s because…well, now it doesn’t make sense when I try to say it. But it’s like you had to do something, and that was the thing you had to do.”

“Brilliantly put.” The kid examined his beer bottle. Caruthers had shamed him. Why did he always have to take the asshole route? He’d in fact understood what the kid was getting at. Bus driving chose him, in a way. “I was here for a while, spending through my retirement money, what I had left after the divorce. I wasn’t sure if I was going to run out of money or die of booze first.” The kid chuckled. “I mean that quite literally. I would wake up on the dirt more often than in my bed. I was always getting beat up and robbed.” Caruthers raised his arms over his head and stretched his back. “I’m sure I got buggered at least once.”

“Buggered?”

“Raped.”

“Jesus, Norman. Don’t tell me that.” The kid writhed on his stool, intolerably uncomfortable with the idea. “Don’t ever tell anyone that.”

“I kept it secret, partly from myself, for years. But you come to a place at some point in life where you face the realities. I find sharing this fact now and then helpful. Secrets are heavy, kid. Drop them where you can, if you don’t mind advice from a sack of shit.”

“Jesus,” the kid repeated, and slugged down the rest of his beer. Ick, dependable Ick, was there with two fresh bottles. “What about the bus driving,” the kid said at last.
“Oh, I just met a guy who wanted to retire and his three sons either joined the army or the revolution, or were killed. I forget. Anyway, I bought him out. Figured I’d be able to pay for my booze until I couldn’t drive any more. Then I’d be at the end of the line anyway.”

“Jimmy Buffet bought a fishing boat with his first million,” said the drunk beside Caruthers, another red-faced man measuring away his life with a tea spoon. “So he could, you know, fish if he ever ran out of money.” The comment was met with silence.

A hard rock band dressed in mariachi suits performed on the Mexican MTV station, corresponding oddly with Zevon’s heroin addiction ballad. “Let’s drink booze,” the kid suggested. “Beer is depressing me. You ever get a beer and it tastes like the first time you ever tried one?”

“Never really thought about it.”

“Sometimes, usually on a hot, sunny day, I’ll crack one and even before I drink I know it’ll be strange and cold, like when my dad first let me sip from his can after a long hike through the desert.” The kid examined the bottle in his hand. “But it hasn’t tasted like that for a long, long time.”

“Wonder what happened,” Caruthers said, though he didn’t know why, or what exactly he meant.”

“I’ve been drinking Quetzalteca lately.”

“Jesus, kid. Don’t touch that stuff. Are you crazy? And what’s with the furniture?”
“It’s cheap.”

“So is radiator fluid, but that doesn’t make it a good choice. That stuff is all chemicals and poison. Why do you think the Indians are so fucked up?” The kid stared off into the hidden dimension. He was one of those kids, and he’d become the kind of man, who had to learn every fucking lesson on his own, an individual whose life would be full of hassles.

“But I like the general ambition,” Caruthers said. “Just the time for a jumpstart. Couple of rums, Ick, on me.”

“What do you take it with?” the kid asked.

“Neat. Or rocks. Don’t let me catch you polluting this fine beverage with Coca Cola. How old are you?”

“Twenty nine.”

“I’d have guessed younger.”

“Thanks.”

“I didn’t mean it as a compliment.”

Some time later, the kid was talking and moving his hands around his head. The noise everywhere mixed together in an underwater kind of way. The kid’s lips, their curl, the confidence they suggested, aggravated Caruthers. He lunged and tried to pinch them together. The glib smile dropped from the kid’s face. His eyes turned hurt for a moment, then narrowed into mean little slits. Caruthers slid off the stool and stumbled through the door, surprised to find it dark out.
“Cash,” he said, extending his hand, “Cash Platt.” As always, a charge of pleasure accompanied the pronunciation of his own name.

His new companion, a large fellow with intensely focused eyes and a shaved head, took Cash’s hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said, “Walter Middleditch.” Cash felt momentarily embarrassed for his breakfast-mate. By necessity, they shared a table at the village’s only café. A hoard of hippies crowded every other seat in the cramped room. They’d walked in at the same time, and Cash had immediately felt at ease with Walter. He’d always preferred the company of other tall men. Around shorter males he tended to detect envy, followed by a doubling back to wonder if his own feeling of superiority hadn’t projected the envy on the other. Over the past few months, he’d begun for the first time in his life to suspect that he might be an asshole.

“You going to the fall moon party?” he asked Walter, who adjusted small wire-rimmed glasses higher on his nose and cleared his throat. In spite of his size and general good looks, Cash noted, Walter was a fidgety type. “These people,” Cash explained in a low voice, gesturing with one hand to encompass the room, “all meet out in the woods and dance around, get drunk, drop acid, what have you.”

“I don’t know,” Walter admitted, frowning at the rowdy group. Marijuana smoke scented the air. “You think I should?”
“Should what?”

“Go,” Walter Middleditch said.

“That depends upon if you want to or not.”

“I think I will,” Walter decided on the spot. “You?”

“Why not? Nothing else going down around here. They don’t even have electricity.” A woman brought coffee, and Cash ordered fruit and bread. Marilyn’s suggestion that Cash take off on his own for a while had initially insulted him. She’d hinted, then insisted. The words “take a break,” and “need space,” had been uttered, not the best sign, but Cash retained his confidence. She’d loved him before, she would again. He was prepared to sweat it out for her, especially after the way he’d treated her in the old days. No mistake, he had dues to pay. In the meantime, why not make the best of it; explore the country, make some new friends, come back to her with some stories to tell, something to offer when he accompanied her to some All Saints Day festival at the end of the month.

Cash finished his meal and agreed to meet his new amigo outside the café at eight o’clock. Walking down the muddy street, he wished he had better shoes for hiking, because he wouldn’t have minded climbing one of those volcanoes to check out the view and take a gander at the igneous rock or whatever those things were made of. Not in cowboy boots though. Next time, he thought. As if he’d ever return. An oddity caught his eye as he passed a fruit stand. He stopped and examined the two-headed pineapple. “How much?” he asked the gray-haired woman working the stand. She held up one finger without looking away from her newspaper, on which
Cash recognized Harrison Ford's name among the Spanish headline. He gave the woman a quetzal and toted his new toy off, cradling it like baby or a football.

Back at his room he sat on the cot, bored and with no amusements in sight until the party. Nagging worries began to plague him. He resisted, but the negative memories leaked in like water through cracks. As far back as he could remember he'd believed in fate. His very name, Cash Platt, had prepared him for a destiny in the public eye. His father, perhaps the only white man in the Midwest to ever name his son after a black person, Cassius Clay in this instance, had always encouraged Cash to aim high. You can do anything you set your mind to, and suchlike assurances. Success came easy to Cash. His grades were poor, sure, but only because he chose to offer the bare minimum attention to school while still graduating. At one point his U.S. Government teacher informed him that he'd fail the course unless he got a perfect score on the final exam, and would therefore not graduate on time. Or ever, the teacher said. The night before the exam, Cash opened his book for the first time all year and read several chapters, aced the exam, and graduated 814th out of 887, a hilarious accomplishment he loved to boast about.

After high school the band fell into place. He'd never played drums before meeting the guys who'd soon become his band mates, but within six months he'd learned the basic moves, and year later the band, On High, played their first gig, a backyard party with over a hundred guests. He recalled how Marilyn had for the first time seemed a drag then, keeping him from the attractively dark Goth girl who'd offered herself so plainly, and even put her phone number into his palm with Marilyn
standing right there. Maybe his problems began that day with the resentment he felt. He went home to Marilyn’s apartment and pushed her away when she tried to nestle into his arms. “I just need a little space tonight,” he told her in a tone that caused her to cry. The sound of her soft sobs caused him to feel guilty, for which he blamed her. How had they stayed together so long, he wondered, staring at the ceiling’s plaster swirls.

If only he’d appreciated what he’d had, maybe he could have kept it. Sure, his job didn’t pay much, but he liked working at the record store, and he frequently received free tickets to shows, with backstage passes, not to mention all the free promotional stuff the owner let him sift through. Cash didn’t mind living with his father, who’d become more like a friend than an authority since Cash’s mother moved into the loony bin.

Cash flushed thinking how he’d begun to pick on Marilyn, just because she’d take it. And the sex stuff. He’d enjoy himself while it went down, performing all the porno shit he’d imagined over the years with a good and wicked feeling. He made a video tape once and recalled the way his stomach muscles glistened with sweat as he worked in an upright position with Marilyn on her back with her ass cupped under his hands. Afterward, though, he’d feel ashamed and disgusted, and rather than turn the disgust on himself, he’d aimed it at Marilyn.

When the band broke up, he saw it as a good thing, and decided to try singing. He’d always envied the attention Rudy, On High’s singer-songwriter-guitarist, received at their shows. He bought a mike, practiced along with tapes, and scheduled...
several auditions from ads in a local music magazine. The first three ended quickly, and Cash buried the distressing suspicion that something had gone more than a little wrong. After the first song of the fourth audition, a heavy rock band who'd asked him to sing "Let Me Stand Next to Your Fire" in his own way, all the band members avoided Cash's eyes. After a minute, the leader of that band, a short, fat bass player with dyed-black hair, turned the high P.A. cabinet toward Cash and asked to run through the song again. "Listen to yourself," he advised Cash, who had, excruciatingly, complied. He sounded like a strangling duck. "Don't feel so bad," the band leader had said afterward. "You've definitely got the balls to belt it out. Now you just need to learn to sing. Cash nodded, his head down. At the door the band leader called him. "Dude, one other thing. I don't want to make you feel worse, but for your own good. If you audition again, don't do that dancing around rock star shit. It's embarrassing." Cash nodded his head once more and someone else in the band said he was sorry before Cash got out the door of the warehouse where they rehearsed. After four kicks, he started the Sportster, a bike that looked great and broke down every other month, and rode back to his father's house, determined to go back to drumming. So he couldn't sing. No big deal. Live and learn.

Cash sat up and peered out his window. Walter Middleditch loped by with a rather Cro-Magnon slouch and swing of the arms. Cash watched him disappear into the lush foliage surrounding the village. If he hadn't really lived much lately, Cash had at least learned. He'd called Rudy from On High about joining him in New York where Rudy had moved. After some hemming and hawing, Rudy had let on that he'd
hooked up with a new drummer. Initially he’d wanted Cash to move out with him, but Cash hadn’t had the money, and moreover feared that Rudy might be hampering his creative potential. Now Rudy admitted that Cash didn’t have the chops for the big city scene, and suggested he take some lessons, which Cash had done, finding that he lacked the patience to sit before a practice pad for two hours a day with a metronome, as the teacher assigned.

Finally, he put drums aside, confronting the possibility that he’d never even liked playing so much as got off on the admiration. Maybe he’d have formed a new band and straightened his head out, if his father, Greg Platt, hadn’t begun seeing Gail what’s her name, who poisoned him against his own son. “You’re 24 now,” Greg had stated in this real serious father tone, as if imparting news to Cash. He’d cracked a beer and placed it before Cash on the short Tiki bar in their basement playroom.

“Maybe you need to think about getting your own place, for your own good.” He went on to explain how he’d moved out at eighteen, and though it had frightened him, he’d grown to love the independence. Cash hadn’t been fooled a moment. The bitch Gail told Greg to get rid of Cash, and true to form, Greg had kissed her ass, just as he’d done to Cash’s insane mother until she made good on the suicide attempts when Cash was nine, and found her on her bed, naked, covered in blood. She’d drawn a hot bath and slashed her wrists, rare for a woman, Cash had learned later. The police hypothesized that at some point in the dying process, she’d changed her mind and made it to the bedroom phone, but hadn’t been able to dial emergency in time. Walter
appeared again, walking back the way he’d come, looking rather befuddled. Cash left his room and met Walter out front.

Neither could find a use for themselves, so they sat on plastic chairs under the hotel’s awning. Occasionally a local or a hippy would pass by, offering them a wave or not. Cash slid the clasp hunting knife his father had given him from the custom holster he’d sewn into the top of his right boot. He withdrew the blade and displayed the knife to Walter as a precursor to some vague stories of the old days when he and his father used to hunt cottontails together with shotguns. Greg Platt liked the woods, liked shooting, and even the idea of hunting his own meal. He’d meant to collect enough pelts to have a jacket made, but never bagged enough. Cash and Greg abandoned the budding tradition after Irene did herself in. Cash didn’t mention this to Walter though. Nor did he mention his suspicion that the hunting trips had only ever been an excuse to escape the increasingly depressed woman. Cash didn’t mind though. By that time he’d discovered popularity and girls. Cash grew antsy sitting around with reticent Walter and whiled away the day by wandering down to the shore, returning through town, sitting on the dock when the ferry arrived to check out newcomers with the rest of the village, and returning to his room simply to sit and wonder what to do next. Finally, dinner time arrived and he met Walter and the hippies at the café.

Someone passed around a basket of cookies. Hungry, Cash ate several and offered them to Walter, who also indulged. The curiously subdued group spoke in hushed tones while everyone ate the standard beans and rice fare. Most of the group
carried drums or stringed instruments, both outlandish and familiar. Cash wondered if they’d let him play, though he wasn’t so good at bongos.

When Cash ordered a beer, Walter felt the need to explain that he never drank except for champagne toasts. “Fun stuff,” Cash said, and joined the group as it made its way into the dark night. The moon had risen, someone informed the party, but hadn’t yet crested the volcanoes. They passed by Cash’s hotel, so he popped into his room for the freakish pineapple and a bottle of wine. They marched in line along a narrow path. Some of the hippies carried candles to light the way. They soon emerging from the woods into a clearing marred by a circle of scorched earth bordered by half-buried stones.

“There it is,” someone whispered, pointing out the barest sliver of white light gilding the edge of the easternmost volcano just above the treetops. Everyone began to hunt firewood, and tossed it into a large pile. The candle bearers dripped wax onto the wood; damp from the recent rains but rotten enough to burn, they flared up hissing when the taper flames touched the waxy deadfall. The insight that someone had slipped him some kind of drug shocked Cash just as the first drummers began to tap quietly into the night. Cash took up a stick and banged it against a large, flat stone. After a while, shadows appeared to detach themselves from their sources and danced around the bon fire while the partygoers stood still. The moon, a great egg above the volcano’s purple spire, cast pale light that seemed to crawl along the leaves and branches of the trees above like an illuminated infestation. Cash saw Middleditch’s
face, frozen into a mask of terror and realized the cookies had been spiked. Having dropped acid or mushrooms a dozen times in his life, Cash let it come on.

“How you feeling?” he asked Middleditch, catching the moonlit glint of his own smile. Middleditch regarded him with crazed eyes, and Cash feared the guy would panic and make something bad happen. He wanted to tell him to relax, but a giggling fit seized control of him. The drums had really picked up, and several hippies twirled around the leaping fire, from which, licks of flame escaped and floated up to join the stars.

A willowy lady danced with arms like snakes up to Cash, and then Middleditch, beckoning both toward the flame. Cash dropped the stick in his hand and swayed with her, experiencing a strong sense of camaraderie. He spun slowly, and saw Middleditch backing toward the edge of the clearing. Cash found the pineapple in one hand and the wine bottle in the other. Confused by an unfamiliar quality to these objects, he drank the surprising liquid from the bottle, and handed it to the snake armed girl. He held the pineapple aloft, half in the moon’s chilly light, half in the fire’s. “The moon,” he said, calling to Middleditch to draw him back into the scene. “The moon is a lady.” The drummers increased their tempo and Cash, gripping the fruit by the twin spiky heads, he danced by lifting first one then the other leg high and stamping with feet pointed outward, as he’d seen a New Zealand Moari do once on television. “The moon,” he called, and opened his knife. He placed the blade between the two flowers, and ripped downward. The dancers jumped about, howling like wolves. Juice splashed upon his knife hand, and he ducked his head.
under the catch the sweet liquid. He handed one half to the nearest dancer and pushed the other into his own face. Grinning and sticky, he looked around for Middleditch, to give him a taste of the fantastic treat, but he’d disappeared into the night, and Cash never saw him again.

Max woke in a bad way. He tried to swallow, but his esophagus clamped shut and released as if lined with sand. Water, he thought, opening his eyes to an airy room painted primary blue. He’d forgotten to buy a new bottle last night, and didn’t recall checking into the room. His thirst drove him to sit up. The scent of human shit caused him to gag. He surveyed himself, fully dressed on the sway-backed bed. He hadn’t even ruffled the scratchy blanket. He stood and balanced by leaning on a wall. Down a dark hallway, he located a bathroom, where he cranked the water into the sink. He splashed his face, caught his blurry reflection in the encrusted mirror and drank from his cupped palms. All the guidebooks strictly warned against this, but he’d begun to drink the local water a month before and still walked among the living.

He used the toilet, returned to his room and slept again. A couple of hours later he woke, well enough to shower and brush his teeth. The mint toothpaste turned foul and gummy a moment after rinsing.
He ventured out, craving sausage and eggs; potatoes, hot sauce; a Coke. Two Cokes. He found an outdoor table at a café, nudged against a belt high wrought iron fence that partially protected him from the outside world. He shared the dining area with another gringo, a heavyset man with two pink prosthetic limbs attached to his shoulders, feeding himself coffee by pinching the cup handle between his steel grippers and raising the cup to his mouth. The nippy gray late morning suited Max’s jangled belly and nerves. He considered writing his mother a letter, and decided the impulse resulted from self pity. He wanted to tell her how sad and lonely he felt, and to frighten her with dangerous news.

A girl took his order and returned with a Coke. He drank it down and belched silently, eyes watering. A harried-looking gringo passed by on the street, pumping along, just under the speed of a jog. He was very tall and a shaved head and small, round glasses. Scratches crossed his bare arms, as if he’d been whipped. He glanced around as though pursued, and Max believed he probably was. The man caught Max’s eye for a moment, and broke the connection as if Max were a threat.

The fleeing gringo seemed to usher in a procession of hasslers, all focused on Max, the only mark in town, who’d chosen a table conveniently located at the fence, planted like a drive up service. Belts? Reggae berets? Towels? Blankets? Beaded necklaces? Volcano tour? A hippy gringa in her late thirties or early forties rode a fat-tired beach cruiser up to the edge of the patio, parked before Max’s table. “Hi,” she said. “I was riding by and I noticed your aura.” She looked good for her age, though her skin seemed more delicate than healthy, and dark pillows bulged under dark blue
eyes. Two braids descended from behind her outwardly cupped ears and rested on her breasts. She wore cut off jeans. Her calves were muscular. Her face ordinary, pretty.

“What’s it like?”

“A bruise. Or a sunset. There’s an ending quality to you. A wound healing. A day closing.”

“Can you see your own aura?”

“No.” She regarded the front tire, and appeared to muster strength. “But I can guess at it, depending upon my mood. I think it’s greenish blue right now. I’m at peace.”

“I’m willing to believe that.” Max thought that he might be willing to believe even more outlandish theories if she would be willing to take him to her stoner lair and twist with him into some cosmic carnality.

“All right. But hey. I was wondering if you’d be interested in a loaf of bread.” She uncovered said loaf from a cloth-lined basket attached to the front of the bike. It was fine-looking, dark and coarse, though in his present state Max did not crave grains.

“For sale?” he asked.

She rang a small bell on her handlebars. “Fifteen quetzales,” she said, chuckling

Max pretended to laugh with her and not in her face. He held onto the hope that they still might fuck in the near future. Her expression though, a fallen thing tinged with a rebellious glint of the eye, demonstrated that he’d blown his cover.
“I grew the wheat myself,” she told him, wounded by his bad vibes.

“Wow,” was all he could come up with, and by this time they might have been tapping telegrams to each other across an ocean. She climbed onto her bike and rode away.

“Don’t worry about her,” the cyborg at the other table said. “She’s sensitive, is all.”

Max thanked the man for his sympathy and retrieved a stack of postcards from his shoulder bag. He wrote a quick note to his mother, one to this grandmother, one to The Heart of the City where he used to work, and considered sending something to his father. He’d brought along the address and the prisoner number, just in case, though he’d left with no design to contact the man. Max’s grandmother would surely tell him where Max had gone. He’d get off on his son’s travels in some say, or be jealous, having spent all those years island hopping in Indonesia. Max had never known where his father had disappeared to when he jumped bail, but he’d always imagined a tropical locale, rich with mangos and women, a green sea lapping sand. Turned out his imagination had been right on, along with the FBI’s. While Max struggled through junior high and high school, hanging drywall, framing, tree trimming, landscaping, tiling and factory work, through college and bartending, his father, Dunny to his friends, of which he had many before his arrest—surféd, nibbled tropical fruit, smoked grass and banged hula girls until the Feds caught up with him. Max hated to be another one of those bitter sons, but he’d been unable to avoid the monumental disappointment of his father’s capture. Dunny had never been much for
marriage and children. Max understood, and never even needed to forgive. And Max empathized as well with Dunny’s experiment: dropping out of high school to marry a poor girl from Hesperia, in the spirit of rescue. Dunny had been seventeen when he’d made such a decision. Give the guy a break. Of course reality had asserted itself soon enough, when Dunny found himself pumping gas in the desert, dirt poor with a wife and boy. Max probably would have taken off too. And shooting the guy, a low level mobster the story went, during a drug deal gone bad, Max would not judge.

Then the phone call. “They have your father,” his grandmother had informed him after affirming his identity. He’d been unprepared for the sudden illumination, the sinking, the drowning, the rage. After some thought, he realized he’d constructed a fantasy associated with his absent father, based on an image he carried around in such a deep spot he never consciously examined the little fairy tale. He traveled along a dark trail through a tunnel of fat, tropical leaves and vines, at the end of which appeared a blazing beach slapped by a fierce but graceful sea. In the distance a man paddled, caught a wave. Max found a board and joined the surfer, his father. How had he found him? A letter ingeniously coded and delivered. How the hell should Max know? It had never arrived. Only upon the dissolution of that dream did Max learn of the depth to which this man who didn’t exist had shaped his identity. In place of the escape to the fugitive paradise, Max found bulletproof glass, a plastic phone, an old man who would grow older and probably die in captivity. What horrors befell an aging inmate who’d never done time before? During his one visit, Max had been too frightened of the answer to ask.
"I know you," a voice called out. Roused from his reverie, Max covered with his hand the blank postcard, as if his shame and anger were written there. An unmistakable figure toting a yellow and black backpack strode toward him, the storyteller's boyfriend, what's his name, the lanky cowboy-biker-industrial rocker.

"How are you?" he asked.

The backpacker paused at the fence, removed his hat and wiped his face in one motion, as if to keep the entirety of his features obscured. "A little rough." He smiled and seemed an okay guy. "Accidentally ate some cookies with something in them."

"Pot?"

"Worse." Max recalled his name was Cash. "Or better. Depending upon how you feel about narcotics."

"I like 'em," the mechanically limbed man put in. Cash glanced his way, demonstrating how he'd been conspicuously avoiding the spectacle.

"Who doesn't," he replied, unconvincingly. After a tense pause, Cash admitted he could use a drink about now, and invited Max to join him. Max considered his raging hangover, and felt he might as well top it off. He was on vacation, after all.

"Wait a second," their new acquaintance called when Max stood to leave. "I'm coming." At a loss, Max said nothing. The three of them progressed east toward Selva. Max and Cash shared a glance but dared not speak. The newcomer wheeled, alarming Max. "The name's Frank." He offered the pinchers. "Don't worry. I won't hurt ya." Max accepted the cool steel hand, noting the hard rubber covering the tips of
the two fingers. Frank grinned at him, clearly enjoying the exchange. “A trip, ain’t it?”

“Not at all,” Max lied, and quickly introduced himself. At the bar, Frank sat between the two younger men and bought the first round.

Caruthers, a good bit rawer than usual, entered Ick’s at the normal afternoon hour to find the kid from last night drinking with a young man wearing a cowboy hat three sizes too small and Frank, the armless psychopath. Caruthers wondered if Frank had imposed himself on the boys, or if they had adopted him as a temporary mascot. Either way, the combination of fresh and spoiled, sound and damaged sickened Caruthers. People should stick to their own, he figured, mounting a stool at the opposite end of the bar. One of the silent regulars and three vacant seats buffered him from them.

“What’ll it be, Norman?” Ick asked.

“You know what it’ll be,” Caruthers said.

“Well, last night you and that young man over there were drinking shots and whatnot, concoctions the kid learned about in the States. Thought maybe you turned over a new leaf. Maybe you want a fuzzy snatch, or whatever in hell they call it.”

“I was temporarily influenced by the full moon. Lunacy, is the term.”
Ick unfurled a napkin and pinned it to the bar with a glistening bottle of beer. Caruthers drank. Halfway through his first, the kid appeared at his elbow. "Hello, sir," he said, last night's ironic lilt in his voice. "Why don't you join us on the other side?"

"I'll pass, thanks," Caruthers said. "A man sometimes wants to drink alone."

This was not true of the moment. The power of his desire to drink with the boy frightened Caruthers. He hadn't noticed the loneliness in years. When he'd first left the States a decade ago, he'd cultivated friends in his excitement over the change of scenery, the ditching of the burden of wife and kids. But they'd dropped off over time. Some died, some hated him, some left town and a few quit drinking. As they disappeared, Caruthers had never wanted to replace them with Ick's new crop of drunks. The only important relationship was to his beverage, a loveless marriage no longer worthy of examination. He'd attained, he reckoned, a purity of sorts.

"That's sad, brother," the kid said.

"Not for me. I'm as happy as a Mexican in a beanery."

"That's some offensive shit."

"Kind of you to notice."

The kid snorted. "So, you want some company or not?"

Caruthers shrugged and cocked his head in the direction of the empty stools to his left. "Can't stop you from sitting where you want. And if you're tired of old pinchers," Caruthers said, simulating Frank's prosthetic claws, "feel free to use me as an escape hatch."
The kids managed to remove themselves from ranting Frank and sat beside Caruthers, who signaled to Ick to set them up. “Be flattered,” Ick said, serving up the bottles. “He doesn’t usually treat anyone until he’s totally sloshed, and by then he doesn’t have the money to pay for it.”

“Obliged,” the kid in the hat said, tipping his bottle Caruthers’ way like the cowboy he certainly wasn’t.

Max introduced Caruthers to Cash, a tall American with white boy dreadlocks under the silly leather cap. Max tried to spark a conversation, but it never caught. For some reason he found interesting the fact that Caruthers drove a bus for a living, but his friend clearly didn’t share his enthusiasm for public transit. The congeniality sputtered, and Max sat chewing his thumbnail in the silence he might have let be.

After finishing his beer, Cash announced that he’d better mosey on. Caruthers noted in the mirror the lift of the head, inviting Max to exit with him. “You staying?” he asked. Max frowned at his empty bottle.

“Go have fun. Get out of here,” Caruthers said. “This bar is a graveyard.”

Ick rinsed glasses nearby. “That so?” he asked quietly. Business had been bad since the travel advisory.

“Ah, you know what I mean,” Caruthers answered, abashed. “How about another beer?”

“No,” Max told his friend. “I’m sticking around.” Cash shook hands with Max and Caruthers before departing. Caruthers felt flattered and mildly disturbed that the kid had stayed. He considered asking if Max had a psychological difficulty or two,
issues they called it these days, but he already knew the answer. “Well, what’ll it be?”

Caruthers asked.

“Dark rum, splash of soda, squeeze of lime.”

“Now you’re drinking like a man.” The drinks appeared. “Here’s to you,” Caruthers said, tapping the heavy glass against the kid’s. The nonsense they spoke became a game in which they traded toasts as a prelude to each slug.

“Here’s to the lawyer hunger striking for her deceased husband.”

“Here’s to Cabro beer.”

“Here’s to Maximon, the patron saint of drunks.”

“Here’s to bus drivers.”

“Here’s to Michael DeVine, slain outside his own restaurant.”

“Here’s to bus driver assistants.”

“Here’s to the President’s feeble mind.”

“Here’s to the *pinche* Zapatistas.”

“Here’s to Cal Ripkin.”

“Here’s to horizon.”

“Here’s to this fucked up country and everything in it.”

“Here’s to getting sloshed out of our minds.”

Laughing as he drank, Caruthers spilled a couple of lines of rum down the corners of his mouth. “You said it there, kid.”

“Here’s to your momma.”
Caruthers wheeled on Max. “What’d you say?” Max recoiled and Caruthers laughed. “You looked like someone just grabbed hold of your balls.”

Many drinks later, Caruthers felt tears push at his eyes. He didn’t think he’d ever been so sincere. “I just flat out spit on ‘em. And you know why?” He considered his fresh drink. “They were getting in the way of the booze.” He chuckled and wiped his eyes.

“You’ve got to forgive yourself,” the kid said, eyes full of watery pity. “It wasn’t all your fault. Shit fucked you up, circumstances.” Circumstances bullshit. Caruthers had recounted the whole story—the lie his life had been. He cringed when he thought of that period of adulthood, just before marriage. Just after marriage. Ten years into marriage. He’d fancied himself a beatnik in college, and avoided Viet Nam through dumb luck. He’d protested, followed the antics of the Yippies and purported to back the Black Panthers. In lieu of class, he’d hung around the burnout kiosk with the marginally enrolled, dressed in military rags and a Che Guevara beret. Some of his friends returned from the war woefully changed. Others came back dead. Caruthers, meanwhile, talked the talk, wore the clothes, loitered in coffee houses, affected to write poetry for God’s sake, and took a job running his father’s blessed auto parts store. He’d met Pam in college, the girl who balanced his wild streak. That’s how he’d rationalized their relationship. For one honest month, he canceled the engagement and ran off with the exciting one, Valerie Knowles. Eventually, he’d come to his senses, as his mother put it, and returned to Patient Pam, Pam of the seasonal banners outside the front door and knickknacks covering every surface not
otherwise reserved. Pam who his parents loved and who he'd grown to disdain. He'd once told a young coworker who confided in him about love troubles that there are girls you fuck and girls you marry. He bit his lip, hard, to drive away the eternal embarrassment of such a profoundly stupid utterance.

"And your kids forgive you," Max went on in his own soulful haze. "They understand. Like me. I don't hold anything against my dad, even though he wasn't around much, and then he kills a guy, flees the country and finally gets thrown in prison. I figure, bummer for him, but I don't hate him for it."

Caruthers lifted his head and regarded the kid. He sat still with one finger in his drink. "Well I'll be double fucked." He clapped the kid's back. "Here's to him getting out."

"Hope he does," Max said after a long drink, "but I don't count on it." For the first time in minutes, hours, Caruthers noticed that music played, that best of Van Morrison tape he'd heard too many times, like he'd heard everything too many times. The kid's expression turned sly and he regarded Caruthers directly, boots resting on the bottom rung of the stool. His black eyebrows seemed false in comparison to his golden beard just then, painted on with a marker. "I remember," he said, and Caruthers settled into his seat for a tale. "I got called out of speech class, seventh grade. I was happy enough to leave. It was one of those classes where everyone is so clever, all kissing the teacher's ass. Mr. Sparks was his name. He felt sorry for me because I was shy."

"That sure changed."
"And because I didn’t know about taking showers every day, dressing in good
clothes, haircuts. I was a greasy loser, at the bottom rung of even the other welfare
cases. So I take my note to the office, and there’s my dad, wearing a Zig-Zag shirt and
ripped jeans. I thought he was so cool, you know. He had a talent for showing up just
when I’m about to forget him for good. So we climb into his beat up jeep and start
off, out of the desert toward the beach. I’m excited, but also feel weird because he
hasn’t said much yet, and usually he teases me a good bit about this and that.” Clearly
enjoying himself, Max paused to light a cigarette and suck the remains of his drink
out of the ice. “He says something like, ‘You’re going to hear about it someday soon,
so you might as well hear the truth from me.’ And then he tells me he shot a man and
would be going away for a long time.” Max dragged on the cigarette and turned
toward Ick, who smoked his own cigarette, staring off at nothing. “The wind coming
over the windshield got quiet somehow, like an invisible bubble surrounded us. My
dad told me I could cry if I wanted, but I didn’t feel like crying. I couldn’t tell him
this, but I felt,” he seemed to search around the room for the right word. “Great,” he
concluded.

“No shit?”

“Like cheering. I felt like a movie star. Better than that, the real man the
movie’s about. The actual character. My dad went on to tell me about the man he
killed, how he was a gangster, and had a boy about my age.” The kid took on a mock
serious tone. “You better watch your back, son. I can’t be there for you, and this boy
might want revenge someday.’ I was twelve,” Max said, and laughed. “I fantasized
about gunning this kid down. James Bond stuff. He’d shoot first, but I’d draw and bammo. Right in the heart.” He snuffed out his cigarette. The ashtray overflowed with butts. “And after that, I felt totally different, all the time, even in my dreams. I didn’t give a damn what anybody thought of me, not the rich kids at school, the pretty girls. None of them knew me. I was a marked man. Special. Better somehow than any of them. Then one day I noticed I’d become popular. This superiority thing I had worked on everyone, and the more I ignored them, or abused them, the better they liked me.”

Max swirled the ice in his glass and caught Ick’s attention.

“You two ready for round one hundred?” Ick asked.

“So I guess I owe the old man that.” Max smiled at the funny way the world worked.

“Another round, Ick,” Caruthers said, slightly in love with the universe. “You ever visit him?”

The kid accepted his new beverage and drank by raising the glass in his upturned palm. “Only once,” he said, squinting into the amber liquid. “He just got caught.”

“I don’t have room to talk,” Caruthers offered, feebly he thought, “but he’s your pop. Nothing either of you can do about that.”

The kid continued to stare at his drink. “I know it,” he said.

Caruthers’ high mood plummeted. He craved the earlier hilarity. “Let’s get out of here,” he said, standing. He came upon an inspiration, and hid a smile behind his hand so the kid wouldn’t catch on.
They located a cab in the street, which drove them out of town, cutting to and fro out of the volcanic crater in which the lake sat like wine in a chalice, up the igneous wall. Soon they pulled off the road onto a private drive leading to a dirt lot filled with cars. Behind a wall of pines appeared a wide, single story building featuring a sign radiating pink light: “La Luna Llena.” Exiting the cab, Caruthers paid the driver, who maneuvered his vehicle to the back of a line of fellow cabbies waiting alongside the building. “Your Spanish isn’t so hot,” Max said.

“I take you to a classy place like the Luna Llena, pay for the cab and you insult me. Ungrateful whelp.”

“It’s pronounced ‘yena,’ not ‘lena.’ Don’t you think you should know how to pronounce the Spanish language after twelve years in the country?”

The kid’s ribbing annoyed Caruthers suddenly, but it passed when they got to the door, at which Caruthers experienced a lift upon insisting to pay both cover charges.

Inside was a riot of lights and sleek females. Men sat with drinks around the rectangular stage, their mouths partly open, eyes blank in a stupor of lust. They were damned. Caruthers felt grateful for his dead dick. Neutered dogs, he’d attest before a jury, were happier than those with nuts. Max nudged Caruthers and pointed out Frank, sitting in the far corner in front of the stage, his bald head glistening, pink as his mechanical arms. He held a bill clipped between his pinchers. A wave of sympathy washed over Caruthers. The poor man couldn’t even beat himself off properly.
A hostess led them to a table one row back from the stage. “Man,” the kid said, fully possessed by his testicles, “these places drive me over the edge.” He gawked at the girl dancing. She was quite beautiful and used a coy sort of bitchery as her gimmick, affecting not to notice the men chewing their lips and tossing bills at her feet, oblivious to the fact that she danced nearly nude on a stage, speckled with glitter, adorned in panties and high heels. Many men responded to this kind of act, Caruthers had noticed, lost souls in love with longing. “I start by imagining fucking them,” Max said, “but in four seconds I’m thinking about how we’ll fall in love, how I’ll snatch her away from the sleaze.” Caruthers studied the kid for a moment; nothing about his face segregated him from the other strokers. The tip of his tongue rested between his slightly parted lips, eyes wide, afraid to blink for fear of missing the moment Ice Queen would finally show the magic thing they all craved. Caruthers himself barely remembered lust. He’d never been all that horny, never cheated on the wife, never coveted prettier women. Some guys were hounds, others weren’t. Or maybe he just gave that all up with Valeria, his evil Holy Grail. “I mean, look at her,” the kid said loud, with the gringo assumption that no one would understand. “She’s not happy here.” Indeed, the girl, a small thing, so perfectly proportioned she might have been created in a mold, didn’t look happy. She didn’t look sad either.

“I think she’s high, kid.”

“Of course she’s high. Wouldn’t you be?”

Caruthers shrugged. “I’m high anyway.” Glancing around the room, Caruthers discovered the truth of the situation. “We’re all high.”
They drank beer. The conversation became a matter of trading noises without significance. The girls had all danced twice, each to her signature pop song. Now the dancing had ended, the music turned low, the lights gave up flashing. The purpose of the enterprise shifted from titillation to release. The girls worked the room, taking men back for jerk offs, hoping, perhaps, for an all-night hire. The kid spoke to the girls who visited the table. He faked despair as his beloveds led fat old men through the special doorway, returned a few minutes later. Now he chatted up the dancer he’d chosen as his favorite. Odd as it was, Caruthers approved of this one: Personality Girl, rather than the stunning Ice Princess who’d won over the majority of the customers. Max’s stripper attempted to counteract reality by making like she engaged in mere horseplay. I’m just a regular girl on a goof, happen to have my clothes off. Bullshit for certain, but Caruthers took it for a good sign that the kid preferred this brand of bullshit to the other options. The kid’s Spanish was impressive, an affected sort of fluency. “My love,” Caruthers understood him to say, “is what I can offer you. My honest friendship and affection. True, I don’t have the money of some of these men. But I will make breakfast in the morning. We’ll have fun. We’ll travel. Don’t you want to go somewhere else, get out of here?”

Her sweet grin took on a cold edge. She was quite beautiful, a *mestiza* with large eyes, dark and glistening as hot tea. Her nose was long, with the Mayan bump, the flaw prompting the jokester routine. She said something to the kid that Caruthers didn’t catch, but whatever it was busted the illusion all up. Max’s face, opened by drink and nice girls, crumpled for a moment, and then the smirk appeared, one of the
tools he used to fend off the world. “Nos vemos,” he said to the girl, theatrically placing his hands over his heart to dramatize his distress. “Tal vez en otro mundo.”

The girl slipped her role back on and kissed Max on the cheek. “You ready?” the kid asked Caruthers. “I’ll meet you outside. Too smoky in here.”

Caruthers ventured with some difficulty to the bathroom and accomplished a piss. Afterward, he navigated the bar, waving off the scrounging girls. His drunk limp had returned. He’d broken his femur tumbling down his apartment stairs a couple of years before, and the injury flared up whenever his high hit the level it had been the night of the accident.

Outside, the kid had found himself trouble. Pana’s king of negative situations, Chucho Aguilera Cruz, presided. He’d made it his job to prey on the drunk gringo tonight, someone with no visible wealth or protection.

“My good friend Norman Caruthers,” Chucho Cruz said in English, dragging the “o”s. Several cab drivers stood by, caressing their jaws or gazing toward their vehicles. Chucho Cruz was showing off, a display no one wanted and no one refused. The kid held a couple of quetzales unfolded in his right hand. Someone, Caruthers imagined, made Cruz feel very small at some point, and now everyone who crossed his path had to pay.

“Señor Aguilera,” Caruthers said, grasping the man’s thick paw. One of Chucho’s surprising qualities was his gentle grip, the dry, silky texture of his palm. Short, broad, mustachioed and brutal, there was nothing else subtle about him. ¿Qué pasa?”
Cruz frowned, as if unfortunate news had just been brought into the conversation. "This boy. I don’t trust him. I don’t like him."

"This boy?" They spoke in English now. "He’s my very good friend."

"This boy?" Cruz glanced around, as if another boy might be hidden nearby.

He settled a stony glare back on Max. "This boy is lying to me," he concluded.

Caruthers waited for the kid to say something and ruin his chances. Caruthers, who had no desire to incur debt to the gangster, was quite ready to feed the kid to Chucho Cruz. But when Max kept cool, held his tongue, Caruthers felt compelled to try to save his ass.

"No, this boy’s okay. He’s just doing a little traveling. Spending some money. Helping the economy, if you get my drift."

"What’s his name?" Cruz, the cop, the criminal, interrogated Caruthers, who blanked for a moment in panic. "Max," he said, just as Cruz’s face began to brighten with victory. "Don’t know his last name, but what the hell? He’s a good kid. What else can I say? We’ve been drinking."

Cruz looked the kid up and down, scowling. Max wore the humble face of someone who’s dealt with officers before and knew when and how to shrink. Cruz let the moment stretch. Caruthers felt five years old, a neighborhood kid asking a strict parent if his friend can come out and play.

Cruz smiled, an expanse of straight teeth under the severely trimmed mustache. Phony, but the best he had. He clapped a hand onto the back of Caruthers’ neck, and, just as happened when his father used to do the same thing forty years
before, Caruthers flinched. Humiliating then, humiliating now. Chucho Cruz had a
light touch though, massaging Caruthers’ cable tight neck like an expert, disturbingly
tender. “Don’t worry, my friend. If this one is amigo to Norman Caruthers, our
valuable *chofer de camion*, he is friends of Chucho Cruz.” With his free hand he
clasped the kid’s shoulder and executed a couple of kneading caresses. Max
concocted an ill smile, returning the entirely insufficient bribe money to his pocket.
The cab drivers standing around seemed to exhale in unison.

“You are looking for a taxi,” Cruz stated. “Come, I will drive.”

There was no question of refusing the generosity. Caruthers and the kid
followed Cruz to his unmarked Buick. Caruthers wondered if this was the car he’d
been driving, so the story went, when rival gangsters forced him off the road, shot
Cruz’s brother in the head as he kneeled beside Cruz, to confiscate a trunk full of
cocaine that the brothers had impounded themselves only an hour before. The
gangsters finally commanded Chucho to stand so they could put a bullet through each
of his kneecaps. Chucho Cruz never betrayed a limp, though no one ever doubted the
story.

They sat in the backseat, like criminals. Caruthers wondered if, after all, the
trouble had not ended. They sped toward town, a scattering of lights beside the great
void of the lake. Cruz turned in his seat and showed his teeth. “You like the girls? I
know he likes the girls.” Cruz spoke to Caruthers, referring to the kid. The rest of the
trip occurred in exhilarating silence. Down the curving road, Cruz took the corners
hard, throwing Caruthers and Max from side to side. Caruthers did not fear for his
life, though, not in respect to the road whipping under them. Chucho Cruz didn’t exude the vibe of one destined to die behind a steering wheel.

When they gained the bottom of the incline and stood at a light, Cruz turned and addressed Caruthers. “We have business, or I don’t remember?” Caruthers didn’t know how to respond immediately, though of course he knew what Cruz spoke of, a matter of annual bribery allowing him to continue operating his bus. “Some papers?” Cruz prodded.

“Oh, that. Yes. I know it. I’m short of dinero right now.” Caruthers began to whine a bit. “I think my transmission is going.”

Cruz pursed his lips and clucked his tongue, as one displays sympathy to a child. “Bad economies,” he said. “Very much troubles.” The light had turned green and a car behind honked its horn. Cruz ignored this, still twisted toward Caruthers, apparently lost in thought. The car pulled around. Cruz emerged brilliantly from his trance with a smile. “I have the answer, my friend. We talk later.” They roared forward onto the bright, empty strip, and turned left into an alley. Cruz parked alongside a windowless building Caruthers had often passed and briefly wondered about before moving on. A steel door stood in the center of a one-story plaster wall, an easy building to miss but for a painted cartoon of a fiercely grinning wolf covering the entire front. In all his years in Pana, Caruthers had never seen the door open, had never witnessed a soul enter or exit. Chucho Cruz knocked. A secret knock, Caruthers noted with a childish thrill.
The door cracked. Cruz mumbled words, and the three entered. About a dozen men sat at cocktail tables or stood along a short, stool-less bar. A stripper swayed to faint Banda music on a murky stage. The ceiling was so low she had to duck her head as she danced. An older woman, her body had the shape of a beer can, with pencils for limbs. They’d found La Luna Llena’s evil twin.

Cruz took Caruthers’s hand in both of his. “I’m going,” he gestured with his head. “Visit for dinner one night. Marta likes you very much.” He regarded Max. “You, be careful,” he said, and left them to join two men at a nearby table. Soon all three disappeared behind a black curtain. Caruthers and the kid ordered beers at the bar. They still hadn’t met each other’s eyes, afraid a glance might give something away. The bartender placed two open cans before them and retreated from Caruthers’ money. A private club, apparently.

They sat at a table by the front door. A rotten smell of mildew rose from the seat cushions, the carpet. “So,” Max whispered, “who was that?”

Caruthers leaned forward. “A serious asshole. What did he have on you?”

“Pride,” the kid said, like it had been on his tongue for a while. “I was showing off my drunk Spanish to a bunch of cab drivers, let slip something about working at a factory in country. I knew I’d blown it when the guy unfolds his badge, asks for papers. I’m not even carrying my passport.”

“Maybe you should be.”

“I don’t like taking it drinking, in case I get mugged.”
Sounded reasonable to Caruthers. He too lacked documentation presently. The beer tasted like piss, and all the night’s success seemed to drain away. Caruthers choked down the sour beer and they got themselves out. Caruthers hired a cab and offered Max a ride to his pension. In the dark of the back seat, imminent loneliness manifested itself in the scent of automobile deodorizer and muted cigarette smoke.

“Kid,” Caruthers asked. “You mind riding with me on an errand before calling it a night?”

“Sure,” Max said, nodding and barely aware of his own existence.

Caruthers told the driver the name of the intersection. “I’m out of rum and almost out of beer,” he explained to Max. They drove along dark streets. “I’m a nasty alcoholic,” he confessed. “Wake up with convulsions if I run out.” The kids’ eyes cleared, and he seemed to weigh the information.

The driver pulled into a space before the all-night cervesaria. Several drunks sprawled around the take-out window like victims of a massacre. The driver put the cab in park and lit a cigarette, careful to exhale through the cracked window. The grandfather who always worked the late shift, probably because he had the insomnia of the old, hefted a case of Cabro onto the shelf and set two liter bottles of Ron Rico beside it. Caruthers paid the man. The transaction, as always, occurred in silence. Not for the first time, Caruthers wondered if the man pitied him. The idea of this poor man’s sympathy brought momentary tears to Caruthers’s eyes. He turned to wipe his face in private before hauling his load to the cab.
He placed the goods between himself and the kid. Max examined the box.

“Care for a nightcap?” he asked.

“Yeah, why not?” Caruthers answered, though he usually made himself hit the sheets before three in the morning. “Rinse the taste of that ugly bar from our mouths,” he reasoned.

At his place, they sat at the table behind glasses of rum over ice, the idea being to jumpstart their flagging energy with straight booze. Caruthers felt dazed and out of sorts. People didn’t visit his apartment, and the smell of the place, the scent of old alcoholic, made him self-conscious. He examined his home through the kid’s eyes, a plain room of poured concrete, softened only by a cheap traditional rug, one corner sequestered by a waist high L-shaped counter, behind which sat a crude sink, a small refrigerator and a propane camp stove. His furniture consisted of a wooden table with four wicker chairs and a queen sized mattress lying on the floor. Paltry enough. Caruthers wished he’d at least have summoned the motivation to decorate the plain white walls. Maybe he’d hunt around for something tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Caruthers thought. The kid faded into a bloodshot glaze. It was 5:20. Caruthers would be sick tomorrow, today actually. He hated that distinction, and how it always occurred to him in these hours. He was going to have to work on re-regulating his intake. The kid kept nodding out toward his drink, catching himself, looking up surprised, then smiling, breathing deeply and examining the glass before him.
The kid was jumbling his program. He’d been doing fine, for years, until he showed up, brought with him all this complication. Caruthers’ internal whine exploded into a revelation. How about the kid’s program? he wondered. Who was jumbling whom? This brief unselfish thought filled him with goodwill and satisfaction. More must be done, he thought. The instant called for radical measures, immediate action. A faint voice murmuring through the haze of drink told him no, wait on it; now is not the time to act on whims. But the rest of his consciousness commanded him to move. Tomorrow he’d be too sensible.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” Caruthers growled, rousing himself. The kid barely glanced over the rim of his glass, eyes spinning in their sockets. Caruthers lurched across the table and managed to get his hands around the kid’s throat. Rum spilled and Caruthers’ chair cracked against the floor. The kid woke, staring at Caruthers’ wrists under his chin. Caruthers shook him and began to squeeze. Strangling the kid, Caruthers forgot for a moment his purpose. The kid broke free, gulped air.

“What the fuck?” he asked, and cleared his throat. “What’s your problem, man?”

“Out,” Caruthers said, locating his resolve. He turned his back. A terrible crash rang out. The kid had upset the table. Caruthers rushed and the kid skipped to the side like a matador, pushed Caruthers by. Caruthers fell to his knees.

“Why are you doing this?” the kid asked, beginning to sob in drunken fashion.
Caruthers climbed to his feet and made another run. “I’ll kill you. I swear if I ever see you again I’ll stab your heart out.” The kid dodged and Caruthers collided with the wall, pushed himself away from it and continued to attack. A strong whiff of freshly spilled rum caught in his sinuses. The kid ran out the door and halfway down the steps, where he turned. Caruthers rested panting against the top rail. “You go. Don’t come back,” he said, hunched, pointing toward the dark lake at the edge of town.

The kid, trembling, straightened, took control of himself. “You’re a really, really, profoundly fucked up man, Norman. I pity you.” He descended the rest of the stairs. Fifty feet down the strip, he wheeled around. “I hate you,” he shouted, hysterical with rage. “I’ll kill you if I ever see you again.”

Caruthers watched the kid storm down the strip toward the pension. He returned to his room and sat on the bed long enough for his wailing heart to slow. He felt righteous and decent, satisfied, and only the slightest bit scared he’d once again fucked it all up as he collapsed on the covers, shut his eyes and disappeared.

Beto Sebastian Garcia Tzoc rode toward the village of Todos Santos Cuchumatan on a borrowed horse. He was sixteen, and would compete for the first time in the horserace of the festival of All Saints. All the money he could use bulged, an
uncomfortable fold, in his pant pocket. He wore the new shirt his mother had woven, a straw hat—old but in good condition—polished boots. In all, he believed he wouldn’t shame himself or his family. The sun had just risen above the jagged blue edge of the world, tinting pink the river of clouds that had been streaming by all morning. Beto filled his lung with the crisp air, happy to be alive today.

The horse stepped cautiously along the path. Down into the valley, horse and boy left the exposed ridge to descend into the bowl where the buildings of Todos Santos gathered like the debris left in the bottom of a cup of coffee. He patted the horse’s spotted neck and felt the skin shiver. “How are you?” he asked. “Enjoying the walk?” The horse clopped along and Beto laughed, pleased with this steady companion.

In town he paid a ladino to pen the horse until the race on Monday. Now it was time to drink. Marimba music flitted about as light as birdsong. The sand-colored walls of the buildings reflected the sun; now and then a cloud darkened the world for a moment and moved on.

Beto wandered along a series of alleys, halls without ceilings, until he emerged on the wide main road. Two men alternately pushed carts stacked with Imperial beer and Coca Cola down a ramp folded from the back of a large truck and loaded the cases behind a plywood puesto. These men had a lot of work to do, for there were puestos on every corner of the long road. A gringo couple stood on the stone walkway. The man lifted a contraption, which Beto recognized as a camera from descriptions he’d heard in the fields. The gringo aimed the thing’s big eye at the
drink vendor, who was busy packing a gray tub with cans. The gringo returned the camera to his chest without taking the picture. He then locked eyes with Beto, a tall and thin man, adorned with wet-looking yellow hair and rectangular eye glasses. Something seemed pinched and without humor about his face. His woman, on the other hand, was warm and dark with wide eyes and hips. She might have been one of Todos Santos’ own. Except she obviously wasn’t.

Beto moved behind the beer puesto when the gringo aimed the camera again. Though he couldn’t reason why, he knew he did not want to be shot with that thing. He asked the ladino for a beer. “They’re not cold yet,” the ladino said without looking up from his work. “But you can have one if you like.” The ladino finished his duties, stood and wiped his hands on a towel. Beto removed the borrowed roll of bills from his pocket. He’d been told of the bills’ value, but this first time using money foolishly worried him. Perhaps he’d somehow do it wrong. The ladino glanced at the money and paused, fighting a tiny battle inside, and then smiled. “No problem,” he said through tobacco-stained teeth. “Welcome to festival.” The warm beer burned Beto’s throat. He felt indebted to the man for not accepting his money, though Beto detected something sinister in the gift. No matter. The sun rose higher, bright and dim as it splashed into and out of the river of clouds passing overhead. Marimba tones still fluttered like birdsong.
Marilyn and Cash caught a ride with the factory couple to the festival at Todos Santos. She’d always found this type of event depressing: Indians staggering about or comatose in the street, Euros and Americans at their worst, nearly as drunk, capturing the degradation on film. Shameful on all sides. But Cash wanted to go. He was a tourist, after all, a fact that bothered Marilyn from various directions.

But here they sat, backs to the pickup’s cab, rising into the clouds. “I’m glad this guy can drive,” Cash said. “I’m a little surprised.”

“But because he moves like an old woman?” she asked.

“Figured he’d drive like one too.”

“Things are not always as they seem.” They slowed and dust from the back tires overtook them, in the process shrouding a broken down bus and its sullen passengers standing to the side. The turn’s force caused Cash’s body to pin Marilyn to the rail. The abyss, a tumbling sort of death, waited two feet away. They righted and continued to climb. The brief easy banter dropped away the like earth itself.

Max reclined on backpacks atop a bus straining upward. The view afforded him a dependable sense of well being, a rush circulating through his body like those human
waves that revolve around sports arenas. He grinned like an idiot at the cottony clouds drifting by, close enough to touch it seemed. He hit his pint of Quetzalteca and returned it to his pack.

Up, up they rose. It might have been frightening: the tight turns; the barreling empty busses returning down the mountain, a near miss every minute; the immense drops; the drivers’ wild eyes. But Max rode on a cushion of protection. If he jumped from the edge over one of those thrilling cliffs he felt he’d float down as gently as a feather.

Caruthers drove through Caminos and left his usual route behind. Not a bus driver in the highlands could afford to pass on the travel frenzy up the mountain to festival this time of year. He glanced into his mirror, at the packed interior, and caught his son’s eye. An assault of pride followed. Over the years he’d sometimes entertained the fantasy that the folks from home, from the States, could witness him at his unlikely job. He pulled on the shifter and slid it into fourth without depressing the clutch, then chastised himself for imagining that anyone on the planet would be impressed with the fact that he’d managed to learn to drive a bus.

“The land is beautiful,” Patricia yelled into Caruthers’ ear. She held the Guatemalan infant in her lap, much to Sarah’s consternation, and to his own
consternation, now that he thought about it. What if the natives decided she'd stolen the child? What if they decided to stone her? Caruthers felt the loss of his pistol. Another necessary replacement, along with a grand’s worth of papers, and a transmission he could no longer fool himself into believing would recover. He’d taken to carrying a drum of fluid, refilling the tranny reservoir every hundred miles or so. Caruthers glanced out the window to see what Patricia considered beautiful.

“Green,” he called back, because it was so, an ocean of post rainy vegetation. In a few months the whole deal would turn brown. Caruthers downshifted to start the climb. “Come on, baby,” he whispered to his bus. He’d been surprised when Junior and Patricia took him up on his offer to drive them to festival. Junior had already made his feelings about drinking and driving clear. Caruthers had asked to gain some friendly points without having to pay the price. Served him right. And now he felt pressured by Patricia’s heavy presence at his back to lay off the thermos. He waited, and he waited longer, then he took the cylinder from the pouch beside his seat, unscrewed the cap and guzzled the lukewarm stuff. Soon the curves and drops would be on them, and even Caruthers’ love of hootch wouldn’t drag his attention from the road during that treacherous stretch. He was a professional, after all.
Bonfires tinted everything orange. When did everyone arrive? At one moment the spotted sky presided over a street sparsely peopled with groups of two or three gringos, stretching and swinging their limbs after the confines of long bus rides; and now this, barely space between the bodies to allow the smoky night air through. Beto had never imagined so many gringos could exist in all the world. The knowledge sunk him. The others had spoken the truth. Gringos ruled the planet. He had withdrawn into the dark beside one of the beer stands to watch the black silhouettes move and make sounds. Everyone shouted; laughter rang out like the howling of dogs.

He’d seen acquaintances from the milpa wandering about, but when they’d come upon one another a shyness rose like walls between them. They seemed embarrassed, as if caught in a private act. He’d wished his acquaintances well and found refuge alone.

A dark figure grew larger before the other dark figures, a woman with long swaying hair, a gringa. Beto had heard about the gringas, how they drank, swore and laughed in the street like men, and he’d seen this to be the case. The other stories he did not necessarily believe, the tales his older companions told of sexual encounters with the gringas, intercourse without promises, without the exchange of words, tales that sounded more of boasting than the incantations of truth.

The gringa smiled and said hello in Spanish while waiting on the beer vendor. After a moment Beto asked if she spoke Spanish. She cast her smile his way, then tilted her head back and poured the remainder of her beer into her mouth. She belched quietly into her fist, laughed and answered yes.
She asked him questions about himself and he asked her the same questions. They called her Marilyn. She helped Beto pronounce the long name of the state where she was born. Her thick yellow hair turned up and curled under in fist-sized waves. The puesto's candlelight danced about her face, illuminating bright black eyes, freckled skin, a nose so narrow and straight it might have been manufactured. The tip of this nose almost touched Beto's own nose as the gringa spoke, leaning forward, drawing back. He understood then, by the tilt of her chin, that most of the rumors about the gringas were lies, wishful thinking. This woman did not wait around to be seduced by the likes of a milpa laborer. Even so, he entertained the prospect. He wondered how it would be to take this tall gringa to bed, then he chuckled silently at himself. He wondered how it would be to take any woman to bed.

She lingered for some time, and finally motioned toward the wall of coalescing bodies and sparks of orange firelight. "I need to go back."

He bowed his head and closed his eyes for a moment to wish her well. And then words, born of beer perhaps, leapt from his mouth. "Would you like to meet me here tomorrow night?"

She cocked her head as if listening to the ground. "Yes," she answered after a moment, facing him again. "Why not? Here, at this beer stand, tomorrow night." Her skirt waved and flicked up over her calves, displaying the shadowed area behind her knee as she spun and returned to the leaping fire.
A half pint of quetzalteca cost less than a dollar, Max reasoned. Of course, translating quetzales into dollars wasn't the right way to go about things. But the teca was just plain cheap any way you thought about it. How many of these bottles could he drink in a night anyway? He leaned back against one of the alcohol stands that lined the main drag. A minute ago, it had seemed, vendors were stocking the temporary booths with beer, Coke and spirits, while gringos poured from busses. Max had been hanging around watching it all happen, but the transformation into night had still taken him by surprise. A dozen bonfires blazed down the center of the street. Rusty smoke rose into the navy sky and bodies paced before the flames. Hell looked like this on television.

Max returned his attention to the bottle in his hand. The label amused him: a Mayan maiden wearing full traje kneeled in solemn compliance before a basket of plump yellow com, her arms outspread in a gesture of offering. “Nuestra Tradición,” read the words below. Our tradition. What a historical rewrite. Rampant alcoholism was the latest fad, certainly no tradition. Though, on the other hand, a point no doubt exists when the new becomes the old, fad takes on the fancy drapes of tradition. He drank from the bottle and shoved it into his back pocket. Then he bought a beer for the road.

Most of the bodies stood in closed circles. He didn't quite have the courage to break in, not yet. A few more drinks and he'd say anything to anybody. Outside the main strip, the town lost its hellish aspect, and with the steep coniferous forest peaks
surrounding the village, the place might have been a ski resort awaiting first snow.

Altitude separated Todos Santos from the rest of Guatemala. The Indians looked different too. Tall and thin, high cheekbones, thin noses, lighter skin, and the clothing. The men dressed like cowboy superheroes, stripes and hats and boots. Lightheaded from the altitude, Max skirted a ring of gringos. Not the usual backpackers, many of them carried expensive-looking cameras and wore dress shoes in place of hikers. Some of the visitors were pros, journalists, coffee table book writers, paid chroniclers of handsome primitives. Having traversed hell, Max arrived at the back edge of the festivities. Marimbas and shadowy figures moving along narrow alleys invited an experience perhaps more legitimate than the main festival, an opportunity to meet actual locals, but Max turned back for another run through. He hoped to meet women.

After Gabriela disappeared, he'd become accustomed to the chaste aspect of the country, but he stared too long at the strippers of recent memory, their neat pubic rectangles, their smooth arcs, so that the old fire had begun again to blaze. Plus hangovers always made him horny and he'd been hung over for days, for weeks.

The human circuits remained closed to him until he recognized Ken Livermore, Cindy Farmer, his new friend Cash Platt and girlfriend. Max hesitated for one moment. There had been some unpleasantness between him and Ken, but that was past, he reckoned, clapping a hand over Ken and Cindy's shoulders. "What the hell are you guys doing here?"
Cindy faced him. He'd not been prepared for the look of revulsion painted there. "Well, we're here for the festival," Livermore said, squirming out of Max's grip.

Max dropped his hand from Cindy and shook her expression from his memory. "Well no shit, but it's kind of crazy meeting here, isn't it?" Max now wondered how crazy it was, now that he considered the odds. Probably just about every gringo in the country stood within a hundred meters of him.

Livermore's mouth writhed. Something like anger flickered in his eyes, or perhaps the lack of color made them perfect reflectors for the fire. "Listen. Max," he paused. This was the authority voice he used on employees. "I'm on vacation, and I really don't need to think about the problems at work, if you know what I mean." Max looked to Cindy, waiting for the smile that revealed the joke. She gazed at the green-black pines. "Look at you," Livermore continued. "Drunk again. We're trying to have a conversation here."

"Wow," Max said, shooting air out of his lungs. "Okay." He drew his dangling hands close to his body as if they might get bitten. The outside couple gazed off at the pines as well. "What, I mean, what did I do?" He felt tiny, and shrinking. He cast his glance to the others, and when Cash smiled in mortified sympathy, he understood that no one would rescue him tonight. Guatemala was too temporary for loyalty, even had Max earned such a thing.

Livermore's tone took on the rhythms of pity. "Nothing personal."
Max laughed just to make some noise. Smiling the coward’s smile, he backed away. The guy named Cash’s girlfriend caught his eye and offered an ironic smile. Life’s a bitch sometimes, huh? Everyone was uncomfortable. “Yeah,” Max said, while still in the glow of their fire. “Okay.” He broke free and strode odd on legs as stiff as crutches. “Wow,” he mumbled, progressing through the crowd, losing himself, fleeing. Public scorn from Kenneth Livermore of all people, a man Max wouldn’t waste thirty seconds on, if he weren’t so desperate for company.

To see the guy shot down, drunk and defenseless as a child, broke Marilyn’s heart. He bore the humiliation with pure hurt, too stunned to construct a game face. There was grace in this, she decided, but when she offered him a smile, she had to retract it before he latched onto her sympathy. Soon he escaped, leaving behind a spell of silence. “Guess I’ll get a beer,” Marilyn said. “Anyone else?”

Since everyone had a full drink, she felt no great desire to return to the group when she’d completed her transaction. Buying time beside the crowded stand, she caught a campesino boy’s eye. “Hola,” she said, raising her can. He dipped his head once, a solemn display of respect, and drank her health. Like most of the Santos boys, a people speaking the Mam language, he was taller and leaner than the Quiche she knew. “I like your shirt,” she said, touching the cuff.
This about sent boy over the precipice of bashfulness. “Thank you,” he managed to say. “My mother made it.” Like all of them, it was beautiful, a multi-colored jacket of light denim, covered entirely with vertical pin stripes of all manner of color; each stripe had, on closer inspection, its own internal pattern. Furry wool patches topped the shoulders, suggesting military decorations. Below, he wore jeans with wide red and white stripes running lengthwise. She introduced herself and learned his name was Beto. She found herself staring into his face, smooth with youth and firelight, round with a button of a chin. She wondered how old he would be, sixteen? Younger? At any rate, he was here to blow off enough steam to last until next year.

“I admire your Spanish,” he told her. “A gringo spoke to me earlier.” He dipped his hat, obscuring his expression. “I couldn’t understand.” Marilyn surveyed the gringos clustered everywhere. She’d been picturing Beto standing on stage with Cash. She stifled a laugh at how fitting they’d look together, outfit wise. “This is the first time I’ve met gringos,” Beto admitted. “I didn’t think I liked them, until meeting you.”

Marilyn turned her attention to him. His eyes reflected the nearby fires, loaning him the aspect of someone teasing, though she didn’t think he was. She wondered what the campesino boys, traveling several hours to fiesta for the first time, said and thought about the gringas. She’d guess they told stories, true or not, about sexual conquest. No doubt about it, your average American woman was a wanton slut compared to the chaste local ladies. Marilyn felt both put off and challenged by what
Beto may or may not be implying. “I’d better go back,” she said. “But I’m happy to know you.”

“Equally,” he said, and displayed straight, white teeth.

“Maybe we’ll see each other again,” she said, and turned. He stopped her by hooking her forearm in a soft grip.

“Wait,” he said. “Meet me here tomorrow night.” His face remained composed, but he released her arm. “I’ll be competing in the race on Sunday. You can wish me luck.”

Here’s cultural misunderstanding dying to happen, she thought. Yet she agreed without pause, a nervous grin dominating her face. “Why not?” He took his hat off and showed the top of his head. She walked back to her friends, high on the potential trouble she’d just enacted.

“Make a new friend?” Cash asked when she returned.

“Looks like it.”

“The Todos Santos men, the way they dress, remind me of those thick candy canes we used to get for Christmas,” the little brunette, Cindy said. “You know, the big ones that don’t curve on the end?”

Marilyn wondered if the girl were purposely eliciting a dick image, or if the image sprang from Marilyn’s dirty conscience. “I didn’t know you celebrated Christmas in Canada,” she said into the silence. They all looked at her, puzzled. “That was supposed to be a joke.”
Just for a moment, Norman Junior wanted to get drunk with his father. Patricia, the girls and the baby had gone to bed, and he wandered the festival strip at his dad’s side, reminiscing, in a general way, about the days in high school, the years of popularity when he played four sports, excelled in two of them, and learned to drink, to smoke pot even, and to have sex. A girl passed them—blond, wild in a skirt and close fitting tee shirt. Had he detected a carnal flicker in the brief glance she’d bestowed on him, or had it merely been firelight, merely his own wishful thinking, his own weak flesh? Junior and Patricia hadn’t made love since they’d arrived in Guatemala. Junior had been considering plans to put them in the position, but he’d been unable to escape the constant presence of his children. And now a new one—Randolph they called him on Rebecca’s advice—not even theirs, took more of her attention. The thought of sharing this information with his father caused him to laugh out loud.

“Having a good time?” Norman asked. “I figured you’d be bound up tight with all the sin here.”

Of course he’d never in reality share so much with his father, who’d only use the information to belittle him. “I don’t necessarily think these people are sinning. Plus, it’s not for me to judge.” His father had no answer to this, other than turning his can of beer upside down, then tossing the empty onto a pile of trash along the side of
the road. A heavy Indian, maybe in his sixties, staggered, a running back in the open field, and Junior intercepted him before he dropped face-first to the ground. The man didn’t thank or otherwise acknowledge Junior’s save. He smelled, among other scents, of piss. Junior let the old timer stagger away. “I wonder where he’ll end up.”

“Underground, like all of us,” his father said. Junior chose to laugh.

“True,” he said. “But really. Think he has a place to sleep?”

Norman stopped to purchase a beer at a stand. “He’ll sleep where he falls.” He looked up at the milky sky, free of stars. “The weather isn’t so bad for it.” Junior thought to suggest the otherwise empty bus, but he let it go. To try to enlist his father into charitable works at this point—or ever—would only strain matters, and accomplish nothing positive. Norman cracked the beer and drank while they walked, silently and without destination through the jostling crowd, skirting the groups clustered around the fires down the center of the road. Junior, for the first time since this reunion, felt no urge to provoke him, which he took as progress.

“What the heck,” he said. “How about a drink of that beer?”

His father glanced over. “You shitting me?” Junior wrested the beer from Norman and drank. “Holy cow,” his father said, swinging his head from side to side in mock wonder. “You’re not going to become a lush now, are you?”

Junior laughed. “Come on. It’s only beer.” He again considered confiding in his father about his marital woes—not that it was anything other than a temporary setback, a matter of privacy. He’d been battling with himself about their housing situation. They’d been staying, free of charge, in a one-bedroom connected to the
church building in Antigua, and to move would take certain funds that might otherwise be used for the Lord’s business. Yet he sometimes rationalized that to see to his own needs would make him a more effective servant. This argument, however, had been used many times throughout history to justify the selfish accumulation of wealth. He’d been praying for an honest answer, so far in vain. He glanced at his father, the puffy, lined face orange in the firelight, white hair thicker than Junior’s own. He wondered if Norman would understand the sacrifices people make for marriage, wondered if he’d made any sacrifices himself, or if he’d always been focused on his own desires. Junior wished to believe that alcoholism, a disease, had ruined his father and mother’s marriage, and hence his own childhood, and those of his brother and sister. Hate the disease, not its victim, he thought, and returned in his mind to his own fears relating to family. He’d thought marriage would halt the dark impulses, lust for women and drink, but the urges remained. Only time had become scarce. He wished to battle his demons face to face, but he’d instead distracted himself away from their temptations. Junior could hardly claim spiritual growth, and he feared his example was the norm. Shouldn’t service to the Lord exact sacrifice, rather than simply make a clean life more conveniently achieved?

“Jesus H. Christ,” a young man, or maybe not so young, exclaimed. “This is turning out to be the worst night of my life, and now I see you.” He was drunk, and directed his slurred words toward Norman, who staggered back as if shoved. Junior drew his height up and stood beside his father, a happy sensation of adrenaline sharpening his focus. The man, a medium sized fellow dressed in dirty chinos and a
flannel shirt, wearing a long goatee, stood swaying before them. “Do you know this
guy?” the newcomer asked of Junior. “He tried to strangle me.” He returned his
attention to Norman. “Fucking murderer,” he said, and stalked off.

“What was that all about?” Junior asked. Norman drank, and began to walk
more quickly, limping. “Murderer?”

“Just another ghost.”

“I don’t understand,” Junior said, struggling to keep up with his father. “Did
you kill someone?” Norman stopped abruptly and turned. A camera flash illuminated
his pale, bloated face for a moment and returned him to darkness.

“The kid had me confused with someone else.”

“So where are you running off to?”

Norman cast his eyes back toward the black hillside, as if searching for
something he knew hid there. “I’ve got to get off this street, find a little hole to drink
in.” He was scratching the back of his hand. Junior noticed even in the dim light a
significant wound there. “I’d just as soon do it alone,” Norman told his son, and
though Junior yearned to follow him tonight, he knew he couldn’t.
Max pushed around his scrambled eggs with a bent fork, keeping his trembling hand occupied while waiting for his stomach to prepare for food. He polished off a Coke and ordered another. He felt on the verge of turning inside out.

But hey, he was on vacation. That’s what they said in Pana when they wanted you to buy something you couldn’t afford. He’d never considered this trip a vacation, but he supposed it was, a break from what he could only call his life. What was the harm, then, of indulging in too much drink from time to time on vacation? He’d always worked, as far as he could remember, including the last few months. Who works on vacation? he asked himself, and dared to shove a forkful of egg into his mouth and swallow.

*Gringos* occupied all three tables of the smoky little *comedor*. Two of them shared Max’s table, a couple of forgettable white males with fresh haircuts and polo shirts. Probably arrived in country the day before, most likely read about Todos Santos in *National Geographic* and flew directly in. Of course that was impossible—no airport—but Max felt un-generous toward Americans today, himself included. As soon as he admitted the cruel assessment, though, he berated himself for judging too hastily. Polo shirts didn’t mean anything. “You enjoying the festival?” he asked.

One of them smiled, a bit scornfully, Max thought. A beefy young man with a face shaped like a catcher’s mitt. He leaned back in his chair and seemed to evaluate Max from a distance. “You don’t remember us, do you?”

The skin on Max’s head tightened.
"You kept stumbling up to everyone and saying 'fuck you, I'm from San Francisco. Fuck you, fuck you. I'm from San Francisco.'" The man affected a drunken slur bordering comprehensibility.

"No," Max said, with a sense of shrinking into himself. "No way. I wouldn't do that." Oh, but he would, he knew. He'd silently thought exactly that, and even without thoughts felt the stupid superiority. "I'm not like that," he said, denying everything.

The accuser's slim counterpart, a more sympathetic figure, said, "Yeah, you did it. I'm sorry to say." He stared into his coffee cup, then drank. "It was strange to watch."

"'Fuck you,'" the heavier one said. "Stumbling into everyone. You're lucky you didn't get locked up, or beat to shit."

Max stood, fork still in his right hand. "Jesus. I can't believe I'd be like that. I was pretty fucked up. Normally," he said, edging toward the door. He remembered he still had to pay, so he dropped some bills on the table. "Well, I'll see you around," he said, as if he'd known them for years, as if they were friends. The kinder one tried to mute the situation with an ironic shrug, while the other brimmed with the story of Max's foolishness. Max fled. He walked quickly, as if trying to outdistance some invisible follower, up and down alleys, avoiding the main strip.

He broke free of town and climbed a rising trail to a high ridge, berating himself. San Francisco. Completely true. He'd considered himself hot shit since he moved from Hesperia, that pit, to the city, and once away he'd done everything in his
power to hide his origins, that crappy single wide trailer smelling of cat piss, the absent father and welfare mother, so sad, so typical. He’d probably flown to Guatemala just to brag about it when he returned. Ahead, the path rose to a plateau supporting a garden abloom with pastel flowers. Breathing hard, he paused to look back upon the tiny city clustered in the valley’s cup. Gentle lines of distant hillcrests rolled to the horizon, easing from blues to reds. Westward, he thought the greenish space between sky and land might be the sea. Clouds like claw marks marred the otherwise clear sky. He’d not experienced silence in some time, and the blood of his body pulsed in his ears. He continued up the path and found the garden to be a bright and faded cemetery. For a moment he feared he’d vomit, but the sweat bursting from his pores cooled his body until his nausea subsided. He walked among the graves, just another mourner.

Marilyn stood like a performer before Cash, Ken and Cindy, who sat upon a low brick wall marking the boundary of parque central. Away from the main bustle of the bonfire strip, the air was cooler and darker, and a sense of tranquility prevailed. Three couples shared the tiny park with them, a young one made out with the shamelessness of youth, another whispered near the chalice-shaped fountain, and the third ambled around and around the figure-eight patterned pathway. “Now what?” Marilyn asked,
the only one of the party with anything to say. She’d been annoyed that she and Cash hadn’t been able to shake the Joyas couple, who themselves added to the overall tension with their own ugly vibrations.

“We can always get more alcohol,” Cash suggested. The others looked to Marilyn for confirmation or denial. Since when had she become queen, she wondered. The youngest child of four, and the only girl, she’d never before led anything. She found the position not to her liking, the classroom excluded. Two men walking along the road behind the sitters suddenly lunged at one another, twisted themselves onto the dust. The ferociousness of the battle alarmed Marilyn. The others turned, and soon a small contingency of gringos circled the fighters. Cameras flashed.

“You can do what you want,” Marilyn said. “I’m going for walk.”

“I’ll come with,” Cash said.

“I’d rather be alone.” Marilyn stood to witness Cash’s reaction to public rejection. She didn’t get off on the hurt and anger she saw under his hat brim. In fact, she hardly believed she’d been so coarse.

Ken Livermore turned to his friend. The look of mild distaste he’d carried all night spit out as a bitchy little snap. “Why don’t you go with Marilyn, and Cash and I will pal around.”

“No offense, but no thanks,” Marilyn said, and walked off before she could determine the effect of her words.

Down the main strip she entered the bonfire mayhem of the night before, well amplified by double the hours of drinking. When she saw the boy, Beto, leaning in his
old spot she knew she'd orchestrated the earlier tiff just to see if he'd be there.

Leaning back against a stand with one boot heel locked over a protruding two-by-four, he tipped his hat to honor her arrival. She bought a beer. The noise of the fiesta made the possibility of speech difficult, so they faced each other without words.

Heart thudding, she grasped his hand and led him into the alley. She had no idea whose fantasy she sought to fulfill. Surely, she'd never desired anonymous sex, never fetishized, in thought or action, a primitive. The alley encountered another alley and soon another, so that by lefts and right Marilyn attained a sense of disorientation, though they could hardly be more than a hundred meters from the reverie. The shouts came muted and the fires displayed themselves only as a pink glow on the low clouds. A band nearby played marimbas, whose notes, Marilyn imagined, fluttered about her head like butterflies of pure sound. She backed into a recessed doorway and pulled Beto to her. His eyes looked frightened, and she almost laughed and pushed at him playfully to get out of what she'd started. But he grew determined and ended the brief hesitancy by kissing her on the mouth. He tasted of mints, and she wondered if he'd planned for such a thing as was happening. The thought annoyed her, so she threw herself into the sex to drive it away. She passed her tongue over his teeth and touched his solid shoulders. When his erection brushed her thigh, he drew back, and continued to kiss her with a chaste distance between their middles. She reached down and touched him, found his hand and brought it to her, under her skirt. She fumbled, and had him out. A man wearing the uniform of a security guard or police officer slept on the cobbles fifteen feet away. The cold air chilled her thighs and ass. She'd not worn
underwear. She guided him in. He worked his hips and she squatted some to accommodate him. They couldn’t seem to fit together for what she now wanted, the feel of his entirety, the base of him shoved to her base. She gripped his ass, felt the smooth muscles there, so different in texture than even Cash’s 24-year-old skin. She leaned back, opened herself wider. They found the spot and he plunged in. In three lunges, just as the rough plaster at her back and the burn of leg muscles began to interrupt the experience, he shuddered and collapsed upon her shoulder. The sleeping man rustled and Marilyn thought he might have been awake the whole time. Beto slipped from her and she stood to stretch her muscles. She searched for words to conclude the business. Thanks hardly seemed appropriate. He continued to recover with one hand against the wall beside her head, breathing at his boots. Two facts occurred to her. What they’d just done was called statutory rape in the States, and she needed tissue.

She ducked under his arm and kissed his cheek. He turned to her, and signaled with a smile that he’d not fallen in love with her over the past minutes. His hat had fallen back and hung from a string between his shoulders. She replaced it. “Good luck in the race,” she said, and walked away.

She skirted the crowd toward the hotel room, simulating nonchalance. Where had the perversity come from? Had it originated with Cash, and now his return had triggered it again. Or had she always been secretly inflamed? There had been the time with Jake, her younger brother. One summer they’d shared a bed at their grandparents. Marilyn had been twelve, and Jake eight. She’d initiated the games,
hadn’t she? Touching, fumbling, even mouths. She’d told herself a hundred times that it was only a stage of growing up, common. Her human sexuality textbook had confirmed it. But she’d felt awkward with Jake, subtly so, ever since, and couldn’t help wondering, at Thanksgiving dinner, for example, when he passed the mashed potatoes to her and caught her eye, how much he remembered, and what he thought. Sometimes she tried to blame her parents, those beacons, for raising her perfectly, for offering the best examples, for turning her into such a blastedly good girl on the outside, and a pervert within.

She saw tall Cash walking through the throng on the opposite side of the street. He turned just then and looked her right in the eye. He broke the gaze immediately, and continued on as if he had business elsewhere. She hoped he did. She hoped, just then, that he too would get laid, because right then she felt terrible, and no rationalization or explanation justified what she’d just done. Looking back at Cash as she made her way, she bumped headlong into someone, who caught her in his arms. Max, the ex-co-worker of Ken and Cindy, smiled into her face. “Where you running to?” he asked, as the other night, visibly drunk.

“I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” she told him.

“You sick?” he asked. “You don’t look so good.”

She didn’t feel so good, and a line of semen tracked down her thigh. “Yeah,” she said. “Excuse me.” He seemed hurt, but she’d used up every ounce of emotion on herself. “Sorry,” she said, and dodged away from him. She entered the bathroom and in the icy shower, she squatted and washed only the necessary parts, that which was
unclean, she thought with bitter humor. Whore’s bath. She entertained a strong desire
to confess to Cash, and realized she’d in some part engaged upon the whole conquest
just to confess, to punish him and her and even the boy, innocent or not she didn’t
know. She squatted and shivered, splashed another palm full of near freezing water
between her legs.

The morning began with rooster calls and marimbas. Beto unfolded himself from his
own arms and stood in the sunlight washing over the land. He shook the stiff chill
from his limbs, smiling, comparing himself to a lazy, sun-loving lizard. Some alive
thing jumped inside him. Today he would race.

What to expect, what to expect? His father and some of the older men laughed
when he’d asked, mocking his anxious concern. Then he’d asked if his father
wouldn’t accompany him, and here the men laughed harder. Fathers shouldn’t see
sons at festival. Sons shouldn’t see fathers. Beto hadn’t known why, until last night.
Better not to witness, at times, the behavior of those you love.

Holy Mother, he thought, recalling the night before. How had he forgotten,
even for a minute? Already the event seemed like a dream. A future secret from a
future wife. He imagined this wife, interrogating him about his past, and he evading.
Maybe she would be the kind of woman who would see through his equivocations,
but would treat the past with a smile, a wise joke. Over the years she would slyly refer to the joke, in front of guests sometimes, causing Beto to blush and reminding him that she was a good woman, reminding him to honor and love her. Ah, what was he thinking? Wife? He had no wife. The race. That is what he needed to put his mind to.

He strode down the street and found the stable. The ladino sat on a box out front, smoking a cigarette. Beto greeted the man, who nodded sleepily and let smoke drift before his face. “Horse,” said Beto. “Gray. White neck.” The man nodded again and waved a hand to Beto. After a minute the man dropped his cigarette and walked around the side of the building. A thin line of smoke rose from the butt, swirled, scattered. Beto extinguished the butt with a twist of his boot.

The man returned leading a solid brown horse. “That’s not mine,” Beto said. The ladino smiled as one smiled at a child.

“No,” the ladino said. “It isn’t. It belongs to Don Sanchez. All the horses belong to Don Sanchez. What’s the difference to you? It’s a good horse.”

“The gray horse with a white spotted neck was loaned to me and is my responsibility, and that’s the horse I stalled here.” Beto decided to find the horse himself rather than continue to talk to this infuriating man. He walked around back, toward the stalls.

The ladino called after him. “Don Sanchez doesn’t care who rides his horses. Why should you?”

A burro tethered to a skinny tree paused in its meal of grass to watch Beto pass and pull open the large door to the barn. Inside, a dozen stalls stood on either
side of a hay and dung-strewn corridor. Grimy sunlight come in through gaps in the walls hung in the air like heavy fog. Many of the stalls were empty, others held horses, but the gray was not present.

"Take the brown one," said the ladino, from the barn's entrance, holding the horse's reins. "It's the best I have."

"Where is my horse?" Beto asked, and approached, considered striking the man.

"Calm down, calm down. Someone must have taken it."

"Taken it? Stolen it?"

"No, no, now I remember. Gray you say? White neck? Oh, yes. I gave it to a gentleman this morning. An older man who will be riding in the race. Maybe you can trade with him. He didn't care which horse he rode. Between you, me, and the Lord," the ladino edged closer to Beto, as if afraid the burro might overhear, "he was a little drunk." The man's skin looked slick with oil and his breath smelled of sour coffee and tobacco. He stooped slightly and wore a kerchief around his neck. Beto had fought twice before in his youth, and had not enjoyed the sickening rush of adrenaline, the sudden hatred brought on by physical battle, but this man excited a desire to cause pain. Instead, Beto accepted the reins of the brown horse and climbed onto the saddle. Fighting the man would cause many complications back home, for his father and mother and well as himself. The stirrups were too short, but he would adjust them later. "I won't pay you," he said.
The man squinted up at Beto. "That doesn’t matter to me. I will simply give the bill to Don Sanchez. All of the money is his anyway. What are you going to do with it in the milpa? There’s nothing to buy."

Beto tapped the horse’s flanks and trotted away, feeling a sense of shame, but not able to imagine what he could have done differently.

At every corner a marimba man tapped his musical coffin with magic wands, painting tones at once taken by the breeze and given to a chorus of angels. And beside every music maker rose a plywood stand housing cases of quetzalteca and cold beer. Max, creating splendid words for his head, had successfully drunk his way out of illness. He needed to cut down the drinking, of course, but not today, not on All Saints Day! The day of the famous horse race! The day when Mayans straight out of Candyland walked the streets like hallucinations. How could anyone experience such a day sober?

"Yes indeed I’ll have another," he said in English to the beer vendor, and the man did Max’s bidding. Max and the vendor had struck up something like a non verbal friendship over the past few hours, and both were equally engaged in the spectacle before them on a ragged basketball court, a preliminary to the race. Performers in pink-faced masks topped by golden conquistador helmets charged one
another with wooden pole horses tucked between their legs, skating into ceremonial orbit at the center and trading sides. Two of them gripped live, unhappy roosters by the legs and used them as riding crops against the flanks of their steeds, a stunning display of cruelty. Oppressed acting as oppressors, Max noted. To what purpose? Satire? Rebellion? Dark empathy, admiration for the slaver? Or merely another empty ritual whose meaning had long since evaporated but the patterns and costumes lived on regardless? Max bet on the latter. He’d recently lost faith in meaning.

A bearded man sitting cross-legged on the opposite side of the dance or race or whatever caught Max’s eye. Max recognized the scruffy fellow immediately. The dick-flapping, shit wiping vagabond. He seemed different today, calmly absorbed in the jousting conquistadors. Had Max not known otherwise, he’d have taken him for a slightly dirty sane person, a outdoor type with hippy hair.

Max bought a fresh can and skirted the crowd to squat beside the vagabond. “Beer?” he asked, presenting the glistening canister.

The vagabond regarded Max with startling pale eyes shining behind bars of dark hair. “No,” the man said, and paused as if surprised by the crisp sound of his own voice. “No alcohol,” he continued after a moment, then returned his attention to the conquistadors.

Max slipped the can into the pocket of his windbreaker. His legs tingled, growing numb. “Why not?”

“Episodes,” the man said, rocking as he spoke, forearms now locked around his shins. A square and sturdy-looking knee protruded from a large hole in his pants.
The man clearly possessed an efficient and well-tuned vehicle with which to transport his injured mind.

The conquistador exhibition ended with a final gathering at the center. Masks and the dying roosters were discarded, leaving a group of somber, gray-haired men, who melded into the crowd without so much as shaking each other’s hands.

“Why did you come to Guatemala?” Max persisted. The vagabond rocked more emphatically and said nothing. “Where are you going?”

“To the water,” he answered.

Chilly sweat burst from Max’s forehead and tingled his spine. His heart began to pound. He sat down in the dirt and almost fell backwards. “How did you get here?” he asked. The man continued to rock. He wore dirty socks and tire-tread sandals. “Are you a veteran? What city did you come from?”

The vagabond stood. He grumbled something that ended in “back,” walking off, leaving the festival to disappear into the pines that surrounded the town.

After lunch Marilyn and Cash walked with the other gringos toward the horse race. She felt fidgety and trapped, about ready to burst out with a confession, though she knew it to be the cowardly way out.
Cash inhaled deeply and expressed appreciation for the scent of pine. The sun, an indistinct blot directly overhead, seemed ready to burn through the haze. The town’s trails and roads funneled into a wide dirt artery bordered by a down-sloping embankment carpeted in brush on the right and a wall of red clay where the hillside had been excavated on the right. The drink and food hawkers carried their remaining wares in chests, baskets and wheelbarrows, pausing to sell as they proceeded. The pilgrims drew closer together as they progressed, occasionally dodging to the side for a contestant on horseback. Cheers rumbled from ahead, gradually overwhelming the marimba music in town.

Soon the pilgrims clustered to a stop. Marilyn maneuvered to a spot with a view of the race. The riders, some in masks, others barefaced, one old man using what appeared to be a chicken as a riding crop, rode back and forth over a hundred-foot strip of the pathway. It wasn’t so much a race as a series of short sprints punctuated by frantic drinking. Vendors waited on either side for the riders, who dropped fistfuls of money indiscriminately to the scrambling salesmen below in exchange for bottles and cans. Camera flashes popped constantly, lending the vision a stop-motion quality. A rock flew, seemingly from the sky, into the crowd. Someone must have been hit, must have cried out in pain, but the general human noise covered it.

“I’m leaving,” Marilyn told Cash.

He had just purchased a beer. “You’ll never know who wins.”

“Nobody, Cash. They just keep going until they’re too drunk to continue.”
"I know. I was joking." She wet her lips and saw a rider attempt to catch his slipping hat only to fall from his horse. Several spectators rushed onto the track and dragged him out of harm’s way, into the bushes along the slope, where he apparently felt content to remain. "What’s wrong with you?" Cash asked in a fierce whisper.

"You used to know what a joke was. You used to laugh."

"I know. I’m sorry, Cash. I’m just nervous around you, ever since you came."

"Nervous? You seem pretty relaxed as long as you’re not alone with me."

Searching for a reply, she saw the boy she’d fucked, Beto, turn his horse and race away from her. "I’m going," she said.

"I’ll go with you."

"No. Please."

Cash faced her and placed his hands on her waist. She appreciated his attempt to diffuse the bad feelings, but appreciation wasn’t enough. "Back to the room?" he asked.

"Home. I’ve had enough."

"Home Guatemala?"

"Where else, Cash?"

He shrugged, removed his hands and returned his attention to the race. She should touch him, she knew, apologize and invite him somewhere quiet to talk, really talk. But she couldn’t handle it just then. "I’ll see you later," she said, and began to battle through the arriving gringos toward home.
Back and forth, ran the horses and riders, back and forth. What a metaphor, Caruthers thought. These poor bastards and their repetitive, pointless lives. He laughed out loud, drawing the family’s attention. “Just like my life,” he explained, nonsensically. Junior made a show of sighing, all exasperation and weary patience. Maybe Caruthers should have smacked him back at the Patio, finally exercise some fatherly duty. Then again, the kid probably would have creamed him. So why not? Maybe that would have been the best course.

The family turned back to the event everyone called a race. Caruthers had staked out a high spot on the hillside, with a view down upon the whole deal from a seated position. He’d also found a proper liquor store earlier in the morning, and replenished his rum supply, fortified the flask in his pocket. Three days of straight beer had him sluggish and overfed. He hit the flask, felt it burn right down to the center of him.

“Daddy,” the little one cried. “I have to pee.” She clamped her crotch with both hands to bolster the claim. The wife and hub exchanged a look. They’d shifted, attitude-wise, over the last four months. Most visitors did change one way or another during a stint in country. Some woke up. Caruthers had been like that, at least in his own mind. The absence of rules had set him on the path toward a genuine self. Only problem, the authentic Norman turned out to be even more an asshole than the false.
But others, like the Christians here, took the corrosiveness of the place into them, let it gnaw from the guts out. Caruthers thought of his ex wife, her illness. He’d meant to ask Junior about it, how serious, what form. Never thought of it when they were alone though.

“Honey,” Patricia said, a peevish edge to her voice, “why didn’t you go before we left the hotel?”

“She didn’t have to go then,” Caruthers said, recalling with faint indignation that same question and latent accusation when he was a child. “I’ll take her,” he offered, inexplicably. The parents shared a glance, clearly weighing their reluctance to face the crowd and the long walk back to the hotel against the obvious bad idea letting Norman Caruthers have charge of their youngest daughter, even for a moment. “Come on,” he said, advocating himself for no reason he could figure, “just a trip there and back. Five minutes.”

Patricia, an inch of gray roots showing at the base of her auburn dye job, took her daughter’s face in her hands and focused her eyes on the child. “Do you want Mr. Caruthers to walk with you to the bathroom, honey?” The child shrugged and smiled, staring at the writhing knot of fingers on her lap. Then she nodded vigorously, excited, it seemed to Caruthers, by the danger of the situation.

“Come on, rapscallion,” he said. “We’ll get you drained and back in no time.” Caruthers took the girl’s hand and walked off before Patricia and Junior could decipher each other’s silent codes. There and back, he thought to himself. Back and forth. “You going to make it?” he asked the girl. She nodded, holding his hand and
pressing to his leg in an attitude of dim fright, confronting the tall bodies jostling around her. “I’ll pick you up if you don’t pee on me,” Caruthers said. She continued nodding, and now looked up at him with a certain earnestness located in those blue eyes. “Promise?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he muttered, and hoisted her up around his shoulders and neck. “Hold on. You fall and your folks’ll skin me.” He made his way more efficiently through the camera-armed gringos and inebriated peasants.

“Go horsy, go,” the girl called, kicking her heels against his chest and squealing with delight.

“Must be nice, kiddo, to be so easily amused,” Caruthers said. The crowd had thinned considerably by the time they reached the first buildings of town. Caruthers saw no sense in continuing all the way to the hotel when a cantina displayed itself so conveniently nearby. “Okay, down,” he said, and swung the girl over his head to the earth below.

Caruthers took the girl, his granddaughter by blood, by the hand and entered the dim, fusty air of the cantina. Two old men sat at a table fashioned of raw lumber and nails, and a young boy stood without passion behind a low counter that served as a bar. “¿Bano?” Caruthers asked the boy, and indicated with a nod of his head the girl beside him. The boy cut his eyes to the left, a barely perceptible motion in the thin wedges of light slicing through the dark room by way of gaps in the wall slats. Caruthers led his charge to the misshapen slab of plywood that served as bathroom...
door, pushed it open and surveyed the squalid interior. The smell of urine burned his
eyes just as he ascertained the existence of a proper john, alongside the trough into
which the men pissed. “Can you do this?” he asked the girl, now uncertain about the
whole venture. She nodded gravely, examining perhaps the filthiest toilet on the
planet. “Stand with your feet on the edge,” Caruthers advised her. “Don’t put your
butt on that if you can avoid it.” The girl continued to nod, and Caruthers left her
there, ignoring the tweak of misgiving pinching some lobe or other in his head.
“Ron,” he said to the boy, just to be a customer. “Copita.” The boy poured the alcohol
into a plastic cup and Caruthers drank it back, tossed a coin on the bar. The girl exited
the bathroom, apparently having found success.

“Air sure does smell good after a room like that, huh?” Caruthers said to the
girl after they’d left. They walked hand in hand a few dozen feet and the girl began to
yank.

“Horsy,” she said, and executed a series of hops. The horsy she referred to
grazed, apparently alone and untethered, on a clump of crab grass growing at the base
of a dead pine, a few yards off the walkway. “Horsy, horsy,” she cried. Caruthers had
heard her give her parents the same rap, to which they’d always explained that the
owner of the horse wouldn’t want her playing with it.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Caruthers said. “No horsies for you.” The girl began her
tantrum routine, jutting out the bottom lip and pushing out those neck veins with
frightening intensity. “Come on, don’t do this to me, please.” She carried on in spite
of his request, belting out a lungful. “Okay, we’ll say hi to the horsy.” The
manipulative tyke dammed the flow of anguish in half a second flat. Caruthers brought her to the beast, a red horse, barrel shaped with several fat ticks feasting on its side.

"Up," the girl demanded and Caruthers complied, held her to the animal. She stroked its dirty hide, and the skin shimmied. The horse stopped chewing and abruptly lifted its head. Caruthers almost swallowed his tongue, fearing for a moment the thing would turn those giant teeth on the girl. But the horse merely stared at her with those huge eyes, so soulful and dim witted they'd break your heart. The girl reached her hand out and the thing met her halfway with its nose. Caruthers himself longed to stroke that soft, twitching patch of skin, but both his hands supported the girl. The horse drew its head back and shook, playfully Caruthers thought. A long, narrow splash of white graced its nose, spilling toward the cheek on one side.

"Hello, amigo," Caruthers said to the animal.

"On," the girl said, twisting in his grip, trying to face him.

"You're going to have to learn to speak in sentences one day," Caruthers told her.

"Ride," she said, kicking. A smile had taken over her face since Caruthers had agreed to take her to the horse, and he wondered if she'd be appeased with anything less than riding the damn thing back to the States.

"Well," he said. The horse had gone back to grazing. "I supposed I could keep my hands on you, and if this thing ran off I'd just keep hold."

"Please," the girl said, aware now that she'd utterly defeated Caruthers.
“All right,” Caruthers said. “You ready horse? Here she comes.” He leaned against the horse’s flank and settled the girl on its back. To Caruthers’ surprise, the horse didn’t react in any way except by one ripple of its pelt on the neck. The girl clung to the mane and clamped her legs around the animal, at once terrified and thrilled. He wished the thing had a rope around its neck or something. “Kiddo, you ready to get down?” She swung her head from side to side, and Caruthers knew he’d have to disappoint her eventually. He began to consider the blackmail aspect of the situation, and realized he’d just as soon keep this little adventure from the parents.

Thinking this way, he hardly noticed the horse lift its head and reach back toward its far side, but he noticed plenty well when the girl shrieked. Caruthers pulled her off and the horse skipped to the side, shook its mane, and stood dumbly watching the humans. “What’s wrong?” Caruthers said. “What happened?” The girl continued to cry in gasping little yelps. He checked her taut fingers, and they seemed to be in order. Her face turned red, neck strained. Caruthers bounced her in his arms. “Shhh,” he said, “it’s okay.” He checked her body and found the source of the hurt. The horse had left a great wedge of teeth marks on the girl’s right thigh, just under the hem of her dress. The crescent-shaped wound consisted of a series of red indentations, surrounded by pale flesh. The whole thigh had begun to swell, though at least no blood had been spilled. Caruthers regarded the horse. It chewed grass a few feet away, indifferent to the grief it had caused. Caruthers stepped forward with the intention of punching it in its half-cocked ear. He stopped though. Just a fucking horse, he reminded himself.
The girl began to cry for her mother, and Caruthers relinquished the hope that he could calm her down before returning her to the parents. He still held her under the arms, and now he swung her to a lying position, cradled her like a baby before setting on his way back. He wished he could reach his rum and considered putting her down. Instead, he began to jog back, just to get over whatever had to be gotten over.

The parents asked what was wrong. Patricia took her daughter, who hiccupped something about the horse. Caruthers briefly considered lying, but it seemed too much effort. Junior stared at Caruthers, a baleful, accusatory expression animating his usually dull eyes. Caruthers drank from his flask, capped it, and returned it to his pocket. “She kept crying to pet this son of a bitch horse, and the bastard bit her.” He shrugged. They found the wound, which was already turning purple and swelling. “One hell of a bite,” he said, and drank again. The kid ripped into him. Can’t you do one single thing right? Trust you, this, trust you that. Endangering our daughter. Caruthers turned his back, wasn’t hearing any of it. Some drunk fool fell directly off the ass of his mount and landed flat on his back. He curled into a ball after the horse behind him planted for a moment a hoof into the man’s gut. Junior placed his hands on Caruthers and spun him around.

“You listen to me.”

“Listen?” Caruthers said. “No, you listen. It was all my idea. I forced her onto the horse and smacked its ass. I was hoping the thing would take off forever; you know, just to ruin your life, but it only bit her.”

“Never,” Junior said quietly. “I’ll never let you alone with my girls again.”
“Fine. I’ll never volunteer to do you a favor again.”

“You asshole,” Junior said, his face pale and creased with wrath. The little girl had stopped crying to witness the excitement.

“In fact, you can find your own ride home. I’ve had about enough of this party.”

“Good. We’ll be moving to Antigua as soon as we return so no need to keep pretending.”

“Thank God,” Caruthers said, and left before Patricia, who’d placed her hand on Junior’s shoulder and seemed about to speak, could spout any of her consoling bullshit. He felt better the farther he removed himself from his son. At his room he packed in a moment. Drained his flask and refilled it with the remains of the fifth on the nightstand. Seba, dozing in the bus, woke to the sound of the engine.

“We going?” he asked, rubbing his face. Caruthers tossed him the flask, and put the bus in reverse to begin maneuvering out of the maze of parked vehicles he found himself in. “Where are the clientes, jefe?” Seba asked. Caruthers wondered himself. It was no time to get his panties in a twist and miss a packed busload next morning. He couldn’t help it though; he was flat out furious. The engine revved as he pumped the clutch. Finally third gear clunked into place. “Not good,” Seba informed him. Lucky for them, they could just about coast all the way back home.

In Momostenango, he picked up a few fares, but most of them abandoned him for other busses when he had to stop and fill up on transmission fluid before they’d even left the city limits. By the time he rolled into the familiar parking space in the
alley behind Ick’s, he and Seba both knew Maggie would not move again without serious mechanical attention. They sat while the cooling engine ticked. “Can you take a week off?” Caruthers asked.

Seba grinned. “Todo mi vida,” he said, “es un vacacione.” Caruthers paid him a large percentage of what they’d earned on the misadventure and followed his ayudante into the blue dusk.

An older gentleman rode Beto’s horse. Beto had seen him earlier in the day, before the race, but hadn’t confronted him. He didn’t want to embarrass an elder. Instead Beto waited. The man drank much, and if he were like most of his heavy drinking companions, he would soon repose upon the turf and Beto could exchange horses with no conflict necessary.

This plan also gave Beto something to focus on. The race itself had already disappointed him. He had beaten the competitors this way and that, had several times over, but the short sprint, the repetition, gave him a sense of futility, like the cycle of the harvest: birth, death, birth, death. He wished there were more. The goal, he’d learned over the last hours, had little to do with speed and everything to do with endurance.
Beto bought a beer and drank it down. Foam spilled over his saddle and down the horse’s neck. “Sorry, friend,” he said, and threw the can over his shoulder, slapped the reins and charged across the field once again.

A couple of hours later, the rider of Beto’s gray horse began to lean, flailed at the saddle horn and slid, rather gently, to the ground. For a moment he lay on his back, but suddenly he came alive and kicked like a beetle trying to right itself. The audience sang out in laughter and Beto wondered if the man deliberately clowned or was genuinely ridiculous. Beto caught the gray horse by the rope bridle and stroked its jaw. He slipped his feet from the stirrups of his own saddle, got a knee under him and then a boot, and vaulted onto his horse. The gray danced, spun twice before Beto calmed him down. The audience cheered and waved their hats. He tried to fight off the grin splitting his face, but failing, he tipped his hat slightly and bolted back into the race.

Later, the sun set without magic, just fading light. Beto rode, with two other men, the final three. The last of the crowd was leaving. The vendors had gone, along with their alcohol. Beto wondered why he still bothered to spur the horse on. The gray looked back at him with a large, placid eye, wondering, doubtless, the same thing. Beto rode, he decided, because he had strength, and that is how the race was run.

He took a small bottle of Quetzalteca he’d bought earlier and drank what remained. The drink had been going down smoother as the bottle became lighter. Beto understood what the men who spent their lives filthy on the cobbles chased: the sense
of floating in warm water, the bumps of the horse gone fluid, a general haziness of contentment surrounding him like an aura of perfume.

Empty bottle forgotten in his hand, engaged in reverie, Beto experienced a sudden, violent shift of the horizon. The ground rushed up and knocked the air from his lungs. Darkness overcame him, and terrible crushing weight for a moment, then he lay staring at the sky. Stars shone through expanding and contracting, shifting gaps in the cloud cover. He’d fallen, of course, and the horse had rolled over him. Though he felt no pain, he realized he could be hurt. The horse snorted nearby but Beto didn’t move his head to see. He felt comfortable, pressed into earth churned soft by hooves. He didn’t want to learn of his injuries. Not yet.

The two remaining riders passed by but didn’t notice Beto in the dark. He wondered what would happen if he or the horse were seriously damaged. The owner would pay the doctor bills and Beto would owe him for the rest of his life. To owe, he thought, owe what? He couldn’t imagine how anything would change, could not find a thing the owner, Don Sanchez, could take from him. Already he was bound to work his entire life. Don Sanchez could refuse to loan Beto the money and the horse for coming festivals, true, but Beto would beat him to it; he didn’t need to return. What Beto sought, he had found, and found it lacking. Further seeking would occur elsewhere, at home, inside himself on those long days alone in the fields, thinking, even speaking out loud to himself, a habit he’d developed over the past years. Beto’s father never attended festival either, and Beto felt he knew why. The Tzocs were not of the festival ilk.
He considered attempting to stand, but elected to enjoy the comfort of the turf a little longer. A very slight pain had begun to burn in the area of his hip, but the drink warmed him from the inside, eased his nerves. A little longer. The drunken shouts, the marimba's and human singing like the calls of coyotes, even the soft thumps of hooves on beaten earth came to him from a great distance, yet seemed to emanate at the same time from inside his very ears. Above, the stars appeared to race through gaps in the filmy night clouds.

Max woke frightened. The room smelled of dirty socks, cold weather and alcohol. His pants bunched around his thighs and he cradled his flaccid penis in his right hand. He squirmed on the dirt floor to raise his pants to the correct position. Sleeping bodies breathed around him. He had no recollection of how he came to this place and recognized none of the inhabitants. A powerful but vague shame dominated his consciousness. One shadowy memory surfaced. For some infraction, he'd been pushed off the bed during the night. He climbed to his feet, still clad in boots. A woman with short brown hair and bulky shoulders lay curled on the narrow bed beside him. Three other beds supported sleepers, while two other forms lay prone on the floor. He feared he'd done something to the stout girl, violated her in some way,
molested her in his sleep, or while awake. The absence of memory alarmed him. He found the door and left without waking anyone.

The sun hadn’t crested the mountains yet, but the sky had begun to lighten. Max shared the street only with a few Indians sleeping on the sidewalks, in the recessions of entranceways. He located his room, quickly packed, and fled.

Though no one roamed the street, the bus was full of clean tourists, journalists and students of Mayan culture, people wearing pressed clothing and toting suitcases. One of them penned Max into the window seat. The initial shock of waking had worn off, and a deep, slithering nausea took its place. Max held his face in his hands, with the top of his head resting against the metal tubing edging the seat before him. He stared at his bench mate’s shoes, black leather, narrow and covered with a fine layer of dust. He couldn’t move his head for fear of vomiting. His window, he’d noticed upon sitting down, did not open. Acidic sweat burst from his face and stung his skin and eyes. If he relaxed even for a moment, the nausea would overcome his concentration, and he would vomit.

He meditated upon his misery for a period outside time. The bus rumbled to life and began to move. They swung around curves that Max could imagine. He half wished they’d plummet. The ride seemed to last forever, yet when he disembarked in Momostenango, the memory of the interminable torture fled, leaving a vague sense of having lived through some distant and horrible event. During the trip he’d kept himself going by imaging how he’d be able to let loose the sickness as soon as he got off the bus, but when he’d actually exited and located a suitably obscure spot, the
nausea abated, and he felt only a raw ache in his head and throughout his joints, a
sticky mouth, and violently trembling hands.

Forty-five minutes later he boarded a second class bus—an old battered
Greyhound whose logo still showed through the pale green paint over—bound for
Guatemala City. With luck, he could be on a flight home by this time tomorrow.

Hours later, in an American style diner near his hotel in the capitol, Max
ordered a grilled cheese sandwich. It came with limp fries. He took a half bite of the
sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and ordered his third Coke. The counter had a plastic
surface, polished, with black, gray and red speckles. The waitress and the cook spoke
to each other beside the grill. Both wore paper hats.

"You heading home?" the only other customer asked, a bulky man with a
shaved head and small round glasses who sat four stools down the counter. Max
nodded in the affirmative. "Me too," the man said, his voice eager. Probably he hadn't
spoken to anyone in days. "Mind if I join you?"

In fact Max did mind. He was deeply engaged in self-loathing and self-pity,
inventing punishments and methods of self improvement, considering moving back to
Hesperia, working for his step father, mudding drywall in housing tracts. He imagined
an apartment, white walls and industrial carpet, a bedroom where he could lie alone
contemplating the cheap overhead fan. In the meantime, he invited his fellow diner
over. He felt he'd never deny a request again.

The man stood. His stooping gait, nervous for such a big man, reminded Max
of something just out of reach. These days, everything seemed like something he'd
seen before. The man sat, cradling a coffee and shaking his head as if he and Max shared some knowledge. “So, do you hate this place or what?” Max didn’t answer for he didn’t know the answer. The man introduced himself as Walter, and extended his hand, which Max grasped. “Somebody drugged me,” Walter told him, and swished his coffee with a spoon. “I still can’t believe it. A bunch of moon-worshipping cultists dancing around, and I’m starting to freak out.” He fixed his gaze, hawkish and softened very slightly by the lenses, on Max. “I’ve never done drugs before. I hardly drink. I’ve never smoked a cigarette.” He sipped his coffee. “Decaf,” he said.

“They drugged you?” Max asked, rather skeptical.

“Yes they did. I don’t know which one, or how, but everything got very weird. And this one guy, I thought he was okay until he brought out a knife, sliced a deformed pineapple in two, all while looking me in the eye. I swear to God I was next. So I run. I splashed across a stream, just about froze to death. Finally I fell asleep next to this shack, shivering. When I woke early, someone had put a blanket over me. I thought it must have been an angel.” The waitress refilled his cup. “Long story short, I got back to civilization, and here I am.”

“What about your stuff?” Max asked.

“Left it. I had my passport and my money on me. I don’t leave that stuff anywhere. I can replace the rest.” Max half admired, half derided Walter, especially in light of how closely he’d begun to identify with his own increasingly worn pack. He couldn’t imagine leaving it behind.

“What if you’re just paranoid?” Max asked.
“I’ve thought of that. I’m not stupid. All I can say is the drug was real. The dancing freaks banging on their drums, and two-headed pineapple.” He placed some quetzales on the counter. The sense of collusion he’d assumed had vanished, and he regarded Max with suspicion. “I traveled for two months through Europe, and I’ve been to Mexico. I’ve been around. This place is evil. I sensed it the moment I got off the plane.”

“I never disagreed,” Max said, pushing his plate from him. “I’m leaving myself,” though as he said it he began to wonder.

“Good luck,” Walter said, and left.

Alone with the silent cook and waitress, Max returned to the book he’d been trying to read for the past month, On the Road, a book he’d always meant to read but that had been a chore. Back at his hotel room he finished the book in the softest bed he’d slept in since the Joyas job. He lay in the dark disappointed, not nearly as impressed by the characters’ audacity as they were themselves. The trips from coast to coast struck him as senseless as his own wandering.

The next morning he rose, packed and left for the airport, where his ticket would afford him the next available standby flight. He passed by a dirt lot surrounded by wire-topped chain fencing. Inside a group of gringos with backpacks stood in line before a sand-colored bus with half its windows knocked out, displaying high on its windshield in green block letters, the word, “TIKAL.” He recalled Gabriela’s enchantment with the place, and her father’s end. She’d suggested they move their together, to live like monkeys in trees. The sign worked on him like a Sign. Or maybe
it was just an excuse. Either way, he walked through the gate and joined the boarding gringos.

Crammed in the front seat between Ken and Cindy, having invented an obviously false excuse for Marilyn’s early departure, Cash gave himself over to nostalgia, to those early years when he used to hike and camp with his father. What a good kid he’d been, sweet to a fault. He wondered if he could somehow return partway to that earlier self, a kid content to scrounge around after firewood, toast a hot dog over open flames.

When they approached Alto, Cash asked to be taken to the Joyas house. He’d hike back to Marilyn’s, a seven or eight mile walk across the countryside, through low hills, some woods, corn fields, and grassy pastures. The fresh air would clear his head, stretch his legs. And he’d have something interesting to tell Marilyn when he arrived at her place. In truth, he recognized, he felt no great hurry to come face to face with her.

When they arrived at Toto, Cash slammed the door and asked Ken if he had any trail maps of the area. Ken regarded Cash for a moment before offering his habitual sneaky smile. “I get it,” Cash said. “No maps, huh?”
“They don’t make them,” Ken explained, and hoisted a suitcase from the truck’s bed. “Just go in that direction,” he pointed west. “You can’t miss it. It’ll be a good walk.”

Cash said goodbye to the couple with unsentimental handshakes. There had been no particular connection made during the trip. The travelers Cash had met for the most part treated him as if they’d never see him again, which in all likelihood was the case, so different from the play at friendliness or outright aggression customary back home.

He slipped his leather daypack over his shoulders and marched through Totonicapán. His leather jacket combined with the heavy pack caused sweat to form over his back and a general feeling of constriction. His legs felt good though, striding toward something.

The sun hung a fist’s breadth above the horizon, a white thumbtack pressed into the flat gray sky. Cash estimated a good four hours of light left in the day. Plenty of time. He walked quickly, planning his talk with Marilyn. So what the fuck, he’d say, to start things off. He needed to get back some control, and how he’d do that is by changing his attitude, reclaiming the confidence he’d lost along the way. He’d work on it, he decided.

With relief, he left the town behind. In the city, in Media at least, the glances of strangers had always sparked in him a peculiar satisfaction coupled with disdain for those who had nothing better to do than stare at a guy walking down the street. When he’d first arrived in Guatemala he’d enjoyed the amazed looks from the Indians, had
felt unique, admired. Now he recognized fear and hostility in those dark eyes, in the
children hiding behind their parents as if confronted by a wild animal. He found
himself constantly smiling, attempting to show that he was decent, wouldn’t harm
anyone, had once enjoyed nature with his father.

He skirted a plot of land, part farm, part junkyard. A face appeared in a
window and watched him pass. He considered waving, but decided against it. Once
past, he located a narrow trail meandering through waist-high brush. Only his boots
contacting the packed dirt and the creak of his jacket marred the perfect silence.
Pestered by the sense of being followed, Cash glanced back and located the spy, one
of the emaciated, filthy, ubiquitous dogs slinking around. “Hey boy,” he said in a soft
voice. The dog, a medium-sized mongrel with wiry hair, kept his distance and didn’t
otherwise react to Cash’s voice. “No speaka English?” Cash asked. Nope. Didn’t
speak Spanish either, Cash assumed. They were a miserable, infested, starving bunch,
scavengers afraid of humans who pelted them with stones when they skulked into
range.

Even such a ragged companion, however, cheered Cash some on this desolate
trail. “Stick around and I’ll buy you a taco,” he promised. Except they didn’t have
tacos in Guatemala, one of the first illusions shattered since arriving.

The trail led into a wall of pines and crosshatched into dozens of flimsy paths.
Without the sun to guide him, Cash concentrated on retaining a steady course. He
didn’t worry overmuch though. Soon he’d emerge on the other side of the trees and
take a new bearing. He’d no doubt miss Alto, but he’d run into the highway regardless, and from there he’d simply have to recognize whether to go left or right.

An hour later he still walked through the forest. He wondered if he’d been walking in circles, and wished for a compass. No moss grew on the trunks, and he wasn’t even sure if the old hiking trick pertained so near the equator. With profound relief, he broke free of the encompassing trees onto a field of short grass, only to find the sky had turned a uniform gray, and though bright, no sun appeared anywhere. A square frame of welded piping appeared, a soccer goal, Cash realized when he saw its mate across the field. Where would the players come from, Cash wondered. Trees surrounded the area, casting no shadows in the odd light.

Across the field he picked up a new path worn into the grass. This led him up an embankment, and through a narrow fence of scrub pine, on the other side of which spread neat rows of some un-sprouted crop. His companion, the dog, had been joined by two others, a short-haired terrier mix, and a mutt with a freakishly large head and body in relation to its stubby legs. This last dog progressed in an unwholesome manner, its stubby legs rushing in a blur below its body, causing it to glide low across the ground like an insect. No longer a friend to this group, Cash chucked a stone at them. They broke ranks and immediately reformed.

The corn gave way and he stepped with care into a thicket of head-high brush. His trail soon ended in brambles. Frustrated, he pushed through, though he knew this to be unwise. His training told him to turn back and start again from the plowed field. The undirected wandering had frustrated him though, and he feared meeting the
owners of the field. His lack of Spanish put him at an extreme disadvantage, he realized. The best he could manage was to point and state the name of his destination.

Breaking free of the brambles, he encountered a stream. The land seemed possessed of the will to obstruct him. At the bank, he removed his pack and hurled it over, then retreated a few yards and leapt, landing on the far bank, which crumbled and sent him sliding knee deep into the chilly water. He crawled out and sat in a grassy patch to dump the water from his boots and squeeze out his socks. The difficulties almost made him laugh.

A few minutes later he encountered a dirt road, a road that led somewhere, and somewhere was better than the limbo through which he’d been traveling. He chose the direction that seemed most westerly and walked.

Roughly two and a half hours had passed since he’d left Toto. Still plenty of light. Certainly no need to worry. A truck approached from behind, drew nearer. Cash almost flagged it down, but what would he say? It passed, the bed full of Indians, who watched him until they disappeared. His trinity of strays trotted thirty feet behind on the road. He wondered why they persisted, what they could possibly want from him. His toes had gone numb from cold and from walking so far in cowboy boots. Night approached.

At last he came upon a human, a boy of five or six shoveling dirt into a huge pothole in the road. Cash had seen children working on roads before. Passing motorists tossed coins out their windows to fund the endeavors. Cash wondered how
many cars passed here in a day and decided that this child possessed more time than money.

When he saw Cash approaching, the boy froze with the shovel’s blade plunged shallow into the dirt. Cash tried to recall the word for bus. He’d heard it before, and knew it hid somewhere in his mind, but he just couldn’t find it. “Bus,” he finally called out in English. When this had no effect on the boy, Cash altered his pitch. “Bus?” he repeated, sweeping his arm in a broad gesture while replicating the growl of an engine. The child turned on his heel and sprinted off. His shovel leaned forlornly but remained upright.

A bad feeling settled in Cash. A voice advised him to turn back, or to slip into the thicket lining the road, to hide. But from what, he asked. What should he do, live off the land? He needed to find his way to civilization, and the boy obviously lived somewhere with other people. He continued on.

Figures appeared ahead, dark shapes growing in dying light. Cash thought he should flee, but his legs didn’t move. The dim shaped adopted the forms of men, half a dozen of them, running full speed. Cash stepped backward. He imagined they’d run by, after something else. He almost smiled at his own panic. He’d done nothing wrong.

Then he could doubt it no longer. They approached fast, huge and armed with machetes and bats. One held a hammer. He threw his arms over his head and cowered, anticipating blows. “Sorry,” he whimpered. Strong fingers clamped onto his arms. He opened his eyes and confronted a furious, round face shouting, a machete
cocketed behind his ear. “Sorry,” Cash kept repeating. Bodies crowded him and he closed his eyes, giving in. Hands gripping his limbs and coat, his hair. Someone ripped his pack from his shoulders. His hat fell. The hands jerked his arms behind his back. Rope cut into his wrists. Over a shoulder he saw the three dogs standing together, watching with impassive interest. A canvas sack opened its maw and consumed his head. In the brown dark he pictured himself from the dogs’ position, a tall man imprisoned. From this position he’d assume they meant to kill the hooded prisoner. The fabric of the sack sucked in against his nose and mouth, smelling of grain.

Time to take your medicine, Caruthers thought, en route to visit the bad man. He’d not asked a favor in years and dreaded the prospect. Hopefully Chucho Cruz would get to the point, lay out what he wanted and what he’d offer without childishness. Caruthers passed through the tipica store and climbed to Cruz’s office. Inside, the Chief of Police stared down at his secretary who kneeled before him. They both glanced up at Caruthers, as if caught in an intimate act. Caruthers noted the tangled yoyo in the secretary’s hand, its string attached to Cruz’s finger. Caruthers fought off a smile. Cruz moved his gaze from Caruthers to the string, which he removed and dropped. “My good friend,” he said, distancing himself from the secretary, who
rewound the yoyo. “I’m happy to see you.” He wagged a heavy finger at Caruthers. “I almost come look for you.”

“Well here I am,” Caruthers said.

“This way, Norman my friend,” Cruz said, signaling Caruthers to follow him down the stairs. “I have something to show you.”

They exited the *tipica* shop through a back portal covered by a hanging blanket. Cruz entered his car. Caruthers opened the passenger door. “Where are we going?” he asked. With an impatient gesture, Cruz signaled Caruthers to enter, which he did. They pulled into traffic. Unlike the other night, Cruz manipulated the vehicle carefully, with both hands on the wheel. At a sign he came to a complete stop, looked up and down the deserted cross street, and continued on. Caruthers decided both a daytime and nighttime Cruz existed. They climbed the road that led to La Luna Llena.

“Girls?” Caruthers asked.

“No, no. Not today. Today, we speak of grave things.” They passed the strip joint’s parking lot and continued up the beaten road. The lake spread below, an angle displaying a totally new shape. Caruthers drank rum from his flask and eased back into the fake leather seat. He grew comfortable with the fact that Chucho Cruz was taking him somewhere and he had no choice in the matter. Deliciously free of responsibility, he hardly cared that he might die.

Traveling along the edge of the ridge, they passed a few large, concrete homes. From this height, the lake’s pocket of fecundity stood in contrast to the surrounding desert scrub. Alarmingly, Cruz pulled from the road and rushed toward a wall of
dense, bushy trees. “Shit,” Caruthers said, and the grassy earth under the tires dipped just before impact. Without slowing they pushed through the feathery leaves, which brushed the windshield and roof in the manner of a carwash. They emerged on the far side and descended over a rolling plane of yellow grass. Twin tire lines hardly marked the way. They parked at the edge of a square pit, roughly square, maybe fifty meters across. Cruz killed the engine and smiled at Caruthers.

“Did I alarm you?”

“For a moment,” Caruthers answered. Cruz exited and Caruthers followed. The pit was actually an arena, with terraced steps leading to a rectangle dotted with wispy grass. Upon closer inspection, Caruthers noticed pitted stone showing through the moss and dirt covering the terraces. They descended to the field, an area the size of a volleyball court. “I like this place,” Cruz said, and inhaled the loamy air.

“Ruins?” Caruthers asked, examining a stone block amidst the bottom rung.

“A ball court.” Cruz spoke from the direct center of the field, as if addressing an assembly. “The players, sometimes kings, they say, kick the ball. To them, the ball was the sun, you know.” Caruthers knew all about the ancient ball game. Anyone in the country for more than a week heard about it.

“Whoever let the sun hit the ground lost the game,” he said.

“Exactamente,” Cruz said, delighted with Caruthers’ knowledge. “Then what?”

“They’d sacrifice the loser. Rip his heart out so the blood could fuel the sun’s journey, or however those savages justified their vicious tendencies.”
“Savages?” Cruz asked. “Maybe. In Tikal, they say, they bring the loser to the top of a temple, tie him in a ball, and goodbye.” Grinning, Cruz rolled his arms to form the image of a body tumbling down a few hundred stone steps. “Muy chistoso, no?” Caruthers shrugged. “Of course, not so funny to the sacrifice. I understand this. I don’t make fun.” He frowned and ducked his head toward Caruthers, as if asking his blessing. “Sacrifice,” he said, and cast his eyes about the sky, as if searching for words out there.

Caruthers had become terribly depressed. He sat on the lichen-veined bench and rested his hands on his knees. “Chucho, please,” he said, addressing the dirt. “What do you want from me? My bus is dead. I’ve got no papers, no money. My son’s a Christian.” He raised his eyes. “I need help, man.”

“Norman. My friend.” Chucho approached. “I know. I see trouble on you like, how do you say, aura.” He glanced around at the empty benches. For a moment Caruthers imagined feathered and painted onlookers occupying the arena. The image did not improve his mood. He dug the flask from his coat pocket and drank deeply. “The winner,” Cruz said. “This is why I bring you today. What happens to the winner?”

Caruthers wiped mist from his eyes. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Land? Slaves?”

“I don’t know, too,” Cruz said, and laughed. “Nobody talks of the winner, but I think of him.” He took Caruthers’ flask. “There is more than to cry for the loser, my friend. There is to drink for the victor.” He belted one down and returned the flask to
Caruthers. Shadow covered all but the far strip of the court, and Caruthers wondered what role the actual sun played in those ancient games. In baseball, batters and fielders lost sight of the ball in bright sun and shadow both. Caruthers lay back on the step and rested his head on a pad of moss. The pale sky appeared as distant as it was.

“A simple delivery,” Chucho said from the periphery. Caruthers glanced over. The moss cooled his cheek. Chucho stood by with both hands tucked into his back pockets. He wore a revolver on his hip, housed in a simple holster. The black, textured grip appeared utilitarian, a mere handle on a mere tool.


“Salvador?” Caruthers asked, and sat up. “I don’t know.”


“Who are the weapons for?”

“Who cares?” Cruz laughed.

“The military or the guerillas?”

Cruz stared at Caruthers for a moment, then turned his back to pace toward the retreating strip of light. “Who won ball? We don’t know. Do we care? No. The sun hits the ground for all. True? The players, they play.” Cruz turned, clearly pleased by his speech. Caruthers considered telling him that he’d entertained his philosophy for
years, and the fact he would be dead forever someday never quite justified his actions today. Instead, he gave in. He knew from the start he’d undertake whatever assignment Cruz proposed. He’d counted his options. Suicide. Homeless wandering and begging. Return to the States and whatever charity might exist there. For a moment he’d actually entertained the idea of asking his son for help. He imagined a tearful confession, embraces, and after the initial ecstasy of weeping only lies or fights. He saw himself sneaking the sacramental wine, and as *chistoso* as that would be, he figured he’d caused his children enough grief already. He’d sought out Chucho Cruz to play ball.

“How much will you pay?”

Cruz tousled Caruthers’ hair.

Traveling north from Guate, they descended into tropics. The land grew thick with high grass, the air humid. They passed through an immense banana plantation. Someone commented on the red, phallic blooms drooping from the banana clusters, a coloring book harvest of penises. The green world began humbly, tendrils and fan-shaped palms low to the ground, but every mile emboldened the plants to rise higher, higher. Five hours into the trip, the sun disappeared behind a leafy wall that gradually arced overhead and became a luminous ceiling.
The bus was unusual, neither school, city transit nor Pullman variety. Its snubbed nose, raised suspension, large tires, and terrain-colored paint brought to mind an aging military transport. More apparently to Max, however, the bus was a piece of shit. As a dog shakes water from its coat, the entire bus shimmied as it progressed. Every bolt seemed to have been loosened two revolutions. Any second the whole thing could fly to bits.

Max, late arriving and without having purchased a ticket beforehand, had been offered the special seat, a steel folding chair welded to the floor, facing the aisle directly behind the driver. Max could lean his head six inches to the left and rest on the driver’s shoulder, whisper in his hairy ear. At the spot where Max’s feet should rest, a rusted hole the size of a volleyball offered a clear path to the whirring road below. “Be careful,” the ayudante had said when he’d shown Max to his seat.

“Thank you,” Max had said, “I didn’t notice.” The green-eyed ayudante met this remark with laugher, having registered the sarcasm. Probably the kid lived in the capitol, was accustomed to words meaning the opposite of what they should.

Over the last hours, Max had begun to resent the other passengers for their padded benches. The terrible illness of the day before had become a mere hangover. His hands shook and acid rode high in his esophagus. Gringos made up the entire bus population, backpackers new to the country, many of them. Their freshness and their relatively comfortable seats separated them from Max; they avoided his glance, embarrassed by their comfort in relation to his.
They stopped at a military checkpoint, where a fat man in clean fatigues ordered the males off the bus. Two men carrying machine guns stood by while the fat man demanded passports, which he examined by flicking his gaze from the document to the owner, squinting his eyes and peering deeply with exaggerated skepticism. When Max’s turn arrived, he withered under the fat man’s gaze, prompting a pat down—his pockets, his socks, his crotch. The man giggled when he cupped Max’s balls. “Te gusta?” he asked.

“No,” Max replied simply.

The checkpoint turned out to be routine, finally, and soon the passengers returned to their seats and the bus further penetrated the jungle. The paved road gave way to dirt and the trip went from uncomfortable to painful. Max gripped the seat of his chair with both hands, lifting himself to absorb the shock of giant potholes and epic ruts. Dust poured in through windows, the hole at Max’s feet, and seemingly through the fabric of the bus itself. They drove over two-inch, staccato ridges for a time, vibrating so heavily that Max’s teeth rattled, legs grew numb. They slowed to a walking pace to navigate an area of lurching dips and knobs, deep fissures. Now the rattling structure of the bus seemed a benefit, as the bus bent and twisted to the features of the land. At times, they nearly flopped over. The road continued to devolve while the jungle grew denser, higher, encroaching. Limbs scratched the side of the bus, whipped into the open windows, slapped faces, knocked hats from heads—behaved like a force both sentient and malevolent.
Max clutched the edge of his empty window pane with one hand and the bottom of his seat with the other. The ayudante wrapped his long arms around the pole and swayed with the rocking bus. A good looking kid, he reminded Max of Lucio. Max felt guilty.

They pulled to the side and the ayudante led three Indians into the bus, the first passengers picked up en route. Without seats, the new passengers clustered in the aisle at the back. More passengers entered, others exited, and now the bus took on the local duty Max had known in the highlands. Beyond their flimsy path, no other road graced the land, no building, no other sign of humans beyond the humans themselves that seemed to materialize and disappear into the jungle at will. The ayudante, who'd had no apparent duties throughout the initial five hours of the trip, now earned his keep. The Indians brought their baggage onto the bus with them, unless they carried a box or basket too large to hold overhead, and only then did the ayudante hustle to the top of the bus, where the backpacks lay, absorbing the abuse of the scraping and swatting jungle.

Max wished he could get to his backpack, at the bug spray and aspirin. Mosquitoes, hardly a problem in the highlands, had begun to feast on his neck and his hands. One had got him on the ear. The maddening itch could not be soothed no matter how hard he clawed. He considered climbing out the window to retrieve his goods, but didn’t want to risk disfavor or invite attention. He slapped a mosquito on his forearm and wondered whose blood stained his skin.
Screams of pain interrupted Max’s thoughts. The riders clustered to the passenger side windows. “Oh, Jesus,” someone exclaimed, and recoiled from what he’d seen. Max didn’t want any part of what had just gone down. Injuries had always made him dizzy, and glimpses of damaged flesh, even on television, tended to haunt his subconscious. Four Indians entered, carrying the howling ayudante into the aisle. Max tried not to look and tried to look and he saw the problem clearly enough. The ayudante’s foot hung from his ankle, the angle all wrong. Max turned to the window. The driver had left his seat and shouted. “¿Qué pasó? ¿Qué pasó?” Through the large rearview mirror Max saw a chaos of shifting bodies. The Indians placed the howling ayudante on a bench. Gringos stood watching or not watching. “Dios!” the driver said, and returned to his seat. He put the bus in gear and moved on, glancing in the mirror every couple of seconds and muttering to himself.

One of the gringos, a young blond man wearing tinted glasses, shouted for attention. “Pain pills,” he said. “I have pain pills.”

“Excuse me,” Max said to the distracted driver in Spanish. “He says he has pain medicine.”

“Get them,” the worried man said. “Andale.” Max learned that the pills were in the blond passenger’s backpack, on the roof. He asked the driver to stop and soon he’d climbed onto the roof, upon which he realized he’d forgotten to ask what the pack looked like. The bus moved forward. Max gripped the luggage rail and swung his head into an open window. “A blue and black Eastpack,” the owner told him. Max pushed himself back up, and for a moment teetered, unable to break free of gravity.
With a burst of energy he crossed the tipping point, and soon located the pack. 

Bracing his side against the rack, he lowered the pack until hands took it from him.

He lay back on the soft packs and breathed in the jungle air. He thought to ride the rest of the way like this, in comfort, above it all, except for the branches that occasionally swatted him, and the mosquitoes chewing him alive. He climbed to his own pack and found the repellant. The poisonous liquid stung his scratched open wounds, and the pain deliciously overwhelmed the itching. He capped the bottle and stored it in his pocket. He tried to relax, but more than the bumps, the bugs and the aggressive vegetation kept him antsy. Some itch deeper than the bites nagged him inside. Flickers of sunlight managed to wind through the canopy now and then. Max understood that months before he’d taken on a certain responsibility without quite understanding, and the fact that he no longer wanted it did not matter. He’d asked to become the first gringo ayudante, and now a kid’s leg had been mangled so that he could fulfill his whim.

The bus stopped. Passengers still had to board and debark, injured ayudante or not. Max climbed down and hustled up to the front. Inside he found no one had taken his folding chair. He sat down and reconsidered. Of course the kid’s accident had nothing to do with Max. He reminded himself that he did not occupy the center of all creation. But the kid was hurt, and the driver needed assistance. The man’s ear sprouted black hair from its pit, but also a fine brown silk around the arcing fold.

“Quiero ayudar,” Max told him. I want to help.

He glanced back quickly, impatient. “Hmm?”

“Please,” the man said after a moment, manipulating the bus over a curving ridge, “that boy is my nephew. My sister, she’s a monster. Did you see his leg? Holy Christ. She’ll blame me, for certain. And our mother always takes her side. Always. Since we were children. Women,” he said to the road, “they stick together.” The bus listed alarmingly for a moment and righted. The driver seemed to have concluded his idea.

“And?” Max asked.

The driver glanced over his shoulder again, a frown radiating from his bulgy eyes. “You. Why are you talking to me? It’s difficult enough to drive.”

“I want to work.”

They stopped for a group of riders. Two of them carried large cardboard boxes. The driver accepted their fares and eventually continued to drive. The boy’s screams had quieted to sobs and whimpers. Max wondered what kind of pills the boy had taken, and hoped it was morphine. He’d met travelers who bought the pills at pharmacies, faking or not bothering to fake symptoms. “Why do you want to work?” the driver asked.

“For pay.”

“Don’t kid me.” His head swiveled over the dingy collar of his guayabera.
"Listen, we're wasting time. Your nephew needs a doctor. I want to help. At the end of the trip, pay me what you think I earned."

The driver downshifted to traverse a series of ruts. "You don't know how much to charge."

"I can ask the passengers. They won't lie."

"True," the man said. "But you. How do I know you won't cheat me?"

"I won't rob you. Don't insult me." He didn't actually know the Spanish word for "insult" so he simply used the English word with a Spanish verb ending. Someone called out, and they stopped for the exit. "What if he'd had a bag up top?" Max asked, utilizing correctly a tricky verb form he'd previously only practiced with Gabriela.

The driver pushed the gas pedal and focused on the road. Max stood and held onto the pole. "Look," he pulled his left front pocket inside out. "This pocket is empty. I'll put all the money I collect in here. You can watch me in the mirror. At the end I'll give it all to you. You can pay me, or not. That will be your problem."

The driver seemed to shrink an inch into his bouncing chair. "Fine," he said at last, "but allow me to show you one thing." He ducked his right hand under the seat between his legs and withdrew a grimy revolver. He hefted it and caught Max's eyes for a moment. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Max replied, "I understand very well." From his spot at the pole he surveyed the crowded interior of the bus, the pinched faces wincing at the boy's moans. He stuffed the pocket back into his pants.
Hands clamped his biceps and forced Cash into the dark. The pressure of those hands
comforted him, and in his blindness he soon began to trust their guidance. The word
please repeated in his mind. Please, he thought, a simple plea for mercy. He stumbled
a few times until he managed to match the rhythm of his captors. He recalled walking
in step with Marilyn, sometimes intentionally breaking the coordination just to be
funny. Marilyn used to laugh and squeeze his arm at these times.

After a long walk voices called out from ahead. His keepers halted. He passed
into other hands. He strained to understand the words they spoke, and wondered what
he'd done to make them hate him so. It was useless. He heard only garble. A voice
spoke directly at him, seemed to be asking questions. "I'm sorry," Cash said through
the grain bag. "I don't understand. I was only looking for the bus." He heard his voice
rise and tears pushed on his eyelids. "Bus," he said, "bus, bus." A burst of pain flared
on the side of his head and he hit the ground. The babbling voices grew more frantic.
He wished to remain on the ground, weeping, but hands grasped him by the shirt and
arms and forced him to his feet. He stood, hoping more than anything to gain the
approval of those who had him. Different factions tugged on him. A child's voice
surfaced for a moment and was drowned out by the general din. They moved him. He
stumbled. A door creaked open and they threw him into an enclosed space. The door
slammed; a latch clicked. The argument continued, muffled, and grew distant.
He lay in a fetal position, hiccuping sobs. The pain in his wrists and the cold night became relevant to the situation. He thrashed against his binds, kicking up dust until he wore himself out. Panting against dirt, he noticed his action had pushed the hood up to his chin. Dragging his face along the floor, he soon peeled the sack from his head and shucked it to the side with a toss of his head. On his knees, he shook the dirt from his face, imagined himself for a moment a bull in a ring.

A thin line of light surrounded the door of his otherwise dark and featureless cell. Lying on his side, he breathed for a few moments, calming himself, and then set about working his hands out from behind. He managed to slide them under his butt, and rested with his wrists nestled behind his knees in a crablike position. He struggled to work his right leg through the loop formed of his bound hands. He rolled to his side, onto his back. He thrashed and groaned, but his legs were too long, and even were he able to bend them enough, his boot heels would catch. He considered pulling off his boots, and that’s when he recalled the knife. Its existence frightened him. He didn’t want to the responsibility. Voices still argued faintly outside. Hard pebbles, corn kernels upon inspection, littered the floor. He maneuvered to a sitting position, still with hands clasped behind his knees, and found the knife’s cool edge in his boot top. With his new, ten-fingered hand, he withdrew the weapon from its sheath. The limited range of his digits wouldn’t allow him to open the clasp though. He brought the knife up between his knees and ducked his head to get at it with his mouth. The steel tasted salty and bitter. He located the notch with his lips and teeth, bit down and after two tries worked the blade out. Someone coughed just outside the door, and
Cash dropped the knife to the ground and sat on it. No one entered, but they would, and then what? Would he stab someone? The thought froze him. His fear weighed against the ache in his wrists. They’d bound him in thin, nylon cord, wrapped several times and knotted professionally, as a hog might be tied for slaughter.

He retrieved the knife, and easily sawed through the cord. Soon his hands were free. He stood and touched the mortared stone walls, found them solid. He carefully approached the door and placed his eye against the crack. A man stood inches away, his back to the shed. Cash grew lightheaded and risked breathing. He didn’t dare testing the door’s strength, but it looked solid. Two dark spaces indicated some kind of bar locking the door. Cash looked down at the knife in his hand, a puny looking thing reflecting a sliver of gray light. He wondered if he’d be able to lift the bar with his blade. The man outside shifted, and Cash snuck back to a corner. An intense wave of weakness almost caused him to fall. He sat on the floor, curled onto his side and fell asleep with the knife clasped in his fist.

The sun set behind the jungle without transition, no soft colors, only darkness. Max felt he should create some space in the aisle. Too many riders carried luggage. But since he didn’t know where anyone got off he decided to leave the mess.
To his vague disappointment, he couldn’t lean out the door with the wind whipping through his clothes. They didn’t move fast enough for wind and he’d likely be swatted by a branches. He stood holding the pole, rocking with the bus over the rugged terrain.

The headlights illuminated a small band of future passengers. The bus slowed and Max hopped out to assist. He felt ludicrous. Two passengers exited behind him. Max attempted to relieve a woman of a wide, disk-shaped basket balanced on her head. She resisted. “I’m here to help,” Max told her, the basket between them, and an agitated man by her side, growing interested in the conflict. She looked to the driver, who shrugged, embarrassed by the state of the world. The woman reluctantly released the basket, and Max sprinted to the rear to lug it up the ladder. At the top he flung the basket onto a pile of backpacks and secured with one of the many strands of twine tied to the rack. The bus lurched forward and Max almost fell from the ladder. Holding tight, he descended. Pausing to smash a mosquito, he let himself in the back door.

“Pardon me,” he said, easing through the crowded aisle.

“We’ll trade jobs, huh?” someone in Spanish said. The ayudante, reclined on a bench, gazed up a Max, eyes distant and smile pinched. A blanket, mercifully, hid his broken leg. “What’s do you do in the United States? I’ll learn it.”

“Sorry,” Max replied. “I don’t do anything.”

“That’s good for me. Perfect,” he said, laughing for a moment and wincing as the pain shot through the drug’s haze.
Max struggled forward to the new passengers and asked them for the fare. Before surrendering the money, they looked at each other, at the driver and again at Max. “I’m helping,” he repeated. He shoved the bills into his pocket and invited the basket owner to take his vacated chair. “Be careful of the hole,” he said from his position beside the driver.

Max ventured a survey of his passengers. The gringos, avoiding his eyes, offered him the sort of vibration usually reserved for the teacher’s pet, the overachieving showoff. Maybe they had it right, he thought, quickly becoming too weary to care. Ahead the lights pushed into the jungle, seemed barely able to hold back the darkness.

Over the next three hours, Max improved as an ayudante, but not tremendously. He remained awkward, clumsy; developed none of the swagger, the deft movements of the boys he’d admired. The smooth moves had grown from months or years of repetition. He’d mistaken boredom for cool. Now the job irritated Max, and his feet ached. A sense of pointlessness, of laboring for labor’s sake harassed him. He’d accomplished nothing, ever in his life, and he wondered why he bothered.

On the other hand, he clung to one possibility: that he’d trim a half an hour from the wounded boy’s journey. It was something, all he could find.

Their headlights showed a painted sign reading “Finca Izabel,” where they stopped. The driver handed Max a flashlight as a quarter of the gringos stood and shuffled toward the exit. Max climbed the roof and began to toss down packs. He’d read about this place, a backpacker haven of healthy food, marijuana, and creative
housing built into jungle ceiba trees. One of the owners, a man named Michael DeVine, had been murdered in recent months by a military officer who'd been on the CIA payroll. He'd been sentenced to life in prison, but to no one's surprise had "escaped" after serving one day behind bars.

The officer, they said, felt insulted when Michael DeVine served a table of Maya before him and his soldiers at the finca restaurant. DeVine made his big mistake by asking the officer and soldiers, in sight of a dozen American backpackers, to leave and not come back until they'd sobered up. Weeks later, a military pickup captured DeVine when he brought the trash out in the morning. They drove him a mile away and bashed his brains out with the butts of their rifles. His widow continued to run the finca, an ongoing embarrassment to the United States, supporters of thugs. Max tossed a final pack into the waiting darkness below. A woman's voice called out thanks, and he climbed back into the now roomy bus.

Hours later, the dirt road gave way to pavement. The jungle fell away. City lights approached, displayed two story buildings and a traffic signal. They parked in a concrete lot illuminated by a single floodlight attached to the roof of a building that might have been a warehouse, but was, denoted by the sign over the door, a medical clinic. "Flores," the driver said, shutting off the engine and hustling back to oversee the extraction of his nephew. Max stepped outside to smoke. As the small procession passed, the ayudante called adios. "Luggage," the driver said, signaling with his eyes the packs on the roof. "I'll be back soon. Wait." Faint music thumped from
somewhere in the heart of the town, and the mosquitoes hadn’t let up. Max hardly bothered to swat them anymore.

Max entered the bus. “We’re here,” he called to those who hadn’t already filed out. Again he climbed the bus, for the last time, and tossed down packs indiscriminately. Now and then someone offered Max an ironic smile when receiving a bag, some kind, some less so.

“Where the hell are we?” someone asked, and another took up the discussion. Guidebooks appeared, maps. By the time Max dropped his own pack to the catchers, the group seemed to have settled the issue. Max felt enormously sleepy, a pleasant sensation really, like a drug experience. Soon everyone had left. Max sat on the bus’s front step, lit another cigarette.

The driver returned shortly. “Thank you,” he said, “for not robbing me.” Max removed the bills and coins from his pocket and handed the money to the driver in two fistfuls. The driver transferred the money to his pocket without counting, and grasped Max’s hand in both of his. They were large, plump hands, damp, but not unpleasantly so in the humid air. “I don’t know why you did this, but thank you.”

“Give my pay to him,” Max said, pointing to the hospital. The man nodded his head. “Wait,” he said, and entered the bus. He reached under the seat where he kept his gun and Max feared for a moment he’d be shot for his good work, but the driver instead returned with a baggie filled halfway with some dark substance. “This is a small gift. You gringos like it. Be careful of the police.”

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Max put the baggie in his pocket and asked the driver if he needed any more help.

"No, it's okay. The doctor is good. You know, in case a tourist falls from a temple." He locked the bus and walked toward the hospital. "We're lucky for that," he called over his shoulder.

Max said goodbye and found his pack lying on the ground behind the bus. He considered consulting the map in his guidebook, but instead he shouldered the bag and moved toward the music.

She missed him when he wasn't around, and felt lonely when he was. Marilyn’s problem was as simple as it was without solution. She’d decided this over the past days alone. Without any duties and wide awake at nine on Sunday night, she paced her shack, bored, trying to invent some activity to take her time but not possessing the will to leave the room. The hill, her former haven in times of anxiety or ennui, had been taken from her by her attackers. She grew angry anew, and questioned her decision not to report them, to anyone, even Cash. Still the same answer. Nothing would have been done, and she’d have felt even more frustrated and hateful. She sat on the cot, stood and moved to the couch. She was, she admitted, waiting for Cash to burst through the door at any moment. Did she want him to? The magic question. Yes
and no. She wondered if he were out whoring, but doubted it. Not in this country, even if he were the type to pay. She attempted to visualize him making love to a woman, a form of self torture, but she couldn’t muster any passion for the endeavor.

A knock at the door startled her. “Yes?” she asked as she told herself it was Cash, though her intuition told her otherwise. The handle jiggled and Marilyn stood, considered fleeing out the back. The door opened and a small girl entered, Laura, Marilyn’s former student. “What are you doing here?” Marilyn asked, baffled and frightened.

The girl panted, as if she’d been running. “Hello, teacher,” she said.

“How, Laura.”

“You friend,” she said. “No, your friend. They have him.”

“My friend?” Marilyn asked, as if in a trance. Cash, she thought. Who else? “Who has him?”

The girl searched for words and Marilyn moved toward her, on the verge of gripping her shoulders and shaking. “En Espanol,” she said.

“La gente,” the girl said. The people. “They talk of killing him,” Laura shrugged, “so I ran all this way to tell you.” Marilyn couldn’t form a single question out of the chaos in her mind. “He has a bag over his head,” Laura explained.

“A bag?”

“Yes. And hands tied. The people are angry.”

Marilyn crossed to the door, opened it, and returned to the room before she’d made a conscious decision to move. She found a cardboard filing box under the cot
and flicked through the tabs, searching for “S.” Laura hovered over Marilyn’s shoulder, an odd little mascot. She located Jonathan Stubbs’ phone number and rushed out. Laura followed without being asked. They jogged to the post office, where Marilyn plunked coins into the phone and punched in Jonathan’s number. Thankfully he fumbled with the receiver and answered after two rings.

“Bueno?” he said.

“They’ve got Cash.”

“Excuse me?”

Marilyn calmed herself by looking down at the wide-eyed, homely face below her. The girl seemed positively thrilled to be involved in the action.

“Jon. This is Marilyn. My friend Cash has been captured by some villagers.”

“Jesus,” he said. “That imbecile. What did he do?”

“Nothing,” she said, defensive, though she wondered herself what he’d done. After she explained the situation, Jonathan told Marilyn to wait by the road with the girl. Marilyn hung up.

“Let’s go,” she said to Laura, taking her hand. Laura’s excitement had rubbed off on Marilyn, in spite of a separate sense of dread. Soon they stood alongside the highway, with nothing to do but wait. Marilyn asked every question she could conceive. The answer did little to hearten her. Before she could fully appreciate the horror of the situation, the lights of vehicles bore down on them from the direction of Cuatro Caminos.
Marilyn waved. A white car turned around and pulled beside them. A pickup with four soldiers in the back followed closely behind. The back door of the car opened and a Jonathan, disheveled in a black tee shirt stating, “Another Man Against Domestic Violence.” Marilyn slid in beside him and beckoned Laura to follow. She wondered how many men were for domestic violence. “You okay?” he asked. A soldier drove and Colonel Fortunato Vegaz, whom Marilyn had flirted with at the party an age ago, faced her from the front seat.

“Pleasant to see you again,” he said.

“A real joy,” Marilyn responded. “What are we waiting for?”

“We are waiting for this child to tell us how to get to her village.” He turned and asked Laura the way. She fixed her gaze on a polished chrome coat hook over the door.

“La senda,” she said, and pointed toward the forest.

“Dios,” Vegaz said, exasperated by this life. “The path? Which path? Does anyone know how to get to this place in a motor vehicle?” Marilyn asked this question of Laura, who told them she’d taken buses to and from Cuatro Caminos on occasion. Jonathan, Vegaz and Marilyn deduced that the village must lie somewhere to the north of the road connecting Caminos and Toto. The soldier drove and the pickup followed. They turned left at Caminos and traveled slowly until Laura spied the dirt road that led to her village.

“Thank you,” Marilyn said, patting the dense hair on the girl’s head. She looked frightened, watching the trees rush by. The lights bumped with the car along
the fields and trees. She turned to look out the back window. A cloud of dust, tinted orange by the pickups headlights, grew behind them.

“I don’t like the soldiers,” she whispered to Marilyn.

“It’ll be okay,” Marilyn said, recognizing the emptiness of her words. She knew no such thing.

The village came upon them, an assembly that scattered when touched by light, disappearing among a cluster of mud shacks. The car slid to a stop. One figure remained in the billowing dust cloud that overtook the car, a young Quiche man in western garb, standing with arms akimbo. Doors flew open. The pickup skidded sideways, further choking the air with dust and confusion. Marilyn followed Jonathan out and joined Vegaz in the smoking light beams. “Welcome,” the man said in Spanish. “I’m called Esteban.” Vegaz and the others introduced themselves. A curious formality ordered the meeting. Laura offered Marilyn a pinched smile and joined Esteban.

“I believe you have a gringo,” Vegaz said, smoothing his coat. The soldier that drove the sedan joined the other soldier at that truck. One of them passed cigarettes around. A sulfur match popped and flared, startling Marilyn.

Esteban nodded uncertainly. He seemed young, with a bowl haircut and a striped polo shirt bearing a tiny alligator on the breast.

“I hope he’s alive,” Vegaz told him, with a touch of fatherly threat. Someone appeared from a hut and joined Esteban, a very short woman with the thin lips and scornful eyes of a lizard.
"You can't have him," she said. The top of her coiled bun reached Esteban's chest. "He's ours."

Vegaz groaned and rubbed his face. He composed himself by caressing his perfectly clipped mustache. Marilyn began to dislike the woman standing beside Esteban. "So he is alive?"

"That's not your concern," the woman said.

"Pardon me, senora. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Colonel Fortunato Aria Vegaz. Please trust me when I tell you that a dead gringo is most definitely my concern." The woman's scowl grew deeper. Vegaz gestured with a courtly wave of his hand toward the smoking soldiers. "Show us to the gringo and we will leave you alone. No one wants trouble." Other villagers gathered behind Esteban and the woman. A middle-aged man placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. She shrugged as if a fly had landed on her.

"Trouble?" she asked. "I'll tell you about trouble. My boy is in bed. Sick." Her expression faltered for a moment to allow her eyes to scan the dark sky above Vegaz's head, then returned to its set position of determined indignation. "The gringo scared sickness into my child," she concluded, as if she'd finally solved a difficult problem.

"Scared sick?" Vegaz asked. "I'm not familiar with that phrase." Rather than answering, the woman seemed to dig into her position. She folded her arms across her chest with the air of constructing a wall around herself. Her scowl took on a blank stoniness. Marilyn, who'd been living among the Quiche of the region for over two
years, and had withheld judgment time and again, surrendered to an exhilarating explosion of fury.

“Scared sickness into him?” she asked, with devastating gringo contempt.

“Hold on,” Jonathan said in English, catching her in his arms. Marilyn hadn’t even noticed she’d moved toward the woman, who now made a show of cowering behind Esteban.

“Did you hear what she said?” Marilyn asked, facing him. He waved his palms before her face, a gesture asking her to slow down. Marilyn reflected that before he’d become a foolish character in her life, she’d respected his aura of serene resignation. She’d always understood that the woes of the world and the ugliness of humans had ceased to surprise him somewhere along the line, and she’d pitied and admired this characteristic that could be called wisdom.

“Calm down everyone,” Vegaz said. “Señora, please. Tell us what you want.”

The woman moved out from behind Esteban, who now seemed uncomfortable, like a party guest with no one to talk to. “One hundred quetzales.”


The woman seemed to gain stature at this point, and held her ground with fists planted against her narrow hips. “What about the doctor’s bill?” Her lips contorted slightly and she summoned a sheen of moisture into her eyes. “What if Lupe fails?”
“Forty,” Marilyn said, having realized she’d lost the battle of principle, and now it only remained to move through numbers. Meanwhile, several cars had arrived, and the first of many flashbulbs popped. While news reporters swarmed, the negotiators settled on sixty quetzales for the gringo, sixty quetzales to heal a frightened boy’s magic sickness.

“Well,” Vegaz said, apparently unperturbed by the negotiations. “Justice is served. Does anyone have change for a hundred?” He dug a billfold from his coat pocket.

“No,” the woman said. “He must pay.” She pointed into the dark. Marilyn shared a glance with Jonathan, and considered moving in that direction to find Cash herself. Yet somehow the woman’s insistence dampened her disdain and anger. The injured party was acting at least partly on conviction, and not purely to squeeze a quetzal from the rich gringos and ladinos.

“Does he have money?” Jonathan asked.

“He does,” Esteban said, and spoke softly to an older villager, who left the scene. “We held his bag while he…” Esteban searched for the correct phrase, “waited.” He offered Marilyn a sympathetic glance and walked off in the direction the bargaining woman pointed. His legs bowed slightly, and this minor fact almost brought tears of pity to Marilyn’s eyes. She feared she’d been in the country too long.
Caruthers, uncharacteristically far from home after dark, ambled about Cuatro Caminos, waiting for one of Chucho Cruz’s distant cousins, a pale-skinned mestizo, to install a rebuilt transmission into old Maggie. The man worked by floodlight under a makeshift tent in a dirt lot surrounded by junked automobiles on the outskirts of Caminos. Marcelo would also be manning the border, dressed in Military greens, on the fateful day. He’d been expecting Caruthers, and began work on the bus without being asked.

With hours to kill, Caruthers considered taking a bus to Xela to fart around, get drunk, but he’d decided to while away the free day, supplementing his rum and coffee with beers at the various stands. He’d been worrying about the young girl, Sarah. She was a wild one, and her parents’ rap would avoid all mention of any of the dark realities of life. They’d said as much. Birth control, for instance. Their method of rearing a teenaged girl was to be total avoidance of the existence of pills, condoms and whatever else they had these days in the shiny first world. Overall, the world would be immensely better served if birth control were distributed freely everywhere. Screwed up kids having screwed up kids accounted for most of the suffering he’d witnessed. Of course, he was still a screwed up kid, and he supposed the availability of birth control hadn’t stopped his bad decisions.

He sat on a bench and ordered a Cabro from the old woman behind the plywood counter. Unaccountably, Caruthers missed Seba’s presence. He imagined him pausing to glance at Caruthers before ordering a beer. At one point, Caruthers
used to invite Seba to a beer during lunch breaks, as a special treat when the sun shone especially bright, or whatever, but somewhere along the line the beer had become the unstated norm. Caruthers supposed Seba might have been taking liberties, but he hadn’t the will to correct the slide. Originally he’d wished to avoid the impression of impropriety. A bus driver and his assistant drinking beer looked bad, even in Guatemala. Everyone knew everyone at Caminos, and folks liked to talk. But talk hadn’t ultimately mattered.

“Hola guero,” shouted an apple-shaped man wearing aviator-style sunglasses seated a few spaces down the counter bench. “I hear about your son.” On further inspection, Caruthers recognized the man as a fellow driver.

“My son?” he asked, plenty confused and beginning to be scared.

“As a way to talk,” the driver replied, grinning. “My cousin, he drive from Guate to Tikal. A gringo is his ayudante for one day.” The man laughed. “He tell me, and I think of you. Gringo driver. Gringo ayudante.”

Caruthers didn’t smile very often these years, so he felt it stretch his face as a man out of shape feels his legs while running. “Truly?” he asked. “A gringo ayudante? Did he have brown hair? A blond beard.”

The driver shrugged, and Caruthers repeated what he’d said in mangled Spanish. “¿Barba rubia?”

“I don’t know about his beard,” the driver admitted in Spanish. “My cousin only told me he hired a gringo to help one day. His regular ayudante broke his leg.”

The man’s grin disappeared and his face assumed a sorrowful aspect.
“Poor boy,” a woman between them said. “Is he recovered?” She had a wide, manishly handsome face, and thick hair the color of galvanized steel tied into two braids.

The driver offered a detailed answer to the woman, who listened with grandmotherly sympathy. I’ll be damned, Caruthers thought. The kid pulled it off. Who’d have guessed? “Friend,” he said, raising his beer to the fellow driver, “thank you for the news.”

“I thought of you when I heard,” the man repeated.

“Señora,” Caruthers addressed the woman behind the counter. “Cokes for my companions, and another beer for me.” The server set drinks beside the customers’ half-empty bottles. The recipients thanked Caruthers formally. “To the gringo ayudante,” Caruthers said, raising his bottle. The others saluted and drank.

“Health,” the steel-haired woman exclaimed, as a second toast.

“Health, wealth, and love,” the driver added, completing the familiar phrase.

“Basta la salud,” the woman replied, as serious as one can be. Health is enough. They drank to that.

Cash woke. His limbs ached and the cold seemed injected into his joints. He hadn’t slept long. It was still night. Two men spoke outside his door. The knife, closed, had
imprinted itself into his right palm. On his knees, he unclasped the blade. The twin
breaks in the door’s bright silhouette moved up and disappeared. The door opened.
Cash swung his hand behind his back, as if still bound. He gripped his right wrist in
his left hand. The knife point touched the dirt, causing a scraping vibration. A man’s
figure stood black before the bright rectangle of open doorway. His body was thick,
with short, bowed legs. He seemed to be looking around the room. Cash saw the hood
discarded in the center of the floor, and wondered where the cut rope had gone to. The
figure stepped forward, and spoke Spanish. He crouched before Cash. His throat
appeared in the light, almond colored and exposed. Cash swallowed, tensed, and
dropped his knife into the dirt. The figure, a smooth-faced man of Cash’s age, gripped
Cash around the bicep and turned him. Cash resisted, whimpering. His captor
withdrew a knife of his own. Cash struggled out of his grip and covered his face with
his bare, unbound arms, deriding himself as a coward and hoping he’d not be stabbed
to death. The figure did not attack, but stood. “Up,” he said in English. Cash crawled
to his feet, ready to flinch away. The figure slipped his knife into a sheath on his belt
and beckoned Cash forward.

Cash passed through the doorway, to a frightening scene. People, hundreds
perhaps, jostled in the dusty light of headlamps. A wandering spotlight fixed its eye
on a young girl, swung across a sea of stern faces. Cold light flashed again and again,
reminding Cash of the lightening season before the rain. The spotlight located Cash,
who hid his face behind the crook of his right arm. Risking a look over his forearm,
he saw the light approach, a dozen people running with it, a black contraption with a
glimping lens atop a shoulder. He’d seen this sort of gathering before, outside a courthouse, surrounding a burning house.

The news reporters surrounded him, peppering him with questions he couldn’t understand. He saw Marilyn squeezing through the crowd. She moved to embrace him, but instead placed her hands on his shoulders. “Are you alright?” she asked quietly. He sensed and shared her embarrassment, such emotion should not have this kind of attention.

“I’m good,” he said. The reporters continued to ask their questions in Spanish and English both. “I’m thirsty,” Cash said, and this statement caused a minor uproar, though no one seemed interested in fetching him water. A female reporter beside the television camera asked in English how Cash felt to be free, then translated the question to the camera. “I just want to go home,” Cash said, now on the verge of weeping with relief. He threw his arms around Marilyn’s neck and tried to hide in her hair. She wore his backpack.

“Did they hurt you?” she whispered in his ear. He shook his head. “Tell the reporters,” Marilyn continued. “Tell them they treated you well, and then we can go.” Cash wiped his face in Marilyn’s hair, breathed in deeply a couple of times and faced the light. A man wearing a suit spoke into a microphone in Spanish. He placed his arm around Cash, who recognized him as the Colonel from the Joyas party.

“Think of the stories you’ll tell your friends back home,” he said.

“Did your captors harm you in any way?” the television reporter asked Cash.
He shook his head, jangling the bits in his hair. “No,” he said, and though the reporter seemed to want more, he had no other comment.

“Quite an adventure our friend has had here,” the Colonel said in English, slapping Cash’s shoulder. “But he is a brave young man. Very courageous. Print that.” Cash wished to dispute this. He wanted to tell the reporter, an attractive woman with an enormous wedding ring decorating the finger of her microphone hand, how he’d wept and begged, how he’d dropped the knife his father had given him when he might have freed himself. She paced Cash and Marilyn as the Colonel and Jonathan, the Peace Corps somebody, led him toward a waiting car. “What did you do?” she shouted. “Were you trying to steal children?”

Cash paused at the open door. “Stealing children?” It was as if he no longer understood even English.

“Why did they capture you?”

Cash knew the answer immediately. “Because I couldn’t speak to them.” He thought for a moment longer. “And they couldn’t speak to me.” He climbed into the back seat beside Marilyn. Jonathan sat on the other side and the door slammed on the reporter’s next question. The driver, a young soldier, executed a three-point turn, and they left the village. The Jon emitted a lengthy sigh and began chuckling softly. Cash looked at Marilyn. She shook her head from side to side, wearing an expression he couldn’t read. “That was close,” Jonathan said. Cash lay his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he saw a dark shape in the center of the road. As the car passed over it, he recognized the shape as his hat.
“Goodbye,” he said out loud. Jonathan and Marilyn looked at him with concerned expressions. Cash began to laugh and couldn’t stop.

The morning ride from Flores to the ruins of Tikal was mercifully, surreally smooth. The free shuttle, a truncated, brand-new vehicle, whirred over pristine asphalt. A smooth Max had forgotten. First-world smooth. Watching the emerald wall blur by, he felt sleepy, and wished the trip would last. What luxury, he mused, to experience nature without touching it. When the bus pulled over before a wide lawn dotted with pup tents and *palapas*, he remained after everyone else had exited.

“Last stop,” the driver said in English. Wearily, Max hefted his pack and hopped onto the close-cropped grass. He passed through the campground to an open structure of palm logs and thatch, the office, where he learned that he could camp under a *palapa* for forty quetzals per night, and enter the park for fifty more, per day. The ranger suggested it took three days to tour Tikal. He’d felt gouged by his hotel room in Flores at twenty quetzales, and now understood he’d stumbled upon Guatemala’s Disneyland.

He chuckled bitterly at himself when he reflected that he’d come, allegedly, because of Gabriela, the lost love he’d hardly ever known. Had he considered he’d find her in the ruins? Not likely, and he simply couldn’t make himself shell out the
money. He thanked the ranger and wandered away, backtracking toward Flores until he arrived at a small restaurant called Café Jaguar located beside the road between a travel agency and a store that sold camping gear. The restaurant was sparsely occupied. *Tipica* blankets decorated the plaster walls, along with travel posters of Guatemala’s prime tourist spots. When he sat a waiter dressed in something that resembled a karate uniform handed him a lacquered menu. Prices were high and the dishes had English names: Temple of the Sun, Plaza of the Jaguar, Palace of the Bat. The food consisted of the same old beans, rice and meat though. Max ordered beans and rice.

“Only?” the boy asked, pointing out with his index finger that no such meal existed on the page. Max insisted, and the food arrived a minute later. The beans and rice formed pyramids and an empty space marked the spot on the plate where a meat should have gone.

“Nice dish,” a man commented in English from a nearby table.

“Ancient Mayan temples of beans and rice,” Max replied. “They symbolize something.”

“I just came across from Belize, and I was expecting a wild place, but not this. Tacky as hell, and I love it.” He had a wide, dark-stubbled jaw and a yellow bandana wrapped over his head, partially confining black spikes of hair. In former days Max would have thought of him as Mexican.

“I just came from the south,” Max said. “The rest of the country is different.”

“How so?”

“Proud traditions?” Max’s companion suggested. He sat alone before a cleaned plate and an empty Coke bottle with a straw protruding from the mouth. A mud-spattered backpack reposed in the chair to the side.

“That’s right,” Max said, and destroyed his temples, mashed the beans and rice together, then shook on a thin orange sauce from a bottle.

“Careful with that stuff. It’s Belize’s national salsa. Habaneros. Really hot.”

Max shoved a forkful into his mouth. A steadily increasing burn ignited a desire for beer. He resisted. It wasn’t yet ten in the morning, and he still felt shaky from the binge. Binge? he wondered. He’d never used that word to describe his own drinking before.

After Max had eaten, the fellow traveler asked if he planned to visit the ruins.

“I came all this way, so I guess I should,” Max replied. “I’m sure it’s magnificent, but the price…”

“I was thinking the same thing.” He joined Max, glancing over his shoulder at four German tourists across the room, and the waiter standing by. “What do you think about, you know, breaking and entering? Visiting the sites sans payment?”

Max agreed without hesitation. The traveler, who introduced himself as Tommy from Manhattan, retrieved a guidebook from his pack and consulted it with Max. As Tommy flipped the pages, Max offered his name and that he’d recently lived in San Francisco; then, ashamed, he admitted that he was originally from Hesperia, in
San Bernardino County. “Never heard of it,” Tommy said. “I’m originally from Long Island. Hate that place. But hey,” he pointed to a small map of the ruins, “here’s the entrance, and here’s the station where they take your money. This is the point to be avoided,” he concluded. “After that it’s smooth sailing.”

They strapped on their packs and ventured forth. “We’ll need a diversion,” Tommy said, as they walked.

“Yes,” Max said. “A smoke screen. Do you have any bombs?”

“Or no. This is better. We impersonate Park Rangers and stroll right in. All we need are uniforms.”

“Okay. How about this. We catch one of those spider monkeys, a baby one, and raise it up like a child. Then we’ll train it to attack rangers on sight. While it wreaks havoc in the station we slip by.” Max hadn’t engaged in this sort of banter since Caruthers, and that had been different, tenser, less equal, more drunk.

“Or we could go in there,” Tommy said, pointing to a thin stream of water dripping from a v-shaped concrete drainage ditch that cut directly into the jungle.

“I believe,” Max said, “you’ve hit on something.”

With so many thoughts in his head, Caruthers resorted to purchasing paper and pens, to put them all down, freeze them long enough for him to assert some order over his
spinning mind. The libraria, a dingy room of whitewashed cinderblocks, displayed its wares behind a counter manned by a dour matron hidden behind mirrored sunglasses. Caruthers had never entered this place before. He pointed to a child’s notebook featuring fluffy bears romping through a landscape blooming fat red hearts. The pages were so sparse he bought four of the books. “Pluma,” he said, miming the act of writing. The woman found a black Papermate and added it to his bounty. Caruthers understood then he’d be writing a letter, and so bought a small envelope. He bought three more for good measure. Thought harder about his project and bought more small envelopes and a couple of large manila models for good measure.

The thoughts increased their furious clamoring as he made his way toward his apartment. One subject stepped from the crowd for a moment: birth control. Kids were the problem, he’d decided, kids having kids. Those few souls smart enough to handle bringing humans into this fallen world seemed to elect not to. The rest, well, they smashed loins as happy as pigs in shit, and raised the fruit of such union with about as much wisdom with which they’d embarked upon the enterprise. The point, for Caruthers, led to the young girl, Sarah. She was a lover, Caruthers would guess, and those holy parents of hers would hide the fact that civilization had invented little rubber sheaths and technology still more advanced to allow the glands their pleasure without disastrous responsibilities ensuing. Caruthers imagined her pregnant at sixteen, and the image angered him. She didn’t deserve such a life just because her parents had gone insane.
He waved to passing Frank and climbed his steps. Inside, he dropped his new purchases on the table and served himself a beer. The thoughts had not let up, and now began to form a plan of sorts. He’d have to exert some influence on the girl. The older one would be okay. She seemed to take to her parents’ vision of the universe. But the young one frankly needed remediation.

He sat and opened one of the booklets. He removed the cap from the pen. He drank from his beer. The can sweat a pool onto the table, so he fetched a towel from the kitchen. He didn’t want to smudge the letter.

He’d have to do some fancy talking, he realized at this point, put some time into the project, probably even let on to cut back on the drinking if they’d ever trust him enough to be alone with the girls. If he made it through the next few weeks, he’d have a good year and a half before the Christians left. Who knows? He might just pull it off. Now he only needed to write a sappy letter, get the kid and the wife buttered up. He’d start with the standard apology.

He upended his beer and finished it in three long gulps. His eyes watered and a belch burned through his throat. He picked up the pen and wrote, “Dear Son,” then stood so quickly he knocked the chair to the floor. His hands shook too wildly to write just then. He gulped air to calm down and began to pace before the window with quick strides, picking up speed as words shot through his mind like a meteor shower, each cluster flaring for a moment and burning out to make room for the next. I remember the day you were born, he thought, and then remembered just that, the anxious hospital waiting room, when smoking still ruled America. The shower of
words slowed until only a few vagrant phrases flashed and died and finally they left him with wordless memories and a sense of yearning deep as cello notes. He breathed, clenched his hands to each other and sat. He read the two words he'd written, “Dear Son.” He took up the pen, and rested the point on the next line down. “Sorry,” he wrote, and added a period. He breathed in deeply. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, and then wrote without stopping until he ran out of words.

Tommy and Max penetrated into the jungle along the drainage ditch passageway. The vegetation rustled around them with life. On two occasions, the branches overhead shook as troupes of monkeys passed. Calls, clicks and whistles rang from all sides and soon faded into white noise. Insects tiny as gnats and large as parakeets scurried and whirred around them.

“Watch out for the two-meter snake,” Tommy said. He led and Max followed close behind. The ditch was narrow and V-shaped, causing them to swing their weight back and forth to keep from slipping on the angled concrete.

“Haven’t heard of that.”

“If it bites you you’ll make it two meters before you’re dead.”

Max regarded a gray stick lying across the concrete with interest.

“They say it’s no joke. The most poisonous snake in the world or something.”
Max had no difficulty believing this. He felt certain any number of forces in this jungle could strike him dead at any moment.

The ditch intersected a legitimate path, ten yards wide, built for visitors. Max and Tommy hung back, hidden, until a small group of middle-aged tourists with British accents passed by.

"Should we join the pack or stay underground?" Tommy asked.

"Metaphorically speaking that is."

"I want to know where this ditch goes."

They crossed the walkway, hunkered like burglars, and continued into the jungle. After a time, the ditch split into a fork. One way looked as good as the other. For all its remarkable diversity, the jungle seemed made of largely the same stuff. They took the passage on the left. Max had taken the lead.

Max froze when a figure, dreamlike, materialized thirty yards ahead, a small man with Mayan features wearing cut off pants and a tee shirt. Max shot his hand back to stay Tommy. The man vanished.

"Did you see that?" Tommy asked.

"I must have, if you saw it too."

Tommy held Max’s pack for balance. "So," he said, "someone just appeared and disappeared before our eyes?"

"Yes. Unless we just shared a hallucination."

Before Max could continued to doubt his eyes, the figure, a boy of perhaps twelve, barefoot and long haired, slipped out of the jungle wall into the ditch, leaned
back and hurled an orange blur toward Max and Tommy. Max dodged to the side, lost
his balance because of the weight of the pack and toppled onto his hip. “I’m hit,”
Tommy shouted. Others joined the first attacker and more orange missiles flew. Max
rolled and climbed to his feet. He felt a sharp sting on his hamstring, followed by a
burning sensation. He ran after Tommy. One of the balls that had missed them settled
into the center of the ditch, the color of street cones and covered in pale yellow
spikes. Organic material, a fruit or heavy spoor of some kind. Max hustled on and felt
his pack absorb another hit. A pointy fruit glanced off his calf, and one more
connected directly with his left tricep. By the time they’d reached the tourist path the
attacks had ceased, the attackers vanished. Max shed his pack and sat beside it in the
center of the path. “Jesus,” Tommy said between breaths. He pulled up his shirt and
revealed a pink mark dotted with red punctures. “Some of those spines broke off in me.”

Tommy picked at his wound while Max examined his own. After a minute,
Max suggested they find a better place to tend to themselves, so they shouldered their
loads and moved in the direction the British tourists had gone. Max’s triceps began to
burn, while his hamstring itched. They followed a tributary path under some low
hanging foliage and came upon what must have been a minor ruin, a stone structure
thirty feet high and half-reclaimed by the jungle. They accessed this building through
a tear-shaped tunnel, a few dozen feet long and angled at the center. They emerged
into a courtyard, enclosed by the jungle on two sides, and the two-story, L-shaped
building on the other. The first floor consisted of four stone cells, while the top floor’s
roof had long ago decayed, leaving it open to the sky. They climbed to one of the upper chambers, a private feeling place, yet airy and bright. Tommy retrieved a Swiss Army knife from his pack. “Finally,” he said, “I get to use these damn tweezers.”

Max peeled his sleeve up to get at his wound. “What if these spikes are poisoned?” Tommy asked.

In the still, heavy air, the mosquitoes gnawed. Max doused himself with spray. The chemical scent bothered his eyes and nose. “I think your imagination is getting away from you,” Max said.

“Imagination? Those kids hopped out of the jungle and pelted us with pointy fruit. Who needs imagination in such a place.” Max removed his dungarees to get at his leg. He felt vulnerable in his boxers, and sprayed on more repellant. He tried to pull out the spines with his own army knife tweezers, but couldn’t get at them.

“These things burn,” he said, “but I doubt they’re poisoned.” Max rolled over and Tommy plucked the remaining slivers from his leg.

“Those little bastards,” he said. They each doused their wounds with drinking water and applied antibiotic ointment. When satisfied with the first aid, they sat for a long time, marveling silently or through speech at the singular strangeness of what had just befallen them. Eventually, though, they needed to continue their day, and so decided to hide their packs and tour the park like paying visitors. Max transferred some essentials from his backpack to his day pack to get through the day.

They climbed pyramid after pyramid. The view was nothing less than awesome, an expanse as vast as any ocean, with the skyscraper temples rising from
the green. They climbed a steep ruin called simply Temple IV, an odd-shaped hunk of stone, vertical, and accessible only by a steel ladder that had been secured into the rock. They stood upon the ledge along with about thirty other visitors. Above them the temple rose thirty feet more, hundreds of tons of purely decorative stone. Looking out at the sea of canopy interrupted by the other major temples poking through like great stony islands, Tommy called the place the Manhattan of the Mayan Empire. Max reminded him that Manhattan would actually be the Tikal of America.

Bored with the cramped space, Max poked around and discovered a narrow ledge leading toward the rear of the temple. He stepped onto it and moved forward. Tommy followed behind, and Max felt penned in, but continued moving to stave off the panic. The ledge ended in a seventy foot drop to dusty shale and a few exposed boulders. "Shit," Tommy whispered. Max decided he felt fine as long as his legs kept moving, and surely the ledge would circle the temple and lead back to the platform.

At the corner the ledge continued to the right. Someone else had followed Tommy, forming a short train. The ledge again angled ninety degrees to the right, into an alcove cut in the back of the temple. He came up short, when he discovered a woman wearing a red bandana over her head sitting with her back to the stone and blocking the way. She cradled a heavy camera in her lap. Tommy’s hand touched Max’s back and Max felt the world reel. The woman, heavy in the face and apparently comfortable on the edge of doom, lifted the complicated-looking camera, aimed it at Max. She clicked pictures, and the camera’s automatic winding mechanism mimicked the rhythm of a machinegun. Max turned, pressed his back to the rough-carved stone.
It occurred to him—as a cold breeze froze the sweat over his skin—that the photographer was prepared to witness, and capture, his demise. He grew frightened, not only of falling, but of her. Eyes closed, he couldn’t help but see her face, the black eyes set into doughy skin, the tapestry-patterned skirt bunched around her thighs, the sandals dangling casually over the edge. “Back,” he said, his voice high, hysterical.

Tommy turned awkwardly, and a long pause ensued in which Max leaned against the stone wall, certain it nudged him subtly but inexorably toward ruin. He grew to understand that the temple didn’t so much push him as something inside himself, a terrifying force urging him to realize the unimaginable, his own death. The clicking of the camera paused, surely waiting for the next stage.

Tommy moved, and Max’s reeling head cleared enough to step, step, step. He turned the first corner and recalled how the loops of his laces tended to catch on the opposite boot’s hooks, causing him to stumble. How easily, he thought, how simply and pointlessly, he could be forever erased from the earth.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Tommy said when they finally gained the main platform. “I thought if I didn’t fall I’d die of a heart attack.” The icy aftermath of the recent terror kept Max from putting to words the experience. He felt numb, and still very much afraid of what he’d seen and what he’d felt on the ledge.

Late in the afternoon they returned to their home temple, and, after scouring the edge of the jungle where they’d hidden their packs, tearing more and more hopelessly at the leaves and vines, they admitted they’d been robbed. “No,” Tommy
said, holding his head. “I refuse to accept this.” Max stared in silence at the darkening green wall before him.

“The priests,” he mumbled nonsensically, thinking vaguely of those human sacrificers of old, on whose buildings they’d been climbing.

“Those kids who pegged us. That’s who did it,” Tommy said, gripping a length of vine in both hands. “I bet they followed us here.” He yanked on the vine, but as hard as he tried he could in no way disturb the jungle. He gave up and resorted to throwing a stone into its midst.

Max, mesmerized by all the vegetation, shook his head to clear his vision and thoughts. “The kids?”

“Yeah man. Those sneaky assholes tailed us. Those fruit throwers.”

They’d been stupid to leave their bags, Max knew. Too stupid. He wondered if he’d wanted to lose his possessions. “Let’s pay them a visit. We know where they live.”

Tommy froze. “Oh, wow. Wow. I don’t know.”

Max felt calm, now that he’d made a decision. “I’m going,” he told Tommy.

“What are you going to do when you find them? They’ll throw that fruit at you again.”

“I’ll go in the dark. They won’t see me coming.”

“In the dark? There’s jaguars and whatnot out there. And what are you going to do when you catch them?”
“Don’t know. I need my pack. Don’t you?” Max climbed their private temple, where he waited for the sun to set. Mosquitoes ignored the repellent to get at his arms and neck.

Tommy joined him. They sat in silence for a few minutes. “Okay,” Tommy said. “I’ll go with you. We still have our pocket knives. Maybe we can stab them if they get tough.”

“Maybe,” Max said.

“Shit, I was just kidding.”

They didn’t see the sun set through the canopy, but when the small patch of sky above turned blue-black, they descended and traversed the tear-shaped tunnel out into the world. Max walked with short steps, brushing the air before him with his hands so he wouldn’t collide with the jungle. “We need flashlights,” Tommy said, holding the back of Max’s shirt.

“They’re in the packs.”

The concrete of the ditch reflected light from somewhere, stars probably. They moved through the creaking sound of insects. Mosquitoes hovered about and brushed Max’s face, dove at his ears. Finally a small glow appeared in the leaves ahead, winked off and reappeared. Voices came through the general jungle hum, and the light, jumping around, revealed itself as a couple of flashlight beams. Tommy gripped Max’s shoulder. Max turned but couldn’t see Tommy’s face in the dark. He remembered it though, Tommy’s broad Mayan nose, low forehead. Tommy had returned to his people, it seemed to Max then.
He left Tommy’s grip and found with his boots a narrow trail of soft dirt leading away from the ditch. With timid steps, he approached the edge of the camp. Four young people scampered about in the light of two flashlights. Three candles flickered on a flat rock in the center of the clearing. His and Tommy’s packs lay open on the ground like gutted animals. A small child, the youngest of the four, picked through the contents of a plastic zip storage bag from Max’s pack. She removed a spool of twine that Max had sometimes used to hang wet laundry. He inhaled, exhaled, and stepped into the light.

Tommy gasped and the child on the ground, a girl of seven or eight with bushy eyebrows and wearing adult-sized clothes, looked frozen and round eyed at Max. She dropped from her hands Max’s cheap camera and the twine. The three remaining children—boys, one around the girl’s age and the other two in their early teens—stood still as well. The moment simmered, and Max drew power from the children’s fear. “Those are ours,” he said in Spanish.

“Yours?” the larger of the teenagers asked, emphasizing the plural form Max had used. Max turned to the jungle behind him.

“Tommy?” he said, and after a free floating moment Tommy materialized. Only his yellow bandana showed clearly.

“Hi,” he said in English, and lifted his dim hand in greeting.

“Bienvenidos,” the girl replied automatically. The larger teenager, whose pimple-ravished face sympathetically pained Max, focused a flashlight beam on the girl, then swung it to Tommy, and finally Max. His posture suggested imminent
violence, and though he clearly contained more anger than Max, more pure toughness, his arms looked pathetically thin in the candlelight, and Max felt sorry for the boy.

“We need our packs,” Max said. The jungle children, clearly at a loss, turned their faces to the flashlight wielder.

“You were camping illegally,” the boy said, a brave display and perhaps one he meant to back up. Max entertained the possibility of a firearm. “Hiking out of park boundaries. This is your penalty.”

Max’s sympathy faded. He considered bringing the police into the discussion, but as soon as the thought occurred, another part of him took over, the tranquil identity that had first revealed itself when he’d originally decided to confront the jungle thieves. Magnanimous and high on just that, he decided upon an enormously appealing tactic. “Listen,” he began, the Spanish rolling easily from his tongue. “My friend, he needs his things. But I don’t care. Take my pack, everything in it. But return his. That’s all.” In his daypack Max had the indispensable materials: mosquito repellant, a bottle of water, a pocket knife, a notebook, pens, a map, a novel, passport, money, airline ticket.

The boy wore a sullen expression that Max recognized from every thirteen-year-old he’d ever known, his former self included. “Why should we give you anything?” the boy asked.

“Because,” Max said, “it is right.” In the silence another, a wiser, aspect of the child’s nature defeated the petulance. He turned to his friends and saw that it was okay.
“Yes,” he said. “Okay. But one question.” He removed something from his pocket and held it aloft. “What is this?” He shook the baggie the bus driver had given Max before the flashlight beam. “Drugs?”

“I’m not sure,” Max said. “Probably. They were a gift.”

The boy sliced the flashlight beam into the jungle and pinched a wide leaf from the green wall, spread it on the ground and kneeled. He dumped the contents of the bag onto the leaf and motioned for Max, Tommy, and the other teenager to sit. The younger ones watched from the edge of camp. The loamy soil accommodated Max’s knees. “What are we doing?” Tommy whispered.

“Taking drugs,” Max said.

“Oh.”

The boy arranged the mound of wrinkled twists into four piles, and dipped his head, his unattractive, acne-pocked face toward Max, who scooped a pile into his palm and filled his mouth. The dry, jerky-like bits inflated into a rubbery mouthful. The taste was funky, swamp mud, smelly feet, dried sex. It took some chewing to break the stuff down, but finally he swallowed the lump and followed it with water from his bottle. The boy filled his own mouth, and his cohort did the same. “What the hell,” Tommy said. “Cheers.” He raised the handful to salute the jungle and shoved the substance, mushrooms clearly, into his mouth. The boy turned his flashlight off, and after a moment the young boy, the other flashlight bearer, followed suit.
Tommy asked Max if he was to understand that he could take back his possessions. Max exchanged a look with the pimply boy, who jutted his chin toward the scattered goods and handed Tommy the flashlight.

Tommy repacked. “Well,” he said after he’d zipped up, “can we split?” Max stood and bade goodbye to the air around the camp. No one replied. He and Tommy left the way they’d come, but when they reached the ditch a sharp whistle brought them up short. The boy appeared, shining a flashlight upon himself, displaying his muscular chest, his ravaged chin. He pointed in the opposite direction Max and Tommy had come from. “This way,” he said, and smiled. His teeth were good, and he appeared as the boy he was, full of benign mischief. Without hesitation Max took his advice. He walked. After a time, stepping lightly with only his daypack to burden him, he noted that the concrete seemed to grow brighter with each stride, though the sky was as dark as ever.

“It’s not working, is it?” Cash said, cradling a cup of coffee between his legs. He sat against Marilyn’s wall, cross-legged on the floor. To say these words brought relief, a long exhalation after holding his breath. “I mean, did we ever have a chance, the way things went wrong in the first place?”
Marilyn had just unfurled the bottom sheet over the bare cot mattress. She left the lone comforter crumpled on the floor and sat on the loose sheet to offer Cash her attention. He’d been sleeping all day, and hadn’t woken until shortly after sunset.

“I bet you think you had it the worst back then, but I hated it too,” Cash told her. “I was so angry at you, so annoyed all the time, at how you took all my abuse. It made me want to torment you even more, to see how much you’d accept.” Staring at the swirling dark surface of his coffee, he detected his own image there. He looked up at Marilyn. “Isn’t that sick?” She watched him pensively, sympathetically, it seemed. “I was the asshole, but I couldn’t stop holding it against you for forcing me to act that way. And I knew all along how unfair it was, but still couldn’t stop. The funny thing is I loved you all along, but it just...I don’t know. It sounds stupid.”

“No,” Marilyn said after a pause. “Not stupid.” She’d shifted to her side, head propped in her right palm. “It’s been like that for me lately.”

“Like that?”

“No, I guess not like that so much. But irritated. Not able to decide, but knowing it was already decided.” She pushed herself into a sitting position. “Not able to tell you the decision, not able to even think about it because it was so scary to admit that the thing I’d wanted for so long is gone, forever.” She turned her eyes toward the ceiling.

Casting off the finality of that statement, Cash offered more words, trying to turn back the tide, to say what he’d needed to say all along, what he’d known but hadn’t been able to make her understand. “Marilyn, I was wrong back in Media.
That’s what I came here to tell you. Nobody ever loved me like you did. The only problem was age, now we’ve both matured. I came down here,” he considered for a moment and sipped his coffee, “and I fell in love with you all over, like a new person. What I’ve been looking for.” He put the cup on the floor and moved to Marilyn on his knees. He rested his hands on the bed to either side of her. “Is it too late?” He touched the soft denim pressed tight against her outer thighs and when he looked into her murky eyes, took in her habitual worried expression pulled taught by her ponytail, he became hard.

She smiled and rested her chin on the heel of her palm. The erotic moment passed. The answer lay sandwiched between her chin and hand, in the slight nod. “Isn’t that the fucker of it?” she asked. “I wanted it so bad. And I still want it now.” She met his gaze, smiling ruefully, devastating him with sincerity. “But it went away, and I can’t get it back.” Unsaid, he realized, was that while she had become someone new, a woman worth falling in love with, he’d remained the same, except without the band and its accoutrements to hide behind.

They stared at each other for a moment and she leaned forward quickly. They fucked on the rug, roughly. The act was simple, ecstatic to the point of pain, and short-lived. Afterward, a tender and sad friendship remained. Marilyn stood and arranged the blanket over the coarse rug. Cash rolled to his side to accommodate. They lay together, rolled in the blanket. Cobwebs laced the rafters. Marilyn’s head felt silky on Cash’s chest and shoulder. Stripped of the herbaceous scents of her old soaps and unguents, she smelled a little smoky, a hint of musk, comforting and real.
“So what are you going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You mean forever or today or tomorrow?”

“All of them, I guess, starting with now. Will you go home?”

“No.” He’d decided only then. “I think I’ll take one of those intensive Spanish courses. See where to go from there.” He rubbed the side of his face against her hair. “You got to be able to talk to people.”

Caruthers had been busy with errands all day. He’d actually created a list, a document he’d not written since he’d worked for his father. During the intervening years he’d forgotten the singular pleasure of crossing off an item. He did just that by marking through the name, “Cruz,” having successfully negotiated his payment, opting for $5,000 U.S. up front, plus the rebuilt transmission. When Cruz had asked if Caruthers planned to skip out on the job, Caruthers had reminded him that he drove a turquoise bus—not difficult to spot. Cruz had grumbled and Caruthers stood his ground. He had nothing to lose, and felt free and fearless. All the money now or no deal. Cruz had smiled finally, and opened a safe. Caruthers, standing outside the tipica shop under Cruz’s office, scratched through the name on a recently purchased notebook. Next in line was “Ick.”
With pleasure, Caruthers thought, crossing the street and entering Ick’s. As luck would have it, Ick tended bar alone this morning at nine thirty. “You’re early,” he said.

“I’m here on business, but you can certainly set me up with a beverage.” Ick complied.

“Business?” he said. “This ought to be interesting.” Caruthers drank, the first beer of the day, refreshing and full of hope.

“I’ll get to the point. I can trust you, Ick, and I’m going to have to lean on that trust.” Ick pulled a stool from under the bar and sat to face Caruthers eye to eye. He was a long necked man, with a prominent Adam’s apple. Caruthers hadn’t looked into his eyes in years, maybe never. They were curiously yellow, diabolical, but Caruthers knew him to be a decent man in spite of this signal. “I overheard you mention one day something about your Belizian bank account.”

“I ain’t going to loan you any money.”

“No, no. Calm yourself. I want to start a fund. Just a few bucks really, something no one can get at for fifteen years or so. One of those growth investments. A college fund you might call it.”

“Well, that’s not a problem. All you got to do is make a call, set up an appointment.”

“I don’t have time, Ick. I’ve got an errand to run out of country, and I need to get things squared away.” Ick watched Caruthers with slit eyes, skeptically waiting for his next trick. “I’ll compensate your time and effort, of course.” Ick didn’t speak, so
Caruthers explained the details. Next time Ick visited Belize he would open two long term funds in the name of the girls, two grand each. Caruthers handed Ick a manila envelope containing the money and the pertinent information. Apart from the girls’ money, Caruthers explained, was a separate envelope for Ick containing $500, payment for executing the deal.

“That’s pretty generous,” Ick said.

“The job will be a hassle,” Caruthers said, and hoped he wasn’t right. Inside the envelope he’d written detailed instructions for how to proceed.

“You planning on splitting for good?” Ick asked, as if reading Caruthers’ thoughts.

“Not sure. Thought I might try Costa Rica. How about Nicaragua? You know they have fresh water sharks in that lake?”

“That a selling point for you?”

Caruthers finished his beer, removed a tightly folded hundred dollar bill from his wallet and placed it under the bottle. “What do I care? I don’t swim?” He stood and bade farewell to his friend.

“What’s this for?” Ick asked.

“A tip,” Caruthers told him. “You’ve been a good bartender.”

Outside, he struck another line from his list. Next he had Seba to deal with. And after that, the night was his.
Max’s boots gripped the angled concrete, step after step. Those rubber soles really held onto the surface, that smooth, hard surface. He felt the texture of the ground up his legs, all the way into his sinuses. Porous and receptive to the booted foot, the skilled leg, the mind that controlled it all. What had he been thinking about? The boot strings, what were they called, laces, hung in hoops, swinging against the boot sides. The shape of the ditch forced him to walk with his legs apart, so there was no danger of catching a hook, tumbling forward, but the flaw of the boots sat there, waiting to send him sprawling, a patient little trap. Max decided to tuck the loops into the tops of his boots as soon as they got somewhere. He considered his own death, imagined stumbling over his laces on that temple, plummeting over the edge. A chill shriveled the top of his head. Hooks, he thought, loops. Loose boots. The mushrooms were really kicking in.

“Shoots, fruits, toots, loots,” Tommy chanted behind. Or had Max read Tommy’s thoughts, or projected his own thoughts into Tommy’s mind? He couldn’t know just then, the way thoughts seemed so real, so textured and of the world. He feared asking and learning the truth.

A dull glow marked the end of their tunnel through the jungle. Max traversed this portal and beheld a vision that just about dropped him to his knees. A massive pyramid stood in the center of a wide, neat lawn; waves of bone-white light shimmered from its surface, splashed into the surrounding dark, not as a flashlight
beam but like an x-ray, cutting through the trees and the milky sky both. He looked at his own arm, white and translucent. He saw through it to the ground at his feet. The insects had quit their jungle noise. He hadn’t been molested by a mosquito since they’d begun this latest foray. “I feel like a turtle,” Tommy said.

Max considered Tommy’s statement, but let it go before all creation became infused with a turtle quality. He walked to the terraced pyramid and placed his hands on the stone. It gave off warmth, like a body. He hopped onto the bottom level and climbed. Soon he reached the summit, a fifteen by fifteen foot square, perfectly level with the top of the forest canopy. The moon, giant and orange, set on the dark plane like a huge marble, igniting the temples that rose above the forest with pale light. From this vantage point the world—consisting of moon, several protruding edifices, and himself, standing on an endless leafy plane—appeared as a monstrous board game. Max shivered at the terrible order of the vision.

“This pack,” Tommy said, clambering up the final step. “I feel like a snail.” He shucked the pack and sat beside Max, legs dangling over the edge, watching the moon rise and pool its light on the sea of dark growth below. Max became aware that he was on drugs, but that knowledge changed nothing. “Whew,” Tommy said now and then. The moon had risen high, and their shadows crumpled around them like robes dropped from their shoulders. They’d either been speaking of the ghosts of all the sacrificed humans around this graveyard of a city, or they’d been thinking it. A grumbling sound emanated from the jungle and a dark object soon revealed itself as a pickup truck emerged from the dark tangles and parked in the clearing below the
temple. Max felt he'd been expecting the truck, but then reasoned the clairvoyant sensation was probably an effect of the drug. Still, he experienced no surprise, seemed beyond such a response. The truck shivered and became silent. "You see that?"

Tommy asked.

Max turned to him and really looked at his face, for the first time since they'd met. His skin had a polished quality, greenish in the moonlight, and his heavy brow, thick lips, chin and nose, resulted in a handsome, primitive face. "Yes," Max said.

Another truck joined the first. They were compact pickups, maybe a decade old, with high suspensions and large tires. Two figures toting small backpacks appeared on foot. One of them carried a long, staff-like apparatus, and the other swung his empty hands as he strode. They approached one of the trucks and seemed to speak with those inside. They stepped away from the trucks and regarded Max and Tommy. Tommy lifted his arm to them and they waved back. Another figure arrived on foot, and then another, and soon a dozen bodies meandered about, loading bags into the truck beds and chatting softly. "We'd better go down there," Max said.

"Yes," Tommy agreed, sadly. "I suppose we have to." Standing changed everything. And then each step changed it again, so Max abandoned his attention to the changes and concentrated on getting down the pyramid. At the base, the grassy dirt felt spongy, but each step closer to the trucks frightened him more. Things would be required of Max when he arrived at the midnight party, things Max wasn't sure he'd be prepared to deal with—speaking mainly. "This pack," whispered Tommy, "it's like—"
"I know. Please don’t say it anymore."

“How are you guys doing, huh?” a man holding a camera asked when they’d approached. Max admired his loud, confident voice and wondered if he himself would sound like that were he to speak. He opened his mouth but no words came to his lips.

“Who you fellows with?” The man asked questions with an accent that Max soon identified as Australian. It became imperative that Max invent the correct answer to the man’s question, yet all he could do was tumble words around in his head. Then something alarming began to happen. Submerged laughter, giggles like rodents scrambled to get out of his chest and belly. He clamped his hand over his mouth and nose. The muscles of his cheek bunched. “Ah, you speak English? Ingles?”

“Si,” Tommy unaccountably answered.

Max spun and stared at the temple. His body spasmed and a strange squeaking sound escaped from his throat. “Is he alright?” the Australian asked.

“Hmm,” Tommy said, apparently mulling. “Yes. I think so.”

The fit passed and, concentrating on the temple, Max’s face relaxed. He breathed out and realized he’d been holding his breath for as long as he could recall.

“I hope so,” the Australian said.

“Okay,” Max said to himself. “Okay.” He joined the group, repeating “okay” to himself quietly. The others climbed into the truck beds. Max and Tommy did the same for it seemed inconceivable not to. They sat together against the passenger side rail by the wheel well. The truck started and followed its twin into the jungle. They drove only with parking lights, and their enclosed passage through the pulsing jungle
appeared to Max a vein running through The Everything. Max enjoyed being taken somewhere, to be out of control of his destination.

"Man, what a sense of drama these guys have, huh? Midnight, full moon, Mayan temple. Showmanship, you know?" the Australian said. He was tall, with predictable good looks except his eyes seemed filmed over and unhealthy. Max stared up at the forest ceiling, at the flickers of moonlight that managed to drop through. "On the other hand, it's kind of spooky. They could do anything with us, take us hostage, or to make a point or something. Have you thought of that?"

"Well," Tommy said, "I'm kind of going through a personal thing right now."

The man snorted. "You really can talk, huh?" Tommy agreed that he could, but Max no longer listened. He'd learned that if he concentrated he could nullify the bumps in the road by breathing to the rhythm of the truck traveling over the surface of the earth. By the time they stopped he'd reached a state where his body moved like water. He opened his eyes. A man in fatigues stood at a barbed wire gate, talking to the driver. He shined a flashlight over Max and the others in the back. He peeled back the wire and the truck drove in toward a cluster of tents and lights.

The trucks parked and everyone climbed out. Serious, silent boys resting their hands on machine guns slung over their shoulders showed the gringos to a rectangle of folding wooden chairs. Some passengers unpacked camera and recording equipment: tripods, flashes, still cameras and video; pens and pads of paper, tape recorders and laptop computers. Tommy rummaged through his pack and found his own camera, offering Max a smirk expressing comradeship and sneakery. Max took a
seat and readied pen and notebook from his day bag. Soon the rustling quieted and all faced a wooden podium fronting a high fence of razor wire.

Several men wearing scary black hoods, some in military dress, others in traditional Mayan gear, appeared and stood hip to hip behind the podium. Camera flashes exploded, creating a strobe effect. Barefaced soldiers clustered behind the masked leaders, several rows deep. Max stood. Gabriela—her face lean and more attractive than ever under a flat topped ball cap, a bushel of ponytail peeking plume-like from behind her ear—stood among their ranks; he stared and swore it was her. Her gaze, glistening, black, slid across his face with no sign of recognition. Max noted that he alone stood among the gringos, and so he sank down, embarrassed, confused. No, he thought. It must be her. She'd covered the moment of identification, cleverly, and for obvious purpose. And proving the point moreover, she'd slipped behind another soldier, out of Max's sight. Max began to envision their meeting after whatever speeches were to ensue.

A hooded woman in traje took the stage. She spoke a Mayan dialect, and a young, male assistant wearing civilian clothes translated into Spanish and then English. Her subject was land rights, how the Maya's traditional lands were taken by the invading ladino government and given to corporations, who profited by using the Maya for, essentially, slave labor. Furthermore, the government provided no housing, no schools, no hospitals, no drinking water. Her complaints and demands seemed reasonable, too reasonable somehow. Max began to lose the thread of her protests, and instead imagined meeting Gabriela, a close dark tent smelling of must and jungle.
She would invite him to join the rebellion, and he would agree. They’d make love in hammocks between bouts of righteous violence.

A man wearing a traditional wool wrap around his hips and a military coat next commanded the podium. Grim stories emerged gradually through the languages. His speech ruined Max’s fantasy. He listened to these stories of the disappeared against his will. He found no justice, simply indifferent evil. The stories repeated themselves like a dirge: abduction, torture, mutilation; secrets pried from ruined bodies and minds; death, by neglect, loss of blood, lack of water, perhaps a slit throat or bullet in the head; the remains discarded in plain sight or hidden away never to be found. The speaker produced a piece of paper, a letter, he explained, written by an innocent man under torture and smuggled to the prisoner’s wife. “I am on the brink of life and death because they accuse me of being a guerilla. I am not the first or the last such case in the world; after a while you come to realize anything can happen. I am very sad because I only think of death, and the mother I will never hug again. A kiss for them all. Please face life like a real woman. You are not the first woman in the world to become a widow. Goodbye forever.” The speaker dropped to his side the hand that held the letter.

“Americans,” he entreated, “write this story, educate your people that your government keeps these murderers in power. All they have are guns and money, while we have the hearts of the people. They can never win, which is why they are so vicious.”
Max had begun to come down from the drugs. He captured a glimpse of Gabriela’s ponytail plume, but her face would not reappear.

Another man, this one wearing a cap over his hood, and introduced himself as subcomandante Marcos. Max had heard of him, in the news. Compared to the other speakers, he was tall and his exposed skin pale. Bright green eyes shined through the uneven light under his cap bill. He explained that he was a sub-comandante because he was not indigenous, and therefore would never be a comandante. His words did not come from him, or represent him. His mouth and mind served only the Zapatista Liberation Army. Max couldn’t help judging this one as less sincere than his cohorts. No one should have to struggle so hard to be humble, Max decided.

Marcos unfolded a parable he called the story of questions, in which Marcos himself met a man called Old Anselmo. Marcos and the old man danced around the issue of what they were both doing out in the mountains until Marcos admitted he was a representative of Zapata. When the old man showed no reaction, Marcos told him several tales of the hero. When Marcos had satisfied his need to talk, Anselmo set him straight. The old man personally knew this Zapata. In actuality, Zapata was two men joined together—one man in the day, another in the night. Half despair was Zapata, half hope. The tale ended without an end, and Marcos apologized for just that, but added that their own tale had no end either.

Marcos asked if the reporters had questions. Gabriela had not reemerged. Max began to crash, and wondered when he’d find a bed. His chin dipped to his chest and he sprang back to consciousness with a jerk. “Did the ZLA justify the taking of lives
to achieve their goals?” someone asked. Gabriela stepped into view. Max, sober now, recognized her with no doubt.

“No. The Movement has the will of the people. We wage war against the corrupt capitalist state by broadcasting the truth to the people of the world. We show how U.S. policies hurt the indigenous and non-indigenous alike. You, the journalists, must take this message to the people of your countries.”

Reporters asked further questions, but Max didn’t hear anymore. He’d dropped into a dream state of sounds and blurred vision. Remaining awake occupied all this force. Finally, Marcos bid the reporters farewell. Max harnessed his energy and stood, moved toward the podium to find Gabriela. Marcos turned and fixed his light eyes on Max. Movement danced around Max’s peripheral vision and the earth shifted abruptly ninety degrees. The ground felt so soft against his cheek he decided he’d remain. A body lay over him. He wondered if it were Gabriela, but he felt too sleepy to open his eyes and check. The body rose and tugged Max to his feet. He mumbled and resisted, but other hands clamped him. Before long, he lay again, but this time on the truck’s cold serrated bed. “You okay?” Tommy asked.

“Fine,” Max said, “but sleepy.”

“Lucky they only pushed you down,” Tommy said, and Max slept.

When he woke the sky had turned pale and the morning birds screamed and sang. He stood with Tommy and the reporters beside last night’s temple, made common by daylight. Max hiked silently along tourist paths after Tommy, out of the park to the Jaguar Café. They arrived just as the shuttle bus dropped off a small group
of early visitors. Max decided to hop on while the opportunity presented itself, before
he passed out in the street.

"Shit, man," Tommy said, as Max climbed the steps. "We'll probably never
see each other again."

Max yawned, wishing to say something to articulate and sum up his
connection to Tommy, but he had nothing. They shook hands and Max climbed into
the empty bus.

Weaving her hair into twin braids, Marilyn found occasion to notice the silence and
space of her room without Cash. In the small mirror hanging over the kitchen sink,
she watched her fingers plait the cables of hair, working as deftly as spiders,
independent of her control. With Cash gone the room felt quiet, still, peaceful, lonely
and as shabby as ever. As the date to leave Guatemala approached, Marilyn grew
increasingly impatient with the squalor of her existence. She hardly believed she’d put
up with it for so long, with so little complaint, and in fact she admired herself as she
would a separate person, a stranger whose travails she’d heard about. Yet her sense of
leaving the current self behind had come early. Marilyn would remain in country for
over two more months. Now that she’d canceled her class and ended her connection
to Cash, she required a new project, and that project, she decided, would be Laura
Trujillo. Light freckles, she noticed in the mirror, had bloomed on her nose, forehead and cheeks, a sign that the rainy season had gone for good.

She finished the braids and tied them off with thick strands of purple tipica thread. She wore a tipica skirt, a red tee shirt and sandals. Even after all these months living with the Quiche, Marilyn didn’t know if they appreciated visitors adopting their clothes or not. The textile vendors certainly didn’t appear to mind selling their wares to gringos.

Marilyn happily left her shack for the beautiful morning outside. The sky was blue and cloudless, the air pine scented and cool enough to pucker her skin. She crossed the street and walked toward Caminos until she found the path that Laura appeared from and disappeared into. Twin pines stood like a ceremonial gate at the foot of the path, which rose into the forested hills. Marilyn climbed, hoping the way would be clear. She could imagine getting lost, mere days after Cash’s ordeal.

She hiked, upward for a half an hour before the path crested the hill and began to dip. Purple and blue flowers, low and bell shaped, carpeted occasional grassy meadows open to the sunlight. She resisted the urge to lay in one of them and nap. Perhaps another day when she was free of errands. The walk was lovely, so different from her former, bare hill. Here was the path of closeness and cover. The privacy suited her present mood.

Before long Marilyn came upon the dirt road, and guessing, turned left. Just as she began to worry that perhaps she’d chosen incorrectly, a truck rumbled from behind. She stood at the edge of the road to let it pass, but was surprised when it
slowed and stopped beside her. The driver leaned over and threw the passenger door open. “Hello,” the driver said, and offered her a ride. Marilyn recognized him as Esteban, the young villager who’d freed Cash. She climbed into the cab, experiencing a moment of shame upon recalling Beto, the young horseback rider from Todos Santos.

She slid onto the ripped bench and slammed the door shut. Esteban made no move to drive on, but sat gazing at her. Exactly four curling hairs grew from his rounded chin. Marilyn grew nervous and fidgeted with the door handle. “Look,” Esteban said, and tossed a folded newspaper onto the seat between them. Marilyn opened the paper, a *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala’s largest, mainstream press. The cover photograph featured a close up of Cash’s face contorted into a mask of terror, under which read “Baby Snatching Hysteria Continues in Western Highlands Village.” Marilyn read the first few paragraphs, enough to understand the tenor of the article. The superstitious Indians had almost killed another innocent tourist. They relied on quotes from the woman lodging the complaints about her sick son, who’d supplied them with plenty to work with by the looks of it.

“Why do those who have the least to say always talk the most?” Esteban asked, not without amusement. “Read this one,” he said, pointing to another story beginning on the bottom left hand corner of the page, over a small photograph of Laura Trujillo, posing sternly in the grainy photographic night. “Quick Thinking Girl Saves Tourist’s Life,” the headline read. A sickeningly cute and patronizing profile on
Laura followed. Even so, Marilyn assumed the girl would be pleased with her notoriety. “Did you see the television news?” Esteban asked.

“I don’t have a television,” Marilyn said. “And I didn’t want to see it anyway.” Esteban fiddled with the gear shifter.

“I’ll read the story about Laura to the village,” he said. “They’ll laugh.” He put the truck in gear and eased forward carefully, to offer his passenger a smooth ride, Marilyn assumed. “Why do you visit?” he asked. Marilyn explained to him that she’d formerly taught Laura, and now that her entire class had fallen apart, she wanted to offer one on one tutoring for the next two months. She would even make the trip to Buexon once a day. “Interesting,” Esteban said, as the village came into view, transformed by the daylight into a harmless collection of the primitive huts, each puffing an attractive line of smoke from its shiny steel chimney. “We can join forces,” he continued.

As they pulled into the village, a dozen people gathered around the truck. “I have a plan,” Esteban told her before opening the door. “Talk to me after I read the stories.” Marilyn left the truck, smiling at the assemblage’s confusion. “Hola,” she said to the general public.

“Buenas días,” the woman who’d been feeding the chickens replied. The chickens themselves hadn’t reacted to the excitement, and continued to pick and scratch a few meters away. The rooster jogged down to chase a hen, just to show her who’s in charge, before climbing to his perch atop a small knoll to watch his domain.
Max opened his eyes. A face stared down into his. Max closed his eyes against the vision, willed it away, but hands interrupted, shook him until he climbed to his feet. At the bus’ doorway, he understood he’d slept through the fifteen minute ride from Tikal to Flores. “Good luck,” the driver called, and left Max outside in sunshine that assaulted his eyes and caused his head to throb. All around him people moved up and down the sidewalk. Buses and trucks sped by, creating noise and dust. He yawned and slapped his face. Standing on a street corner in a dream city, he could not wake up.

He walked forward, just able to take one step, then another. He found himself moving toward music, a deep thumping, primitive sound beating somewhere in the heart of the city. He dragged his feet over buckled concrete, deeper into the noise that covered all the other noises, the shouts of children, the cries of ravens, bad mufflers, a siren. After some time a sign appeared down a side road announcing the existence of a hotel. Each step brought him deeper into the sound. He managed to climb a short flight of steps onto a porch, gathered his energy while holding the paint-flecked rail, and pushed through the door. The thumping vibrated the walls and floor, his teeth. He paid the woman at the desk for one night. “Are you sure,” she asked. “Only one night?” He nodded his head, too sleepy to make words. Something in her expression bothered him, beyond her owlish eyes behind the thick glasses, beyond the fierce under bite that displayed crooked bottom teeth seemingly embedded in her bottom lip.
He couldn't worry about her now. His head felt as if packed with wet concrete; thoughts, fears, everything mired down. The woman handed him a key attached to a wooden disk marked with the number ten. He propelled himself up the listing stairs by pulling the loose rail. At the top he opened his door, closed it behind him, dropped his pack on the splintered wooden floor, and fell onto the bed.

Closing his eyes did not greatly alter his perception of the world. He remained in the same dream of inescapable music. Time no longer seemed consistent or relevant. He was in the room with himself, staring through his eyelids at the stained ceiling, or down at himself lying broken on the wide mattress; he ventured out into the streets, into the past, wandered halls and rooms of former and future buildings; he didn't exist at all except as a perceiver of the music pounding away in a void. He sat up, having gained some form of wakefulness. His mouth felt dry, rank with paste. He ached at the neck and back, shoulders. Everywhere. He located his water bottle and drank it dry. He stood and had to catch himself against the wall. Partly walking and partly leaning, he moved into the hall and found the bathroom, where he emptied his insides of stinging liquid.

The music played on. But the water and bowel movement had revived him, and full of ambition, he set out to locate a new hotel tomorrow. He had to escape the noise, which had seeped into his joints and seemed to be the cause of his aches. He passed the owl-eyed woman, who watched him pass with the same pestering interest as earlier. He'd seen the look before, he thought, determined now to move to a new
hotel and sacrifice the money he'd already paid. But where had he seen it? He couldn’t manage to think anything through.

Outside, he saw a store a half a block away and walked in that direction. The morning sun hadn’t moved from its spot above the horizon, resting on the tops of the surrounding buildings. By the time he reached the store and bought water he abandoned his plan to find a new hotel. He wasn’t sure he would make it back to the old one. With effort and frequent pauses, he managed.

“Hey,” the woman at the desk cried out as he passed. “Are you going to stay another night?”

Max froze at the bottom of the stairs and turned to her. The tilt of her head—he had it—she reminded him of a preying mantis he’d seen on a television program once. A coldly curious glance. “I already paid,” he informed her, as if she hadn’t just received his money minutes before.

She pointed at a sign above her head that said checkout time was 10 AM. Next to the sign hung a large clock, but Max found himself unable to translate the relationship between the hands and the numbers they pointed to. At a loss, frightened now in his confusion, he asked if it were tomorrow.

“It is today,” she replied. He could find no way to refute this, so ambled with difficulty to her desk and gave her money from his pocket. “Only one more?” she asked. “Not a week?”

“Only one,” he said, angry that she seemed to be insinuating something he couldn’t understand. “I leave tomorrow.” She looked at him as if he repulsed her, and
fascinated her as well. He turned and labored up the stairs. He would sort it out after
sleep.

He did not know with any certainty the difference between waking and
sleeping. The music never paused, in either world. Only when he sat up, drank his
water, made his way to the bathroom to pass it through him, and climbed down for
more water could he truly claim consciousness, but the time lying on the bed never
offered the oblivion of sleep. The next time he ventured out for water, he dreaded
passing the front desk. The woman sat in her spot, watching. From the corner of his
eyes, he saw her raise something, a heavy camera that she pointed at him. He
stumbled out as if he'd been threatened with a gun. When he returned she did not
show the camera again, but when she requested money he paid without resistance,
keeping his eyes to the floor. After that, he offered her money each time he passed
from outside in. He no longer imagined during the brief moments of energy that he'd
move out of the pounding hotel.

Fifty miles into the trip southwest, Caruthers realized what had nagged him all
morning. He'd meant to buy a new weapon, a pistol, at least to go down guns blazing
if it came to that. Funny, he supposed, considering the firepower he had stowed up
top. Couldn't be helped now though. Guns needed delivering, to the just or unjust he
did not know. Either way, he’d accepted the charge. At least, he thought, chuckling to himself, he had his good old Baltimore Orioles souvenir bat to protect him.

Caruthers shifted into fourth with pleasure. Santa Magdalena’s new transmission hummed smoothly, and perhaps for this reason Caruthers felt as good as he had in years. The rebirth of the bus seemed to signal the hope of further regeneration. Or perhaps this journey merely reminded him of the road adventures of his youth. “How about stopping for some beer?” he asked Seba. Caruthers had brought the rum and coffee, of course, in sufficient quantity to make the seven hour trip, but beer had always been contra the reglas while working. Not today. Early in the trip, Caruthers had decided not to take any passengers. Not so much concern for their welfare as laziness. Who would stop him on such a fine Sunday, he asked the empty road. “How about we move to the coast, Seba? The mountains get too cold in the rainy season,” Caruthers said, as they descended into the muggy, lowland atmosphere. “Magdalena was made for this weather.”

They coasted the last hundred meters down the straight incline and left the foothills behind. “Cervesa,” Seba said, pointing to a bare particleboard shack announcing its wares in sun bleached letters spanning a makeshift sign propped against a stunted and brittle palm. Seba had apparently caught the mood of adventure, and stood watching the approaching world through the windshield, interested perhaps in the waving grass, the swampy scent churning about. Caruthers wondered if he had any idea what they transported, and assumed he did. Those baskets on top didn’t hold livestock, and though he played the fool, Caruthers doubted very much Seba was a
fool in fact. Caruthers stopped at the shack and slapped some quetzales into Seba’s hand. The assistant returned in a moment with a garbage-bag lined cardboard box filled with cans and jagged shards of ice.

The grassy land gave way to dunes emerging from reedy ponds of salt marsh. Occasionally they sped by waiting passengers, who waved their arms and cursed the renegade bus. “You know,” Caruthers told Seba, “this reminds me of a bus trip I took into Mexico back when I was in college. My first trip out of the States. A group of us signed up for this vacation package, the slimy thirty-year-old dropout who ran the show had dubbed it. Not much of a deal, I realized later, just greyhound tickets from Baltimore to Laredo. And from there we crossed the border, on foot mind you, and hopped a chartered old Pullman with pukey seats all the way across the country to Mazatlan.” Seba perked up.

“Soy de Mazatlan,” he said.

“No shit? You from there?”

Seba shrugged then, his enthusiasm drained. “Close,” he said, and named a town Caruthers had never heard of.

“The Pullman had a keg of beer in the back.” Caruthers recalled a girl on that bus, tall with a pretty face and jet black hair, but hips too wide for her to make the grade with the top boys. He’d drank beer and talked to her all night, at least until he’d passed out. She’d asked him to tell her a story, just make one up. And he had, a silly parable about a sorcerer who got tripped up by his own evil intent. “I woke on that swaying bus, twisted into a pretzel with that heavy Pacific air pouring in. The worst
hangover I’d ever had up to that point. It took all my power not to vomit on the poor
girl beside me.” Caruthers recalled then that he’d pissed himself that night, and turned
his mind from the memory.

They crested a small hill and the Pacific Ocean took them by surprise.

“Another beer,” Caruthers called, nearly overcome with emotion over the spectacle.
He wondered why he’d not ventured from the interior for so many years, but of course
he knew the answer. Foamy caps marked the gray water, and white and black birds
circled overhead. The sun hadn’t yet moved into this zone, but pushed the bus’
shadow onto the black sand beach flanking the road. A whole gaggle of kids in shorts
clustered ahead, hailing a ride. Caruthers honked his horn and waved. One of the boys
threw him the finger. A village called by the map Punta Obscura, just a handful of
wrecked buildings along one sandy avenue, passed by in an instant. A tattered flag on
a pole, drained of its insignia by the sun and salt, snapped in the steady breeze. “Ever
been to Costa Rica?” Caruthers asked. “Why don’t we drop this load and head south,
see how far we get?” Seba crushed his can and belched, grinning at Caruthers.

“¿Porque no?” he asked.

Why the hell not indeed, Caruthers thought, and immediately knew why not.
The only change would consist of a higher cost of living, no papers, and more
regulations over the public transportation industry, particularly regarding foreigners.
A sign appeared directing them back inland toward their rendezvous at the
international border. Caruthers glanced over his shoulder for one more look at the
ocean before turning into the rising sun, which burned through the top of the
windshield, maddeningly close to the edge but impossible to avoid no matter how he craned his neck. Caruthers wished for one of those Save Me Jesus stickers the drivers all applied, a black one to shield him from the glare. He finished his beer and chucked the can halfway to the back of the bus. Seba turned to watch it roll along the aisle and bounce off one of the bench’s legs. “I’m crazy today, Seba,” Caruthers said, to explain his breach of code. He’d never littered in his bus before.

Seba opened a fresh beer. “For you, Patron,” he said, placing it in Caruthers’ hand. Caruthers drank without hurry, pacing himself now that the excitement he’d enjoyed in view of the coast had passed. The road took them back onto the butt end of the Sierra Madre range. Chucho Cruz had planned this route because his friends could bribe their way through the mountain border crossing at a place called Cerro Brujo, a tough drive he’d told Caruthers, but isolated and free of the wrong types. They climbed back into the cooler, thin air. Pines and the occasional grove of hardwoods blocked the late afternoon light. Only one vehicle, a rusted sedan, passed them in three hours.

A sign appeared ahead, the sign Caruthers had been looking for. “Cazadoras,” it read, and in smaller letters, “gasolina y cuchillos.” Hunters, gas and knives. A combination not so odd as Caruthers had first thought. He pulled up to one of the two pumps. Fifty meters ahead he saw the turnoff onto the old logging road leading over Cerro Brujo into Salvador. Seba began to pump gas, while a man with greasy bars of black hair pasted over his bald head approached from the small store. Caruthers hated to leave Seba here. Might be a while before he got a ride, but the money would help.
He figured Seba would make out alright, though he couldn’t actually imagine him anywhere but in Santa Magdalena. Caruthers stood in the bus’ doorway, stretching his arms to the ridge above the folding doors and watching the numbers fly by on the pump. He hopped down and paid the man, who accepted the money with no apparent joy or ill will. Caruthers considered for a moment entering the store to examine the wares. Perhaps he could buy a rifle or pistol in such a back woods locale, but he let it go. He was no gun slinger. Seba capped the tank and followed Caruthers back into the bus. When Caruthers saw that the proprietor had returned indoors, he withdrew five hundred-dollar bills from the pouch hanging from a cord under his shirt, considered for a moment and returned one hundred to his stash. That ought to get him where he needed to go.

He handed the four hundred to Seba, who examined the bills as if they contained secret messages, which, Caruthers thought, they did. “Que te via bien,” Caruthers said. “I have to leave you here.” Seba counted the money again.

“Thank you, patrón,” he said, folded the bills and shoved them deep into his front pocket. “Why?” he asked, a question of ranging implications.

“Retirement,” Caruthers said, though Seba didn’t seem to know what that meant, and Caruthers didn’t know the word in Spanish. Seba shook Caruthers’ hand. Before walking out, he looked around the bus as if checking to see if he’d left something. He moved up the aisle, picked up the loose can, and left. “Fare well,” Caruthers intoned into the vacant bus. He suddenly felt terribly alone, and frightened.
The road had once been paved, but now the remaining chunks served as obstacles, islands to be avoided. Caruthers drove up, into chilly clouds. Gray moss hung from branches, and this part of the world took on a grim fecundity. He switched back to coffee and rum. His shirt, the one with the lizards, look absurd in the misty forest light. Several minutes later, Caruthers rose above the tree line, and the landscape abruptly transformed into open country marked by low table rocks interrupting dark brush with red berries. He’d left the cloud cover, could see its gauzy wisps in the rearview mirror.

The crossing appeared on a level stretch, a wire-topped chain link gate blocking the road butted to a small shed. A compact pickup parked on a patch of gravel nearby. Caruthers parked and a familiar figure jogged out of the shed, Cruz’s man who’d seen to the repair of the bus. The man, one of those mestizos with light green eyes and pale skin, frowned at Caruthers for a moment, perhaps wondering where the passengers had gone to, then rolled open the gate. Caruthers eased forward while the mestizo ran across the thin strip of no man’s land to the Salvadoran side, which was free of guards. Cruz’s man opened that gate also, and Caruthers slid through. The afternoon sun shone on this treeless mountain top, and Caruthers allowed in some optimism. “Easy enough,” he said out loud. His voice startled him, coming out over the hum and rattle of Santa Magdalena, and he reminded himself that the errand was far from complete. He now had to descend the mountain, a forty five minute drive, enter the city of Santa Ana, and pull into a warehouse, where Chucho
Cruz and cohorts would relieve him of his burden and set him on his way. Still a good hour for things to fall to shit.

In the mirror, he saw the mestizo close the gate and sprint off. The real border guards would no doubt be back soon. The next time he glanced in his mirror, a few minutes later, a polished black SUV followed a hundred meters back. Caruthers quickly understood that this vehicle existed for him alone. Since leaving the highway, he’d passed no cross roads that could have spawned such a medium of transport. He reasoned that the SUV could be an agent of Chucho, or whoever was purchasing the arms. It would simply follow him down the mountain, make sure he made it to the warehouse rendezvous. Sure, he thought, and God loves me.

The SUV kept pace as the road descended. Caruthers guided the bus over one last peaked ridge and the world presented itself all the way to the wavery edge. Just beyond the jutting peak of the mountain’s shadow, the city of Santa Ana sat clustered in a web of its own roads, glinting like fistfuls of mica dropped in the sand. The mountain slope itself supported only the meanest weeds. Crumbly granite formations rose in small spires from the chalky soil.

The road turned abruptly to the left to accommodate the grade. A kilometer later it approached a terrific precipice plunging straight down, all the way to the ragged base of the mountain. The road hugged the edge for a breathless span and cut back the opposite way. Caruthers saw below him the road snake back and forth in this manner a dozen times, down to the mountain’s base. A flash down there caught his eye, a bright wink in the midst of a greenish blur against the khaki earth, just where
the paved road began to lead toward the haze-shrouded city. He strained his eyes and
made out a large military truck, joined by two jeeps. Tiny figures wandered around.
The flash met his eyes again, binocular lenses, aimed at the man of the hour, he
wagered.

On the next turn along the ravine's rim, he risked a look down the striated
rocky wall. Trapped mist pooled like packed cotton at the bottom of the ravine, taking
its oblong shape. He turned and passed one level below the inexorable SUV. Driving
slowly, with several switchbacks between him and the party awaiting his arrival,
Caruthers had occasion to consider the possible outcomes of his situation. He slipped
the souvenir baseball bat from its holder at his side, a pathetic defense. He hefted it
just the same, sad now that things had come to this point. He imagined rushing the
roadblock, bashing through perhaps, and after that a long or short chase resulting in
capture. If he were lucky they'd shoot him on the spot. He imagined a cell, torture. He
imagined Junior receiving news, a ransom note. Probably they'd simply kill him. Or
not. Maybe he'd end up in a court of law, so the military would use him as an
example, to expose all the lefty gringos out there as the gun runners they were. He
imagined variations on these themes, but what escaped his imagination was a happy
ending. He tapped the dash with his bat, gently. Oh, Maggie, he thought. I don't want
to die. He returned the bat to its place, and, crawling forward in first gear, fished a
beer from the melted ice in the soggy box. He popped the top and drank. It tasted like
his first beer ever, just as the kid, what's his name told him when they'd first met.
Steering with one hand, he eased around the switchback and started toward the ravine. He assumed he'd not have the courage, but what the hell, it was a plan. The rim appeared, a lip of wind-worn granite, gray with black checks. Beyond it the far side of the ravine painted a backdrop of rusty curtain folds. Experiencing no particular explosion of courage, he simply goosed the engine. When the front tires leapt over, his heart filled his chest, expanded through his throat, his face and every molecule thrilled. The bus dipped, teetered for a moment. Caruthers felt on the bottoms of his feet the rocky edge scrape the bus's underside. The nose continued down and Caruthers saw little eddies of mist swirl below in the soup. He hoped he wouldn't survive long enough to hurt. The bus dropped. He let go the beer to clutch the steering wheel with both hands, and for a free floating moment marveled at the can suspended before his face. Then the tires touched the wall and bounced, rather gently. The bus twisted in the air. Through the windshield, the view shifted slowly from the cloudy bottom to the V shaped opening of the ravine, which turned to its side. The seat jerked with stupendous violence, and the front door swatted his body with sickening, numbing force. As he was swatted from wall to wall, a square of blue sky flashed by, his final vision before blackness rushed from all sides and met in the center.
Max woke, truly woke, from what seemed a long dream. The music still assaulted the air, but now he recognized its source, a disco nearby, not the cosmic, eternal torture he’d come to believe in. He realized he’d been very sick.

He ran to the filthy bathroom, shut its insufficient stall door, and continued the pattern of his wounded digestive tract. But his mind had returned. As he waited for his stomach to clear, he counted back, each visit to the store, each episode with the woman at the desk. He had been trapped in this hotel, in this dream, for five days, give or take.

He returned to the room and found it below even the usual budget standard: planks unevenly spaced, floor rough with splinters and leaning dangerously toward one corner, cobwebs thick in every corner. He lifted his day pack, glancing about the room for valuables, but found nothing. The bed had not even been mussed, and he wore every stitch of clothing he now owned, even his boots. His feet felt as slushy as if packed in warm butter, and his body smelled sour. He uncapped the water bottle and drank. His hands shook so badly he could hardly replace the cap.

Downstairs, he encountered the desk woman for the final time. She was much younger than he’d thought, probably in her mid-thirties, and now he easily solved the mystery he’d been grappling with. She’d simply been waiting for him to die. The responsibility of his corpse would have been hers, and this future chore must have grown strangely in her, forging a rather morbid relationship with him over the days. He exited without comment or significant eye contact. He thought to consult his guidebook to locate a new hotel, then remembered he’d left the book in the jungle. So
he walked away from the music until the bass pulse had grown so faint he couldn’t
know if he actually heard it or its echo in his mind.

Two days later, weak still, he discovered a small café whose tables sat on a
deck that extended over the water of Lake Izabel, one of Flores’ attractions. Cool,
clear weather graced the afternoon, and tinted the lake one shade darker blue than the
sky. The surrounding jungle formed a high emerald cliff around the perimeter; its
reflection swayed along the shore. Max detected a faint “V” in the center of the lake’s
smooth surface, and wondered what invisible thing could be cleaving that wake.

“Hola,” the only other customer on the deck said, a jolly-faced woman with a
rosy glow around her nose and cheeks, whose unfortunate pattern baldness she dealt
with by allowing her thin hair to grow two inches out, forming an ephemeral haze
around her visible crown.

“Hola,” Max replied. He hadn’t engaged in a conversation in some time.

“What a glorious day, don’t you agree?” she asked, breathing in the mud
scented air.

“I almost died,” Max surprised himself by declaring.

“No shit?” She spoke English glibly, but with a Latin American accent.

“I slept for a week straight. I didn’t even know I was sick.” She adjusted her
chair to face him, displaying a certain graceful manipulation of her heavy body. He
explained the curious state of half-dream and half-consciousness in which he’d
existed through the illness, an experience that already seemed to be fleeing his
memory. “I would’ve died without even noticing,” he concluded.
“Malaria,” she said. A weighty word, famous and dreadful.

“Nobody knows where I am,” Max said, recalling that his thirtieth birthday had passed while he was sick.

“You’d have been robbed and tossed into the gutter,” she said. “Who knows when they’d have contacted your people?”

The wake in the water had drawn closer to the shore. Max now saw a small black shape at its point.

“No offense, and nothing personal. But what do you do with a dead gringo?”

“No offense taken.” A chill ran through Max. It had been happening regularly since he’d failed to die. “Being dead. What can you say about it?”

The woman toyed with a button on her elaborately embroidered vest and regarded Max with a squint. “I’m not psychic,” she said, “but I get a premonition.”

Max had no patience for a mystical prediction ending no doubt in some kind of plan to transfer his money to her, but he didn’t have the heart or energy to be rude just yet.

“Lonely,” she continued. “Your path is going to be very solo.

“You’ve chosen a passage,” she broke the heavy gaze and stirred her coffee with a tiny spoon. “Or it has chosen you.”

Max sipped the bottle of carbonated water before him. “What if I change directions, choose a new way?”

She sipped her coffee. “I suppose you can try,” she said doubtfully, gazing at him with eyes half lidded, hazel colored and quite lovely.

Max warmed to this odd looking huckster. “You’ve wandered too, I take it?”
“Looking at it clearly, you would have to say that was so. Call me Hope,” she said. “No symbolism. Just what my parents named me. Esperanza to be precise.” She spoke of herself. Born in Buenos Aires. A scholarship to study painting in Italy after high school. The experience drunken away, carousing through Europe with gypsies who taught her the lucrative art of quick tourist portraits and caricatures. She told her story without vanity or shame, and Max imagined her young and attractive. “I still paint seriously sometimes,” she told him, “when I can afford supplies. I never got famous, but who’s famous these days?” She fished a card from a beaded change purse and flicked it expertly ten feet, where it landed face up on Max’s table. “I’ve got an opening coming up.” The card didn’t have her name on it, only “Galleria Azteca.” “Free wine,” she said, “snacks. I don’t see you buying a painting, but maybe a poster.”

Max stuck his pinky into the mouth of the empty bottle and popped it out to create a sound. “What would I do with a poster? I’m traveling light.”

“You can put it in a cardboard tube and send it home. They sell them at the libraria, just down this street.”

Max blew into the bottle and recalled the flute he’d left behind in the jungle, having never learned to play it. Esperanza opened a wide leather portfolio and removed a stack of what turned out to be posters. “Take a look, why don’t you?” she entreated, displaying in her smile a chrome incisor. Max moved to her table to examine her wares. She spread four different prints over the table one by one. Max experienced a pleasant surprise in finding that he quite liked the paintings, one in particular: a smear-faced, black-robed figure wearing a blood-red Pope’s hat,
windsurfing across a fierce, slate and white-capped sea. The figure scared Max somehow, though the wind board’s sail, a rainbow-striped triangle, painted without perspective, as with a ruler, worked against the fright, trivialized it in someway that did not diminish a quality of unease over the whole enterprise of sailing through a cold and thrashing universe.

She asked 25 quetzales for the print, and Max talked her down to fifteen. “Tell me something,” Max said after they’d exchanged goods for money. “Did you really mean all that stuff about my future, or were you just selling a poster?” She sat back as if slapped. “I don’t mean any offense,” Max said, “and I don’t care one way or the other. I’m curious is all.”

She laughed. “I’m not offended. I just don’t know how to answer that question,” she said. The wake, following an upturned, animal nose, collapsed on the shore. A black Labrador retriever stepped onto the beach and breathed out a sigh of gigantic weariness. It shook itself but could barely shuck the water from its coat. It rested for a moment, then continued its journey with devastating patience.

They’d settled on the public library in Xela for their makeshift work room. The new two story building had come to feel more like home than Marilyn’s room in Alto. She and Laura had made the acquaintance of all the librarians, who invariably could find
them a plain, though private room, furnished with a table and chairs. Until she’d begun to tutor Laura, Marilyn had only taught what could be considered survival English. Now that Laura would be starting private school the next fall—owing to Esteban’s plan to have her replace him when he left for the capitol, and to Laura’s newfound status as the hero of the day—Marilyn had hardly known how she’d prepare the girl. She’d responded to the challenge, and to Cash’s sudden absence in her heart and in her room, by throwing herself into the two hour sessions, using her entire mornings planning lessons on reading and writing, simple mathematics, history and literature. Today she’d decided to broach the subject of Jesus Christ. Laura would be entering a Catholic school, after all.

“Nails?” Laura asked, horror stricken. Apparently her religion did not include this particular story.

“That’s what they say,” Marilyn responded. She tried to move the conversation forward, but Laura wouldn’t leave the image behind. “Okay,” Marilyn said. “If you don’t like the story, why don’t you invent a new version.” This had become a frequent tool for instruction, and Laura proved an imaginative young artist. Marilyn set the coffee can full of crayons on the table beside a stack of construction paper. She watched Laura fastidiously choose crayons for a moment, and left the girl for a time. Marilyn jogged down the library’s staircase, now echoing with children’s noises, and took to the street for a short walk.

She strolled down the handsome avenue, lined with some of Xela’s only trees, toward the central park, a zone increasingly inhabited by backpackers since the travel
advisory had been lifted and the sleazy media had found or invented fresh atrocities. Marilyn had been rejoining her kinsmen over the last weeks, lingering over one cup of coffee, a beer at the usual spots, or simply reclining against the park’s fountain and soaking in the good weather, as free of worry as any American. She supposed she was training herself for the upcoming return home. How odd she felt about this. On the one hand, she looked forward to seeing her parents, her friends, the familiar streets and yards, her favorite diner, Jack’s, where she’d first discovered endless cups of coffee and adult-style conversation. On the other hand, a kind of reluctance dampened her enthusiasm. Upon examination, this disinclination seemed to come from fear of what she’d find there, of discovering what particular transformation had occurred in her absence.

The more distant future had recently come into clearer focus. A week before she’d befriended a backpacker, who had also served in the Peace Corps at one time. The woman, Sandy, had lately discovered a lucrative career as a teacher in posh international schools. Sandy had bought Marilyn several beers while talking up the profession. She enjoyed teaching the polite, worldly children of diplomats, military officers and wealthy locals. But she loved especially the money and perks, and had managed to pay off significant student loans as well as save twenty thousand dollars, all while living well, frivolously even, in the embassy neighborhoods of capitols throughout Asia and South America. She’d just finished a contract in Sao Paulo, and currently had been backpacking her way north, roughing it for old times’ sake, except now she checked into a real hotel every few days to clean up and recharge.
Sandy’s example served to fill the scary little void that had been forming in Marilyn as the days of her Peace Corps service grew slimmer, a void temporarily occupied by her recent reacquaintance and subsequent obsession with Cash. Curiously, she now felt very little for Cash, except perhaps pity and a sort of distant good will. That he’d stayed in country after the incident surprised her, and offered hope that he’d get by okay. But she had other concerns taking up that worry, concerns over herself namely, like locating and applying for a teaching certificate program upon her return.

Marilyn strolled into the park, taking pleasure in simple movement. As she passed the fountain, a breeze kicked up and pushed a spray of the lightest mist over her, causing the white hairs on her arms to stand upright. She imagined the near future, a convention hall filled with hundreds of recruiters trying to convince her to accept their offers, a clean and modern classroom filled with polished children. She daydreamed about fine clothing, hot baths, sophisticated meals.

Only the thought of Laura obstructed this happy future. She worried about the girl, and felt guilty that she’d never have the luxury and options that Marilyn would soon claim as her unearned birthright. Though Marilyn supposed a form of snobbery was at the heart of such sentiment. Who was she to assume that her quality of happiness would be superior to Laura’s? The girl had attained more than any girl ever had before in Buexon, Guatemala. Just because she’d never live in an air conditioned apartment, or drive a new car didn’t negate this fact. Besides, since she’d never had such luxuries, she’d not miss them. Marilyn had circled the park once, hardly noticing
the faces and activities around her, she'd concentrated so hard on her rationalizations. She'd not sacrifice her own comfort to help those in need. No doer of good deeds, Marilyn would at best donate a few bucks when she had them, look kindly on an uncouth beggar, spare a dollar and not worry what he used it for. So that was who she was and wasn't. Perhaps she'd still lay claim to a worthwhile life, or perhaps not. She felt grateful that it was not up to her to judge. Or perhaps she was being too hard on herself. She might just need to shut the hell up.

She returned to the library. "I'm finished," Laura said, and pushed her work across the table to Marilyn. Taking up the center of the rough, brown paper, a purple Jesus with club-like hands and feet lay upon a cross decorated with leaves and flowers. A rather deranged smile on this Jesus' face suggested an absence of the usual discomfort experienced by his kin. Though it seemed likely enough that he'd gone insane. A fiery red sun adorned the paper just beyond Jesus' right hand, and a pale green moon occupied the opposite side. A likeness of the watch Marilyn had given Laura hovered overhead, the strap open and positioned horizontal, the hands for some reason frozen at 4:50. Below the cross reclined, on what might have been a couch, an assemblage of three sexless and faceless, though apparently comfortable figures. The words, "THEY USED VELCRO," stretched across the top of the page in block letters of red and black, the colors of her watch and band. Ever since Marilyn had given Laura the inexpensive gift, she'd been fascinated by Velcro strap, by its sound upon release, the sticking quality and by its name.
“You are a strange child,” Marilyn said. Laura frowned and examined her revision of the crucifixion.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Marilyn sighed to loosen the heaviness in her chest, “that I’m going to miss you.”

Norm Junior opened his apartment door and found a white man wearing a cowboy hat standing in the late afternoon sunlight, holding a thick manila envelope in both hands.

“You’re Junior,” the man said. His voice was scratchy and the simple proclamation frightened Junior for some reason. “This is from your pop,” the man said, and handed over the envelope, then stepped back as if afraid Junior would try to return it to him.

“What’s this about?” Junior asked.

“Well,” he shook a cigarette from a pack and gripped it with his lips. “Your dad’s took off.”

“Off?” Junior heard himself utter. In the kitchen, Patty sang one of the romantic ballads currently popular on the radio, probably crooning to Randy, the new member of the Caruthers family. Sarah joined Junior at the door, hooked her fingers in his pocket.
“Said something about Costa Rica,” the messenger said. His Adam’s apple dipped and rose as he swallowed a lungful of smoke and blew it out to the side, as some smokers did when in the company of nonsmokers.

“Who is that, Daddy?” Sarah asked. She’d become Junior’s close ally since the arrival of Randy, perhaps recognizing their mutual ambivalence to the new arrival. Junior examined the worn envelope. A gold clip held the lip shut, and no other feature marked its surface.

“He left some money for the girls,” the messenger continued. “Had me deposit it in accounts for them. Should pay off eventually. It’s all in the envelope.” Junior had questions, many questions, but the man turned and paced off before Junior could articulate even one.

He almost chased after, but instead closed the door. “Let’s see,” he told his daughter. They sat side by side on the couch. He opened the envelope and slid the contents onto the coffee table. Rebecca joined Patty’s song. The family had formed two distinct coalitions lately, but Junior supposed that life, just like the Lord’s work, proceeded in mystifying directions. He had faith that all would settle down. Even his wayward father had seen fit to make amends, it seemed, though Junior couldn’t help experiencing a return of his old anger toward the man, for yet again running off. But that’s what he does, Junior reminded himself. To fool himself into believing otherwise had always been pure folly.

The manila envelope contained more envelopes, each addressed to a different audience. Before opening his own, Junior sifted through the others: Donny, Julie,
Pam, Junior’s grandmother Greta, and one each for the girls. Curiously, under Sarah and Rebecca’s names were written “please do not open until...” followed in each case with a different year in the future. Junior calculated briefly and found that the dates corresponded to each child’s thirteenth year. The anger flared up again and Junior almost ripped the envelopes open to defy the selfish man’s wishes. But he didn’t. He instead opened his own letter, unfolding several pages filled from margin to margin with his father’s unsteady cursive in blue ink. “Dear Son,” he read. “I’m sorry.” Junior folded the paper, as if to hide the words from his daughter, who watched with such intensity that she might very well have understood the marks. He returned the letter to the envelope, not yet ready for the old man’s words.