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THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND

by

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A Dissertation
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in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
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Department of English

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Steeped in the bedlam of Guatemala's civil war, this novel is a story about Henry Foster, a seventeen-year-old boy from the United States who tries to hold his family together during a crisis in his father's sabbatical year. Astronomy professor at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Milton Foster takes Henry and his family to Lake Atitlan, where he can research the celestial maps of the ancient Maya. The family arrives in 1978, before the presidential inauguration of General Lucas Garcia, whose administration would soon become a marker for the onset of widespread violence and repression. After Henry is accosted by a roadside soldier while defending his nine-year-old brother Jason, their mother insists upon leaving the country. But their father refuses to go before his research is complete. Caught in the crossfire, the brothers must choose between their parents.

When Henry sees a military assistant harassing Maria, a twenty-two-year-old Mayan, he unleashes his frustrations on the young man and kills him. Afterward he is terrified that he has put his family into grave danger. Now his father insists that they leave the country, saying he will follow as soon as he can wrap up his research. Jason and his mother fly back to Maryland. Henry and Maria travel to the ruins in Palenque, Mexico. But when they hear that an American professor has been arrested at Lake Atitlan, they feel they must return despite the danger.
CHAPTER I

The bus skidded to a stop on the tire-rutted apron of parched mud beside the overlook, dust and volcanic ash billowing from the wheels and blotting out the roadside soldier. Henry Foster peered over rows of heads toward the front and hoped that he and his brother Jason, who sat next to him near the back of the salvaged Bluebird school bus, wouldn’t have to leave their places. But after the soldier clomped up the steps and studied the men, women, and children, he jabbed his rifle toward the exit.

"Hombres afuera," he said.

Jason squirmed. "That mean us?"

Henry gripped the back of the next seat, his fingers slipping on the vinyl. At seventeen years old and two inches under six-feet tall, he would certainly be considered a man. He had to go outside. But he didn’t want to leave his nine-year-old brother alone, so they would both go out. Other boys stepped into the aisle beside men who seemed to be looking after them. Throughout the bus men and women fished for identification papers, preparing for some kind of inspection. Even the driver’s helper, a cauliflower-eared boy who couldn’t be much older than ten, stood halfway down the aisle with a document clenched between his teeth. He angled his back toward the soldier and stuffed something down the front of his jeans—a drawstring purse loaded with change. Henry patted their passports in his breast pocket. He had heard about people getting caught in the crossfire
between the Guatemalan army and rebel guerrillas, but in the past three months nothing like that had happened to him. He had never seen a guerrilla, as far as he could tell. This guy with the rifle must be a government soldier: his camouflage uniform looked new, his assault rifle modern.

"Of course it means us." Henry winced, having spoken too loudly. Most passengers had quieted down as soon as they spotted the soldier waving his red bandana in front of the sawhorse barricade, and now almost everyone was silent. Many had been talking while they left Solola, the mountaintop village half a mile behind them. But the roadblock smothered conversation. At first he had thought the driver would smash through the sawhorses, but at the last instant the man had pumped his brakes and wrenched his steering wheel to the right, turning them off the pavement and onto the shoulder, where they now rested. The cooling engine ticked.

Henry clamped his shoe box under one arm, thinking it might be more secure if he kept it with him, and swung into the line. They were the last ones. He reached toward the window seat and tugged his brother's T-shirt. When Jason pulled away, his sleeve stretched.

"Let go," he said.

Busy with others, the soldier didn't seem to have heard. He questioned the men squeezing into the aisle beside the driver's helper and the Mayan laborers who had already been standing for the trip down the mountainside. There weren't enough seats to go around. Passengers had been thinning out after the bus left Guatemala City two hours ago and went barreling west through the darkness, making stops at highland settlements. But in Solola, where the sunrise had overtaken the vehicle, the whole village seemed to climb on board. Not the whole village, but so many people had been waiting in the square that Henry thought the earlier buses had probably never shown up, for some reason. He placed one hand on the back of their seat, stooped behind the crowd, and leaned close to his brother.
“We’ve got to stick together,” he said.

“I’m staying here.”

“No, we can’t do that.” Henry understood that he was the one responsible for getting them back home. For the past three months home had been the waterfront cottage their parents rented on the southern shore of Lake Atitlan, a body of fresh water skirted by mountains and volcanoes in the Sierra Madre range. The bus was parked beside Lake Atitlan now—on a cliff near the top of the five-mile stretch of pavement that snaked around crags and dropped fifteen-hundred feet from Solola to Panajachel, a tourist colony on the northern shore.

Jason said, “Yes, your Highness.”

Henry tapped an index finger against his lips, his thumb grazing the stray hairs on his chin. While the soldier questioned the men, babies whimpered and chickens squawked and flapped and passengers sneezed in the volcanic ash and dust. A woman who appeared nine-months pregnant eased her window shut. A laborer breathed through a handkerchief. Jason pulled himself onto his feet and eyed the Samsonite suitcase bulging from their overhead rack, but Henry shook his head. That thing weighed too much to deal with now. An accomplished violinist, his brother had spent the weekend in Miami, where he accepted another music award and visited their grandparents, who had driven him around and taken pictures at the ceremony.

In the aisle a wicker basket contained bunches of bananas whose green tips curled out from a square of blue-and-white *corte* material. Henry stepped over the basket, uncomfortable being the tallest person here. Much to his relief, his brother followed. Down on one knee, the boy paused and knotted the laces of his Nike waffle trainers. The wind had tangled his blond hair, and comma-shaped curls clung to his forehead. The morning coolness was already giving way to warmth. The line shortened. Henry faced the front and shuffled closer to the doorway, smelling musty burlap sacks. A soldier barked orders outside:
"Manos arriba," the man said. He sounded older than the youth posted at the top of the aisle. Maybe he was in charge.

Mayan men and boys formed a line outside the bus, facing the overlook. Above the window sills their raised arms wavered like stalks of corn. In the distance Lake Atitlan reflected the color of a robin's egg, speckled with whitecaps. Henry neared the exit. The man in front of him kept one hand on a boy's head and guided him along the passage. But when the soldier waved them out the boy twisted free, latched onto the railing beside the steps, and searched for someone in back.

He said, "Mamacita."

The pregnant woman waved him out. "Vayate," she said.

The boy kicked and howled as the man wrestled him away from the railing and carried him down the steps and outside into the sunlight. Henry inched forward.

"La caja?" The soldier, who wore a military cap and chewed bubble gum, wanted to know what was in the shoe box.

"Solamente zapatos y gafas," Henry said. Simple exchanges still challenged his confidence with the Spanish, and he counted out his words like pennies. He ducked away from an orbiting wasp and lifted one side of the cardboard lid, revealing the prescription glasses and tooled leather hiking boots he had purchased yesterday in the capital.

The soldier blew a bubble, apparently bored. He was young enough to be in Henry's class at the Catholic school that he and his brother attended in San Bernardo, a village on the opposite shore. But the kid probably didn't go to school, unless it was a military academy. Henry's father claimed that the army herded Mayan boys into trucks when they needed recruits, often showing up at soccer matches. Some volunteered, but many were forced to become soldiers at military bases. This soldier might be from a village nearby, and now here he was pitted against his own people. Henry wondered if the recruits ever had to raid their own villages.

Ash dusted the soldier's eyebrows, making them seem gray. At his temples his
sculpture showed through his crew cut. The bubble ballooned to the size of a mango, growing
bigger and bigger. When the bubble popped, Henry flinched. The soldier, holding his
rifle with one hand and plucking gum off his mouth with the other, laughed at him and
nodded toward the exit. Henry pounded down the steps, relieved that he still had the shoe
box, but also pissed off. He could feel his pity hardening into anger. In his mind he
carried an image of the little punk’s clay-tinted face streaked with scraps of pink chewing
gum and imagined driving his fist into that mocking expression.

The sunlight dazzled him, as if he were emerging from hibernation. He shaded his
eyes and heard his brother bang down the steps behind him. The soldier outside growled
at someone:

"Subversivo?" the man said. He clutched his rifle horizontally in both fists,
shoved the bus driver back against the hood, and jammed the barrel under his Adam’s
apple.

The driver choked, his straw hat lifting off his scalp, his face reddening. This
soldier, an old guy in his thirties or forties, looked as powerful as a zoo. Steel wool
matted his forearms and his gut drooped over his clip-studded belt. Mirrored sunglasses
screened his eyes. Henry’s anger switched to alarm. He squeezed the nape of his
brother’s neck and steered him toward the far end of the column, the sun warm on his
back. They crunched over gravel on the hard-packed clay. He watched the shadows of
their legs lengthen to meet the earth each time their feet came down.

Sunshine glittered off the sheet-metal roof of the open-air viewing station. Built
upon a wooden platform, the station had waist-high clapboard walls plastered with
advertisements: Fuji, Canon, Olympus. Backs to the bus, the Maya kept their hands
raised and cowboy hats tilted forward. Ash smeared the work boots and blue jeans worn
by some laborers. Others were dressed in traje, the traditional outfits from their villages:
open-toe sandals, pants and shirts patterned with yarn decorations woven into the fabric.
Henry’s mother, who was learning to weave on a back-strap loom, had told him that the
decorations were spiritual. He nodded to the men as he proceeded down the line, but they stared straight ahead. None of them seemed to pay attention to the driver, who gasped and pleaded. None of them spoke.

From outside, the interior of the bus looked as dark as a cave. Out of the corners of his eyes Henry watched the silhouette of the young soldier, who poked and harpooned his rifle into the overhead racks, his voice trailing out as he interrogated the women. He had almost reached the spot where Jason’s suitcase was stowed. Getting out with the boots and glasses had been a stroke of luck.

Jason followed his gaze and said, “Good thing I left my violin at—”

“Better raise your hands.” Henry set down the shoe box at the end of the line. Before raising his own hands he nodded to the worker on their left, whose hat was ringed with a marriage ribbon. The worker stared straight ahead.

Fringed by marigolds, crosses marked the spots where vehicles had plunged into the ravine. There was no guardrail. Sunshine scoured the mountains and volcanoes, whose ridges were here and there terraced with tomato and onion gardens. Beyond the distant shore, three volcanoes tapered into puckered summits. A patchwork of farms blanketed their lower slopes—cornfields, coffee plantations, and fruit orchards. Islands of evergreens and big, leaf-shedding trees dotted the cultivated areas. Brown rectangles revealed plots of freshly hoed earth.

An advertisement had been torn off the viewing station, its corners still stapled to the wall around the exposed area in which someone had spray-painted graffiti about fighting repression: “Luchemos contra la represion.”

“Remember what Dad said?” Henry kept his voice low and gave his brother a sidelong glance. Their father had coached them on what to do if they got pulled over.

“What?”

“Stay calm and try to cooperate.”

“What if he wants to beat us up?”
“He won’t.”

“He’s beating up that driver.”

At the far end of the line the pleading driver pressed his hands together. “He’s not a gringo,” Henry said. “Besides, he almost drove through the roadblock.” His father had said that the government told the army not to bother foreigners, who fueled the economy. But if the soldiers did bother them, a bribe usually helped. One or two quetzales should do the trick. He felt for his wallet, remembering that he had both dollars and quetzales. He was loaded.

The volcanic basin extended more than eight miles. He scanned the far side, feeling better now. The soldiers would probably just check their passports and send them on. He could make out the mitten-shaped bay of San Bernardo with the Catholic church on the peninsula between the thumb and fingers. But their waterfront cottage, tucked in a cove outside the bay’s entrance, was too small and faraway to see.

Two nights ago he had slept in his own bed. At first his parents had objected to him making this trip. Taking the buses into Guatemala City and back was an overnight excursion, possibly dangerous. But he had urged them to let him bring his brother home. He was seventeen, almost a man. His father insisted upon driving to the airport, but changed his mind after he fractured his fibula and lost his glasses. He had stumbled on a cliff near the Cave of the Witches, his ankle getting wedged between rocks and his glasses disappearing into an arroyo. He limped all the way back to their cottage with a hairline fracture. The groundskeeper’s dog was his sole hiking companion, except for one outing when he had taken his friend Padre Flores.

When Henry’s mother had volunteered to drive to the airport, his father smirked. The Fosters had driven from Maryland to Guatemala, but in Mexico his mother’s beauty and long yellow hair ignited the curiosity of inspectors at every checkpoint. At first his father had joked about it, but after they got delayed for three hours in Acapulco, trapped in the Dodge Swinger like bugs under a Mason jar, he had bought her a black wig and a
frumpy jogging suit.

He said, “Here, hide your golden fleece.”

“You don’t think I’m actually going to wear that thing?” His mother recoiled from touching the wig, as if it were an octopus. “I swear, you are so sexist.”

“April, I’m not condoning the attitude, but I’d like to get there sometime this century.”

For the rest of the ride she fumed, wearing the gray jogging suit instead of her peach halter top and denim skirt embroidered with a design of California poppies. But when they approached the Guatemalan border at Ciudad Hidalgo she refused to put on the wig.

His father skidded into the shoulder. “Who do you think you are—Gloria Steinem?”

“Who do you think you are—Adolf Eichmann?”

“That is an inappropriate question.” His father checked the backseat through the rearview mirror with a startled expression on his face, as if he had sat on a wasp. Henry had heard those names before, but couldn’t remember who the people were.

“Anyway,” his father said, “when did I become the one on trial here?”

“I, am, so, sorry, sweetheart.” His mother was jerking the hairpiece over her head. “I guess it would be more appropriate to compare you to Hugh Hefner.”

He was the Playboy guy. In the backseat Henry had envisioned Miss August, her centerfold layout vivid in his mind’s eye, her belly button surrounded by swirls of peach fuzz. He wondered if the bunnies ever got turned on while they were being photographed.

At the scenic overlook he stamped a shallow clover into the ash. Pangs of homesickness awakened his distress, and he was wishing that his father were here when the soldier with sunglasses came lurching toward them, his potbelly jiggling, his rifle swinging from a strap on his shoulder. Something was wrong with one of his legs. He glanced into the bus as he approached, his lenses glinting. The sun behind him cast stilted shadows. Reflected on the ground, his legs stretched impossibly far.
“Pasaporte,” he said. His sleeves were folded back above his elbows and dirt webbed his palm. The radio hitched to his belt blurted out a message so garbled that it seemed to have traveled a great distance.

Their fingers touched when Henry handed over the passports. The soldier grinned, baring crooked teeth. So many Central Americans had immaculate teeth that Henry had started to think they all did. A mole the size of a raisin jutted from the center of the man’s forehead, and the two crossed hairs that sprouted from it made scissoring motions as he wrinkled his brow and riffled through their identification. He stopped at a certain page and lingered there, thumbing the bridge of his glasses higher onto his nose. Over the past three months Henry had developed a fondness for his passport, the only one he had ever owned. He thought the snapshot reflected his true, mature identity, and he was considering how much he would hate to lose it when the soldier slid both documents inside his belt, slipping them under the bulge of his belly. He reached out and trailed the backs of his hairy fingers across Henry’s cheek.

The ticklish sensation of those hairs on Henry’s face magnified his terror to an exquisite intensity. He cringed, feeling the skin around his testicles shrivel, and stepped back. The soldier edged closer, his breath warm and metallic. When Henry backed into the bus he threw out his arms, his elbows gouging the metal, the panels making thundery sounds.

“Turisto?” The soldier gazed up at him.

“Vivimos aqui,” Henry said. A drop of sweat trickled inside his collar.

“Donde?”

“Afuera de San Bernardo.” He pointed across the water.

The soldier nudged the box with his good leg, laces zigzagging up his black leather boot. “Regalos para mi?”

Henry opened his mouth, but decided not to answer. He kneeled in front of the man, groping for the shoe box without breaking his eye contact with those mirrored
lenses, in which two alien reflections of his own face glared back at him. He thought that he had better get control of his feelings, as real men were supposed to do. His family depended on him. He straightened his legs, smiled diplomatically, and handed the box to the man, whose rifle pointed up. When the soldier spun the lid aside, it caught an updraft and whirled over the cliff.

The boots were for Henry and the glasses for his father, who had promised to take him along on his next hike up Volcano Toliman when his ankle had healed. Henry planned to start breaking in his new boots on the way to school tomorrow, after he had rubbed them with water-resistant oil. The rainy season seemed to have ended, but the locals said that more downpours were likely. It was mid-September, the end of the Independence Day weekend. In the capital that morning he had seen buildings draped with huge blue-and-white banners from the parades celebrating Guatemala’s independence from Spain. Confetti littered Avenida de la Reforma.

The soldier removed the glasses from their case. Henry stepped forward and tried to explain that his father was far-sighted.

"Sin gafas," he said, "mi papa no puede ver." He remembered how his father looked without glasses, the skin pale around his eyes.

"Es verdad?" The soldier's tobacco-soured breath puffed against Henry’s throat.

Henry nodded. "Lejos, no problema." He gestured toward the summit of Volcano Atitlan, then brought his flat palm toward his nose. "Cerca, mucho problema."

"Comunista?" The soldier unfolded the spectacles and wiggled the stems. When his radio made a loud crackling buzz, he took one hand off the glasses and without looking down twisted a knob. The static died. A crow cawed from the sheet-metal roof of the viewing station, slipping as it hopped from groove to groove.

"Mi papa no es comunista," Henry said. His father, who had warned him that this issue might come up, said he wasn’t rebelling against class-based societies. Astronomy professor at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Milton Foster told Henry that he was mainly
rebelling against the hard-science biases of his colleagues by spending his sabbatical year among the people whose history provided the subject for his book about the ancient Maya with their pyramids dedicated to their ancestors, their hieroglyphic writings, and their celestial maps.

"You are..." The Guatemalan spoke English.

Henry waited to see if there was more.

"You are Communist?"

"Somos Americanos."

The soldier took off his sunglasses, slid them into his breast pocket, and replaced them with the prescription glasses that belonged to Henry’s father. He held out both arms in front of him and floundered, as if sleepwalking.

He said, “I no can see.”

Henry darted out of his way and checked on his brother, who stood nearby, his damp eyelashes clotted in sawtooth patterns. Two lines of wet brightness striped his cheeks, and his bloodshot eyes grew wider when the soldier raked the glasses off his face and spiked them onto the ground. He brandished his weapon with both hands, the strap slipping off his shoulder, and aimed at Henry’s head.

"Jimmy Carter es un maricon." He prodded the barrel against the center of Henry’s forehead. Maricon meant queer.

When the soldier said, “Lucas Garcia,” his expression changed to one of admiration, his eyes shining. Henry recognized the name of Guatemala’s new president, but wasn’t sure how he was supposed to react. He pictured his family cheering on the Washington Redskins.

Sunlight coppered the features of the soldier, who withdrew his rifle, scratched the stubble on his chin, and leered at the upside-down glasses. The wire-rim lenses weren’t broken, but one stem was awkwardly bent. The frames cast spider-thin shadows, the lenses oily smears. Glass popped under his heel when he crushed the lenses. He looked
into Henry’s eyes, pursed his lips, and twisted his toe back and forth. Grinding fragments into finer fragments. Henry leaned back against the bus and covered his privates with both hands, the smell of his urine rising to his nostrils and mingling with the chemical smack of diesel fuel. He listened to the women shifting in their seats, the rusty springs creaking, and wished that he were inside. The young soldier still questioned them.

From the mountaintops a dog bayed, the sound trailing off into pure loneliness. The soldier in front of Henry fitted the stems of his sunglasses behind his ears and nodded toward Jason.

He said, “Tu cuate?”

“Es mi hermano.” Henry pushed off the bus and went toward his brother. The soldier curtsied primly in front of the boy, holding out the fringes of an imaginary dress. Jason looked down, but the man placed a stubby index finger under his chin and tipped his face back up.

“Rubio,” he said, “rubio.” He curled a lock of blond hair behind Jason’s ear. Mottled with red and white dimples, Jason’s chin quivered.

“Tengo dinero.” Henry yanked out his wallet and removed a bill, but the soldier ignored him. He positioned himself between the soldier and his brother and held up the bill, seeing that it was United States currency. Bordered by an egg-shaped frame, the lined portrait of Abraham Lincoln showed through from the other side. The soldier snatched the five-dollar bill and crumpled it in his fist. He stuffed the money into his pants pocket, gargled mucus onto the roof of his mouth, and spat in Henry’s face. Henry blinked and drew his palm across his cheek.

“Vamonos.” The soldier leveled his rifle toward a cluster of pines whose long shadows almost reached the marigolds beside the road.

Stay calm and try to cooperate. Henry turned about face and plodded in that direction. He wiped the glob of phlegm onto his thigh and stared at the ground. Joined to his own shadow upon the ruts, the reflection of the soldier lengthened and narrowed.
“Look out!” Jason said.

White shock exploded in Henry’s mind. He staggered, hopping to one side, and realized that the butt of the rifle must have clubbed his temple. Arms extended, he faced the soldier and backed away past the rear bumper of the bus. Women peered out, their eyes glowing. His ear felt numb and something warm trickled down his neck. A shrill ringing filled his head. He stumbled backward over ruts of dried clay, sweat and blood pooling in his left eye and warping his vision. The pine trees melted into a garden of voracious plants. He turned to run, but as he turned something rammed into his spine and pitched him forward, both arms flung out, his forehead hitting the ground. Gravel cut into his palms, and when he opened his eyes he found himself staring at a cracked button in the dirt.

He flipped over, his shoes scrabbling, and began to sit upright. But the soldier planted a boot on his chest and slammed him back down. Henry cried out, lights sparkling in his vision, the back of his skull aching. Unable to inhale, he wheezed. He grabbed the soldier’s boot and jerked, but his fingers kept slipping from the oiled leather. When the pressure vanished, he sucked air into his lungs in shuddering gasps.

“Tienes hambre?” The soldier straddled him and pinned back his shoulders with both knees. His pants pocket turned inside out when he removed the five-dollar bill. Henry twisted his head to the side, but the soldier crammed the wad into his mouth, past his teeth, the mirrored lenses looming over him like the eyes of some demonic insect. Henry gagged. Clotted in his windpipe, the cash made it hard to breathe, so he swallowed. The man slapped him, struggled to his feet, and stood favoring one leg.

Blood prickled into Henry’s shoulders with a burning sweetness and his cheek tingled. He held out his forearm and searched for Jason, who shifted from foot to foot in the whale-sized shadow of the bus. Trapped in the glare, Henry remained on the ground and listened while the soldier lectured him, explaining that the army had to protect the wealthy because they were the ones who provided work for the poor. He was working for
the common people and would not answer to the human rights policy of Jimmy Carter. The United States was wrong to impose human rights standards on Guatemala. What about their own violations? Henry kept one eye on the bus, where the other soldier was letting passengers get on board. The line filed into the entrance. The motor started with a hoarse, violent sound, and the tailpipe coughed.

Before letting the brothers go, the soldiers lit cigarettes. The one in charge took Henry’s cash and returned his wallet with their passports. The other one dragged a sawhorse to the shoulder, his cigarette trailing scribbles of smoke.

Inside the bus, Henry could feel people watching him. He stared at his old boots and limped down the aisle, worming his way past the standing workers and heading toward the back, where he and his brother could hide. They would have to stand now, but at least they would be less visible back there. He was wishing that he could get rid of his urine stain when the vision of their empty seat stunned him; it was such an unexpected consideration. The instant he saw it the bus moved, veering toward the pavement.

The men standing in the aisle reached for the overhead bars. Henry faltered, using the backs of the seats as crutches and feeling grateful—so grateful that it seemed inadequate when he edged past the last two workers and said, “Muchas gracias.” One of them nodded, but the other’s face was hidden as a gust flattened the brim of his cowboy hat against his cheek. He clapped his free hand over the crown.

Jason scrambled over beside the window. “You okay?” he said.

“Got any change?” Henry slumped down beside him. Molten confusion bubbled in his chest, his gratitude churning with rage and fear and something else.

“What?”

“For the next bus.” He had planned to get change in the next village. He touched his temple and winced. Blood tipped some of his fingers.

Jason shook his head. “He stole yours?”

“I didn’t have any.” Henry wiped his fingers on his corduroys. The trip down the
mountain would take another fifteen minutes. He could worry about the money later. He felt so infuriated that he could barely think straight. He told himself to calm down and act like a man. Be rational. His father had told him that bribes would be effective, but maybe he had used the wrong kind. What seemed to set the soldier off had been his offer of United States currency. He should have paid closer attention to his father’s advice.

When the front tires bumped onto the road, the driver braked and groped for something under the dashboard. Henry turned and squinted toward the overlook through the double panes on the lower half of their window. His brother followed his gaze. Ghostly images of him and his brother seemed to hang outside the glass. Through their reflections, he contemplated the view.

The marigolds flashing in the sunshine almost surprised him. For him a change had come over the world, but the world seemed the same. At the overlook, the soldiers sat on the steps leading up to the entrance. The one with sunglasses was trying on Henry’s new boots. He spoke to the young one and pounded him on the back so hard that he knocked off the kid’s military cap, which somersaulted and landed upside down near their feet. The young soldier pointed at his cap and laughed. He held out his palm toward the bus, as if begging for change. Both soldiers laughed. Henry wanted to scream. He glared at them and imagined firing an assault rifle from the bus—emptying the magazine and splattering their brains like a couple of cauliflowers.

“Scenic enough for you?” he said.

Jason faced him. “How do you mean?”

Henry rubbed his stomach and kept staring past his brother. The fresh air blowing in the window helped to clear his mind. There were more important things than revenge to think about.

He watched the young soldier take one final drag and flick his stub onto the road, where it rolled to a stop between the yellow lines. The ember smoldered, trickling smoke.
CHAPTER II

Henry clung to a vertical bar as the bus sputtered down a steep grade, nosing toward a turn. The flood plain below reflected green. He had grappled his way to the front, having decided that he and his brother should not go into the next village, and now he spoke to the driver:

"Necesitamos salir, por favor."

"Sientate," the driver said, but Henry remained standing. When the driver’s helper tugged his sleeve from behind, he jerked his arm away.

A bluebottle fly landed on the driver’s neck beside a trickle of blood and rubbed its front legs together. Henry had thought the man would be glad to get rid of them. After all, their presence had triggered more violence. He stared at the cliff-shadowed pavement and considered riding into the next village. But the soldiers at the overlook might radio down to Panajachel.

"Hay mas soldados en Pana," he said.

"Tiene pisto?" The driver swerved around a pothole and glanced into the rearview mirror. Henry explained that the soldiers had taken his cash, but not his wristwatch.

"Quiere mi reloj?" he said. The driver nodded, accepting the offer.

One arm around the upright bar, Henry fumbled with the clasp. The man took the watch from him without looking, shrugged the fly off his neck, and gripped the steering
wheel with both hands, his knuckles shuddering, the watchband dangling from his fingers. Henry could smell the brake pads smoking and hear the tires gritting against the blacktop. Gravel pinged. The vehicle tilted sideways on its shocks, leaning toward the valley. He faced the back, reached for the overhead bars, and brushed past the driver’s helper as the bus rounded a U-turn. Passengers emerged into bewildering clarity, sunshine flooding the interior in dust-glutted zones.

Jason squinted from their seat. Henry waved him to the front, but his brother shook his head. Just as well: the kid couldn’t handle that suitcase. He said, “Con permiso, con permiso” while he jostled toward the back, feeling as if he were a gibbon swinging from limb to limb. Sunlight illuminated the stains under his arms and the boot-print stamped on his white button-down shirt. He dropped his arms and clutched the backrests, one wrist grazing the shoulder of a woman from Santiago whose familiar style of headdress stuck out like the rings of Saturn.

The road twisted down a series of switchbacks he recognized, the turns dizzying. Ripe currents swirled around his head, the body odors blending with the smell of singed rubber and his urine. He steadied himself, worried that he might get sick. No, he was going to see this through like a man. He concentrated on the mountainside. The shadow of the bus flitted over boulders, whose stability made him feel better, more anchored, until it occurred to him that the driver might not pull over. But the man was probably just waiting for a good spot. When the road straightened out he plodded the rest of the way, stepped over the basket of bananas, and sank beside his brother with a grunt. He gulped the fresh air blowing in their window.

Jason said, “If you think I’m getting off—”

“I am trying to help.” Henry slapped his brother’s thigh so hard the boy cried out. Slumped against the windowsill, the worker in front of them sat upright and adjusted his hat, whose brim was dusted with flour sifting down from a bag riddled with holes. The bus passed two natives trotting down the road, one with a cello on his back, the cello so
big it concealed everything but the man’s legs and sandals. The farther the driver went
the more impatient Henry became. His nausea at bay, he got to his feet and freed his
brother’s suitcase from the rack.

They were at the front when the bus finally stopped. Henry congratulated himself.
They still had a way to go, but they had passed one checkpoint and dodged another.
Mission accomplished, pal. He hauled the suitcase down the steps, smelling wet boulders.
The blueness of Lake Atitlan, so much closer now, buoyed his spirits. He imagined their
homecoming. His mother would hug him and cry and his father would pound his back
and say, “This young man is one cool customer. He ran into a bit of trouble, but didn’t
lose his head.”

He led his brother to the shoulder and wondered if that bus had ever taken children
to school. It probably used to be yellow, but now it was painted with all the colors of a
rainbow. The bus looped around a switchback turn and went out of sight. In a minute it
emerged into view while crossing the single-lane bridge below them. A boy leaned out
from a window and waved up—the same kid who had called out, “Mamacita.” Jason
waved back. Henry wished the boy wouldn’t lean out so far. He could see his mouth
forming the one English word so many natives spoke out loud: “Goodbye, goodbye.”

The bus went into shadow, lumbered around the last turn before Panajachel, and
disappeared. They rode on. In the quietness Henry shaded his eyes, startled by the large
gap between the sun and the caldera. The shadows seemed much shorter than they had at
the roadblock, as if a couple hours had passed since the bus had been flagged over instead
of maybe forty-five minutes. The shadow of him and his brother stretched only five or six
feet. He hadn’t checked the time before giving his watch to the driver, and now he felt
spooked. But maybe he was imagining things.

“What time do you think it is?”

“You didn’t have to hit me.”

“I’m sorry.” Henry ruffled his brother’s hair and looked around, trying to get his
bearings.

The other side of the road was bordered with towers of blasted rock, the shadows resembling puddles around their bases. The scarred ledges of boulders were mottled with scabs of lichen and veined with roots of scrub pines that clung to pockets of soil. From a bluff, water plummeted hundreds of feet and slammed into moss-bearded stone. Ferns nodded in the vapors mushrooming from the waterfall. Mist boiled over the bridge, scattering the smells of wet vegetation and rocks.

Jason said, “Why get off here?”

Henry spat into the road. “Not a goddamn thing we could do in Pana.”

“Couldn’t we get help there?”

“Too risky.” Henry shook his head. In addition to the soldiers he wanted to avoid the national police, who patrolled the streets in pairs, wearing helmets and pale-blue uniforms.

“Wish we could just call.”

“Me too,” Henry said. Their lodge had electricity, but no telephone.

“So what are we going to do, walk?”

“We could walk to the shore.” Henry pointed into the gorge. Below the waterfall, the torrent that gushed beneath the bridge mellowed, scribbling a leisurely path through the cornfields to Lake Atitlan. Banana trees fringed the banks, their glossy leaves shaped like the bills of toucans. “Maybe we can find some fisherman to take us home.”

“How would we pay him?”

“Dad has money.” Henry hoisted the suitcase, whose leather was gouged where the soldier had poked his rifle. He jolted past a shredded tire, lurched into the nearest furrow, and staggered downhill, the luggage banging against his thigh. Clods caked his bootlaces. After a few steps he stopped. “Sure doesn’t feel like they stole anything. What’ve you got in here, a tombstone?”

“Books for Dad,” Jason said. “There’s something for you, too.”
Henry set down the suitcase. He had thought his grandparents might have packed a
gift for him, but he had resisted asking about it in their hotel last night. Now he realized
they might have sent the telescope he had mentioned in a letter. "What is it, Jason?"

"Grammy wrapped it before I could see."

The suitcase began to feel lighter. The sun shining through the foliage tinted
Henry’s skin green as they walked on. The corn had been harvested, and breezes rustled
the dry husks. Dirt trickled inside his boots.

"Should’ve worn snowshoes," he said.

Before long, splinters of blue light glimmered through the corn. At the edge of the
last field the outer stalks leaned away from shore. He lugged the suitcase across the
mouth of the flood plain, where the rubble of polished rocks skittered underfoot, and
plopped it down. When he straightened his back, dizziness made him reel.

"You okay?" Jason said.

"Good altitude training." Henry smiled. Before the checkpoint they had been
talking about the Marine Corps Marathon, a race they planned to run next fall in
Washington, D.C.

Clouds loafed between Volcano Toliman and Volcano San Pedro. Henry pondered
the surf, his shirt billowing, the smell of his sweat reaching his nostrils. Far out,
whitecaps ruffled the water. The stream they had followed gurgled into the thin margin of
shallows. Incoming waves crosshatched the surface into ripples. To his left, swells lapped
boulders. To his right, reeds swayed. He could only see one boater, a man cutting reeds
with a machete and gathering them into his cayuco, a dugout canoe.

"No fishermen," he said.

"Too rough for that." Jason was an enthusiastic fisher.

Last night Henry had seen the snapshot of the eight-pound Red Drum his brother
had caught in Biscayne Bay with their grandfather over the weekend. He watched the
waves. Mayan men often fished for black bass in the morning, returning before afternoon
to avoid the *xocomil*, a southern wind that whipped Lake Atitlan into whirlpools. Beatriz, the wife of their groundskeeper, had warned Henry about those whirlpools, saying the *xocomi* came from the goddess of the lake. Whenever the goddess got angry, she stirred up the currents.

“What about that guy?” Henry crossed his arms back and forth over his head.

“*Señor, puede venir?*”

Jason jogged ahead of him, his hair blowing. “Hey,” he said, “the guy’s waving back.”

The *cayucero* swung his straw hat in a wide arc. Henry made a looping gesture with his right hand, the way he had seen roadside Maya do when hitching rides. The man canoed toward them, the slick blade of his paddle flashing. Despite the sun, the clouds massing on the western horizon behind the man looked bruised. In the distance thunder muttered. The man kneeled on a mattress of tule reeds and came floating toward them. The tips of the reeds curled over the prow.

“*Vamos a San Bernardo.*” Henry thrust his finger toward the opposite shore.

The man jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, where waves tossed dangerously.

“*Peligroso,*” he said. The black-and-white checks on his wool apron identified him with Solola. The mountaintop village was out of sight from here.

“*Allí tenemos dinero.*”

“*Momento.*” The old man came closer, ripples from the stream making a chuckling sound. The figure of a bat was sewn into his jacket sleeve. As he studied them, the pleated skin around his lips crinkled shut like a drawstring purse. The man wheeled the prow around in the other direction, eddies swirling in his wake. Maybe he thought San Bernardo was too far away.

Henry said, “*No es lejos.*” A cloud dimmed the sun, giving him goose bumps.

The native glanced over his shoulder. “*Es peligroso el xocomil.*”

Jason said, “What’s the *xocomil*?”
“He thinks the goddess is going to eat us.” Henry kicked a white pumice stone into the water. Porous as sponge, the stone bobbed on the surface. He turned and scanned the shoreline behind them. Beyond the reeds, wind snatched smoke from a scrap-metal roof.

“What goddess?”

“Maybe someone over there will help.” Henry pointed at the cane-walled hut.

When the sun emerged, he looked at the volcanoes and wondered what their patron spirits were supposed to want. Beatriz had told him that each volcano had its own dueno, but his father said that was just mythology. No mumbo jumbo could stand up to the scholarship of his father. Volcano Atitlan stood behind Volcano Toliman. Far across the water the bay of San Bernardo lolled. He felt suddenly drained, not sure how they would get home. He never should have asked his parents to let him make this trip alone. Maybe they never should have come to this country. For that matter, maybe he never should have been born.

His brother went ahead. Henry lugged the suitcase and stepped from stone to stone, thinking about the photographs his father had shown him of the rocky landscape of Venus, where the sun rose in the west and set in the east. His brother rounded a bend, where rocks gave way to mud. When he spotted his brother peering into a curtain of reeds up ahead, he carried the suitcase over there and dropped it on the spongy loam. He kneeled beside the suitcase and folded his arms on top, resting his chin on his wrists. The loam soaked the knees of his corduroys.

“Check it out.” Jason parted the reeds wider. A pine sapling grew from a rocky island edged with reeds. The island was so close to shore it probably became a peninsula when the tide was out. A quick, white-collared bird perched on a reed, bending it down. The bird swiveled its head and eyed them. A long-legged insect skated across the water, each leg propped upon a dimple shaped like a contact lens.

When Henry noticed the dugout, he scrambled back onto his feet. Stripped of bark, the upside-down cayuco had seemed, at first glance, like a log washed onto shore. He
stepped around the suitcase, shedding his fatigue, and crashed through the reeds. He plowed his shins through the cold water. Sandpapers scurried away as he sloshed onto the island. He turned over the canoe. His brother came and looked over his shoulder. A wooden paddle lay on the faded weeds.

Twine was wrapped around the sapling. The ends were knotted around a rusted handle bolted to the prow. He couldn’t loosen the knot. He held out his palms, smeared with gumminess.

“Sap?” he said.

“Kind of gross.” Jason wrinkled his nose.

Henry found a fragment of slate flecked with fish scales, sawed off the twine, and unwrapped the coils. He stood upright and tossed the mess into the boat. His wet corduroys felt heavy.

“Good going,” he said, clapping his brother on the back. The rope reminded him of textbook illustrations of DNA. He looked toward the cane walls of the dwelling with the scrap-metal roof. Through the gaps he thought he could see people moving.

Jason turned in the same direction. “We should ask their permission,” he said.

“Hell with that.”

“I don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to like it.” Henry realized that he had repeated what his father said to him. He crouched beside the shallows and scrubbed his hands with a pumice stone. Reeds crowned his tea-colored reflection. Beatriz had told him that natives often performed costumbres—prayers asking the goddess for safe passage. She had even given him a secreto—an object for his protection that he kept in his pocket out of gratitude.

Beatriz said the chip of bone came from a jaguar vertebra found in a sacred place, but she wouldn’t say where. A blue heron watched them.

The suitcase fit into the bow, a seat for Jason. They turned the boat around so the prow faced the water. Behind the stern, they pushed. Henry’s pulse drummed. His temple
pounded as they drove the boat in the water. He helped his brother get settled on the suitcase, then waded to the stern and hooked his right leg inside the dugout. He shifted his weight to his right foot before shoving off with his left, yanking his boot out of the water and vaulting into the canoe.

They skimmed toward the bulrushes. On his knees, Henry saw his reed-speared reflection seesawing. He prodded the paddle into the cracked shells and stones on the bottom. Grit ground against the paddle, making a muted crunch. Silt swirled. They entered the thicket of tule reeds, where it was hard to find enough open water to go forward.

“Where are we?” His brother sat facing him, reeds scraping his arms.

“In the reeds.” Henry thrust the paddle against the stalks. Sleeves of slime coated the reeds near the surface. The dugout was sandwiched so tightly within the foliage that the wood squeaked when he drove the prow forward. Wind stirred the feathery tips of the reeds. The smell of slime dwindled as the canoe emerged.

In the open, breezes cooled the sweat on his face. Lake Atitlan shimmered, reflecting bright sunshine into his eyes. He could feel his pupils shrinking. Jason gripped both sides of the dugout and glanced over his shoulder toward the depths. Henry squinted, for the first time considering what to do if they were discovered by the owners of the boat.

“See anyone?” he said.

Jason said, “It sure is going to rain.”

Beyond the opposite shore, clouds darkened the horizon. Henry couldn’t remember seeing clouds when they had been at the roadblock, and again he wondered what time it was. Waves clopped against the hull. He paddled into the bay and remembered what his father had told him. Tens of thousands of years ago a volcanic explosion had blasted a bowl in the earth’s crust, making this one of the deepest lakes on the planet. He had planned to cut straight across, but now he considered hugging the
shore. He could see the boulders on the bottom, as big as Volkswagen Bugs. Farther out
the bottom dropped into blackness, and the depths scared him.

When he saw a puddle forming in the dugout, that decided him. He would not cut
straight across. Following the shore would take longer, but they could swim to land if the
boat capsized. He would stay within fifty yards of land. A board was attached to each
side of the dugout, like a splatter guard, and Jason held onto these.

Farther out the wind slashed the surface and the prow sliced the waves. Swells
raised and dropped the boat. The overloaded hull plunged into troughs and showered
them with cool, bracing spray. From this perspective the whitecaps in the distance
merged into a single layer, like frosting on a birthday cake.

After a long spell of paddling, Henry was tired. The farther they went, the deeper
the puddle got. He checked the level every time he shifted the paddle from one side to the
other. Now he had to mention it to his brother.

"Think we're leaking," he said.

"The what?"

"We need to bail."

Jason started cupping water in his hands and tossing it over. Henry steered closer
to the shore. They were well past Panajachel, and when he looked over his shoulder he
could no longer see the girders on the bridge that spanned the Panajachel River. He aimed
the dugout past the next village, Santa Catarina, and pointed them toward San Antonio.
As he drove the canoe forward, the sun slipped in and out of the clouds. The air had
turned cooler and smelled of rain. Thunder rumbled. Closer to shore the surface calmed, a
lighter shade of blue. Ice-clear prisms of sunlight shot into the water and faded into the
depths of blackness.

The canoe was sinking, but they might get close enough to their cottage to swim
the rest of the way. Otherwise they would have to go to shore far from home and hike the

25
rest of the way. That would save the suitcase, but Henry had reached the point where he
cared more about getting home as soon as he could. His head pounded, his back ached,
his palms burned. He sweated, looking forward to the hot-needled shower he was going
to take.

By the time they neared San Antonio, the water had risen to their ankles. Dressed
in white blouses, Mayan women stood calf-deep slapping and scrubbing laundry against
rocks, their dresses knotted over their knees. A boy stood on shore wearing only a shirt
and stared at them. Suds foamed around the legs of the women and glowed under the
clouds that overshadowed Lake Atitlan now. The women were finishing up, heading back
to shore as rain started to fall. One woman paused and twisted moisture from a bolt of
fabric between her hands.

Rain dimpled the surface of Lake Atitlan. Jason bailed, but they were still sinking.
Beyond San Antonio, the waterlogged boat dragged through the water. The bay of San
Bernardo opened on Henry’s left. Seagulls wheeled overhead and perched on pilings,
small as matchsticks in the distance. The church steeple rose over the terra cotta roofs. He
set the paddle across the boat, where it clattered woodenly. His muscles were cramping,
but he didn’t want to give up so close to home. He summoned more energy, dug in, and
started across the mouth of the bay.

When he could see the terraces of their cottage through the rain, he paddled
harder. The rain stung his face. He paddled ten minutes more, an eternity, before
dropping the paddle in the boat, where it floated among the loops of twine. The sodden
suitcase made the prow dip.

Jason stopped bailing. Bloodshot arteries branched over his eyes.

"See our dock?" Henry could make out the gray smudge. "We can swim from
here."

"What about the suitcase?"

"Wrap this around your chest." Henry handed one end of the twine to his brother,
a good swimmer. This was the right thing to do.

“What for?”

“Make a tight knot.” He opened and closed his fists.

Jason fumbled with the twine as Henry watched. His brother was afraid, but he would be fine in the water. Their dock was only fifty yards away. Besides, the rope would connect them. He would let the suitcase sink, but no way was he going to lose his brother. The coffee trees behind their cottage tossed in the wind, the undersides of the dark-green leaves flashing silver.

“Better take your shoes off.” Henry plunged his hands under the water in the dugout, but had a hard time untieing his own laces. His fingers were stiff, the laces too small. He decided to leave his boots on and looped the twine behind his back. The twine was easier to handle, and he made a sturdy knot over his stomach. Then he leaned forward and checked Jason’s knot. He cinched the knot more tightly, until it was well secured.

“We can roll over to this side.” Henry dipped his head to his right. “Jason?”

“Hang on.” Jason was still prying off his right running shoe, digging the toes of his left foot under his right heel. His other shoe floated in the boat.

Henry waited, staring at the suitcase. They couldn’t get it to shore now, but they could save something small if it were important. He wouldn’t know which of his father’s books mattered the most. He remembered the telescope, but dismissed the thought.

“What about your check?” he said.

“My what?”

“For your award.”

“Pop already deposited it.”

When they rolled overboard, leaning to one side, the water smacked Henry’s cheek. He held his breath under the cold water and kept his eyes squeezed shut. Upside-down, he could feel his body sinking. He righted himself and dangled underwater,
exhaling bubbles and scissoring his legs. He didn't open his eyes until his head broke through the surface. He gasped, flinging water from his scalp. His brother was treading beside him.

They swam toward their dock. Henry used the breast stroke and his brother the dog paddle, the rope tightening and loosening between them, the water stippled with raindrops.

At the cottage their dog bolted out from her dry spot beneath the Sago Palms and raced down onto the dock, where she sent up a long singing note of alarm. Henry watched the terraced lawn, but nobody opened the door. A stone path wound between the aloe vera plants. The hammock drooped between avocado trees. Through the rain he could see flickering lights inside the lodge making the windows yellow.

"Balam," he said, when they got closer. "Here, girl." Beatrix said the dog's name meant jaguar in Cakchiquel, her native tongue. Balam was an old rat terrier, mostly white with several large black spots. When the dog recognized his voice, she flattened her ears and whined.

Crushed shells ground beneath Henry's boots. He stood up to his waist in the water and tried to untie the knot, but his fingers were too stiff. He smelled smoke from the chimney.

The hound pranced back and forth along the dock, her tail curled between her legs, her nails clicking on the boards, her face simpering, her snout yearning forward. Her hackles were still raised in excitement when she bumped her nose on a piling and sneezed. She sneezed two or three times, each sneeze knocking her off balance. The last sneeze was so hard she almost fell off the dock, and the brothers laughed.

Jason looked down at his palms, his skin wrinkled. "Look," he said, "my fingers are prunes."

"Mine too." Henry held out his own hands. "We're already old."
“Come on,” Henry said. “Haven’t we already beaten this thing to death?”

No one answered him. His family had been going over and over the roadside incident throughout the day, and now it was dark. They gazed into the fireplace—his brother, his parents, and him—as the chimney top hummed in the breezes washing up the lawn from Lake Atitlan. Bottle-shaped flames crackled against the charred masonry. A knot exploded, scattering sparks over the stone hearth, where the screen guard had been folded and set aside. Henry was about to get up from the bamboo-frame couch and put the screen back into place when his mother kneeled beside his armrest and spoke in a firm, hushed tone:

“I am not badgering you.” She was so close he could feel her breath puff against his blood-clotted ear. He stared straight ahead into the fireplace, where the amoebic flames spurted from newly exposed embers. Ashes drifted as the flames lengthened, issuing from smoldering nuggets of pine. There was no grill. Beneath the logs, the crosshatched kindling had dissolved into limp gray tubes. Even the long-lasting chunk of oak seemed about to collapse.

“I know you’re not,” Henry said. When he faced his mother, he could see miniature reflections of himself curved across the glassy dampness of her eyes. The stacked levels of his reflection—his mouth, his eyes, his head wrapped in gauze—were
squashed flat as pancakes. Her eyes mirrored the fire too, making it look as if the crown of his head had erupted into flames.

She said, “I’m so glad to hear you say that, young man.”

“We understand, Mom.” Jason looked over from his end of the couch.

Henry turned to his father in the wicker chair beside the fire. He wore khaki pants and a black T-shirt, an expression of grim tolerance flickering on his face. His research had been interrupted when the brothers had shown up that morning, and after he satisfied himself that they were safe he seemed to dwell on his work. Strewn over the coffee table, his books exerted a gravitational pull on his attention.

The brothers were dressed in white terrycloth bathrobes. Henry’s legs were stretched toward the fire and his brother’s legs were curled up beneath him. The night wasn’t cold, but their father loved to make use of the gargantuan fireplace built from the slabs of split boulders. Henry looked at his boots drying on the hearth, casting shadows over the stones, then peered sideways at his reflection in a window. Darkness blotted the glass, where his profile seemed uncannily familiar, like some Middle Eastern suspect on the *CBS Evening News*. The dressing on his head resembled a turban. He would become a laughing stock at school—even more than usual. Here comes Henry, the Shah of Iran. Maybe he would take the dressing off before reaching the school yard. Maybe he would hide his injury under a sombrero. Maybe—

A gust buffeted the side of the house facing Lake Atitlan, the north side, and the screen door squeaked as it swung inward, its reversible hinges rusty. The fire brightened. Aloe vera blossoms scented the living room with their perfume. After the storm clouds had passed over the caldera hours ago, they left the landscaped terraces of the cottage fresh and moist. Henry’s mother slipped her cool fingertips inside the flared sleeve of his bathrobe.

“Maybe I should come with you guys,” she said.

“What, to school?” Henry jerked his arm away and crossed his arms over his
chest. His parents had decided that he and his brother should go to school tomorrow, despite what had happened. Soldiers were rarely seen in the quiet village of San Bernardo. He was less worried about encountering soldiers than the prospect of his being teased at school: Henry, the Japanese Kamikaze. Ayatollah Henry. Most of their walk to school took place on obscure paths that cut through the coffee farms and oak forests around the base of Volcano Toliman, but as they neared San Bernardo they emerged onto public roads and usually became a spectacle—the gringo kids. The presence of their mother would add to the spectacle.

“Your hair would just draw more attention,” Henry said. “What do they call that?” He turned to his brother on the couch—more for support than information.

“What, Rubio?” Jason said. “Peine de oro?”

“Thank you.” Henry slapped his palm on the armrest, feeling that his brother was backing him. But the violence of the impact shot up his arm and awakened fresh waves of pain in his shoulder. Before bed he would ask for another prescription painkiller.

“Boys have got a point.” Their father nodded, his broad forehead glistening with sweat that seemed powered by the industry of his thoughts. The right leg of his khaki pants had been torn away to accommodate the cast on his ankle. A tuft of curly hairs stuck out from the collar of his black T-shirt, going all the way up his throat and into his beard. He grinned at Henry’s mother and said, “You’ve become a mother roadside attraction.”

When nobody laughed, his father shook his head. Henry felt stupid, realizing that he must have missed something important. A tall man, his father made him think of an intellectual giraffe cropping high leafage among a herd of runts. His research books were piled over the coffee table, including a facsimile edition of an ancient Mayan codex, a hieroglyphic book made of pounded-bark paper coated with a plaster wash, the paper folded and encased in covers with fake jaguar skin. The wicker chair creaked when his father stretched out his arm to pick up his wine glass. An L-shaped cast covered his right
ankle, which rested on the round tabletop beside an ashtray, two long-stemmed glasses, and a bottle of red wine, their second. When he leaned back in his chair the table shifted, causing the cork to roll toward the edge.

“Maybe you guys should stay home tomorrow,” their mother said.

“There’s an idea.” Henry tried not to sound too eager, but a flurry of enthusiasm left him giddy with excitement—or maybe it was the painkillers. “We do have important things to do around here.” He wanted to elbow his brother, but couldn’t reach.

Jason said, “I am getting out of practice.”

“You guys have already missed too many days as it is,” his father said. Henry wanted to object, but kept his mouth shut. He didn’t think he could influence the reasoning of his father, who sometimes called education “the Holy Grail.” The school year was less than a month old and they had already missed too many days. Besides, the school had a health clinic where his broken ankle had been treated. Henry should stop in there. Before taking a sip, his father raised his glass higher. “Here’s to Jason and his wonderful awards, talents, and honors.”

“We’re both very proud of you,” his mother said. She looked past Henry, who flattened his shoulders against the cushions while she and Jason exchanged smiles.

“Me too,” Henry said. Everyone regarded him queerly, and his face grew warm. He fiddled with the belt of his bathrobe, feeling his sore palms. His mother had painted iodine on them.

“I want you guys to be careful.” She stood and went back to the dinner table.

When Jason said, “We will, Mom,” Henry turned to his brother, drew the back of his wrist across his forehead, and rolled his eyes. He thought they had dodged a bullet, but his brother frowned and plucked lint from the sleeve of his bathrobe.

Clearing the dinner table was normally Henry’s job, and he watched his mother gratefully. The dining room and living room were different parts of a single room connected to the kitchen through a square opening in the wall, where a waist-level
counter was patterned with tiles resembling ancient Mayan petroglyphs. The tabletop was a six-inch-thick cross section of two tree trunks—his father said they were ash trees—fused together in growth. Shaped like a figure eight, the table’s polished surface gleamed under the cut-glass chandelier.

Henry loved this place and resented not being allowed to lounge around for a couple days. The house was a two-story lodge with a high, A-shaped roof, the living room paneled with blond wood. Knotty-pine joists formed rows overhead and met at the peak, where a horizontal beam ran the length of the ceiling. The bigness of the house matched the bigness of Lake Atitlan and the three volcanoes. The fireplace chimney tapered like the neck of a brontosaurus. He missed not having a television, but there was a short-wave radio. And he loved reading on the couch, especially when his brother practiced violin upstairs. The music always seemed to get jumbled with the sentences going through his head.

Dishes clinked. Henry smelled the sourdough bread his mother had baked to go with their dinner of meatloaf and potatoes au gratin. The meal had relaxed him. Knowing his parents were in charge relaxed him even more. When the brothers had first shown up, drenched and battered, their mother had been upset, their father composed. He had managed to calm her down, so that by dinnertime she had become peaceful. But now she seemed in danger of getting worked up again. Henry shot a worried glance to his father over the coffee table. Then he lowered his gaze.

“I'm sorry we lost your books,” he said.

“Not we,” Jason said.

Henry turned to his brother. “What?”

“Not we,” Jason said. “You.”

“All right,” their father said. “Anyway, we can’t get them back.” When he had first learned that his extra research materials were lost, he had let the matter drop.

Henry was relieved that his father didn’t blame him. He said, “We can’t drag the
"That lake is over fifteen-hundred feet deep," his father said. "The deepest point has never been discovered."

"You told us, Daddy," Henry said. "That’s what I mean."

The wicker strands around the enclosed base of his father’s chair crackled as they expanded in the heat. His father smiled.

"Some critter seems to be trapped beneath this chair," he said, winking at Henry and Jason. The animal under the chair was a joke they repeated so often it had become a ritual. Each time they tried to dream up more and more exotic possibilities.

"Could be a Dodo," Henry said.

"This is nothing to joke about," his mother said. "Assault rifles, rebel guerrillas."

She pitched a wad of paper napkins toward the fireplace, but it broke apart, one clump landing in Henry’s left boot. The rest sailed into the fire, where the flames reddened.

"They were soldiers, actually." As soon as Henry saw her expression he wished that he had kept his big mouth shut, for a change. He was such a dolt.

"How can you be so sure?" His mother stepped in front of the couch, where the fireplace cast her shadow between Henry and his brother. Cool breezes made the screen door sway and creak. Swelling and flickering, his mother’s shadow darted.

"I already told you," Henry said. "They had modern equipment." He appealed to his father, who was rubbing his eyes. Without glasses, he squinted bleakly across the room.

His father said, "Enough is enough."

"What is that supposed to mean?" His mother looked back over her shoulder.

"Just give the kid a break." His cast still on the table, he reached for his wine. He sipped from his glass, set it down, and leaned back in his chair. The wine sparkled. The cork rolled even farther across the table, not stopping until its tip extended over the edge.

"I want to know what those men wanted," his mother said.
"They wanted to see our identification." Henry turned to his brother. Let him talk for a while. He considered going upstairs to bed and glanced at the clock on the mantel, wondering if Beatriz had let the dog off the leash yet. Each night before Beatriz cooked, she hitched Balam to a post outside the groundskeeper’s quarters that she shared with Francisco. After their meal she fed the dog leftovers, if there were any, then let the boys keep her overnight and take her with them to school the next morning. Balam spent most school days sleeping under Henry’s desk.

Jason said, “They also wanted to know where we live.” This was a new detail. Henry saw that it touched a chord in his mother, who was wearing her denim skirt with a design of California poppies. She had burned the jogging suit and the black wig.

“You mean you actually gave them our address?”

“Mom,” Henry said, “we don’t exactly have one.”

“Don’t you get smart with me, young—”

“I’m not.” Henry looked past her, staring straight ahead toward the fire. Flames rippled from the hissing embers. “There’s no number. Our road doesn’t even have a name.”

The dirt lane that led to the lodge bordered a coffee farm before ending in a gray-soiled area stamped with the footprints of chickens. That was where his father parked the Dodge Swinger and where Francisco and Beatriz lived behind the lodge. There was no mailbox on the property. Letters were delivered at the general post office in San Bernardo, two miles away. Henry had picked up their mail on his way home from school so often that his father had started calling him the mailman.

“This is our real address,” his father said. He spread his arms and displayed the front of his black T-shirt. Breadcrumbs littered a white silkscreen illustration of the Milky Way galaxy. An arrow pointed to one of the galaxy’s spiral arms and indicated: “You are here.”

“Cut the act, Milton.” His mother flounced into the kitchen. Through the opening
between the kitchen and dining room she said, “Mr. MacArthur-Award-Winning-Genius Astronomer.”

“Sir would suffice.” His father flung his voice toward the kitchen, offering the boys a smile. Henry smiled back, but Jason looked down.

“Slob would suffice too.” His mother slam-dunked something into the garbage can. She came back out and snatched spoons, forks, and knives from the dining room table. She walked in front of the fire in her bare feet and looked down at Henry’s father, her fist bristling with silverware. “Your T-shirt needs ironing, motherfucker.”

Henry blinked. Then he closed his eyes and massaged them. Against the backs of his eyelids, he could see the negative images of burning logs. When he opened his eyes again, his father was contemplating the wrinkled representation of the Milky Way galaxy on his T-shirt.

He said, “These wrinkles merely represent the warped fabric of space-time.”

“I thought you were just some nutty academic incapable of properly dressing yourself.” His mother shook her fistful of silverware.

“Not so, not so.” His father smiled at the boys, who were being invited to share the humor. “I’m making a kind of metaphysical fashion statement.”

Henry laughed. “Those bread crumbs must be stars,” he said. But when he saw the expression on his mother’s face, he felt guilty. His smile withered.

“That’s right, that’s right.” His father poked an index finger into his beard and gazed toward the rafters in the high ceiling. “Each crumb would account for about ten-billion stars.”

In the fire the oak log caved in, collapsing in the middle. Sparks showered onto the hearth. Henry wanted to put the screen guard back into place, but he leaned forward and squeezed his kneecaps instead. Ashes sashayed lazily up toward the chimney, like snowflakes in reverse.

“Are you crazy?” his mother said. “Have you gone completely insane?”
“Much madness is divinest sense.”
“This was a desperate situation for the boys.”
“Yeah, they’re a couple of desperadoes.”
“You sons have just been terrorized, and here you are making light of it.”
“Freud claims that jokes bear an intimate relation to the unconscious.”
“Freud has nothing to do with our children.”
“Au contraire.”
“Speak English.”
“Sorry,” his father said. “Forgot I was speaking to uncultivated boobs.”
“Enough with the jokes.”
“Actually, it isn’t a joke about space-time.” His father sat more fully upright and smiled at Henry. “It really is warped.”
“You’re what’s warped, Milton.” His mother stepped closer to the fire. She said, “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”
“Now you’re waxing eloquent.” His father smiled, but Henry kept a straight face. He felt sorry for his mother, whose eyes had turned red.
“I can’t do this.” She slumped down on the hearth and dropped the silverware in a clattering heap beside her.
“That’s all right,” his father said. “The dishes can wait till morning.” He pushed himself out of his chair and hobbled to the fire. His crutches leaned against the mantel beside Henry’s boots. On the mantel the glass dial of the ticking clock reflected his father’s face lopsidedly.
“You know what I mean,” his mother said.
“Hear that, boys?” His father grabbed the poker with one hand, stiff-armed the mantel with the other, and jabbed at the logs. “The voice of omniscience.”
His mother said, “I am leaving.”
“But we just got here.” Henry thought how unfair it would be if she made them
leave so soon. “We’ve still got to hike Volcano Toliman,” he said, as if that were the
most important thing.

“I never meant to drag you children into a terror zone,” she said. Spears of damp
hair clung to her forehead, and the fire made them appear carrot-colored.

Henry said, “It’s not exactly a terror zone.”

“I’ll have you know there’s a civil war going on in this country, young man.” She
reached for her glass of wine, which clinked against the bottle on the coffee table. The
bottle cast a shadow that shrank and expanded.

“We’ll have the Battle of Antietam right here if you try to make us leave.” His
father stabbed an ember.

In his gut Henry felt hollow. Breezes whistled through the screen door, making the
flames spurt. Along the uppermost edges of the embers little tongue-shaped flames
capered.

“I think we should leave.” His mother’s voice rose. “My vacation is over.”

His father said, “The opera ain’t over till the fat lady sings.”

“You saying I’m fat?”

“I don’t think you understand the expression,” his father said.

Henry nodded. The expression had been used by Dick Motta, head coach of the
Washington Bullets, while cautioning his team and fans during the NBA playoffs this
season. But Henry could see that his mother didn’t recognize the context, even though
she had watched the finals with them.

“Listen.” His father adopted a more sober tone. “I’m simply saying that I came
here to research the ancient Maya, and that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“Getting dangerous around here.” His mother took a gulp of wine and widened her
eyes as a trickle escaped from her mouth and went streaking down her throat.

“We’ve only been here three months,” his father said. “No sense in turning tail
now.”
"I think there is." She dabbed her throat with the back of her hand.

"Over one minor incident?"

"It may seem minor to you, but you weren’t there."

"Neither were you," his father said. The poker knocked against the wrought-iron stand as he leaned it beside the tiny broom and shovel. He kept one hand on the mantel and fixed Henry with a direct look, as if he were addressing one of his students. "Did you feel that your safety was in jeopardy this morning?"

“No, sir,” Henry replied. From the corner of his vision, he saw his brother look away. The trellis on the front porch creaked in the wind.

Their mother said, “That isn’t the point.”

“What exactly is the point, since you’re such an authority on the subject?”

“To you I’ll never be anything more than your ditzy little secretary.”

His father seemed very tall standing beside the fire, his shadow stretching across the living room. He said, “Can we review my English rendition of Catullus?”

“Is everything a game with you, Milton?”

"Mea culpa."

The expression sounded familiar, but Henry wasn’t sure what it meant.

“The point.” His mother paused. “The point is that regardless of what your son says to placate you, I refuse to jeopardize the welfare of our children just so you can enjoy an exotic locale in which to research your stupid book.”

“There’s more to it than that, April.”

“What more?” His mother seized the wine bottle, and Henry thought she was going to throw it. He tensed, but all she did was peel one corner of the label with her thumbnail.

In relief and weariness he closed his eyes and listened to the clock ticking on the mantel, picturing its glass dial and burr-shaped winding stem. He decided that he was going upstairs to bed and was opening his eyes when the bottle shattered. He lunged back
against the cushions, the couch skidding. His father leaned both hands on the mantel. Near his feet the flames hissed, flaring a vivid pumpkin color. His mother’s eyes glimmered.

“What’s the matter?” His father laughed as the puddle oozed over the hearth, ballooning out toward the pile of silverware. “Not a good enough year?”

“What’s the matter? What’s the matter?” His mother pursed her lips and spoke in a mocking tone. “I’ll tell you what’s the matter....” But instead of telling him she buried her face in her hands.

His father said, “Get a towel, Henry.”

Henry stood. His back and knees ached. Jason looked stricken, the reflected flames glistening in his eyes. As Henry limped around the couch, the brothers exchanged a look that said, “Worse than usual, possibly serious.” He passed the screen door and inhaled the cool, storm-rinsed air. The moon had risen. Through the screen Lake Atitlan looked maroon.

In the kitchen he noticed the newspaper article Jason had saved in his pocket. Still damp from their swim, the article had been unfolded and laid out to dry on a cookie sheet, its long column legible under the light. Henry skimmed the text, looking for his brother’s name:

Music for Youth Foundation Presents $20,000 to 4 Outstanding Musicians

Miami (September 16, 1978) The Music for Youth Foundation (MYF), in conjunction with the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts (NFAA), last night presented four outstanding young musicians with a total of $20,000 in cash awards at a black-tie ceremony in the Chopin Room of Miami’s Hotel InterContinental, which was followed by a champagne reception and silent auction. The twenty finalists had been chosen from a pool of 683 applicants....

Nine-year-old Jason Foster, the youngest contestant at the ceremony, was
presented with a $5,000 Young Musician Gold Award for his work with the violin. He is currently in the second grade at Greenbrier Elementary in Boonsboro, Maryland. He was a Western Maryland Young Artist Concerto Winner in 1977, which qualified him for consideration for the $5,000 Scholarship Awards. Jason was also named Western Maryland Performing Artist of the Month in 1977. He hopes to study violin performance at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston or the Carnegie Mellon School of Music in Pittsburgh and credits his success to the encouragement of his parents, Dr. and Mrs. Milton Foster. Jason’s paternal grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Foster, were both in attendance at the ceremony.

In the brightness of the kitchen Henry looked up from the article and glanced toward the dark living room, where the fire cast a reddish glimmer.

“Sure,” his father was saying. “I guess that’s why you’re setting such a majestic example.”

“Me?” his mother said. “What about you? You squander all your time pondering inscrutable tomes, but you can’t even see what’s right here before your eyes.”

“Perhaps you can clarify it for me.”

“Your family is collapsing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re ripping us apart on the bloody altar of your academic ambition.”

“How eloquent.”

Henry unrolled paper towels from the dispenser on the wall, detaching them carefully along the perforated edge. When he returned to the living room, his fingers were trembling.

“Very eloquent indeed.” His father raised his eyebrows. Henry dropped his gaze to his feet. “Maybe I should scribble that one down for posterity.”
“Fuck you, Milton.”
“I guess they should’ve given the violin award to you, darling.”
“Don’t you dare take anything away from our son’s accomplishment.” His mother
looked at Jason, who sat frozen in his white bathrobe. “You should be proud.”
“I am proud,” his father said. From his tone Henry could tell he was sincere.
“Funny way of showing it.”

As he soaked up the wine, Henry stared into the coals. Embers the size of papayas
were seething in the cavernous belly of the fireplace, and when he leaned closer he could
hear a high-pitched undercurrent of sizzling. Each flame was rooted in a sheer, invisible
crescent. The flames seemed alive, shivering in currents of air.

Breezes cooled his forehead as he padded barefoot to the kitchen with both hands
full of wet Bounty. Wine dripped on his feet. When he saw Balam nosing her way into
the living room through the screen door, he stopped. But then he realized it wasn’t a dog.
He said, “Dad?”

A long-whiskered otter wormed its way inside, reared up onto its hind legs, and
cased the room with its eyes and nose. Its front paws dangled, as if fingering the brim of a
hat.

The screen door swung shut, pinching its tail. Unperturbed, the otter dropped onto
all fours and waddled toward the coffee table.

When Jason looked over the back of the couch he said, “Where’s Balam?”
“What on earth?” His mother bolted onto her feet before the fireplace.
His father said, “*Lutra canadensis.*”

The otter moved with a rolling motion, leaving a watery trail on the tiles. At the
coffee table, it rose on its hind legs and put its front paws on the edge next to a tall pile of
his father’s books. The cork fell onto the floor and went rolling and bobbling under the
couch. The otter sniffed inside the ash tray, where a roach-clip held a stubbed-out joint
of *Sinsemilla.* The otter’s pelt seemed to bristle with quills. Henry could see its ribs.
His father said, "He must be a cool otter."

"Maybe it's a she," Jason said.

The otter ducked under the table, emerged on the other side, and sniffed his mother's toes. She held perfectly still except for her flaring nostrils. After a brief investigation, the otter ambled back toward the screen door. His father pointed at the door. Henry held the screen door open. The otter waddled down the steps and went rollicking across the lawn.

Afterward they all crowded in the doorway. Henry flipped on the porch light. In the electric glare the otter stopped beside an aloe vera bush and looked back over its shoulder, its jeweled eyes glowing red.

Waves lapped against the shore, and a round moon was rising over the caldera. Henry stepped onto the path that went down to the dock, feeling the blunt stones on his soles as he followed his mother and brother to the cove. The path wound between islands of landscaped boulders and flowers.

His father remained standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with a crutch tucked under one arm. Henry headed toward the water, passing the avocado trees with a hammock strung between them. In the moonlight a chameleon darted across the path. The moon seemed slightly lopsided, and he remembered that it had been full last night.

Lake Atitlan reflected a lane of scalloped brightness. Jason looked like some ghost floating toward the dock in his white bathrobe. Henry passed the boathouse on his way to the water. At the dock, he looked back toward the lodge. His father still stood silhouetted in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Smoke boiled from the chimney and blew toward the water, giving the air a woody scent that mixed with the fragrance of aloe vera and orange blossoms. The commotion of the otter drew his attention back to the water. He turned and walked toward the end of the dock, creaking across the boards and trying to avoid splinters.
The otter swam around and around, making circles in their cove as if performing for their benefit, leaping out of the water and belly-flopping back down.

Jason said, “She must have a litter nearby.”

“She’s a mother?” Henry was surprised.

His own mother said, “Why else would she try to distract us?”

“That explains why she’s hungry.” Henry listened to the waves lapping against the barnacled pilings and watched the otter splash around. He scuffed the weather-split boards and glanced down through the gaps, where the waves pitched and glimmered. When he looked back toward the house his father had disappeared, leaving a lighted space in the doorway.
CHAPTER IV

The dog clambered up the stairs beside Jason. Henry followed them, leaning on the wrought iron handrail, pausing at each step. The lodge had two bedrooms upstairs—the master bedroom with an interior balcony overlooking the living room, its wooden guardrail missing several spokes and usually draped with beach towels—and the bedroom the brothers shared. Their room faced east with a bay window that had three panes of plate glass and lots of tiny diamond-shaped panes of leaded glass set in a band across the top. On clear mornings the ornamental panes captured dozens of warped suns as light poured into the grove of orange trees next door.

In the doorway of their bedroom Jason pointed at their heating grate and raised an eyebrow. Henry reached inside the entrance and flipped on the ceiling light. Balam brushed past their legs, wagging her tail as she entered. After they were all inside, Henry eased the door shut.

"You know the drill," he said.

At night the temperatures could drop into the forties in the western highlands, so the lodge came equipped with central heat. Soon after moving in, Henry had discovered that voices from the living room downstairs carried up the air shaft and frequently could be heard through their bedroom grate. The grate had adjustable vents on back and two screws that kept the grill from sliding around. He had stripped the threads from the
screws, and now as he lifted the metal contraption out of the floor the loose heads wobbled. He kneeled beside the opening and set the grate next to Jason’s spindle-legged music stand.

Covered with Navajo wool blankets, their twin beds were situated on either side of the bay window. Jason came over with their pillows. Henry chucked his pillow against the baseboard and drove his fist into the stuffing, a spongy material from kapok trees.

“Going for a knockout?” Jason said.

The wood floor mashed into Henry’s kneecaps. He curled on his side and nestled the crown of his head against his pillow, angling his good ear toward the air shaft. No voices, but he was glad to smell that joint burning. Maybe they would talk more openly now. Jason lay down facing him, and their knees bumped. Balam padded across the small Aztec rug between their beds, clicked over the floorboards, and nosed Henry’s palm. He had forgotten to save her bread crumbs from dinner. He patted her head over the black spot that ringed her left eye.

“Old Balam,” he said. “We should call her Pirate.”

When Jason said, “Listen,” Henry pressed his ear closer to the opening.

“I am not letting them make that decision,” their mother was saying. Her voice rose up the air shaft from the living room, sounding tinny and slurred.

“Then you’ll have to take them both,” their father said, “Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”

Henry felt his brother look at him, but kept his eyes averted. The argument had changed—or evolved, as their father would say. Far from insisting that they all stay in Guatemala, he sounded willing to consider options. Henry recognized the characters from Through the Looking-Glass, but didn’t see what they had to do with him and his brother, who were far from being mirror images of each other. Balam circled a spot near his feet, lay down, and wheezed.

“What kind of logic is that?” his mother said.
A coughing spell made his father gag. After he recovered he said, "Smooth."
"I know we should avoid favoritism, but Henry would be hard for me to manage."
"Your idea."
"Open marriage was your brain child, buster."
"What does that have to do with anything?" his father said. "Besides, you eventually warmed up to it with a certain... ah, deferential zeal."
"At least Jason doesn't have social problems."

Henry looked into the air shaft. He was the awkward, shy one, while his brother made friends easily. After only three weeks at the Catholic school, Jason already had friends.
"You could bring him into a more active relation with life."
"Don't you think I've tried?" his mother said. "It's like tugging a piece of furniture screwed to the floor."
"So you propose leaving behind the problem child?"
"He's not exactly a problem child."
"Go ahead, you finish it."
"He'll be going away to college next year, anyway."

When a silence followed, the brothers exchanged a look. Henry felt embarrassed. He peered into the galvanized metal air shaft as if he might dive into it and wished that he were easygoing like his brother or quick-witted like his father. But the natural things to do and the smart things to say typically occurred to him after it was too late. He wasn't brilliant or accomplished, but hoped that he could get admitted to the University of Maryland. Because he would be away from the United States throughout his senior year of high school, he had mailed out his application before leaving home.
"At least wait until we get back from Palenque," his father said. "Give you some time to mull things over."
"I'm not about to go sightseeing at your precious little ruins," his mother said.
“I’ve had it up to here.”

Henry imagined his mother leveling her hand beneath her chin.

His father said, “We have to let them decide.”

“Seems cruel.”

The next silence dragged on for too long. Henry braced himself on an elbow.

“Mom crying?”

Jason’s eyes widened. The dog lifted her head from her paws and thumped her tail.

Henry struggled onto his feet, feeling like an invalid. When his robe snagged
Jason’s music stand, the stand tipped over and clattered onto the floor. Balam yelped and
scrambled onto all fours. Pages scattered and spun down, feeling curiously cool where
they touched Henry’s feet. He felt a savage impulse to kick the music, but his anger
turned to shame. He placed the stand back on its tripod and tidied the pages into a stack.
He tapped the edges. *2 Concertos for Violin* by Johann Sebastian Bach. He replaced the
music and turned off the electric light.

The moonlight was soothing. He lowered himself to the floor and glanced at the
window, where a blizzard of lunar reflections was trapped in the panes of leaded glass.

“Do you question this report?” His mother was slurring her words. “Amnesty
International claims that since 1966 over 20,000 Guatemalans have disappeared or been
killed. The army—financed by guess who—tears out their fingernails and gouges out their
eyes. They actually cut off the body parts of living people, even slitting their throats and
then—”

“Domingo said things are calming down,” his father said.

“What about Panzos?”

“That’s practically all the way over on the Carib—”

“More than a hundred Kekchi *campesinos* mowed down with machine guns. That
was free months—I mean three months ago—and all because they protested the government
denying them title to their land.”

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“I realize it sounds—”

“Who’s next?” his mother said. “I’ll tell you who’s next: the political leaders and those trade union guys. Then the journalists, the priests, the teachers.”

“News flash,” his father said. “We discussed this ad nauseam before we left.”

“The Maya in this country have to grovel before the master race.”

“Keep it down. The kids might hear us.”

“Staying here isn’t worth the risk.”

“The life without risk is not worth living.”

“Thanks for the information, Cicero.”

“That was Thoreau, actually, but scholarship never was your primary asset.”

“I graduated from Stanford,” his mother said, “with honors.”

“Good thing I hitched my wagon to your star.”

Henry kneed his brother. “What are you going to do?” he said.

“I’m going with Mom.”

“You already made up your mind?” Henry felt lightheaded. Someone hollered, and he pressed his ear closer to the air shaft.

“What assumptions?” his mother said. “I am merely assuming they should avoid getting shot! But maybe that’s too naive. Maybe I have to unpack my goddamn assumptions.”

At faculty parties Henry had listened to professors talk about unpacking assumptions. Now the idea reminded him that Jason’s suitcase was probably lying at the bottom of Lake Atitlan. His father had once compared sentences to the rows of suitcases going along the conveyer belts at National Airport. Meanings could be taken out and examined, like socks and gloves.

“If they get divorced...” Henry propped himself on his right elbow. “If they get divorced, one of them will have to move out of our house.”

“The house in Boonsboro?” Jason said. “Mom won’t stay in that dump.”
Henry gazed at the window and realized this was true. His mother had never seemed at home in the country. His father was the one who loved the old farmhouse, from which he commuted to Johns Hopkins. “Then you’ll probably have to go live in an apartment or something,” he said, “maybe in Baltimore or Washington.”

“That’s okay. We could still be together.”

“Who could?”

“Us.”

“We could still run the marathon and all, but what about Dad?”

“He might never get out of this place. He’s crazy.”

“He is not,” Henry said. “He’s just marching to a different drummer.”

That night Henry couldn’t stop worrying. He watched the rising moon bleach the plate glass and project a triangle that slid down the opposite wall and passed over his brother with glacial slowness, folding over his bed and touching the sheet music stacked on his bedside table. Jason hibernated beneath his covers. Henry peeled back his own covers, crossed over to Jason’s side, and held one page to the light. *Sonata in G Major* by George Frideric Handel.

Balam flopped her tail on the Aztec rug. When she yawned, her tongue curled. In the master bedroom his parents were quiet. He crawled back under his covers, laced his fingers behind his head, and stared at the crack that zigzagged through the plaster over the door. He had never felt an earthquake here, only tremors that jiggled the cut glass chandelier over the dining room table and sometimes widened the crack over their bedroom door. He wondered if this could be their last night together. No, his mother wouldn’t go that soon. Even if she did, she might come back. His parents had separated once before—eight years ago, the summer they moved from California to Maryland—and she had come back that time. Still, he had better make up his mind. He wanted to stay with Jason and his mother, but couldn’t see himself leaving his father behind.
That summer his parents had been eager to leave the Bay Area, where the political conflicts were spiraling out of control. At first some of their friends had been arrested while picketing Mel's Drive-In for discrimination. After that tensions increased. Free Speech protests escalated into hostile confrontations between the Berkeley students and administration. Anti-war rallies turned into riots. Ronald Reagan, then Governor of California, insisted that evil subversives were behind the protests. At one demonstration his parents got boxed in by police as tear gas was dropped from helicopters. When his father was hired at Johns Hopkins—the same week Jason was born—his parents seemed relieved to have a way out.

They had met in the City Lights Bookstore when his father, a Physics major at Caltech, was exploring graduate programs up around San Francisco. He questioned the hard-science bias at Caltech. Although he never ultimately left the hard sciences, he had been excited about graduate study in anthropology at the time. They first saw each other from opposite sides of a bookshelf, peeking through the chinks. His father bought Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey*, his mother *Anna Karenina*. She was a freshman at Stanford, but after Henry's birth she took time off from classes and worked as the receptionist in the Biology department. Later she returned to classes, graduating the same year his father finished his doctorate in astronomy.

After moving his mother realized she missed the Bay Area, despite all the discord. She had loved strolling through the sunshine to sushi restaurants and hip bookstores. She loved the coffee shops with sitar music and loved their apartment—their pad—with her own handcrafted pillows strewn over the shag carpet. She missed the gatherings when his father showed films on the wall. Sometimes Henry was allowed to watch. He had been there the night Michel Foucault showed up with his entourage and they all watched *Nanook of the North*.

His father wanted to find an old house in the country and fix it up, but his mother preferred moving to Baltimore, the most convenient location. She wasn't into the
country. She spent three weeks in the farmhouse before flying back to California, where she and his brother stayed with her sister in Monterey. Henry understood she had taken his brother because he was a newborn, but why she left in the first place had been mysterious. The country couldn’t have been that bad, even for her. Now he figured it probably had to do with his father wanting to see other women, but at the time he had been nine years old. He had imagined she wasn’t satisfied with him. After all, he did struggle in math and often got caught after bedtime reading comics under the covers with a flashlight. The longer she stayed away, the more he had felt jarred. As the Maryland fall unraveled into winter, the icy weather mirrored his isolation.

He loved the cottage beside Lake Atitlan, but his real home was a two-story brick house built in 1854 with a metal roof and a hand-pump whose spigot coughed water from a cistern in sloppy bursts. Painted red, the house and barn sat on stone foundations within a five-acre slope of South Mountain, two miles from Boonsboro. Mulberry branches clawed his bedroom windows. Their front yard bordered a road beside Greenbrier State Park. The park had a lake, South Mountain, and a leg of the Appalachian Trail. Three white pines towered over the lilac bushes in the front yard, and every spring the blossoms were laced with the smell of pine sap. The back yard dipped toward a farm-patched valley to the north. Mountains ranged over the horizon in Pennsylvania. There were mountains beyond mountains. Civil War battlefields were everywhere.

His mother left for the trial separation in mid-August. Unpacked luggage still cluttered their Maryland farmhouse, and the mess soon got worse. In the refrigerator guacamole sprouted mold. Carry-out leftovers spoiled and pizza crusts hardened in shallow boxes between the refrigerator and trash, now glutted with egg shells, banana peels, and Chinese cartons illustrated with red-ink sketches of Buddhist pagodas. Chopsticks pierced the Glad bags.

One night in September the telephone rang. Before answering, his father picked a path among the opened U-haul boxes, leaned over the record player, the lava lamp tinting
his profile green, and lifted the needle off Lola Beltran. “Your mother,” he said.

The receiver, upside down beside the turntable, rocked as the vinyl grooves spun in silence. Henry felt spellbound. He lifted the cool receiver and tugged against the knotted cord.

“Mom,” he said, “when are you coming home?”

He had spoken with her one other time since she left—seventeen days earlier when she called from a payphone at National Airport as her flight boarded, saying that she and Jason were taking a two-week vacation. Now she was calling from Monterey.

“I found a job in a used bookstore,” she said. “It’s called Twice-Sold Tales.”

At first Henry didn’t know how to interpret this declaration. Her lighthearted tone comforted him, but her meaning left him bewildered.

He said, “We ran out of milk.”

“I want you to know this has nothing to do with you.”

“Dad did the shopping.”

“I mean this arrangement, Henry.” She paused, their connection crackling. “This is something your father and I just have to do.”

“What is?” He gripped the dumbbell-shaped receiver, the earpiece and mouthpiece seeming too far apart for his head, and gaped out the living room windows. Gusts rattled the mulberry branches outside the brick walls, making a few leaves parachute through a cone of brightness from the porch floodlight. His father had told him that mulberry leaves were sometimes used as food for silkworms, whose larvae made silk for their cocoons.

His mother sniffled at the other end of the line, and he envisioned her fine yellow hair spilling over her shoulders. He could hear her breathing at the other end. When she steered toward the subject of Santa Claus, he realized the situation must be serious. He finally put two and two together.

After he set the receiver back in its cradle, he ventured into the glare of the kitchen and asked his father when she would be coming back. That morning his father had shaved
off his beard, and he looked shockingly young as he stared into the dark gulf of their back yard. A spinning mulberry leaf settled in some branches. The rolled-glass windowpanes warped their reflections, making Henry’s eyes look bugged out and his father’s belly swollen.

Dirty laundry used to magically transform into fragrant towers in Berkeley, but now it oozed from the hamper. He wore mismatched socks his first few weeks at Greenbrier Elementary, where he didn’t see any black kids. Some fifth-graders chewed tobacco and spat out racial slurs. Once, in the cafeteria, Henry shook a wing of fried chicken and said, “What kind of crap are they feeding us now—soul food?” Tommy Grossnickel turned into a Jell-O of giggles. His nickname was Porky—even though the main thing about him was that he got straight As without studying. But Henry began to feel guilty after Grace Hemings gave him a cutting look.

Trouble swirled around Mr. Motely, whose glasses had the thickest lenses Henry had ever seen. Four Eyes, also known as The Cue Ball, visited his home room daily. Henry volunteered to answer the questions dealing with the addition and subtraction of whole numbers. That seemed to satisfy an invisible quota enshrined in Mr. Motely’s head. But when fractions or negatives were involved, Henry pondered the trough that held his pencil, a Venus Velvet.

His fears skyrocketed one rain-chilled afternoon in November when Mr. Motely introduced the section on word problems: there are 2,012 pounds of cow manure to be shoveled into bags with fifty-eight pounds in each bag. How many full bags would there be? How much would be left over? A farm has the shape of a rectangle. It is four miles wide and nine and one-half miles long. What is the perimeter of the farm? A beagle weighs twenty pounds on earth, but on Mars would weigh two-fifths of that. How much would the beagle weigh on Mars?

“Perhaps our new pupil can answer the last one,” Mr. Motely said. Dark clouds had puffed around South Mountain all morning, and now rain streaked the windows.
Hot water knocked into the radiators, whose paint-blistered ribs issued greasy ripples of heat. Forecasters said that overnight the rain would turn to snow. “You enjoy reading, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Henry said. He had unpacked his twine-bound stacks of comics the day he arrived. He brought comics to school and read them during lunch. Superman was his pal.

“These word problems must seem quite simpleminded to such an assiduous young scholar,” Mr. Motely said. Students twisted around in their seats. Henry stared at the teacher, whose face seemed caved in, like a Halloween pumpkin rotting on a doorstep.

How much would the beagle weigh on Mars? Less, but how much less? He couldn’t get past his image of a puppy scampering around outside the landing module. Would there be a mother ship orbiting with more dogs—Labrador retrievers and border collies? He pictured dog biscuits floating in gravity-free space and an air hose plugged into a helmet with a window. The beagle would probably slobber over the glass.

“Wouldn’t the dog be better off right here on earth?” Henry said. A spit-ball stung his neck, and he flushed. “At least he could help fertilize the farm, and all.”

Laughter erupted. Henry dredged up a smile, as if he had been joking, but his expression felt pasted on. He turned to the windows and invested the view with fake enthusiasm. The windows were shut, but he imagined cranking them open, peeling off his mask, and skimming it outside. Rain pelted the windows. Birds huddled along the telephone lines, an abacus of starlings, adding and subtracting as some joined and others took off.

After school he walked home. The maples and elms looked stricken, their limbs glistening like shellac. Maybe he could go live with his mother in Monterey. He had been scared to ask her on the telephone with his father nearby, and she hadn’t brought up the subject. Ragged scarves of breath streamed from his lips. He stepped over the earthworms wriggling on San Mar Road. The walk was less than a mile, but seemed
longer. Still, it was better than taking the bus.

A family-sized carton of Joy stood on the washing machine. Dented at the corners, the frayed covers of his math book exposed layers that felt soft against his fingertips. He trudged upstairs, lugging the books to his bedroom where they wouldn’t invite any questions, and plodded back down. At the foot of the stairs he peeked into the doorway of his father’s study, a solemn place. His father commuted three days a week and wouldn’t be home for hours.

He shucked off his sneakers, padded across the Persian carpet, and spun the library globe. Larger than a beach ball, it was mounted on a wooden stand. He closed his eyes and stuck out his finger, which landed on Salamanca, a city in Spain. A wood-burning stove hunkered in a corner beside the roll-top desk. The brass stand that used to hold an asparagus fern in Berkeley now supported a coffee mug. The cushioned chair sat between the window and the two-drawer filing cabinet with the coffee maker and lamp on top. The window, framed by dotted Swiss curtains his mother had hung, faced the cordwood and hand-pump. Beyond the porch, the double-bladed axe was lodged in a chunk of black locust. When he leaned toward the glass, a sparrow poised on the axe-handle darted away and went looping over their picket fence.

In the barrister’s case his mother’s Russian novels were mixed with his father’s history and science books. Their move had unearthed different layers; some titles glinted like arrowheads. He teased out a paperback whose lettering had been doodled over so much he couldn’t read the title. But when he saw the picture of a mushroom cloud on the cover he put back the book. Nuclear war terrified him. The uranium that fueled the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima had been manufactured in Berkeley, according to his father. Henry had often participated in air-raid drills at Jefferson Elementary, as if after a nuclear blast he might go home and find his mother taking chocolate-chip cookies out of the oven.

Anne Frank’s diary rested between Leaves of Grass and Nobody Knows My Name.
He saw titles on the Black Panthers, the American war in Vietnam, and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory where his father had worked. His parents seemed to have read everything from Mao and Marx to Emerson and Thoreau. He had been two when Walter Cronkite reported that John F. Kennedy was dead. He couldn’t remember that, but he remembered the killing of Martin Luther King. He removed *Before Adam*, a book written by someone named Jack London. The cover featured an illustration of a treed ape scowling down at a saber-toothed tiger. He slipped the paperback into his pocket, thinking it must have been one of his father’s boyhood fascinations.

Before math the next day, Henry raised his hand for the lavatory pass. In the hall, he ducked into a doorway leading downstairs to the utility room, where a jungle gym of pipes radiated warmth. He could smell the dust cooking on the metal. Wire mesh embedded the soot-smudged windows. There was enough light for reading. Yesterday’s clouds had gone, leaving brilliant sunlight, and last night’s flurries had melted. He started reading. The boy in the story dreamed about an earlier lifetime when he had been an ancestral ape. Evolution was taken for granted, something that must have pleased his father as a boy.

A rapping on the pipes jarred him from the story. He looked down and saw the janitor, whose name-tag read, “Isaac.”

The principal’s secretary was painting her nails when Isaac opened the office door. The tang of nail polish smarted in Henry’s nose. “Do I have to go in?” he said.

Isaac put his free hand on Henry’s shoulder and smiled. He seemed to feel guilty for having taken the book and brought Henry to the principal’s office.

He said, “Big doors hang on small hinges.”

Inside the radio murmured about climbing any mountain, your cheating heart. Fiddles played in the background. The secretary looked at them. “How are you, Mr. Jackson?”

Isaac said, “I’m blessed.”
He guided Henry to a chair and spoke with the secretary, who said the principal had stepped out for lunch. Sunlight blazed through the Venetian blinds. When his vision adjusted, Henry was shocked. The secretary was a goddess, almost as beautiful as his own mother.

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," she said. The janitor closed the door behind him. They were alone in the room. "Not one peep out of you, young man."

"No, ma'am."

She tightened the cap on her nail polish. Then she waved both hands in a limp-wristed way before picking up the telephone receiver. She rotated the dial with the eraser end of her pencil, her nails moist and red, her sweater the color of tangerines. The corkscrew cord stretched out between her breasts as she leaned back and spoke to his father, the earpiece pressed against her long black hair. Her sleeves were pushed up to her elbows, and sunlight emblazoned the fine hairs on her forearms. Henry wondered if she knew how to make bread.

His father arrived within minutes. He took off his sunglasses, rubbed his clean-shaved jaws, and smiled at the secretary, who rose and reached her hand across the desk. They shook hands. She kept looking at his father as she pressed a button and spoke into the intercom, summoning Mr. Motely. Her voice echoed from the speakers in the hall.

After the math teacher entered he said, "This young scholar was caught reading pernicious material." He held the paperback Isaac must have given to him, clamping it between his thumb and forefinger as if it were a turd.

"Pernicious?" His father's expression was frozen in the transition from politeness to surprise. He turned to the secretary. When she shrugged, her sweater dipped between her breasts.

Mr. Motely held out the book to his father, who set his sunglasses upon the secretary's desk. He took the paperback in both hands, flipped it over, and flinched.

"What is the matter with this book?"
“It’s been banned.” Mr. Motely straightened his bow-tie.

“Have you read it?” His father shook the paperback at Mr. Motely—the old tomahawk chop. The math teacher reddened. The secretary buried her smile in a Kleenex. “If you haven’t read it,” his father said, “how can you presume to say it’s no good?”

“I haven’t read Mein Kampf, either.” Mr. Motely pushed his glasses higher upon his nose. He sweated in the reflected sunshine, his bald head glistening.

“Henry,” his father said, “wait outside.”

The hallway swelled. Double-barreled fluorescent tubes hummed as his father bellowed. Henry studied the unfinished portrait of President Washington. Why was his father making such a big deal? He even felt sorry for Mr. Motely when the math teacher came limping out.

In the driver’s seat his father beamed. “Did you see how the sunlight reflected off his head?” He shielded his eyes and said, “The glare, the glare.”

Henry laughed. “Did you forget your sunglasses?”

“A pox upon me for a clumsy lout.”

“Want me to get them?”

His father fitted his key into the ignition and narrowed his eyes toward a hawk circling over South Mountain. He said, “Do you admire the view?”

The Central Library in Hagerstown was at the corner of South Potomac and Antietam Streets. Within an hour Henry held his own library card, still warm from the lamination press, with his snapshot encased in clear plastic and his full name printed underneath: Henry Nicholas Foster. He asked his father why they took his picture just for a library card.

“You got me.” His father shook his head. “You’d think this was Alcatraz.”

“I’ve never been there.”

His father stopped shaking his head and looked at him. He swept his arm toward the shelves. “Pick any books you want,” he said.
Henry trotted over to the magazine rack, where models smiled at him from dog-eared covers. He could even smell their perfume.

“Books, I said.” His father clapped his hand on the crown of Henry’s head and led him over toward the children’s section.

In the Volkswagen Bug, Henry balanced his books on his lap, the stack reaching to his chin. On Mount Lena Road his father slowed down behind a pickup with a loaded gun-rack in the rear window. The truck had one bumper sticker with an image of the Confederate flag and another with three sentences. His father read them out loud: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” He swatted the steering wheel. “How hegemonic.”

“Sir?”

“Doesn’t exactly raise the level of the discourse, does it?”

“No, sir.” Henry resented the ridiculous driver, even though he wasn’t quite sure what his father meant. The word discourse reminded him of the main course he sometimes had to finish before dessert. He looked in the rearview mirror outside his door and pretended the trees were broccoli. His father jolted down their driveway, weeds lashing the fender.

At the bottom he said, “Come to my study tomorrow morning at six o’clock.” The windshield was an insect graveyard.

In the morning he felt stricken staring at the math book in his father’s hands. Here his father was a brilliant scientist, but Henry couldn’t even solve fourth-grade word problems.


“Addition?” Henry scooted to the edge of the metal folding chair between the window and his father’s armchair. Drafts chilled the back of his neck.

“The addition of fractions,” his father said. “Now, what’s their common
denominator?"

Breaking the word problems into steps helped, but the sessions were difficult. Henry became so nervous that he would wake up many hours before each meeting and lie in bed worrying about how he would perform. They met every morning for three weeks and practiced for one hour. He used to love his father’s study with the library globe and the map of the Milky Way galaxy—bright stars against an ink-black space. Now those stars seemed prickly. But as their morning sessions accumulated, he began solving the word problems more easily and his confidence grew. In class he became less nervous. Once again the Milky Way poured warmth into the study.

One morning they came across the question about the beagle on Mars. Henry was surprised. The solution was simple: two-fifths of twenty were eight.

"The dog would weigh eight pounds on Mars," he said. His father smiled, so Henry plunged on. "Dad, are we sending astronauts to Mars?"

"Unmanned spacecraft, if we can get the funding."

"But we landed men on the moon."

"Thanks to Wernher von Braun." His father sounded sarcastic.

"Who’s he?" Henry pictured Wernher von Braun as a bald rocket scientist wearing a bow-tie and driving a pickup with a Confederate flag and a loaded gun-rack.

"You saw what happened to Apollo 13."

"Yes, sir."

"Mars is much farther than the moon, a frigid planet with ice caps of frozen carbon dioxide." His father scratched his stubble and smiled. "You seem to be on top of this stuff now."

"Mr. Motely said we shouldn’t be covering the material ahead of schedule."

His father launched a laugh toward the ceiling. "That guy is about as sharp as a marble."

Henry laughed politely. "But Dad," he said, "a marble isn’t really sharp at all."
His father stopped laughing and looked at him. "Why don’t we try something fun for our next session?” he said. "We could read one of your library books."

When the electric coffee maker clicked, the lamp between them brightened. The lamp’s base came from a dried, L-shaped branch of cactus with holes where the needles had been.

After school, Henry pounded out of the bus, raced down their driveway, and leaped stairs up to his bedroom. He opened *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck.

The next morning he read the first chapter out loud, facing his father across the footstool. His father read the next chapter. The story was about a boy whose father killed pigs for a living. Henry speculated: "In *Before Adam* the boy is scared, but not this kid."

"He seems sad to me." His father looked out the window at the sifting snow. It was December now. "Sad, and maybe reverent."

Henry tried sounding out the word. "Reve—"

"Means he respects his father."

The cast-iron stove warmed the study. Henry watched embers flickering behind the open flue, an opening that had the shape of an isosceles triangle.

That night he slept well. Before dawn he woke from vivid and mysterious dreams. There was a silence around him unlike other silences. Stillness cradled the old farmhouse, and his bedroom windows glowed a deep, marine shade of blue. He rubbed an oval in the fogged window. Cool and damp against his fingertips, the glass squeaked. Through the windowpane he smelled frost. He peered out the porthole. The whole valley had turned white, and snow was still coming down. Around the farmhouse there was silence and morning and snow falling as though it had fallen from the beginning of time and would continue until the end. He imagined countless shoe-boxes full of moths being tipped upside down.

Maryland was paralyzed. Classes were canceled for both of them, and that
morning they read for hours. Before noon they reached the final chapter. At the end of the novel the boy’s father dies. The boy is only thirteen, but still has to take on his father’s job and run the farm.

The last scene takes place at the grave, where the boy says goodbye. As Henry read out loud, he felt as if his own father had died, somehow. Afterward he was quiet for a while.

“True story?” he said.

“Fiction.”

“So it didn’t really happen?” He was disappointed. The story seemed to matter less.

“Even if the events aren’t exactly what happened, they still express real feeling.”

“But the book is a lie.”

“That’s right.” His father reached to stroke his beard and seemed surprised to touch his bare chin. He said, “A lie that tells a truth.”

Snowflakes spangled the air and blanketed the countryside, changing everything. Ten inches had fallen overnight and sculpted the farm into new shapes. The axe-handle supported a tall slice of white, looking as reverent as a wand. The Volkswagen Bug had turned into an igloo.

“Like the yard?” Henry said.

“How so?”

“I mean, the way the snow smoothes over everything.”

“Language as snow.” His father tipped back his head. He seemed to be observing two water stains on the ceiling. “A book as some kind of snowstorm that alters the landscape of the past. That what you mean?”

Henry nodded. His father clenched the armrests and boosted himself from his chair. He faced the window with his hands clasped behind his back.

“I suppose we’re always being bombarded with new experiences,” he said. His
Henry, who had never seen his father cry. "New experiences are chances for insights, and maybe for you those insights come through language." When his father turned, he was back to normal. He was all right.

Henry relaxed. "You ever write fiction?"

His father smiled broadly, his eyes glistening. "Not intentionally," he said.

For Christmas Henry's mother sent him a big package. In the box was a smaller box, wrapped in paper decorated with Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. In that box was another box. Chinese boxes. He tore his way through five boxes until he got to what seemed to be the last one.

"The five thieves," his father said.

"Sir?"

"Now you've reached the inner sanctum."

"Too small for a basketball." Henry shook the box.

"Maybe it's a Ferrari."

It was a snow globe with a nativity scene.

"How quaint." His father rolled his eyes, but Henry liked the snow globe. Snow was swirling around Mary and Joseph and the manger. He set the glass ball on the mantel over the fireplace, where the embers glowed.

His father drained his tumbler of scotch. He said, "So festive."

In the spring when his mother returned from California life had seemed full of promise. But now Henry remembered how that first snowstorm had changed everything. Outside his windows the mulberry trees had been transformed, their limbs holding a network of white ridges. Frozen into place, the world had become supremely silent, the rough places smoothed out and made plain. The woodpile had turned into a polar bear and every picket along their fence wore a white cap. The tall pine trees became three white-robed sentinels who seemed to have traveled a long way to offer their blessings—a long way through the darkness and the snow.
CHAPTER V

When they left for school the next morning Henry asked his brother if he wanted to take the lead for a change, even though the trail would be darker than usual. On other mornings Jason had complained that he always had to follow. Now he blinked under the floodlight on their back porch and nodded, his upturned face scored with shadows, his moist teeth gleaming.

“I could do it with my eyes closed,” he said.

“Better keep them open.” Henry mussed his brother’s hair and watched him go bounding across the porch, his satchel of books swaying as he sprang up the flagstone stairs and climbed through the Aleppo pines that screened the groundskeeper’s quarters from view. He pulled the strap of his own bag higher onto his shoulder and mounted the steps, hoping that Francisco and Beatriz would still be asleep. The further away from their porch light he got, the harder it was to see. Wind blustered up the hill from the cove, stirring the pine boughs with a whispering sound and scenting the darkness with the smell of wet rocks and creosoted pilings.

The crunch of a pine cone under his boot felt satisfying. So far, so good. But when he reached the top of the stairs the wedge of light shining under the door of the groundskeeper’s quarters quickened his pulse. He didn’t want to explain why they were leaving early. He glanced toward the outhouse hidden behind the eucalyptus trees, not
sure if someone were inside, and glided past the rabbit hutch. In the faint light he could make out where the sheet-metal roof over the hutch had dripped a pocked furrow of dew into the volcanic ash. An eruption of knocks made him jump, but it was just a woodpecker hammering up in the pines. The rabbits, twitching in their hutch, must have been disturbed when the terrier went rocketing past them. She would be on the coffee farm by now, probably chasing squirrels. He smelled leaking oil as he passed the Dodge Swinger. A spider web was strung between its antenna and the handlebar of Francisco’s one-speed Huffy bicycle, whose wire-mesh basket was rusted and empty.

At the edge of the plantation, Jason waited for him. He looked back over his shoulder, the excitement visible in his eyes, and opened his mouth, about to cry out loud. Henry raised a finger to his lips, but he was too late.

“Geronimo!” Jason said. He plunged into the dense foliage, went tearing ahead on the trail, and after several steps came to a halt. “Holy—”

“Our eyes will adjust.” Henry came to a stop behind him, put both hands on his shoulders, and nudged him forward. They went stumbling ahead under the masses of leaves clustered in the dark, mincing along the trail as the slender trunks of coffee trees grew more focused. He looked up through the ragged patches of shifting leaves, where the Milky Way trickled light.

“Jason,” he said. “See those stars?”

“My eyes are still adjusting.”

“I forget which are the ones moving away—the blue-shifted or the red?” Their father had explained this to them over breakfast last week before driving Jason to the airport.

“The red, I think.”

“You’re doing a good job there.”

“I know this trail by heart.”

The footpath tunneled between rows of trees arranged in a grid, going straight for
stretches and then bending around the hulks of widely scattered boulders. The terrier raced ahead—a pale blur shuttling from trunk to trunk. She was old, but their morning hikes got her excited.

“Dad told me something over the weekend.” Henry felt goose bumps rising on his upper arms and tried to keep his tone casual. “You know it was Teddy Roosevelt who stocked the lake with bass?”

“Guy on the dime?”

“That’s Franklin. Teddy came earlier.”

“Wish he could do it again.”

Henry laughed. “Fat chance.”

Their parents had forbidden them to fish anywhere near the Maya, whose livelihoods depended on their catches. So they stayed away from the reed-fringed lagoons where dugouts gathered before daybreak and fished from the boulders in their cove, using live bait—usually night crawlers dug out from under the newest strips of sod Francisco had put down. But in three months they had only managed to land one black bass. Jason had hooked the fish and then lifted it out of the water while Henry took a close-up with his 35 mm Olympus camera, using the same roll of film he had used when they caught a catfish in Florida, where they had visited their grandparents on the drive down from Maryland to Guatemala.

“Remember that catfish we caught,” Henry said, “with five hooks in its jaw?”

“I remember the one I caught.”

“I’m getting that roll of film developed this week.”

Poised on a branch up ahead, a squirrel snickered at them as they approached. Henry could see the silhouette of its tail furl and unfurl against the horizon. Innumerable as matchsticks, the trees were gradually emerging from the gloom. Cool air nipped at his face and hands, smelling faintly of smoldering fires. His breath smoked.

“What time is it?” Jason said.
“Can’t you tell it’s getting lighter?”

“Seems dark to me.”

“Want me to go ahead?”

“We left too early.”

“I told you,” Henry said. “I need to stop by that health clinic before class.”

Unable to sleep, he had lain awake throughout the night and into the morning. He had gotten his brother out of bed before the alarm clock in the master bedroom would go off, insisting that they skip breakfast and leave the house half an hour early. He had left a note for their parents on the dining room table. He wanted to speak with his brother in private, but knew that he would have to be careful. Otherwise, his plan might go down the tubes.

As they filed along the footpath, he let their solitude accumulate. The sounds of their footsteps grinding weeds and scuffing roots mingled. The path was headed toward a slope about to bottleneck into a ridge between arroyos, and the higher they ranged upon Volcano Toliman the more light filtered through the trees. Birds were singing.

“Oh.” Henry spoke in a buoyant tone. “Francisco has spear guns in the boathouse.”

“No way,” Jason said. His voice rang with awe verging on disbelief. He stopped and turned. Henry drew to a stop beside him, glad to have gotten a reaction.

A gust rattled the tree branches over their heads. Higher up on Volcano Toliman someone was trying to start a chainsaw. Charcoal-dark shadows rippled over their opposing pairs of shoes. Surprised by his brother’s disbelief, Henry found himself remembering that species of fish his father had told him about: scientists used to believe that it was extinct until fishermen caught living members of the population—the coelacanth.

“Dad told me,” he said, trying to make out his laces.

“Why didn’t you say something?”
“There’s some other equipment in there too.”

“What kind?”

“Dad says we can use it pretty soon.”

“How come he didn’t tell us earlier?”

“He didn’t know until last weekend.” Henry leaned over and picked up a bottle cap trampled into the soil. He thumbed off the dirt and squinted at the El Gallo trademark. “Anyway, it’s too dangerous to use that stuff now, with the storms and all. We have to wait till the rainy season is over.” He straightened his legs and looked down at his brother.

“What, in October?”

“Probably just a couple more weeks, depending on—”

“You see them?”

“We could be like Jacques Cousteau.” Henry gazed off toward the east. Between him and his brother there was no figure more heroic than Captain Cousteau, and he recalled the underwater footage they had seen together on television specials as he surveyed the horizon. Through the woodland he could make out the sierra on the eastern edge of the volcanic basin about two miles past San Bernardo. But something about the view puzzled him. The skyline seemed too blurred until he figured out that he was actually peering through a swarm of nocturnal moths hovering beside the footpath. The prospect of snorkeling in the shallows of Lake Atitlan was pleasant, even though the depths petrified him. He pictured Cousteau and his assistants trailing bubbles as they explored the sun-flooded ribs of some moldering wreckage. He could feel his brother searching the side of his face, so he looked at him.

Jason said, “Where are they?”

“In that footlocker.” Henry pocketed the bottle cap, hoping his tone signified comradeship. “Francisco unlocked it for us,” he said. “Spear guns, flippers, underwater masks—the whole bit.” He spread his arms to emphasize the bountiful extent of the
equipment. But in the growing light he could make out a realization dawning upon his brother's face, upturned in suspicion. His brother stood so close Henry could smell his toothpaste. On the volcano, the chainsaw stopped. Apparently the thing had been running for some time. In the quietness the leaves rustled.

"I'm still going with Mom," Jason said.

"But if we both stay-"

"I'm not." Jason turned about-face and went forging ahead.

"Thing is..." Henry jogged up to him in dismay, staring doggedly at his satchel of books. He reached out to grab his brother's shoulder, but withdrew his hand at the last second. In his mind he could hear his mother: keep your hands to yourself, young man.

"If we both stay," he said, "Mom might stay too."

"You can't make me change my mind."

Henry slowed down, letting his brother go striding ahead. He had touched the wrong cord, even though his reasoning made sense. If they both insisted upon staying that would probably delay their mother's departure, at the very least. She must be counting on taking his brother with her. If not for the violent outburst of the soldiers, Henry thought she would refuse to let their family get broken up again. But the roadside incident had taken them all by surprise. Deep down, he thought his parents loved them both. But as he reached the other side of the plantation, he began to see his brilliant plan draining away into nothingness.

He scuffed through the layers of fallen leaves. Maybe his plan had been dumb, but how else could he keep their family together? He didn't think he could talk his mother into staying any more than he could talk his father into going. He trudged along in quiet desperation, feeling overwhelmed. His frustration snowballed.

"If you want to go, then go," he said. "Think I give a damn?" He plodded, feeling crushed. The path swerved around a boulder, and on the other side it paralleled a low stone wall that separated the coffee trees from a neighboring cornfield. He trampled the
leaves gathered along the wall, stepping over fallen stones, his stride angry, his thoughts muddled. Sure, his brother might be an accomplished musician, maybe even some kind of virtuoso. But wasn’t he also just a fourth-grader who loved to fish? He felt as if a dam had ruptured somewhere inside him, and now his carefully withheld feelings were coming out. He wished it would stay dark. He resented the dawning clarity that could expose his weakness. Leaf-ragged shadows mottled the path. Above the canopy of leaves the darkness was melting into blue.

“Why not come with us?” Jason said, as if tossing a bone over his shoulder.

“Because,” Henry said, “we can’t just leave Dad.” He glared at his brother’s back, tripped over some exposed root, and lunged to his right. Holding out his arms for balance, he couldn’t help staggering into a coffee tree, whose brittle limbs prodded his face and throat. A twig with beans clustered on it snapped and fell inside the collar of his sweater. He laughed bitterly, his temple pounding with humiliation and anger as he disengaged himself from the bizarre embrace. He was partly relieved his brother didn’t look back, partly incensed. Slung over Henry’s right shoulder, the twine strap of his mesh bag slid down to the crook of his elbow, his books banging his thigh. He jerked the strap back into place and scowled through a lopsided wreath of leaves. Stars pierced the zone of blackness to the west, but overhead they had vanished.

At the edge of the plantation the neat geometrical rows of cultivated coffee trees gave way to wild pines and oaks. The land became steeper as they ascended the Volcano Toliman, tapering into a ridge. Ferns clogged this part of the trail, brushing their ankles and making coarse rustling sounds as they tramped along a razorback ridge that rose between two mist-layered ravines. He scrambled to catch up with his brother, whose lightness would serve him well in the Marine Corps Marathon, if they ever ran the race. He watched his brother with growing doubt. Jason toted his books in a black-and-white satchel with the broad strap placed across his forehead, leaning forward as he rowed his arms through the air. Chichicastenango, the name of the village where the satchel had
been purchased, was stitched into the material.

Henry tried to settle into a rhythm, swinging his arms and listening to the whisking of ferns against their ankles, a sound that usually cheered him. *Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go.* But this morning was different from other mornings. He swung his fists like dumbbells and spat. Instead of stepping over the familiar log fallen across the trail, as usual, he kicked the scalloped fungus ledging its rotten bark. He even started growing annoyed with the birds, who all seemed to be squabbling as they flitted through the dark calligraphy of branches, obsessed with staking out their territories. His old boots, whose leather was stiff and cracked from the hearth, squeaked with each step, chafing his heels. He cursed the fat little fucker who had stolen his new shoes. The guy probably had to stuff them with crumpled pages of *Prensa Libre* to wear a size twelve. When Henry bumped into a pillar of gnats, he lashed out.

Ravines skirted Volcano Toliman like pleats on a wedding dress, and the ridge narrowed as they mounted higher. Trees thinned. Ash powdered the trail, muffling their footsteps. The trail went straight for a quarter-mile before they reached the fork—the highest elevation of their hike. To the right one route angled up toward the saddle-dipped hump between the twin volcanoes, and to the left the other dropped into a series of laddered switchbacks that went zigzagging down the eastern face of the ridge. In the fog beyond the top of the ridge loomed the nodding flower heads of the fifteen-foot-tall dahlias.

When his brother went down the worn path Henry followed, staggering in a loose-limbed, heedless stride, every step taking him deeper into his misery. The turns were marked with slabs of volcanic rock his father called igneous, their surfaces polished by the passage of countless sandals and bare feet. He lurched downward. Had anyone ever felt as bad as he did while going down this route? Of course. The problems of the Maya made his own seem minor. He was just some rich tourist who wanted to think the Milky Way galaxy spiraled around him. He had once overheard a phrase while sipping
cappuccino on the piazza of an espresso shop in Panajachel: the ugly American. That was

him.

At the bottom, the footpath emptied into an unpaved road lined with cane-walled
huts. Some dwellings were roofed with thatch and others with rusted scraps of sheet-
metal held down with busted chunks of concrete blocks and shredded automobile tires.
He saw one roof held down with a corroded radiator. Scarves of mist were strewn across
the road. Balam surged far ahead, cutting from side to side to chase goats and chickens
and a little pig. Clapping sounds came from Mayan women making tortillas.

Soon two Mayan men overtook them on the road. Hunched over beneath stacks of
split logs bundled upon their backs, the men kept their thumbs hooked behind the fiber-
bristling segments of raveled twine that braced the wide leather straps across their
foreheads. The rope looked taut as piano wire. When the workers trotted past, Henry
contemplated their difficult lot.

He said, "Mucha lena."

Both men glanced over without turning their heads.

Near the outskirts of San Bernardo the brothers paused, as usual, on a knoll that
overlooked the village. Most days when they stopped here the fog had already burned
away, but this morning they reached the hilltop just as the sun was brimming over the
horizon. Henry thought the vista would probably be suitable for a postcard, except that
people were hungry and shivering down there; people were homeless. Smoke guttered
from all those stovepipe chimneys, rising toward the colossal timbers of sunshine that
slanted downward from the brink of the volcanic basin. Roosters crowed.

"What about Mom?" Jason said.

Henry stared down at the Spanish-tile roofs, as if an answer might lay underneath.
Marbled with twists of smoke, the sun kindled the haze. The bay of San Bernardo was
about one mile away. In the mitten-shaped harbor the thumb was now hidden by the bluff
on which the church stood. Edged with cornfields, coffee farms, and luxury chalets, the
slate-colored water steamed. Reefs of fog lingered over Lake Atitlan, dissolving in the sunshine. Seagulls, seemingly out of place hundreds of miles from the Pacific Ocean, circled the docks and clamored. Their faraway cries, barely audible, sharpened Henry’s sense of futility. Breezes carried the smell of tortillas, making his stomach growl. When he and his brother had shown up at the lodge yesterday, drenched and tired, their mother had been taking bread out of the oven. Waiting for those loaves to cool had been a sweet agony of anticipation. He envisioned her back in Maryland kneading dough on the flour-dusted chopping block.

“At least she won’t be in a civil war,” he replied.

“That’s because she’s smarter,” Jason said.

“Come on, Balam!” Henry called to their dog, who was crouched under an avocado tree, her lips pulled back from her teeth as she licked out a cracked shell. She wagged her tail, but would not budge. Henry swung around and stamped back to the road. He walked ahead of his brother and felt wretched, utterly forlorn. Even the dog had her own agenda. He booted an ash-plugged pumice stone and imagined that it had been blasted out of a pressure-packed Volcano Toliman long ago, maybe even back in the dinosaur age.

He wasn’t sure if there had been dinosaurs in Central America, but he could ask his father, who said that when Lake Atitlan had been formed tens of thousands of years ago the volcanic eruption released thirty times more hot ash and rock than Mount Vesuvius had dumped over Pompeii. According to him, even the dinosaur age was recent on the cosmic calendar. The Big Bang had occurred on the first second of January 1st. Dinosaurs hadn’t appeared until Christmas Eve. The entire history of civilization had taken place during the last ten seconds of December 31st. Modern man wasn’t far removed from the caveman.

The road took them through the heart of San Bernardo. They passed the candle factory and poultry farm, where downy tufts clung to the octagon-shaped screens. They
passed the bodega with salmon-colored terra cotta shingles. They walked past cement-block houses trimmed with lavender and pink. Tethered goats bleated from dirt yards. In the cemetery plastic flowers drooped. They hurried past a gaggle of loop-necked vultures huddled around carrion behind the roadside bushes. Henry could smell the rotten flesh. Some vultures hopped away in great, sidelong, fluttering jumps. When he remembered his injury and the sombrero he had planned to wear this morning, he stomped to a stop in the dust and rolled his eyes.

"Must be losing my fucking marbles," he said. He looked back over his shoulder, where his brother lagged behind. He turned in the road, cupped his hands around his mouth, and hollered: "Come on, Romeo! Don’t keep your noviacita waiting."

He meant Maria, the willowy Mayan who worked at the café behind the church. Most days after school the brothers met at the café and drank orange Fantas before walking home. For some reason she had taken a liking for Jason, who was too young to appreciate girls. Maria had skin the color of oak leaves on young trees in the rainy season and breasts upturned like ripe acorns. She wore her black hair cropped short, revealing the curves of her neck and highlighting her cheekbones and widely spaced eyes. As he stood there he realized she wouldn’t be kept waiting if they were late for their morning classes. Besides, they were early. He was being illogical.

"She’s not my girlfriend." Jason caught up to him. "Stop being gross."

"I thought you were in love with her." Henry walked faster, not caring if his brother kept up or not. He considered taking off his bandage, scared that he might get singled out and possibly questioned by the bald policeman who was sometimes gnawing a cigar while sitting in a tipped-back chair outside the jail. Often the policeman would be chatting with the young assistants to the military—boys really—who hung around the jail. But even the idea of teasing off those blood-dried strips made him giddy. Before they reached the village square he stopped and balanced on one leg, turning up his left boot. Somewhere along the way the sole had started to peel.
At the square he floundered over the cobblestones, his left tread flapping. There was a cat that appeared to be licking her kittens while they nursed underneath the chair of the policeman, who was nowhere to be seen. Neither were the military assistants. Soldiers were rarely seen in the quiet village of San Bernardo, but their young assistants often lurked around the square. Although Henry had never had trouble with them, he recognized some of their faces and always tried to steer clear. One assistant in particular—a short fat guy with rolls of fat at the back of his neck—had a menacing scowl that put him on edge. He always had the feeling that the kid was watching him when their paths crossed. But he was not here now. Henry took a breath and told himself to calm down. If he couldn’t convince his brother to stay, he would be forced to choose between his parents. He had to keep his cool.

The Mayan women seemed calm as they ambled past him, going to and from Lake Atitlan. Some wore cheap plastic sandals made in China and others went barefoot, stepping from stone to stone and balancing clay jugs on their heads, sometimes keeping one arm raised. Most wore sashes loosely woven into their braids, which swung back and forth. In the square a gust stirred the catalpa trees, whose uppermost limbs were tangled with sunshine. Crowned with brightness, the trees had pencil-slim pods that rustled in the wind. Sun-blackened pods littered the gutter. Pigeons strutted, their heads bobbing as they hacked seeds from the pods. Henry stepped over one cobblestone pasted with a withered, trumpet-shaped blossom.

When Henry turned to look for the dog she came dashing past him and went rushing toward the pigeons, startling them into flight. The flapping birds flocked overhead and started circling the square, their wings catching the sunlight. But every time they tried to land the dog would race toward that spot and send them around for another revolution. His brother stood nearby, crossed his arms, and watched. Padre Flores—or Domingo, as their father called him—was the one who allowed Henry to bring the dog into class. He was a tall, bearded man who loved mangoes and papayas and had a gentle

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reassuring manner that made Henry feel less apprehensive. Weary of her game, the terrier looked back. Henry waved her on. She wheeled around and bounded ahead, her pink tongue lolling.

In the square was the basketball court. Henry had watched the last game of the NBA Finals with his family in an Austin bar the day before they crossed the border into Mexico—all of them rooting for the Washington Bullets, who had shot down Seattle, a victory sealed by Wes Unseld in the final seconds. Henry looked at his brother and suddenly felt guilty. Probably he should just leave him alone. Let him go home with their mother. After all, he was just a kid. He mimicked a hook-shot.

“Look,” he said, “I’m Wes Unseld.”

“Why do they do that?” Jason frowned at the wall beyond the basketball court.

Henry dropped his arms. They shouldn’t be standing around in view of the police station, but he followed his brother’s gaze. Past the basketball court, a flight of stairs went up to the veranda that fronted the post office and jail. A group of young children was gathering to see the kittens. The windows were all barred, and there was a courtyard wall whose upper ledge bristled with green and banana-colored shards of glass that sparkled in the sunlight.

“The kids or the glass?” he said.

“What?”

“They put the glass on the wall to keep people from climbing over.” Henry shaded his eyes. Scintillating in the sunlight, the jagged bottles cemented into the ledge seemed designed to slice off the fingers and scoop out the knuckles of anyone who tried climbing over.

Jason said, “I meant Mom and Dad.”

“Oh, sorry.” Henry laughed, which eased the pressure. But when the children scattered away from the chair, he went silent. The bald policeman looked out from the doorway, his thumbs hitched in his belt. His gaze took in the gringos standing beside the
square. Henry looked down and forced himself to act as if he didn’t want to avoid the
policeman. Act carefree. He kept his voice level and smiled at his brother. “Why do they
do what, Jason?”

“Make us decide.” Jason shifted the strap of his satchel higher on his forehead.
“Wouldn’t you rather have a choice?”

A vendor bumped his wooden cart over the cobblestones, heading toward the
docks to sell snow cones to the tourists from Panajachel. It was too cold for snow cones
now, but by the time the mail boat arrived the bay would be simmering. The vendor
swerved toward them.

He said, “Nieve, nieve.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. The strap had carved lines into his brow, making him
seem old. Henry waved off the vendor and squinted at his brother. If he just focused on
the lines on his forehead, Jason might have been some geezer with one foot in the grave.

“Come on.” He put his hand on the back of his brother’s head. “Let’s get out of
here.”

“Get off of me.” Jason swiped his hand away.

“Nieve,” the vendor said. “Nieve, nieve.”

Henry ignored the vendor, clamped his hand back on his brother’s neck, and
squeezed hard. He could feel the cartilage against his palm. He pushed Jason ahead of
him and walked toward school without looking toward the policeman. “We can’t stay
here.”

“You’re not the boss.”

“Will you please be quiet?”

“Get off.” His brother twisted free.

“Please?”

Jason bolted away on the road and went running downhill. When Balam saw the
movement, she left the pigeons and bounded after him. Henry strolled away from the
square and the police station without looking back, trying to look casual but growing more and more frightened that they might be followed. He imagined the bald policeman sending one of the young military assistants after them. He sauntered away, his boot flapping.

An abrupt clap made him jump, but it was just a shopkeeper splashing a bucket of water over his entrance. In the gathering sunlight the water steamed. He expected his brother to slow down, but the kid kept going down the hill. Before long the black-and-white lettering on his satchel receded to a blur.
CHAPTER VI

His bandage attracted curiosity around the square, but nobody stopped him. He sauntered down San Bernardo’s main road in the direction his brother had gone, pretending not to notice the villagers spying on him from the lattices of windows and the chinks of cracked doorways. But he felt as if he were taking part in some kind of procession.

A barefoot girl peered out from the Dutch door of the zapatería, whose lower half hung ajar. Dusty in the sunshine, the shop window displayed a mobile of cowboy boots, leather sandals, even high heels—all suspended from lengths of fishing line and pivoting in the drafts. The hiking boots he had purchased in Guatemala City weren’t sold here, but maybe he could stop in later and get his old boots repaired. He nodded to the child, who clutched a GI Joe doll. She backed over the threshold and pushed the door shut with a thump.

He strolled on, swinging his arms and feeling his books rub his right thigh. The road flowed with foot traffic and clanged with bicycles. Maybe it wasn’t as early as he thought. He raised his left wrist and blinked at the tan mark where his watch had been.

When he recognized the high-pitched voice of a freckled boy from his class—the only Mayan with freckles he had seen at Lake Atitlan—he glanced over with a hopeful grin. But the boy averted his eyes and slouched between his two comrades, circling his
arms around their necks and ducking his head between theirs. They confided in urgent whispers and hurried away. Near the base of the hill they erupted into laughter and shoved each other back and forth. A chicken got mixed up in their legs, squawking and flapping, and when the freckled boy tripped and fell onto his hands and knees they laughed some more.

Henry regretted having smiled in the first place. “I take it back,” he said. He began searching for a spot between store fronts where he could remove his bandage, scouting out the corridor between the tannery and the cheese shop coming on his right. But when he got there the cinder walkway, strewn with broken glass, flattened boxes, and dented garbage cans, discouraged him. Homeless drunks probably passed out there. He trudged on, smelling tanned leather and feeling foolish. What did he expect? At the cheese shop the roof of his mouth prickled and moistened. Wheels of Gouda cheese in crinkly red cellophane wrappers lay beside tubes of peppered salami and blocks of Swiss cheese. Cracker boxes were stacked in pyramids next to bottles of wine on the refrigerated case. He had five quetzales, but the sign read, “Cerrado.”

Erosion was wearing away cobblestones. Floods washed down from Volcano Toliman after each downpour, leaving clay gullies and piles of rocks swarming with rats and snakes. He waited at the top of a narrow passage where a line of Mayan women filed up with baskets and jugs balanced upon their heads. The last woman—a teenager, probably—steadied a bundle of tule reeds on her head with one arm and carried an infant against her side with the other. The reeds, six feet long, drooped and bobbed as she approached.

“Buenos dias.” Henry smiled, and when the first woman wished him a good morning he felt a rush of gratitude warm his face, as if it were a big deal. The others kept their eyes cast down. The mother’s sandals were falling apart, her feet calloused where the hard plastic grated against her skin. He leaned away from the tips of the reeds and gave her a wide berth as she moved past him, her wraparound skirt whispering. The reeds
dripped two ragged lines in the dust. He could smell laundry detergent and wood-smoke clinging to her huipil.

Down on the quay the snow-cone man pushed his cart on its two bicycle wheels, plowing trenches in the sand, and disappeared behind heaped boulders. Seagulls rioted over his head, marking his progress toward the docks. Henry scuffed along and wondered what to do now that he knew for sure that his brother would go wherever their mother went. Crabgrass and clovers sprouted between cobblestones. Sunflowers taller than any basketball players he had ever seen craned their prickly necks over a wall, their heads swaying in the breezes washing up the road. The wall guarded an estate, whose entrance was barred with a double gate topped with scrolls and padlocked with chains. He could go with his mother and brother, but what about his father? Behind the bars hoses snaked through the grass, sprinklers watering the frangipani, rainbows shimmering. Masses of honeysuckle vines were draped over the ledge, their nectar sweetening the morning air and making a tangled loveliness in his throat. He passed through the perfumed zone and plodded on toward the church.

But when the steeple came into view, he slowed down. He could skip classes. He could hang out at the docks and watch the boats come and go. Why not? Or he could take the mail boat back to Panajachel and eye the sunbathing gringas. He wished he had saved the telescope out of his brother’s suitcase. He walked on, the steeple looming higher. Near the eastern edge of the flood plain on which San Bernardo had been built, the old colonial church sat on a bluff overlooking the bay. When his father had registered him and his brother for classes, Padre Flores had taken them up into the bell tower, where they could see the grounds in all directions, a view his father called panoptic. His father and Padre Flores had attended Caltech in the sixties. After graduating, Domingo became a missionary in Los Angeles and later moved to Guatemala. He was the one who had urged his father to bring his family here, saying the political climate seemed relatively safe at Lake Atitlan, despite the region’s troubled history and the bleak tone of the last
Amnesty International report.

A dust devil spun litter across the road. Henry stood in the shadow of an idling produce truck and brooded. In the presence of his brother or the priest, the others didn’t bother him as much. But when he was alone they mocked him, calling him “El Excelentísimo Don Enrico Foster,” as if he kept apart because he thought himself superior. But the crowds were also islands in which he could hide. The police had never hassled him here, and he had only seen military assistants at the café a few times. So he often felt relieved, even buoyant, while approaching the school. But this morning tension knotted his gut. He lagged his way toward school.

When he picked out his brother and his friends congregated on the churchyard, he snapped his fingers, trying to get the attention of the dog. The sun rising behind the church’s facade cast shadows across the bald-spotted lawn. On the side of the church that faced the bay a corridor bordered the classrooms. He snapped his fingers again. Children screamed at the orphanage on the other side of the church, swinging on swing-sets and playing in a sandbox with Tonka Trucks donated by Padre Flores and his parish. A Mayan woman dressed in traje watched over them. When she noticed Henry, she crossed her arms over her breasts and looked away.

Jason and his friends were gathered in front of the whitewashed steps of the church between the orphanage and the classrooms. Someone said, “Rubiocito.”

Henry tucked a loose strip of gauze behind his ear and ventured onto the lawn. He could feel himself slipping into his tourist mode—absurd, but he wasn’t sure how else to act. He advanced upon the crowd gazing over their heads and pretending to admire the old Spanish architecture that so many travel brochures called rustic, even though churches didn’t mean anything special to him. Nothing.

Pigeons cooed from the tower, where two bells hung from a wood crossbar. Jason’s buddies tapped him on the shoulder, but his brother didn’t turn around.

“Balam.” Henry crouched. “Here, girl.” He whistled, relieved when the terrier
finally came bounding across the lawn. He embraced her, ruffled her silky ears, and took hold of her collar. They retreated to the pecan tree, whose trunk cast a shadow across the road.

A bicycle jangled as the rider—a tenth-grader named Mario—stood on the pedals and pumped. He skidded to a stop on the lawn, tearing up some turf. Kids laughed, but Henry felt annoyed. They would never do that if Padre Flores were watching.

“Later, alligator,” he said, glad the others wouldn’t understand. He cupped a hand around his mouth, knowing his brother never held a grudge for long: “See you at the café, then.”

He led the dog onto the walkway and passed the clinic. He could stop in later. Sweat dripped from his armpits, even though the morning was still cool. He kept a firm grip on the dog’s collar now that they were on church grounds. He had forgotten her leash, but hunching over helped him avoid eye contact. The collar lifted a rim of hairs from the back of the dog’s neck, revealing her hide as her nails went clicking over the square tiles. They walked through crowds.

One long building housed the administrative office, the health clinic, and all the classrooms. The single-story building went all the way from the main road to the alley behind the church. The school didn’t have enough rooms to keep each grade separate, so many levels got lumped together. Students from the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades were in his class, and it was still the smallest one, with less than ten students. Not many could afford to attend all the way through the twelfth grade. Most were expected to work on the farms owned by their parents—or farms that were supposed to be owned by their parents. Padre Flores said he was helping the Maya gain title to land taken over by the ruling classes after Guatemala had declared independence from Spain. He taught Henry’s class, saying he could manage that while also overseeing the church, the clinic, the radio station, the literacy program, and the orphanage.

The roofed walkway was open on the sides and set apart from the classrooms by a
narrow space planted with box-shaped hedges. The sole on Henry's boot slapped the tiles. He watched the girl ahead of him, who was surrounded by other girls bantering in Spanish. She wore tight Calvin Klein jeans and swung her hips, probably more than usual because he was right behind. She had a lovely figure, but he didn't like the way she made a production of herself. Padre Flores didn't make students wear uniforms, and those who could afford nice clothes, especially tight designer clothes, were most popular. The girls chattered in Spanish. At school nobody spoke Cakchiquel, the Mayan language Francisco and Beatriz used between themselves. Most students were Mayan, but they talked and dressed like ladinos—mestizos of mixed European and Mayan blood.

His classroom was at the end of the corridor overlooking the alley. He went past the door, clamped Balam between his knees, and let go of her collar, wincing as he straightened his back and gripped the cool wrought iron railing. He looked into the alley. He could feel the dog's tail wagging against his calves. He listened as the students filtered into the classroom behind him, whispering and giggling. In the classroom Mario and several others—he could hear the freckled boy among them—burst into hoots and jeers. His face grew warm when he realized they were probably joking about something sexual between him and the dog. He patted her head and kept her anchored between his knees, listening to the pneumonic hinges wheezing and dreading the moment when he would have to go in the classroom.

The outdoor café where he and his brother met was across the alley. The patio was small, with three umbrella-topped tables. Next to the patio stood a cement-block building with a big Coca-Cola advertisement painted on the wall. The house was topped with a rusty sheet-metal roof. Maria lived there alone, as far as he knew. She cooked and waited on the customers, sometimes helped by other Mayan girls from the barrio. The roof had been extended on the patio side, supported by a grid of two-by-fours, to shelter the bar area. After the mail boat arrived from Panajachel, gringos trudged up the alley from the docks to drink fruit smoothies and espressos at the bar. From his classroom he could hear
the blender whir. Before class he sometimes saw Maria sweeping the flagstone patio with a broom of palm leaves, but not now. The umbrellas were still closed.

A tall clapboard fence ran from the house to the end of the patio. From the walkway he could see down into the patio, but from the alley the fence gave privacy from beggars. He stared into the patio and realized why he hadn't skipped school. In a couple hours he would excuse himself from class, saying he needed to visit the clinic, and go to the café alone. The thought of seeing Maria without his brother thrilled him. He squeezed the railing and felt a gale of excitement that turned him cold with its fierce, poisonous intensity. She was an older woman in her twenties, more mature than the girls at school. She dressed in western clothing without flaunting herself and spoke flawless English. She seemed streetwise, judging from her reserved manner.

Once he had mustered the courage to ask her where she had learned English. She told him California, but didn't pursue the subject. He knew there was a connection between her and Padre Flores, having seen them talk together. But he had been too afraid to ask Padre Flores about her and he wasn't sure how to approach Maria. Maybe this was his chance. If she asked him what happened to his head, he could brush aside her concern and refer casually to his scrape with the soldiers. He hadn't thought about discussing this encounter with her, but now the idea flowered within him. She might take an interest in his case. Hadn't he seen her working in the clinic one afternoon? He imagined their interaction, investing it with all the optimism he had been pinning on his brother. Let him go home with their mother. Maria would still be here. He could order his favorite dish, ropa vieja, strings of marinated chicken wrapped in tortillas. As if in response to his thoughts, Balam thrust her muzzle between the rails, her nose quivering.

He looked down the alley, scanning the beach for Maria. The alley and the main road were parallel, both ending in the central part of the bay, where the shallows deepened from pale green to the darker shade of kelp. Would she walk down to Lake Atitlan for water? No, the café had running water, but she might go down to wash
laundry. He leaned over the railing and searched for her. The snow-cone man, having parked his cart beside the dock where the mail boat would tie up, was smoking a cigarette. That was the main port of San Bernardo, with docks jutting out from the boulder-strewn beach. Dugouts on shore leaned against each other like torn envelopes. Cobblestones on the main road went all the way down to the sand, where they seemed to have grown into boulders. Farther out, the blue channel sliced through the green shallows.

The smells of frijoles and chicken cooking persuaded him that she must be inside the café. He stared at the Coca-Cola advertisement and imagined the conversation they would have. If she asked about his injury—how could she not?—he might add that he had been protecting his brother. Maybe she would like him then. He stared at the square little window in the door that led from the patio to her house, wishing she would come out before the bell rang for class. He pictured the slimness of her arms and the smallness of her breasts. A starling fluttered down and perched on the limb of an oak sapling beside her house. But the thin branch bent, and the bird flew away. The classroom door wheezed open and closed behind him. He was tormented with excitement, feeling dispossessed. There was an opportunity he must explore.

“You all right, son?” Padre Flores said.

Henry looked over his shoulder and felt his face redden, as if he had been caught red-handed at some shameful act. The priest stood beside him at the railing, sunshine gleaming on the white shirt and white cotton pants that fit him loosely, hanging just so. He wore Birkenstock sandals, the blond hairs on his toes glistening in the sunshine. His thick beard and long blond hair made him look as if he had stepped from a commune of hippies to this Catholic church. But everyone at the school seemed happy with him because he did so much for the community.

“Me and Jason ran into some trouble with the soldiers,” Henry said. “I thought I would stop by the health clinic before lunch.”
“Maybe you should go there right now.”
“I’d rather wait, if you don’t mind.”

Padre Flores put his hand on Henry’s shoulder.

“What about that bandage?” he said. In the sunshine, his face glistened. He had a broad forehead, prominent cheekbones, and a cheerful manner. His white teeth shone when he smiled. But now his face expressed concern.

“One of the soldiers hit me with the butt of his rifle.”

“How did your folks react?”

“They’re arguing about the whole thing.” Henry stared down into the alley, relieved to have someone to talk to. Inside the classroom, his connection with the priest cut him off from other students, who seemed to resent the special relationship. But outside of class Henry was grateful for the connection. As he stood there, he realized this was another reason he hadn’t skipped class today. He didn’t want to disappoint Padre Flores, whose kindness had been strong and clear from their first meeting three months ago. The priest’s concern washed through him like medicine, and he repressed a sudden urge to yield to tears.

Padre Flores said, “I feel terrible.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“We have to talk some more about this later.” He let go of the railing. “But right now I have to go in there and teach.”

“Yes sir.”

“You come in when you’re ready.” He leaned over, patted the dog, and smiled in the sunlight as if he were grimly determined to make the best of the military situation.

“How is that Spanish going for you, son?”

Henry was relieved he had changed the subject. “You’d think by now I would be comfortable with it,” he said, “but I’m a slow learner.”

“I knew Spanish before I came, but I did experience some culture shock,” Padre
Flores said, “However, this place grew on me.”

“Lake Atitlan, sir?”

“San Bernardo.” Padre Flores straightened his legs, reached up with one hand, and stroked his beard. “Panajachel gets on my nerves. All those gringos sipping cappuccino and writing letters about inner peace while the Maya struggle to feed their kids.”

Henry nodded. He was looking across the alley through the corner of his vision. Maria came out wearing khaki slacks and a white blouse and started opening the umbrellas.

Padre Flores said, “Did you listen to La Voz last night?”

“Usually we do, but not last night.”

“Begin, Sadat, and Carter signed a peace accord at Camp David yesterday,” the priest said. “Egypt and Israel can live in peace, why can’t we?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

One day after moving to Lake Atitlan, Henry had been listening to La Voz de San Bernardo, the Catholic radio station, when he heard that the national palace of Nicaragua had been seized by guerrillas demanding liberty for political prisoners. He hadn’t been scared, since Nicaragua was well to their south. There were demonstrations in Guatemala to support the left-wing rebels in Nicaragua, but they went unopposed, a good sign. Padre Flores said the new administration in Guatemala should be more tolerant than the previous one under President Laugerud. Garcia Lucas was going to be a friend to the natives.

Henry patted the dog. “I’m certainly grateful you let me bring Balam to school,” he said.

Padre Flores smiled. “Well, this place was named after Saint Bernard, you know.”

“The one they named those big dogs after?” Henry had never thought of that.

“Those shaggy dogs with the little barrels attached to their collars?”

“Italian churchman from the eleventh century.” Padre Flores headed toward the
classroom. “Those dogs climbed into alpine passes to save stranded travelers.”

Henry waited outside until the bell rang. He gripped Balam’s collar and shuffled to the door, opening it with his free hand. In the classroom everyone hushed, and his face grew warm. He should have gone in earlier. He stared at the green-veined linoleum tiles, his pulse hammering, and released the dog into the room. He smiled at Padre Flores, who nodded from his desk beside the blackboard. Once he had sat on his desk and delivered his lecture from the lotus position.

When he heard glass shatter across the alley, Henry was still clutching the doorknob. Before entering the classroom he turned and looked back. A round tray bounced on the flagstones and rolled across the patio, wobbling like a loose wheel.

Down on her hands and knees, Maria got to her feet and brushed off the front of her pants. The salt and pepper shakers lay in a heap. He stifled an impulse to go help. Embarrassment held him in check, his hand on the doorknob. The others couldn’t see what had happened, but they watched him standing there with the door open. When a boy laughed, he plunged into the room, letting the door swing shut behind him and keeping his eyes downcast. Balam had settled into her spot under his desk. He waded through a gauntlet of stares.

That morning Padre Flores lectured about Tecun Uman, the Quiche warrior prince who had died in hand-to-hand combat with Don Pedro de Alvarado. A Spanish conquistador, Alvarado had conquered Guatemala in the early sixteenth century. But Henry couldn’t concentrate on the lecture. His thoughts kept swinging back and forth between his worries about his family and his anticipation of seeing Maria. As the morning wore on, he thought less and less about his family and more and more about Maria.

By the time the long hand on the clock had almost reached eleven, storm clouds had blotted out the sun and he was still sitting there with the dog sleeping at his feet,
reluctant to raise his hand and draw attention to himself. Any minute it would start to rain. He curled his fingers under his chair, steeling himself and feeling ridiculous.

Lightning yellowed the row of high windows that looked over the roof of the walkway. No windows faced the alley, but those above the walkway provided a letterbox view of the sky, pierced in the center by the church steeple. The clouds emitted booms that echoed with dull, scalp-prickling concussions. He could smell rain and hear the window jiggling.

The first few raindrops splattered against the windowpanes like a handful of flung pebbles. Balam lifted her head from her paws and looked up. Her ears rose, as if drawn by puppet strings, and she tilted her head sideways. When Henry finally raised his hand, Padre Flores called on him. Everyone faced him—the weird gringo.

"Por favor," he said, "tengo que salir." From across the room Mario sneered. Padre Flores nodded toward the door.

Lightning flickered, yellowing the windows. The overhead lights dimmed and brightened. Someone whooped in the alley as they went running past. Ripped-timber tremors followed, shaking the classroom windows, and then the showers came down in a rush. A barrage of water pelted the roof. Henry rose from his seat while the students watched. Backing toward the door, he pointed down at the dog.

"Stay," he said.

Balam’s ears drooped. A nervous tic made her hide shiver. The dog watched him mournfully as he retreated to the doorway. At first, when he had brought her to class, she had tried to follow him wherever he went. But now she knew the routine. When he opened the door a crashing noise came into the room. He stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind him without looking back. He stood with his back against the door, relieved to be away from the others.

It was a deluge. Showers pounded the roof so hard that it sounded as if someone were being hailed by riotous applause. He thought of his brother. When Jason had
accepted his music award, this might have been how it sounded. Henry stood there with his back to the door and imagined rows of people clapping in the audience. Showers clamored all around, and a hubbub of puddles was already bubbling.

Within minutes the storm had inundated the church grounds. Water gushed from the gutters and lathered the churchyard, pouring downhill toward Lake Atitlan. The alley overflowed with rain. A banana peel floated in a puddle, flailing like an octopus. Ragged sheets of water poured down from the roof and spattered the walkway tiles, filling the air with a fine mist that he could taste at the back of his throat. He stepped to the railing and looked out across the alley toward the café. Veils of rain swung in slow, floating waves across the landscape. The cluster of oak saplings to the left of Maria’s house plunged in the wind, the undersides of the leaves flashing silver. To the right of her house, the patio was gray in the downpour.

Two umbrellas had been collapsed, but one was still opened, the scalloped trim snapping in the wind. He was thinking that Maria probably hadn’t had enough time to complete the job when a gust knocked over the open umbrella, table and all. The umbrella whacked some bar stools, which toppled to the floor. The aluminum tabletop clanged against the flagstones and rocked from side to side. Several bar stools were left standing, and as he looked more carefully he could make out what appeared to be a rifle leaning against one of them. He wiped water from his eyes, held the cool metal railing, and squinted. Raindrops slanted across the alley, screening the café. Arrows of water hit the ground and snapped, bouncing up.

A young military assistant stood behind the bar, his profile hidden by a rack of tulip-shaped smoothie glasses that hung upside down from the wooden dowels over the counter. His right hand partly covered a paper napkin. Henry gripped the railing more tightly as trickles of cool water dribbled inside the cuffs of his sweater, making him shiver. His heart banged against his ribs. He wasn’t sure what was happening, but sensed violence as the boy crumpled the napkin, his lips moving. He seemed to be arguing, but
Henry couldn’t see anyone else. He was a short, powerful youth with a crew cut and stocky neck. Arching his back against the wall, he gazed down at something behind the bar. A light bulb swung from a cord above the bar, its corkscrew filament gleaming and casting a glow visible through the rain. Rolls of fat as thick as bicycle tires puckered at the base of the boy’s neck. When Henry realized it was the military assistant who was always scowling at him, his stomach wheeled with fear.

The crown of Maria’s head appeared over the counter. Then her hands came into view. She was unbuckling the boy’s belt. Henry turned away and looked back again. He felt a strangling rush of fear and excitement. He wiped water from his face and blinked, resisting the possibility that this could really be happening. He told himself that it could not be happening in the quiet village of San Bernardo, as if this might banish it from reality. He headed back in the direction of the clinic, splashing through puddles, not sure what he was going to do.

He wished he had not seen. He passed doors, stopped halfway to the clinic, and glared down at a puddle. Some muscle on the side of his neck twitched. He should help her, but he already had enough trouble of his own. Besides, he hardly knew her. Maybe the military assistant was her boyfriend or something. He stared down into a puddle, afraid to turn around and look toward the café again. If he didn’t look, he wouldn’t know what was happening. He couldn’t be held responsible for something he didn’t know about.

But he went back to the railing and looked a second time. Across the rain-streaked alleyway he watched Maria’s head snap to one side. She stumbled into the shelves behind the bar, and tin cans toppled as she fell backward and disappeared below the counter. The boy sneered down, gripping the bar in one hand and the shelves in the other, and lunged forward. No doubt about it: he was kicking her. Henry let go of the railing and turned back toward his classroom door. He had to tell Padre Flores. But the sound of Maria’s scream drew his attention. He locked his fists around the railing and focused, narrowing
his gaze through the showers. Tilted against the stool, that rifle was on his side of the bar, well out of the boy’s reach.
CHAPTER VII

Henry climbed over the guardrail and dropped into an ankle-deep puddle. The rain soaked him in an instant, drenching his wool sweater and flattening his hair against his scalp. He swabbed the water from his eyes with his left sleeve, blinked, and peered at the café. From this angle he could see into the area behind the bar, where Maria and the military assistant were illuminated by the yellow glow of the light bulb swinging over them on its cord, his view slashed by the rain. Above the counter only Maria’s profile showed, facing the assistant, who leaned back against a wall with one hand on the crown of her head.

Neither of them were paying attention to the alley when Henry cut behind the fence and headed toward the cluster of leafy oak saplings that stood on the opposite side of Maria’s house from the patio. When he reached a spot where the fence blocked him from view, he stopped, shielded his eyes with both hands, and glared at the glimmering pickets. He hoped that he was doing the right thing. His jeans clung to his calves, the waterlogged denim making him shiver. Currents gurgled around his boots and went rippling downhill.

Lightning engulfed the alley with flashes of weird, bone-white starkness, as if some colossal strobe light sputtered. Thunder boomed, rattling the adobe and cement-block buildings that lined the alley and shaking the ground under his feet, the echoes
bouncing back and forth between walls. He went on toward the cover of the young trees, wanting to hide from anyone who might be watching. Halfway across the alley he slipped and held out his arms for balance, rotating them. He should go back for help, but knowing that Maria was probably being hurt intensified his resolve to do this alone. His mind constricted into a weary determination. Sure, he might get beat up again, but this time he was going to fight back. He sloshed through puddles, his arms extended, his eyes trained on the footing, and wondered if Maria’s short black hair had ever been long. Braided with running water, the alley sparkled and dimmed.

Gusts batted the saplings, whose leaves swirled. He ducked under their branches and looked out, scanning the alley from the other side. Nobody in sight. Wind-flung volleys of raindrops plowed up the puddles like gunfire. A bang startled him, and he shrank deeper into the foliage. Something moved behind the cheese shop that backed into the alley farther uphill. He squinted through the maze of whirling branches, trying to steady them with his hand, until he realized that it was just a screen door banging in the wind.

Electricity splintered the sky over Lake Atitlan, glutting the alley with stark light. Thunder rolled in the spell of darkness that followed, and when lightning forked against the distant flank of Volcano Toliman, carving a zigzag of brightness, he remembered that it was dangerous to stand under trees in a thunderstorm. He plunged back out into the showers, tramped through the muck to Maria’s house, and stood shivering under the eaves. Rain clattered against the metal overhang and came pouring off the edges in glassy, funneled sheets.

No windows faced the alley from Maria’s house, and the only door he had ever noticed was the one that opened onto the patio. If anyone beside Maria had been inside when the storm broke, they probably would have come out and checked on her. She must be alone. He advanced along the puddle-free embankment that adjoined the wall, stealing toward the fence. The wide overhang protected him, but stray drops still needled his
throat. He braced his left arm against the pitted cement blocks and shivered, worried that he wasn’t doing the right thing. He stared straight ahead, looking lengthwise along the building, and pictured Maria’s olive-gray eyes, slim brown arms, and small breasts. Remembering the way she tossed her head back in amusement, as if to taste her laugh before she let it out, he pressed on.

His hand left impressions upon the Coca-Cola emblem painted on the wall. He removed his hand from the wall, clamped both hands beneath his arms, and looked out through a place where a sheet of water unraveled into beaded strings of raindrops. Beyond the roofs of San Bernardo the bay glinted with a blue sheen, whitecaps popping into view and disappearing into the gloom. Goose bumps stippled his upper arms. Despite his sweater, he couldn’t stop shivering. He freed his hands, propped himself against the wall, and worked his way toward the fence.

A gap separated Maria’s house from the fence, but when he got there all he could make out through the opening was truck tires stacked over his head. He looked along the fence, whose length narrowed in his perspective. Those tall, saw-toothed pickets should prevent his being seen from the patio, but could anyone else see him? Across the alley, the classroom windows faced the church. If he needed help he would have to go back. Water spilled over the classroom gutters and stained the whitewashed walls with gray, upside-down triangles. Inside the students were warm and dry. Even his dog was sheltered. He decided to keep going—at least until he could check on Maria. He left the shelter of the eaves and clomped through the driving rain. Nailed close together, the pickets didn’t seem to have any chinks or knotholes. He felt for an opening as he prowled along the fence, anything big enough to peek through, but found none.

When a bolt of lightning glazed his surroundings, he backed his shoulders against the fence and cringed. He didn’t think he could be seen from the patio, but the possibility was enough to cripple his confidence. In his mind he heard his mother: this isn’t sensible at all, young man. You march right back to the classroom this instant. One caveat, his
father said: you don't even know how to use that rifle. Henry shooed them away and plodded on. At the other end of the fence, the last picket stood flush against a post. Afraid to stick out his head, he folded his arms against the fence, leaned forward, and buried his face in the crook of his right elbow.

After a fight, he would be sore. He imagined his mother at his bedside dabbing his wounds with iodine, his father standing in the doorway and stroking his beard, not joking. His parents might change their plans. After all, their firstborn son would be critically injured. Maria would be grateful, and the other Maya in San Bernardo would hear that he had risked his life to save one of their own. Maria might even become his novia. He pressed his forehead against his arm and grew aroused. Pangs of excitement kindled his imagination, and he saw himself cradling Maria's face in his hands as the other girls looked on. They would have to keep their distance, for they had failed to appreciate him. Maybe at night she would ask him to come inside.

Jason would come to understand that he had undervalued his big brother, the hero, and the other students would admire him—even the ones who had made fun of him. His blackened eyes would command respect. He thought about those smudges that Joe Theismann—the quarterback for the Washington Redskins—smeared beneath his eyes before he played football. No doubt Henry would sustain many glorious injuries. When a splinter jabbed his elbow he winced and drew away from the fence, the matchstick-long sliver snapping off and jutting from his sweater. He plucked out the splinter and flicked it away. Maria was being hurt, and here he was pining for glory.

He was looking at a different fence. No, the fence was the same, but he was something worse than he had imagined. He didn't really care about Maria. He just wanted to capitalize on this opportunity to get close to her. That was the real thing. Maybe getting his eyes blacked out was what he deserved. He was the one responsible for the trouble in his family. He had to bring his brother home to show what a man he was. Yet his fiasco had led to the argument between his parents, and now look at them. He stared
at the glassy fence, whose pickets mirrored his real stature. He wasn’t anyone’s savior, not even his own. He traced his trembling index finger along a bulge of lines in the woodwork where they ballooned around a knot. Sure, he might get beat up, but that was probably what he deserved anyway. It might even be a relief. Then he would just look on the outside the way that he felt on the inside.

The sodden bandage was drooping over his brow. He scraped off the dressing with a single motion and threw the thing away. He ripped the band-aid off his left temple, his wound cool and raw now, and pressed his palms flat against the fence. Thunder jiggled the pickets. He strained to hear voices from the other side, but the clamor of the storm drowned out most sounds. Blood washed off the fingertips of his right hand and settled into the cuticles. He stepped toward the end of the fence.

He eased to the edge and peeked around the fence. Behind the bar the assistant’s back was now turned, his neck swollen with rolls of fat, his shoulder blades stretching the camouflage design on his T-shirt, patterned in multiple shades of green. He blocked Maria from view, but as Henry watched he saw her hand shoot up over his shoulder. He withdrew behind the fence. She hadn’t seen him, but he felt as if he were being summoned. He rested his hands on his knees and panted, his breath steaming in clouds, his pulse slamming into his ears.

The next time he looked the assistant was bulldozing Maria back against the wooden shelves of canned food, coffee mugs, and stacked saucers. Under the swinging light bulb, Maria’s face surfaced over the assistant’s shoulder, then disappeared. He didn’t think that she had noticed him. He could still make out a frilled sleeve of her white blouse pressed against the shelves beside a Mason jar that was stuffed full of beeswax candles. He wasn’t sure what was going on over there. Though short, the assistant reminded him of those bullies that threw their weight around at playgrounds, knowing they were more powerful than everyone else. Henry had never stood up to them. When something pressed into his palm, he took his hand off the post. Rusted staples
crisscrossed the wood, where fliers had been hung.

He pored over the patio, trying to figure out what to do. The overlapping sheets of metal above the bar funneled water from their grooves, the water cascading onto the flagstones just beyond the rifle, beating a steady tattoo. Propped against a bar stool, the rifle was out of the rain but beaded with moisture. The assistant must be crazy to leave his weapon out of his reach—or just inexperienced. When gravel popped under Henry’s boots, he jerked back behind the fence and cast a sidelong glance toward the ground, where blue-chip gravel fringed the patio. Next time he would be more careful. He leaned out for another look.

Maria raised her arms over her head. The assistant reached up with her, the backs of his pudgy hands dimpled at the knuckles, and looped a bandanna around her wrists, binding her to the pipe branching over them. Henry looked at the round top of the overturned table, whose aluminum edge was rocking back and forth over the grit and broken glass on the flagstones, making a gritty sound that he could just barely hear. He could hide behind the table. Haphazard gusts whistled across the tables and chairs. Rain darted against the sectioned, grapefruit-colored canvas of the squashed umbrella, whose trimming fluttered and snapped. A bottle had slid off the table and broken on the flagstones, where catsup oozed from the starfish-shaped explosion. Clear as icicles, the slivers glittered.

He zeroed in on that rifle. He could rush out and grab the thing, but if he managed to take it secretly that might buy him some time. To do what, he wasn’t sure. He saw himself aiming at the assistant’s fat head and squeezing the trigger—but no, that was insane. He had to think clearly if he was going to do any good at all. Probably he should just throw the rifle over the cliff and into Lake Atitlan, where at least it couldn’t be used against them. He eyed the fang-shaped magazine—that must hold the ammunition. The magazine jutted from the wooden stock and curved toward the sight-mounted barrel. He stood there breathing quietly through his nostrils, knowing the time for action had come.
but afraid to make the first move. A frayed, olive-green strap was clipped to the rifle. Flung over the bar stool, that strap would have to be freed before he could secure the weapon. He drew back and slumped his shoulders against the fence. Once he went past that barrier, there was no backing out. He withdrew behind the fence.

As he stared at the classrooms, the urge to get help struck him with the impact of a revelation. It was so obvious—just get out of here and tell an adult. He strode back into the alley feeling that he had come to his senses at last. Now he was doing the right thing. He walked with confidence. Padre Flores would be grateful for his maturity. In his mind his father beamed and his mother smiled. He could almost taste the dinner he would eat. His mother would heat up the meatloaf, gravy, and mashed potatoes. Tapioca pudding for dessert!

When Maria screamed, Henry skidded to a stop and his boots slipped out from under him. He staggered backward, arms flailing, and landed on his rear end.

“No, no, no,” she said.

Bracelets of water lapped his wrists. He looked around wildly and listened for more, slime squeezing out between his fingers. No voices. He clambered to his feet and plunged back toward the fence in a stiff, headlong stride, his fists swinging at his sides. He stepped over his discarded bandage and walked to the edge of the fence.

He went down on his hands and knees, gravel scraping his palms. Lightning emblazoned his reflection upon the caramel-slick mirror of sludge. A fresh volley of raindrops pelted his head and back. He crossed the margin of gravel and lowered himself onto his stomach, his sweater soaking up water from the puddles covering the flagstones. The showers had churned up the puddles into a lacy froth, making ping-pong-sized bubbles that skidded around like bumper cars. Across the flagstones the bar stool reflected a jungle-gym of shadows that wheeled and blurred. He wriggled toward the rifle, craning his neck. If he put his finger outside of the trigger guard, the assistant would think he was ready to fire.
The underside of the bar stool bristled with wads of dried chewing gum. When he got close, he propped himself on his right elbow and reached for the rifle with his left hand. Not close enough. He scooted forward a few more inches, stretched his arm farther, circled the stock, and tightened his grip. As he lifted the rifle, hearing their voices now, he freed the strap from the bar stool. He cradled the metal-limbed gadget against his chest, terrified that the thing might go off, and slid his index finger into the space between the trigger guard and the magazine, where there was just enough room. The flagstones hurt his elbow while he aimed at the spot above the bar where he thought the assistant’s face would emerge. He heard them talking, but couldn’t make out what they said. When the assistant spoke to Maria, softly and quietly, Henry realized from his tone that he probably hadn’t noticed a thing.

He clutched the stock of the rifle against his chest with his left hand and anchored his right palm flat upon the flagstones. He bent his knees and pushed himself into a three-pointed stance, his shoulder trembling. As he stood, he felt lightheaded. The barrel slipped against his throat, chilling his skin. He grasped the rifle with both hands, ready for action, but they were unaware of his presence. He wedged the butt of the rifle against his right shoulder, cushioned the stock in his left palm, and centered the sight-mounted tip between the shoulder blades of the assistant. He aimed at a brown blotch in the camouflage pattern of the assistant’s T-shirt, keeping his finger outside the trigger guard and clutching the rifle tightly.

He had forgotten to check the safety. Maybe he should get rid of the weapon now while nothing stood in his way. He glanced over the cliff, where mist billowed from the canyon. Rain fell into the darkness of the bay, and from below he could hear the distant pounding of breakers against the boulders.

When he turned back the assistant was unbuttoning Maria’s blouse. Henry stood in plain sight, but Maria’s eyes were blocked behind the assistant’s back as he reached inside her blouse and cupped her breasts, one in each hand, under the swaying light bulb.
Shadows wobbled across the bar. Henry stared in horror and fascination, the rifle shaking in his hands, growing excited and thinking that he was no better than the military assistant.

Yet he couldn’t tear his eyes away. Stacked on the shelves behind Maria, cans toppled from their columns as she struggled with the assistant, her arms still bound to the pipes over her head. Cans fell on the floor behind the bar. When the Mason jar filled with candles fell off its shelf, glass smashed on the flagstones. Fragments crackled under the assistant’s boots, an ugly crunch. When Maria noticed Henry standing there, her eyes grew wider.

In one motion the assistant spun around and dove across the bar, lunging toward the stool where his rifle had been. He seemed to recognize in mid-flight that the rifle in Henry’s hands was his own and braked himself with both hands, his palms skidding across the counter, his forehead smacking a cutting board. His military cap came off his head, spun, and landed upon the flagstones below the bar.

Waves crashed against the boulders at the base of the cliff. Overhead seagulls screeched as they swept past. Showers pelted the flagstones. Maria kept her eyes fixed on him and nodded at the counter, where a machete lay on the cutting board beside two halves of a football-shaped papaya that was sliced lengthwise and gutted of seeds forming a glittering black mound beside the assistant. Pumpkin-colored fruit streaked the blade of the machete.

The assistant swung his legs around, sat upright on the counter, and gripped the edge. He swiped his wrist across his mouth, smudging his upper lip with a mustache of mud. He seemed poised and ready to jump down onto the patio. Henry found himself wishing that he would, just to relieve the tension of suspense. He aimed at the assistant’s gut. His belt was still unbuckled, the tongue drooping, the zipper drawn halfway up. The assistant followed his gaze and laughed, his stomach quivering. He scooped up a handful of the seeds and pitched them across the patio, where they scattered clinking against the
metal chairs and tables. Henry couldn’t understand why he didn’t seem more threatened. As if responding to his thought, the assistant shouted:

“Es que no tienes huevos.”

He squeezed the rifle, thinking it might not be loaded. But if that were true, then the assistant would have already jumped down. The rifle pinned him to the counter top like a mounted insect. Shuffling backward, Henry kept the barrel leveled.

The assistant said, “Adonde vas?”

“You’ll see when I get there,” Henry said, feeling superior. The assistant wouldn’t understand a word of English, but Maria would. She struggled with the binding and watched.

“Como?”

“I’ll como you, you—” Henry felt the gravel under his boots, signaling the edge of the patio. He stepped back into the alley and took his finger out of the space between the trigger guard and the magazine. He gripped the stock of the rifle with both hands, raised the weapon over his head, and reached back. From the corner of his vision he saw the assistant leap down from the counter and come bounding toward him.

“Deme la carabina,” the assistant said. “Deme la carabina ahorita.”

Instead of giving him the rifle Henry heaved the thing as hard as he could, propelling it high into the air. The rifle spun end over end, blurring into a disc, and vanished over the cliff.

The assistant stopped on the patio and spat. He looked back toward Maria, who was still tied to the pipes, and then faced the alley. He said, “Es una puta.”

“Es una monja,” Henry said. Why had he said such a thing? He decided that he would rather think of Maria as a nun than a prostitute.

The military assistant said, “Pach’q’onik?”

Henry thought that he could recognize the guttural sound of the Cakchiquel, but didn’t know what the words meant. He kept saying that Maria was a nun, repeating
himself louder and louder as the assistant plodded toward him. What he said no longer mattered. Someone from the school might hear. If he yelled loud enough, Padre Flores or someone might come out and help.

"Es una religiosa," he said. "Es una hermana de la caridad."

"Mentira." The assistant shook his head as he advanced. Gravel crunched beneath his boots. Henry resisted the impulse to run. Maria struggled with the bandana, her blouse open.

The assistant lumbered toward him, crossing the patio and not stopping until they stood face to face. He had cheeks the texture of raw hamburger patties and a ball of snot skewered to one nose hair like a cattail.

"Es una monja," Henry said.

"Y tu mama tambien." The assistant smiled, drops of water falling from his pock marks. Each word came out with a puff of mist.

Henry despised him. He smiled, pretending to be diplomatic and thinking that the one who made the first move was supposed to have an advantage. Meaning to connect with his right fist, he faked with his left.

Knuckles smashed Henry's cheek and knocked him backward. He saw bright explosions in his mind. Before he knew that he had fallen he felt the alley slam into his shoulders and the back of his skull. He lay in a bright booming spell of shock.

The assistant came swaggering closer and stood looming over him. Henry drew back his legs, and when the sole of his left boot flopped open like a tongue the assistant snorted in laughter. Henry peered into the salmon-tinted roof of his mouth and felt his mind blackening with rage. Now he realized that he wanted to fight, despite his fear. More than anything he wanted to erase that look of derision from the assistant's face.

He said, "You son of a-"

The assistant whirled around and trotted back to the bar, where he picked up the machete. Henry clambered back onto his feet and walked toward the assistant, who
waved the machete. Cling to your security blanket all you want, you fat little chump. He advanced and smiled at Maria over the assistant’s shoulder, his mind set. A thousand lives, a thousand deaths mattered nothing now, only the fulfillment of this perfect ecstasy. He picked up the broken catsup bottle and held it by the neck, the jagged end facing out. With his free hand he motioned the assistant toward him. The assistant stepped closer.

“Yeah,” Henry said, “come and get me.”

The assistant was about to swing the machete when Maria cried out.

She said, “Henry!”

At the sound of Maria’s voice, the assistant looked back over his shoulder, and in that instant Henry lowered his head and plowed into him, guarding his face with his forearms and trying to get inside the range of the machete. But the assistant, backed up against the counter, jack-knifed his knee upward. Henry felt his head snap back. He felt his lips split and his upper teeth move inward. He stumbled to the side, his arms outstretched, and collided into a table. He pitched onto the floor on his hands and knees, the bottle flying from his grip.

He moved his tongue behind his upper row of teeth, felt them loose in his gums, and resisted vomiting. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind, and spat. A fragment of his tooth clicked across the flagstones. The assistant came closer. Henry scrambled onto his feet, the unfamiliar jaggedness of his cracked tooth cutting his bottom lip. He held out his left arm, gaping through his splayed fingers and tasting blood.

Legs braced, the military assistant held the handle of the machete with both fists and swung with a sweeping, roundhouse motion. Henry hunched over, hoping to deflect the blade with his raised arm. But when he felt the metal hack into his left shoulder he screamed. He had a sweet sick feeling. Blood blossomed on the shoulder of his sweater. He staggered backward, tripped over a chair, and fell. Broken glass cut his fingers. He scrambled back onto his feet, cradling his hurt arm against his side, and lurched and reeled in a wild, cowering circle. Maria was shouting, but he couldn’t make out the
words. The ache in his shoulder dazed him, and each step jarred him with fresh waves of pain. Thunder rumbled, making the aluminum chairs clink.

He faltered back, but the assistant kept coming, matching him step for step. The machete in his right hand, the assistant drove forward and slashed. Henry sucked in his stomach and jumped backward, arching his spine like a cat, his arms raised. The knotted pain erupted in his shoulder as the machete described a smooth, skimming curve that went whiffing past his gut, missing him but grazing his sweater, the blade snagging a tuft of wool.

When Henry thudded onto his heels, he lost his balance. He stumbled and caught himself, regaining his balance in time to counter the next blow—a backhand stroke—by lifting his good arm. The machete veered under his arm, the flat side of the blade slapping his side harmlessly. He clamped his arm down over the blade, sandwiching it against his ribs, and twisted around sharply. He yanked backward.

They both fell. Flagstones banged the back of Henry’s skull, and for a split second he must have been knocked senseless. He awakened to see the military assistant falling toward him. He seemed to fall in slow motion, his image gathering coherence bit by bit, and landed with a grunt. Henry pressed his thumbs into the eyes of the assistant, who cried out.

The assistant shook his head, trying to dislodge Henry’s thumbs. Henry prodded and jabbed harder. When his left thumb slid deep into the socket, the assistant screamed, shivered, and went limp. Henry shoved him off and propped himself on his right elbow.

The pain from his shoulder added to his sense of surprise and outrage when the assistant struggled back onto his feet. Henry nursed his injured arm against his side, scrabbled back onto his own feet, and leaned against a chair. He panted. His skull pounded, shooting pain through his head, and the smell of blood and urine filled his nostrils. Down on all fours, his opponent was hacking as he tried to get up, something dripping from his right eye.
The assistant looked up, his face gnarled. Henry was shocked at what he had done.

“No mas,” he said. Enough was enough. He hobbled over to the assistant and touched his shoulder, feeling sorry for him.

The surprise of the assistant’s head butting into his groin bewildered him. He grabbed the assistant by his ears and yanked his head to one side. But the assistant hugged Henry’s thighs and surged forward, driving the top of his skull into Henry’s groin. Henry fell backward, pain shooting through his testicles. Dizziness disoriented him for a few seconds. Everything around him was whirling as he got back onto his feet.

When his vision focused, he saw the assistant tottering back onto his own feet.

“Bastante,” Henry said. “No le molesta.”

When the assistant heard Henry’s voice he lunged toward the sound, swinging so wildly that he almost lost his balance when he missed.

Henry had an almost tender feeling for him. He drove his left fist into the assistant’s stomach, feeling his wrist strain with the impact. The assistant’s mouth gaped open, his features becoming a gruesome mask, his breath rank. He was still conscious, but his limbs seemed to be loosening in stages, the slackness moving from his ankles and knees up to his chest. His shoulders slumped as he fell forward. Henry stepped back, anchored his feet, and smashed the assistant in the mouth with his right fist, feeling the teeth cut into his knuckles.

The blow spun the assistant around. He was about to land face-down on the flagstones, his arms flung out. But for an instant he hung suspended in air and glanced back over his shoulder the way a man might look while boarding a bus.
CHAPTER VIII

Between his parted eyelids, Henry watched them argue. At the other end of the health clinic they stood in front of the sink beside the stove, Maria’s voice firm, his father’s insistent:

“What do you mean to imply by that?” he said.

Maria cut the tap, lifted the pot, and elbowed his father. He backed out of her way, his rain slicker dripping, his cast rapping the tiles. She centered the pot over a burner. Henry could smell antiseptics and the wet leaves of the pecan tree in the churchyard. The storm had passed.

“I only mean the situation is delicate.” She switched on the gas. Blue flames curled around the base of the pot, spitting orange sparks. “I’m certainly grateful for what your—”

“Then tell me what happened.”

“Padre Flores will be here shortly.” She put both hands on her hips in a way that reminded Henry of his mother, despite her boyish hair and belted slacks.

“Why isn’t that soldier here too, if he’s so badly injured?” His father swept his arm toward the cot. Henry shut his eyes. He lay on his back, his head propped on a pillow, and cracked his eyelids open again, peering out through his lashes. In the dim room the blue glow of the flames colored their reflections in the glass panels of the open
medicine cabinet. Unable to feel his right hand, he felt a shadow of anxiety pass over him, as if a bird had flown overhead. He tightened and relaxed his fist under the blanket until he felt blood tingling into his palm. Maria turned her back to him gripped the edge of the sink. He wondered if she were crying.

A charred odor rose from the stove. He tasted blood clotted at the back of his nostrils. A pair of fluorescent tubes hummed on the ceiling, sputtering light. He couldn't remember how he had gotten here. Across the room a refrigerator shuddered into quietness.

“I should not be discussing this.” Maria had showered and changed. She wore a short-sleeved cotton blouse tucked into her black slacks, and her combed hair was damp. Through her blouse he could see the strap of her bra between her shoulder blades.

His father said, “Domingo and I are good friends.”

“I am aware of that, but—”

“I’ll talk to him myself.” His father turned, glancing at the cot, and faltered toward the door. Someone knocked.

Maria bounded across the floor and put her hand on his father’s arm. They froze. She leaned close to the bright crack between the door and frame, one hand on the slide bolt. The Venetian blinds on the windows had been drawn, but a high slat let a narrow plane of light into the room, through which motes of dust spun. His father’s crutches leaned beside the door.

“Quién es?” she said.

“Open up,” Padre Flores said. Tumblers clicked as she twisted the slide bolt. When the door opened, the priest shuffled inside in white pants, white shirt, and Birkenstocks, his usual clothes. But his long blond hair, normally clasped in a ponytail, now fell about his shoulders in disarray. Behind him the church yard sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. Starlings hopped on the wet grass. When the priest looked at him, Henry opened his eyes wide.
Maria shut the door. “He’s still—”

“I’m awake,” Henry said. Everyone faced him, and his father hobbled across the room toward him. Henry gripped the aluminum frame of his cot and pushed himself into a sitting position, his teeth showing in pain, the tendons of his neck spreading his throat wide. But he fell back against the pillow. His shoulder hurt, his lips hurt, even the roots of his hair hurt. He didn’t understand how he could hurt in so many obscure places.

Padre Flores stood behind Henry’s father and said, “You sure had us worried, son.”

“You all right?” his father said. The anxiety showed on his face as he leaned over the cot. Both his father and the priest edged closer. Henry reached out his hand from under the blanket and shook hands with his father.

“You’re dripping on me,” he said.

Padre Flores said, “You blacked out.”

“I can’t remember how I got here.”

His father said, “How long was he unconscious?”

“I don’t know,” the priest said. “Couple of hours, maybe three.”

“Jason told us you might be in trouble,” his father said.

“We’re all in trouble.” Maria bolted the door and helped his father out of his raincoat. She hung it on a rack and padded to the stove, where steam billowed.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Padre Flores led his father to the chair beside the cot. His father gripped the armrests and eased himself into the director’s chair. He grimaced, his teeth showing in his dense beard, his cast sticking out from the ripped denim of his blue jeans. He wore a flannel shirt with a checked pattern of black and red blocks, the sleeves rolled back halfway to his elbows. On his left wrist was a watch with a gold band.

“Can you move your hands and feet?” Padre Flores said.

“Sure,” Henry said, “but how did I get here?”
“Maria and I carried you.”

“Where is that assistant?” Henry said.

“He’s recuperating,” the priest said. “Don’t worry about him.”

Maria said, “I don’t see why you care about that—”

“You weren’t the one who hurt him,” Henry said. He may have blacked out, but his memory of punching the assistant in the face had not dimmed. The fight had been exhilarating, and this sharpened his guilt. He wanted to see the assistant, make sure he was all right, maybe apologize.

His father smiled and held up his fists. “Want to fight, Henry?”

“No way.” He tried to smile, but his face hurt. He stared up at the flickering light, thinking that his father must not know all the terrible things he had done. His brother couldn’t have told them much. He felt a surge of hopefulness. Maybe this would work to his advantage.

“How do you feel?” his father said.

“My shoulder hurts, but—”

“I want to know what happened.” His father leaned closer and put a hand on his shoulder. When Henry flinched, his father took his hand away.

“Jason told us you got into a fight with a soldier,” he said.

“Mom knows?”

“Excuse me.” Maria approached with a steaming washcloth. “Tell me if this is too hot.”

Almond-shaped, her black-framed glasses gave her a feline appearance as she came over with a washcloth in a pair of tongs, steam curling off the fabric. She avoided his eyes while draping the hot washcloth over his forehead.

Henry cringed. The warmth stung his left temple, but felt good. He closed his eyes, breathing in the medicinal steam, and pressed his arms closer to his sides. His left shoulder hurt. He was still dressed in his wet clothing, except for his boots. Against his
hands he felt the clammy denim of his jeans, but the blanket soothed him. His breath whistled through his nose.

“I want to thank you for what you did,” Maria said.

Henry said, “If you hadn’t distracted that guy—”

“Keep your head back.” She touched his chin and tilted his head back. Her arms were slender and brown, her fingers thin as cinnamon sticks.

He faced the ceiling, his eyes averted. His pillow felt damp.

“Well, Domingo?” His father looked up at Padre Flores who stood with one hand clasped in the other. Outside a dog barked. The priest frowned. Maria kneeled beside the cot across from his father. When Henry tried to make eye contact with her, she looked down.

“We do have a delicate situation here” she said.

His father said, “What’s so delicate?”

Maria said, “Domingo?”

Henry watched Padre Flores, who walked over to the medicine cabinet and shut the doors, whose metal latches clicked against the magnets.

“That assistant is beat up pretty bad,” he said.

Henry said, “Can I see him?” Padre Flores exchanged glances with Maria.

“Not right now.” The priest looked around the room, as if he had misplaced something.

Cots lined one wall, where a calendar hung with a picture of a Mayan weaving. The clinic had cement-bock walls, without a ceiling. Henry glanced up at the corrugated metal roof, supported by a frame of two-by-fours. Outside water dripped. The sun was waning, and through a window he saw a tangle of bamboo shoots with their narrow, blade-thin leaves casting precise shadows over the Venetian blinds. Beside the door his father’s crutches had formed a puddle.

Maria turned over the washcloth on his forehead.
"What about the soldier?" his father said.

Padre Flores said, "You may have saved Maria's life, son."

"She may have saved mine," Henry said. "If she hadn't distracted that guy during the fight, I'm not sure how things would have turned out." He cut his eyes toward his father, who nodded in approval and stroked his beard.

"We do have something else to consider." Maria glanced toward Padre Flores, who held out his hand. She said, "That guy isn't a soldier. He's an assistant to the military commissioners here in San Bernardo."

"What does that mean?" his father said.

"Comisionados militares don't wear uniforms," Maria said. "And neither do their assistants. They don't have salaries or uniforms."

"No uniform," Padre Flores said, "just power."

"Commissioners are people who have been discharged from the military," Maria said.

"I knew that," Henry said.

"Let her speak," his father said. "You're saying he's an assistant—not a commissioner?"

"Right," Maria said. "An assistant to the military commissioners, who are low-level bosses. Whatever happens in San Bernardo, they inform the army in Solola. That's their duty, as they see it. When they get named to this office, they become important in the eyes of the community."

"I imagine so," his father said.

"It's a quintessential ego trip," Maria said. "You know, like becoming a god."

Henry wondered which university she had attended in California.

Padre Flores took a metal folding chair from the wall, opened it, and set it down facing them. He leaned his hands against the back and said, "They respect nothing."

"They certainly don't have much respect for the Maya," Maria said. "They are
opportunistic thugs who work in the countryside without salaries or uniforms, acting as spies.”

“Spying for what?” Henry kept his eyes averted toward Maria.

“They go where meetings are held,” she said, “and look for people who have communistic doctrines. In their minds that means anybody who criticizes the government. Whenever they find a suspicious person, they go to a comandante and tell him that this person is part of a guerrilla system, this person is criticizing the government, this person is criticizing the army. That is why there have been so many deaths in Guatemala. In this country one can easily become friendly with someone and later be accused of doing something bad. Then come the superiors to kill that person because he or she is thought to be against the army or against the president. That is how the massacres we have been witnessing in these times have taken place. This has been happening a lot right here in San Bernardo.”

“What massacres?” Henry said. He remembered the atrocities his mother had mentioned to his father when he had eavesdropped through the heating grate. That was the first he had heard of such violence in Guatemala, and now as he lay there on the cot he began to see that he had been sheltered from information.

“I didn’t know the problem had escalated to this extent until recently,” Padre Flores said. He ran his fingers through his beard. “If I had known, I never would have encouraged you to bring your family here.”

“I understand that, Domingo,” his father said. “No one is blaming you.”

“It’s my fault,” Henry said. “I’m the one who started the fight.”

“But this incident really puts us into a difficult situation.” Padre Flores put his right foot on the seat of the chair.

“Yes, I can see that,” his father said. “But are they really as bad as all that?” He looked back and forth between Maria and the priest.

Maria opened her mouth, but kept silent. She turned toward a window. A squirrel
chattered in the churchyard. Through the blinds the sunlight had thinned to pale yellow.

Padre Flores said, “Things have really changed in the past few months. News has emerged that people in San Bernardo were threatened with anonymous letters accusing them of having contact with the guerrillas and saying that they could be kidnapped.”

“You never said anything about kidnappings,” his father said.

“This is a recent development,” Padre Flores said. “I didn’t even know about it the night we had dinner out at the cottage. Believe me, I would have told you. But should we be having this discussion in front of the boy?”

“What do you mean?” Henry tried to sit up, but his back throbbed. “I’m old enough.”

“Are you?” his father said.

Maria went to the door. When she opened it, he saw that the electric lights had come on over the walkway. A triangle of brightness cut across the linoleum tiles. She shut and bolted the door.

“I’m not scared,” Henry said.

“What these men did was ask the commissioners to prevent such kidnappings,” Maria said. “The commissioners asked for money to have these men erased from the blacklist. But they had themselves fabricated anonymous letters to scare the people. When the people got these letters, naturally they paid the commissioners.”

“Little by little,” Padre Flores said, “the people came to realize that the commissioners were the cause of misfortunes. Anyone who could not pay what the commissioners demanded would disappear in a few days. Many people sold their land simply out of fear that they were going to be killed. The townspeople wanted to investigate, but the person in charge of the investigation would be kidnapped and become desaparecido.” He snapped his fingers. “The people realized they had no local support. They had to go beyond the commissioners.”

Henry looked at his father, whose brow was furrowed.
"For the commissioners it was a business, because they do not work," Maria said.
"They live off what they extort from the people, just drinking and womanizing." She hesitated.

"Keep going," the priest said.

Maria said, "I'm not sure I want to get into this."

Henry's father sat up in his chair. "Domingo?"

"She's right," the priest said. "Maybe this isn't the appropriate time."

"We need the information," his father said. "The boy is old enough."

"At one point two of the commissioners held two women hostage," Maria said. "They first threatened the husbands, and the poor husbands did nothing when their women went to live with the two commissioners. What could they do?"

"That's what happened to Senor Miguel Delgado del Bosque," Padre Flores said.

"Who's he?" His father looked at his cast, on which Henry and his brother had scribbled.

"He's the father of one of our most respected teachers here," Padre Flores said. "This man had some money because he was the owner of a cantina. One night they broke in and tied him up and searched his house. But Miguel Delgado kept his money in another house. When they saw that they would find nothing, all of them raped his wife."

"My sister," Maria said.

"When they finished," Padre Flores said, "they untied her husband and told him not to say anything. What made it even worse was that Miguel Delgado was at that time the mayor of San Bernardo, a respected person. But the commissioners respect no one."

"They're animals," Maria said. "These men live dissolute lives. They commit kidnappings and inflict tortures upon the victims. Afterwards the bodies disappear, but it is well known what happens to them. They put stones around their necks and throw them into Lake Atitlan."

Henry thought of the Mayan women he had seen that morning bringing water from
the beach in earthenware jugs. He thought of the tourists who swam off the Panajachel beach.

"When the commissioners get drunk," Maria said, "sometimes they give their rifles to their assistants, mere boys who don't even know how to use them. The boys guard the town."

"This assistant was so dumb he left his rifle out of reach," Henry said.

"He had a rifle?" his father said.

Henry said, "I threw it into the lake."

"You threw the rifle into the lake?" His father pushed himself to his feet and stared around the room. "We have to get out of here," he said. He limped over to a window, stuck his fingers into the Venetian blinds, and peered out. Everyone was quiet in the room. He turned and looked at Henry. "I want all of you on a plane for the United States tomorrow."

"What about you?"

"I'll leave as soon as I can hastily wrap up my research."

Padre Flores went to Maria's side and put his hand on her shoulder. "You may have to go away, too" he said. "You might be in danger, in case the assistant has friends in the military who know where he hangs out."

"And you're sure this boy that Henry beat up is one of them?" his father said.

"I've known that kid all his life," Maria said.

"If we release the military assistant," the priest said, "he'll report what happened."

His father said, "What would they do?"

Padre Flores said, "They might send out the--well, anything could happen."

"The what?" Henry didn't want them to water it down. Padre Flores looked at his father.

"Go on," his father said. "Tell us everything we need to know."

"Death squads," Maria said. "Even if we killed him the army would ask
questions."

"We can't murder the boy," Padre Flores said.

Maria said, "Releasing him would result in far more death than killing him."

"I know," Padre Flores said, "but we can't murder him."

"What can we do?" his father said.

"Get out of San Bernardo," Maria said, "until this situation can be resolved."

"Domingo?"

"She's right," the priest said. "The ball's in our court now."

"You can't leave Henry here," Maria said. "This is the first place they'll look."

"How much time do we have before that happens?" his father said.

"Not tonight," Maria said. "I wouldn't expect them that soon."

Padre Flores looked at Maria and said, "What's the assistant's typical routine?"

"He probably touches base with the commissioners at least once every week."

"Maybe we should question him," Padre Flores said, "when he comes to."

"He's unconscious?" Henry said. "I didn't know that."

"He wouldn't talk anyway," Maria said. "Even if he did, he wouldn't be reliable."

"So they could show up tomorrow?" Henry said. The prospect of armed soldiers searching houses would make his mother and Jason leave the next day. Maybe he would leave with them. Maybe even his father could be convinced to leave. A truck went rattling past on the road outside.

"When they show up," Maria said, "you'll know about it."
CHAPTER IX

The Dodge Swinger climbed the main road of San Bernardo in first gear. Henry wished his father would drive faster. He wanted to avoid contact with other people, especially any military assistants or police who might be in the village square. But he kept quiet. His father was probably babying the car over the cobblestones for his benefit, and he did feel fragile. He wished that he could just snap his fingers and magically be home.

Two blocks separated them from their turn onto the dirt road leading to their cottage, the same road that he and his brother had followed after leaving the trail this morning. That walk seemed to have happened a long time ago to people other than him and his brother. He stared out his window, feeling separated from the inexperienced boy he had been and guilty for having put others into grave danger. Mayan men and women trudged under their burdens as the automobile creaked past them spurtng exhaust. One man labored uphill, his back bent under stacked cases of clinking Coca-Cola bottles, and glared into their windows. Henry scuffed the rubber floor mats with his damp busted shoes, his sense of guilt sharpening. Their car still smelled new and may have cost more than that man would earn in his entire lifetime.

When the laborer had receded far enough behind them Henry cranked open his window, thrust out his elbow, and looked into the rearview mirror mounted in a
streamlined case outside his door. A shiner circled one eye. Vertical cuts marked his lips, as if his mouth had been sewn shut. Breezes swept back his hair, exposing a pale rim along his scalp where a pimple festered. He wondered if Maria had seen it. He tilted his head and eyed the new scab forming over his left temple. She had told him that the injury would heal better without a bandage. He slumped back against the cushion, probing his cracked tooth with his tongue and wishing she hadn’t seen him in such an ugly state. But knowing he had saved her from that thug filled him with excitement. He smiled, stared out his window, and read the white block lettering printed on the mirror: OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.

“How come you’re going so slow?”

“You want to drive?”

“Sorry, sir.” Henry shook his head, feeling stupid. His father was right, of course. Who was he to make suggestions, particularly about driving? He didn’t own a license and didn’t even know how to drive. He was only the one who had gotten his family into this jam—the problem child, the lone wolf, the dumb one. In anxiety he clutched his knees, but twinges of pain flashed through his hands and made his knuckles smart. He clamped his hands under his arms, feeling worse and worse. He couldn’t even be an invalid properly. The silence between them grew heavier, and he felt the need to make up for his stupidity.

“I just don’t want us to get stopped,” he said.

His father cut the headlights. “That better?”

“Yes, sir.” Henry thought that his father must be angry, but didn’t know how to make things better. He stared straight ahead and kept his mouth shut. He wasn’t sure whether driving without headlights was any safer, but he did feel more at ease in the shadows. To his right he could see the summits of Volcano Toliman and Volcano Atitlan, whose shadows engulfed San Bernardo. Overhead the sky reflected blue, but electric lights flickered in the darkness blanketing the village. The sun still brightened the mountaintops to his left, the eastern brink of the caldera glowing a tangerine color. Out of
sight somewhere behind him, the sun must be slipping below the horizon this very second. He pictured the earth rotating toward darkness and thought that one day he would die.

"We still have some time," his father said. The instrument panel illuminated his profile, the greenness making his beard look as dense as moss.

"For what?"

"Before anyone gets suspicious."

Henry looked down and rubbed his left wrist where his watch had been. He was turning back to the windshield when he spotted a young boy crossing the road ahead of them rolling a bicycle wheel in front of him.

"Look out!" Henry braced both arms against the dashboard.

His father slammed on the brakes. Pain scalded Henry's left shoulder and his head snapped forward, his chin hitting his chest. The tires skidded, the car swerving sideways. The boy jogged past the grill casually and crossed the road. When the car shuddered, his father stomped the clutch with his good foot and jerked the stem of the gear shift that branched off the column of the steering wheel, taking the engine out of gear.

Exhaust drifted into Henry's window as he watched the boy, who rolled a stripped bicycle wheel ahead of him, keeping the wobbling rim upright by swatting it with a stick. He whacked the rim up onto the concrete sidewalk and looked back over his shoulder serenely, as if he had known all along that there would be no collision. Henry's scalp bristled.

"That kid came out of nowhere," he said.

"Lummox."

"Sir?"

"Complete idiot." His father jabbed a knob with his thumb, and the headlights sprang into life. The boy had disappeared. He must have turned a corner or something. His father punched the knob again, making the high beams tunnel into the gloom. Motes
of dust swirled through the shafts.

At the square kids played basketball under a floodlight. When Henry recognized some of his classmates he slouched lower in his seat and peered over the dashboard.

“Think they’re talking about what happened?” he said.

“They don’t know anything,” his father said. “Domingo let out school early.”

“What reason did he give them?”

“He said the storm had cut off the school’s electricity.”

“But the lights were on.”

“Aafter they left, he switched the lights back on.” His father gripped the steering wheel more tightly and gave him a sidelong glance. “It’s very subtle.”

Henry rubbed a smudge of catsup on his right thigh, feeling withered under the sarcasm. He was grateful that his father and Padre Flores were taking precautions, but not relieved. Anything could happen now, and he wished that his grandfather were here. He always seemed to know how to take tough situations in hand, and Henry had never felt like an idiot in his presence. He had mailed a letter to his grandparents two weeks ago and was waiting for a response. He looked at the post office as they drew alongside the square. There could be a letter waiting for him.

His father said, “Domingo learned a thing or two in the sixties.”

“You think he would consider just telling the authorities?”

“He doesn’t trust the military—any military.” In his father’s grip the steering wheel shuddered. “You know he was ten years old when he and his mother moved from Argentina to California?”

“I knew that,” Henry said. “What I don’t understand is why they moved.”

“What you don’t understand would fill a book, young man.” His father grinned.

“Yes, sir,” Henry said, smiling back at him. But he felt as if he were wearing a mask.

“They moved after the military ousted Peron,” his father said. “Domingo became a
paciﬁst, especially after Vietnam."

Henry wanted to ask who Peron was, but was afraid to appear stupid. So he was
glad when his father volunteered information. His father said that the military had ousted
Peron in 1955. Peron had been a popular president who sided with the working class,
polarizing Argentine society. In Guatemala the CIA invaded in 1954 and kicked out the
reformist President Arbenz at the request of the United Fruit Company. The Guatemalan
military had been put into power by the United States government, and it had remained in
power for the past twenty-four years, despite the ensuing bloodbath carried out against
the civil rights leaders and unionists. When Carter imposed human rights requirements
for U.S. military aid, Laugerud, the president before Garcia Lucas, had refused to accept
the requirements.

“So what are we going to do?”
“I’ll talk with your mother.”
“I’m going straight to the shower when we get home,” Henry said. “Then I’m
going to bed.” He had no desire to talk anymore—not tonight. He had no desire to
eavesdrop. He wanted nothing to do with the next discussion. He mentally rummaged
through the bathroom medicine cabinet, remembering where the best painkillers were—
those yellow, submarine-shaped capsules.

“Let me do the talking,” his father said, “but there is something I need you to do
for me.”

“All right.” Henry rolled up his window, but left a margin open.

“I want you to leave the country with your mother and brother, as I said.” His
father slowed to make way for a barefoot girl leading a pig on a leash. In the headlights
the udders of the pig swayed. “Tomorrow morning I’ll drive the three of you to the
airport—”

“Dad,” Henry said. “I won’t leave unless you come with us.”

“Why not?”
"We can't just leave you here."
"I can take care of myself."
"I'm not going."

His father was quiet for a few seconds. Their turn was approaching on the right, and he stared straight ahead. He didn't seem angry at all. "Well," he said, "there is an alternative."

"What is that?"

"Open the glove compartment."

Henry found two brochures from Mexicana Airlines covered with illustrations of Mayan pyramids, brightly feathered Macaws, and jade masks. The embossed pyramids stood out. Each packet contained a ticket. "You just happened to have these in the glove compartment?"

"I wanted you to have them before we got home."

"How come?"

"No need for your mother to hear about this. I bought those tickets before we left Maryland."

"But you didn't know what happened until—"

"I knew enough." His father squinted through the tinted glass at the top of the windshield. "Now that the military's involved, you have to go away."

"Where in Mexico?"

"The airport's in Tuxtla Gutierrez, near San Cristobal. Remember Hotel Mundo, the one with parrots?"

Henry recalled a courtyard with banana trees, parrots, and a waterfall cascading into a pool where orange carp swam.

"Near some ruins?" he said.

His family had stayed there while traveling through Chiapas on their way to Lake Atitlan. After driving south along the west coast of Mexico much of the way, stopping at
Mazatlan, Tomatlan, and Acapulco, they had driven east across the Sierra Madre mountains to visit Oaxaca and San Cristobal.

"Palenque's about a three-hour drive from there."

"I remember you mentioning that." He remembered that his father had mentioned Palenque last night as well. "Back when we were passing through the area, I mean."

"I was planning to visit the ruins with your mother, but that's not going to happen."

"Can't you convince her to stay a little longer?"

"I don't want to," his father said, "not now. But I'll stay at the cottage myself and keep a low profile for the next few weeks. Francisco can pick up our mail and keep me abreast—"

"What are you talking about?" Henry was shocked.

"I'm not going to Mexico with you."

"If Mom's not going to use her ticket, why can't you come with me?"

"She's definitely not using her ticket. She's flying back to Maryland tomorrow."

"You're absolutely sure?"

The road leveled near the top of the hill, and his father shifted into second gear.

"When Jason told us about your run-in, your mother started packing."

"Then we can all fly back together."

"Not me."

"You're sending me to Mexico by myself?" Henry felt the rawness of his throat.

"Traveling isn't easy with this cast."

"What about me?" He banged his fist on the dashboard and winced. Pain jarred his shoulder, making him feel embarrassed for the idiotic gesture. He hated himself.

"We have to consider our options rationally."

"Fuck options." Henry spat out the words, his lips stinging, his mind reeling with desperation and fear. He didn't know what to do. He imagined lifting the latch on his
door, shouldering his way out of the lumbering vehicle, and ducking his head into the path of the coming rear wheel. His father slowed down for the turn. Henry stiff-armed the dashboard.

"You’ve had a hard day," his father said.

"I will not go there without you."

"Maybe Maria would go with you." His father turned the steering wheel.

Henry was silent. His palms slipped on the dash as he turned to look at his father. The metal imprint of the Dodge logo pressed into his left hand like Braille.

"Ask her," his father said. "I would."

A spotlight illuminated the red flags waving above the butcher shop on the corner up ahead. His father grappled with the steering wheel, angling the car off the cobbled road.

When they dropped onto the dirt road, the smoothness was startling. Henry could feel his ears ringing. He watched Lake Atitlan far below them now, the color of eggplant.

"You think she would?" he said.

"She probably wants to avoid danger as much as anyone else."

"But why on earth would she go anywhere with–?"

"You’ve got the tickets."

"But Domingo could pay her way."

"You need a guide," his father said. "Besides, she’s grateful that you rescued her."

Henry swallowed, tasting blood at the back of his throat. He envisioned Maria’s short black hair and smooth brown skin and felt stricken with malarial excitement.

At the cottage his father drew his mother aside while Henry hobbled into the bathroom and locked the door. He peeled off his wet bloody clothing and turned on the hottest water he could stand, letting the needle-sharp jets redden his thighs in the shower and make his hard-on as slippery as polished marble. He braced his legs, leaned his left
forearm against the tiles under the shower head, and used strokes so hard that they almost hurt. He could feel the energy flowing through him, as if waves from Lake Atitlan started at the beach and went rushing toward their front door, not stopping until they pounded at his back. He imagined the waves washing across their lawn, crashing over the sundial and limestone walk and making the aloe vera blossoms rock. When the waves reached their house, the momentum of their run would make them wash into the shower and come pounding at his back, thrusting his hips forward.

Steam billowed around him and his image of Maria, enveloping them in a cocoon. She stood with her naked back to him and arched her spine, her slim arms outstretched with her hands flattened against the tiles under his own hands as he pumped into her. He imagined her looking back over her shoulder and making eye contact with him, her mouth open, her expression bewildered, as if to say that when she had stepped into the shower with him she hadn’t known she would be taken in this way. When he groaned, his mother’s voice startled him.

“You all right, sweetie?” She rapped on the bathroom door.

His father’s voice carried from the kitchen: “Leave him alone, April.”

“But the child is in pain.”

“Come back here,” his father said. “We need to have a powwow.”

Afterward Henry slipped out of the bathroom without talking to anyone. His parents and his brother were in the living room. As he limped through the kitchen he removed chocolate chip cookies from the jar and ate them while climbing the stairs, spilling crumbs on his bathrobe.

Under the Navajo blanket he faced the wall, still hungry. The two pills he had taken made him feel high. He slumbered, his limbs sinking into the mattress, and heard his family opening and closing doors throughout the lodge, creaking up and down the staircase. The mattress felt unmoored, as if it were drifting away.

At some point during the night the smell of popcorn rose from the kitchen, and
muted voices chimed in the heating grate as he burrowed deeper beneath the covers. He had to keep the right side of his head against one pillow to prevent anything from touching his sore temple. He hugged the other pillow.

Sometime during the night he woke and heard Jason and his mother enter the room. They whispered. He kept his eyes shut and pretended to be asleep.

“How badly?” his mother said.

“Look,” Jason said. “He’s asleep.”

Henry was startled when he felt the dog spring onto his bed. She circled around several times and then settled with her back against his legs. He shifted as if in his sleep. When he heard his mother shuffle to the bed and lean over him, breathing quietly, he realized she must be taking inventory of his wounds. He held still until the hallway light clicked off. He heard his brother climb into his own bed, and soon afterward the house grew quiet and still. His mattress floated on a tide of darkness. He could hear the heating grate make ticking noises as the metal cooled and expanded.

In the morning he woke with his stomach grumbling and one eye swollen shut. He had the sense that he had experienced vivid and mysterious dreams, but he couldn’t remember what they had been. He touched the puffed skin on his face and surveyed the room with his good eye. His brother lay on the other bed asleep under the covers. The terrier had left the room; their door was ajar.

A clopping sound came from the kitchen. The smells of fried onions and mushrooms and sausage flowed up the staircase and into the room. The open door revealed the landing at the top of the stairs. He thought that his mother was probably making an early breakfast to lure him out of bed. Guerrilla tactics. His father and brother would continue to sleep for hours, as usual, but Henry tended to wake early every morning, as his mother knew; it was something they had in common. She also knew it was hard for him to resist her cooking, even when he didn’t want to leave the warmth of his bed. The chopping downstairs pared away the precious minutes he could remain in
bed. When he pulled back the covers, the motion sent tremors along his back.

The cold wooden floorboards on the soles of his feet made him shiver. Putting on
socks was almost impossible. His spine seemed to have rusted. He sat on the floor,
reached toward his feet, and finally gave up. He limped barefoot down the staircase in a
rumpled collared shirt, taking one step at a time and using the banister. He paused after
each step.

When his mother turned to face him, she set down the knife, brushed the hair from
her eyes, and took a step back. She braced her hands on the counter and widened her
eyes.

“That bad?” Henry was secretly pleased. Maybe he could persuade her to stay,
after all. Her eyes were bloodshot.

When she saw him look at her eyes, she said, “Onions.” She wore one of his
father’s collared shirts, but nothing else that he could see, not even flip-flops. He shuffled
toward the bathroom.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” His mother opened her arms. “You come back
here, Henry Nicholas Foster.”

He took one step toward her and waited. At first he stood there with his arms
hanging at his sides as she hugged him. Then he felt guilty and patted her on the back. He
looked over her shoulder at the cutting board, where green peppers and eggplant and wild
onions had been sliced and diced. Vegetables simmered on the stove. He tried to
disengage himself, but she crushed her breasts against him. When she whispered, her
breath tickled in his ear.

“I expect to hear everything that happened.”

In the bathroom, the fixtures gleamed. The whiteness of the porcelain hurt his
eyes. The smell of bleach rose to his nostrils and made his eyes water. His mother had
gotten up early to clean. He avoided looking into the mirror, keeping the medicine
cabinet open, but took a long time washing his hands.
He faltered across the kitchen floor and sat at his spot on the dining room table. He
could see his mother and talk through the opening in the wall.

“How long have you been up?” he said.

“Tell me what happened.” She emerged from the kitchen with the coffee pot.
Tucked behind her ears, a few strands of her yellow hair came loose as she poured the
coffee.

“Some military assistant was hurting Maria,” he said. “So I had to do something.”

“The girl who works at the café?”

Henry nodded. “When I tried to help her, I got into a fight.”

“Were you badly hurt?”

“I’m sore,” Henry said. “That’s all.”

Steam billowed around his face. The aroma of the coffee woke him up, and he
looked into their back yard. Fog pressed against the windowpanes. He sipped the coffee
that had come from beans Francisco picked on the plantation behind the house, but it was
too hot.

“Your father says you threw the rifle into the lake.”

“I had to do that.” Henry stared into his coffee. The clay mug was slightly tapered
to resemble a volcano. The words *Mayaland of Eternal Spring* were painted across the
side.

“You know we’re leaving this morning.”

Henry acted surprised. “You can’t leave so soon.”

“You’re coming with us.”

“Can’t we wait and see what happens?”

“No,” his mother said. “Things have gotten too dangerous around here.”

“You bought tickets already?” Henry said. His mother carried the coffee pot into
the kitchen. Steam trailed behind her, and he watched her disappear behind the
refrigerator and reappear within the opening between the rooms. When she leaned on the
counter, one of the buttons on the front of her shirt slipped free. He looked into his coffee mug.

His mother said, “You are coming with us, young man.”

“I don’t want to go,” Henry said. “I want you to stay.”

In the circle of blackness a reflection of the cut-glass chandelier sparkled, eclipsed by his forehead and eyebrows. When his mother turned on a burner under the pan, the blue flames blossomed. She sliced garlic on the cutting board.

“This issue has been building for a long time.” His mother frowned. The skylight over the sink shed a faint illumination upon the crown of her head. The darkness outside had turned gray. Clusters of long pine needles littered the convex bulge of the skylight, and he could see them sprinkled over the Plexiglas.

“What issue?”

“The differences between your father and me.”

“First I’ve heard it.”

“I know you and your father talk.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You didn’t have a candid discussion in the car last night?”

As he lifted the coffee mug to his lips, Henry felt his hand shake. His wrist was sore and his left shoulder swollen and scabbed. He thought about the tickets in the sock drawer of his dresser. He didn’t want to tell his mother about his plan of inviting Maria to Mexico. His father had said there was no need for her to know. Besides, if he let her believe he might go with her and Jason, then he could easily slip away later this morning. But knowing that he was keeping his real plans from her made him feel guilty. To combat this feeling he softened his tone.

“Dad driving us into Guatemala City?”

“We’re not taking the bus.” His mother brushed the garlic into the oiled pan with the onions and mushrooms. She jiggled the skillet. Garlic popped in oil. She cleaned
spinach leaves under an open tap. He listened to the water drumming against the stainless steel.

When he realized she was crying, he looked out the window. The gray lattices of branches were becoming visible, and he thought he saw a squirrel dart under the picnic table on the patio.

"Why can't we just stay a little longer?" Henry said.

"Too dangerous." His mother threw the spinach leaves into the colander, where they landed with a wet slapping sound.

"I'm sorry you're having such a bad time."

"Me?" His mother turned from the stove. "In the past twenty-four hours you've been in two fights. Can you honestly say that you're enjoying yourself?"

He tried not to think about the fight, but it was impossible. Thinking about the fight made him worry even more about the military assistant. Every time he was reminded about the things he had done it created a giddy feeling in his stomach. He wondered how the assistant was doing, and the thought that he would actually get to see him later this morning made him feel nervous and excited. At least he could apologize to the guy.

"Why can't you just wait?"

"You don't really want us to stay."

"I do too," Henry said. "You're not supposed to tell me how I feel."

"But I am supposed to look out for your safety."

"Some things are more important than safety."

"What could possibly be more important?"

"We can't just leave Dad here all by himself." Henry set down his mug and avoided eye contact. He stared at his place mat. According to its legend, the place mat belonged to the Hotel La Ceiba, on the main street in San Bernardo. A collage featured wonderful ways to have fun at Lake Atitlan. A pen-and-ink sketch illustrated a smiling
blond girl in a polka dot bikini zipping along behind a motor boat, her ski sending up dazzling sheets of foam set against the backdrop of picturesque volcanoes.

His mother dumped the spinach in the pan.

Henry said, "The other night you told Dad you couldn’t handle me."

"You shouldn’t have been eavesdropping."

He watched her through the opening, enjoying the results of his cruelty. He did feel forsaken, but his aggression gave him a different feeling—a sullen, bittersweet sense of perverse pleasure that came from his deliberate misunderstanding. This was a disturbing and exciting feeling that he did not like to think about.

"How else could I get the truth?"

"You know you can ask me anything, honey."

Henry hoisted the coffee mug and gulped. The hot coffee nearly scalded his throat, and his eyes watered. He pushed himself onward, wanting to say more.

"Why do you prefer Jason?"

"That’s unfair." His mother whisked eggs in a bowl, and her emotion seemed to make her work faster. Henry listened to the sound of the wire whisk scraping against the metal bowl. "He’s just younger," she said.

"What’s that supposed to mean?"

"You’re getting old enough to take care of yourself."

"I thought you preferred him because he doesn’t have any social problems." Henry stopped tracing his finger along the glazed opening of his coffee mug just in time to look up and see his mother flinch. Her reaction filled him with a sickening, tender sense of shame that he was afraid to express except as surliness. He felt even more resentful and confused.

"I meant that he has an easier time mixing in with his surroundings."

"You meant I’m some kind of freak."

"Don’t put words into my mouth."
"What did you mean, then?"

"I do not prefer Jason," his mother said. "It’s true that he gets along well with everyone, but that doesn’t mean I love him more."

"So how am I supposed to feel about that?"

"About what?"

"Because I’m a lone wolf there’s something wrong with me?"

She dumped the eggs in the pan. "I didn’t get up early to be interrogated."

"Do you want to talk about this or not?"

"You certainly are your father’s son."

"Thank you."

"That wasn’t exactly a compliment."

In a fury of concentration Henry glared down at his place mat. Perched upon a knoll above the “Most Beautiful Lake in the World” a cartoon Mayan woman was dressed in an authentically native costume with a hand-woven basket balanced effortlessly on her head as she contemplated sunshine glittering on the waves, enraptured by the majesty of mother nature.

"Things didn’t turn out like we planned," he said. His loneliness grew into a restless, hurt anger, and he wanted to leave. He ran a finger along the edges of the place mat and remembered the dream he had before waking. He thought it was strange how he could so easily forget.

His mother emerged from the kitchen, poured him a glass of tomato juice as red as a crayon, and went back. When she returned to the dining room, she set his spinach omelet on his place mat and said, "Eat your eggs."

"I just remembered a dream I had," Henry said. "I was snorkeling with Jason. We had spear guns, and we were swimming around the boulders in our cove." His brother had been poking his mask in the crevices between the boulders, holding a spear gun that flashed in the underwater daggers of sunlight. "But some current kept pulling me back
into the depths."

"What's your point?" His mother stood beside him and wiped her hands on a dish towel.

"I'm not sure I have one," Henry said. "I just wanted to tell you."

"But you think your dream means something in particular."

"Why do I even bother to tell you anything at all?" Henry felt exasperated. His anger gave birth to a vicious satisfaction. "You weren't even in the dream," he said.

His mother dragged out the chair beside him and dropped onto the seat. Henry stared down at the steam rising from his spinach omelet, his chin trembling. His mother put her finger under his chin and tilted his face up.

"Look at me," she said. "Maybe I was the water you were swimming in."
A fraction of light from the hall pierced the shadows in the master bedroom. Henry opened the door wider and looked inside. His father didn’t stir on the king-size mattress. Sprawled on his back, his breathing hoarse but even, he had one leg sticking out from the patchwork quilt like a chunk of driftwood. Holding his breath, Henry crept into the room. He eased the door shut behind him and exhaled, nervous but relieved. If his father had been awake, they probably would have spent more time going over his travel plans, increasing the likelihood that his mother might come upstairs before he could sneak away from the cottage and get back to the health clinic. Maria was the one he needed to talk with now.

He kept his back to the wall and sidled over to the cedar closet, stepping on a pair of frayed tube socks knotted together as a toy for the dog. The closet door hung ajar, and he slipped inside the small room, his passage making the hinges creak. The dim, reddish interior smelled so wildly of cedar that he felt as if he were standing inside an evergreen. His heart pumped blood into his ears, his left temple throbbing. He held onto a doorpost, leaned back, and lowered himself hand over hand until he was sitting on the floor, where he slumped over onto his side and took quiet, measured breaths until the sting in his shoulder lessened. When he felt better, he clambered onto his hands and knees and crawled to the baseboard where the shoes were kept.
The shoes weren't lined up as usual. Some were upside down, some mismatched, others missing. His mother's flip-flops, slippers, and the pair of high heels she had taken to Guatemala had been removed. He clapped his hand on one of his father's extra boots, the treads as deeply grooved as snow tires, and fumbled around for the other one. His left hand batted a marble that went bouncing across the floor and rolled along a baseboard until it hit something. He froze, but all he could hear from the adjoining bedroom was the regular breathing of his father punctuated by the ticking of the bedside clock. He groped over the floor as quickly as he could, feeling for the other shoe. He wanted to find Maria before San Bernardo woke up. The last thing he needed was to bump into people and have to make excuses. He hadn't told her that he would come back, but she would understand his need to see the assistant. When he set his hand on a wire hanger twisted into an irregular shape he found himself remembering the time the keys had been locked inside the Dodge Swinger. He and his father had jimmed the door and used the hanger to open the lock. He sat up on his knees in the darkness and smelled cologne mixed with cedar. A wave of feeling took him by surprise—part sadness, part something else. Suspended from the hangers, the cuffs of his father's jackets grazed his shoulders.

After he found the mate, he crawled back to the door, satisfied that he had what he needed. He clutched the doorpost with both hands and pulled himself onto his feet, his back straining so much that he squeezed his eyes shut and opened his mouth wide as if screaming. But nothing more than a whisper came out. He stood swaying in the doorway and felt lightheaded, his vision swimming. The mattress rippled. The curtains were drawn aside on the window over the bed, and when his eyesight cleared he looked out over the front yard, where the landscaped terraces were buried under the fog. Layers of fog surrounded the islands of boulders whose aloe vera stems stood motionless. A family of swallows nested underneath the eaves outside the window, and he could see their shadows flitting back and forth.

Outside the master bedroom he crossed the landing at the top of the staircase, the
shoes in his left hand, and smelled the aroma of toasted sourdough bread and sausage
drifting up the stairs from the kitchen. When a floorboard squeaked, he stood motionless,
his stomach growling. He should have eaten more, but it was too late now. By the time
his family sat down for breakfast, he would be back at the school talking with Maria. His
mother had asked him to join the family around the table later that morning, saying that it
might be the last time they would be together for a while. He had agreed, knowing that he
wouldn’t be there, and now he felt guilty. He gazed down the staircase at the lower
landing, where the stairs made a sharp turn toward the kitchen, and mouthed a silent
farewell.

In their bedroom Jason slept with one arm thrown back over his head, the covers
lassoing his neck like tide-washed kelp. Balam crouched beside him on the bed and
opened her eyes without raising her head from her paws. Her tail flopped once. He shut
the door, pressing the knob until the latch clicked, and set down the black leather shoes,
whose dark leather seemed severe, so much darker than his old brown shoes. He limped
across the room in his bare feet and lifted up on the top drawer of the wicker dresser
before sliding it out. He found clean underwear and wool socks. From the bottom drawer
he removed his sturdiest pair of jeans whose dark blue denim smelled of Lake Atitlan and
the boulders on which they had dried in the sun.

To step into his blue jeans without losing his balance he had to lean his good
shoulder against the wall. He unbuttoned the shirt he had slept in and shrugged out of it,
letting the flannel drop around his feet. Scabs encrusted his shoulder like an archipelago
of volcanic islands, but his arm was young and strong. He flexed his arm and admired his
muscles before struggling into a green cotton shirt with buttons at the neck, leaving the
top two unfastened. He slipped his passport inside a front pocket of his jeans. After
folding the ticket vouchers into his wallet, he thumbed through the cash his father had
given him, enough to last several weeks. The leather case that held his 35-mm Olympus
camera hung from a hook in the closet. He would finish the film now in the camera and
get the photographs developed in Mexico. He bundled the camera in a wool sweater with snowflake patterns and put that into his twine-mesh school bag.

Steel inserts protected the toes of his father's low-cut boots, whose industrial treads might make Henry stand a little taller than he had in his old shoes. Hands on his knees, he crouched and relaxed his weight into the wicker chair, wondering why his father had brought extra boots but not extra glasses. He struggled into his socks and wedged his feet into the boots, a good fit. As he double-knotted the cord laces, he imagined standing next to Maria, who couldn't be more than five feet tall. He clung to the rickety dresser while getting back onto his feet.

He patted the dog and leaned over his brother to kiss him on the forehead—but no, that might wake him up. He stole over to the bay window in the hiking boots and touched a cool pane, his breath fogging the plate glass. Fog cloaked the orange trees next door and surrounded the hedges of forsythia bushes beneath the window. In the east the horizon was lightening.

The smaller windows on the sides could be opened. He tugged open the window beside his bed, letting damp air into the bedroom. The draft smelled of orange blossoms, bird droppings, and the rotting wood of the windowsill. He stuck his head outside and dropped his string bag onto the springy hedges. Then he stuck his right leg out of the window and felt for the toehold on the outer ledge, about an inch wide. The jump was normally a cinch, but this time it was bound to hurt. The important thing was not to make any noise.

After he got both feet balanced on the ledge outside, Balam vaulted off the bed and cantered across the Aztec carpet. She thrust her snout toward the window and wagged her tail. He hoped she wouldn't bark and scratch at their bedroom door. If Jason let her out, she might follow him. He pulled down the sill almost all the way, leaving just enough room for his one hand clutching the inner part of the sill. He faced the window and looked back at the terrier through his own reflection. She licked his fingers and then
let out a woof that puffed out the sides of her muzzle. His reflection covered her face, and her whiskers seemed to project from his own cheeks.

Before jumping he looked down. The bay window jutted pretty far, but he still had to shove away from the house to clear the hedges. He heard the dog bark when he jumped, and afterward he felt the toes of his boots skim the hedges. His heels rammed the turf and flashes of pain shot up his legs like jolts of electricity. The momentum of his fall sent him toppling him backward, and he found himself backpedaling through the fog until he lost his balance, catapulted onto his rear end, and went skidding backward across the grass.

He stuck out his arms behind him, and the pain in his shoulder sent pangs through his neck. He rolled over onto his hands and knees, hung his head, and panted until the throbbing subsided. Immersed in the dense fog, he could feel moisture clinging to his face. When he felt something alive press against his palm—probably a worm—he jerked his hand away. He sat up on his knees, smelling night crawlers in the sod, and thought of the mornings when he and his brother would dig them up for bait. He forced himself to get onto his feet, wiped his palms against his thighs, and patted his wallet. He lurched over to the hedges, where he shouldered his bag. His ears were ringing and his shoulder had started bleeding through his shirt. He jogged across the uppermost terrace of grass, trying to get used to the heavy boots and work out the soreness from his limbs. He set his mind on Maria. If he could just talk to her, things would turn out all right.

At the low stone wall that separated the cottage from the property next door he sat down and lifted his legs over, one at a time, lichen sticking to his palms. He cut through the orange trees, wanting to avoid the groundskeeper’s house at the back of their own property, where light shone through cracks in the clapboard. Last night he had left his old shoes on Francisco’s workbench so the man could salvage the leather, maybe even repair the shoes. But Henry didn’t want to talk with him now. He felt separate and strange. He held the neck of his string bag in his right hand and loped through the orange trees, whose
limbs slapped his face. At the back of the orange grove he crossed over into the coffee plantation and went trotting along the path, feeling his way through the darkness, the shoes making muted thumps on the beaten earth of the trail.

After he had traveled about a mile from the cottage he slowed down. He was glad the dog hadn’t followed, but worried about the bad things he had done. He kept insisting to himself that he wasn’t a bad person. He pictured the assistant, whose eyes were probably so puffed up now that he couldn’t see. But there wasn’t much chance that he would be injured in any permanent way. No doubt their skirmish would add up to nothing, as often happened with schoolyard fights. The worst one he had seen was the time a student got rushed to the hospital for eleven stitches. That had been the year they started bussing in Berkeley, and the sixth-graders who had ganged up on the student got suspended for a couple weeks. Big deal.

Beyond the coffee plantation he entered the grove of oaks and grew alarmed to see the sun nudging the rim of the caldera. He had hoped to pass through San Bernardo in darkness and seek out Maria somewhere—at her house, maybe—without being surrounded by watchers. But now, realizing that he would probably be seen as he went through town, he felt a tingling nervousness in his palms. He started jogging again when he reached the oaks, feeling scared, and pretended that the trees were his pals, his comrades. As he clomped through the forest, smelling crushed leaves underfoot, the presences of the oaks calmed him, as if the trees were looking out for him. It was a great mistake, his having been born a man. He would have been much more successful as a tree.

The oaks were his favorites—the chieftains of trees. He slapped the gray furrowed bark of an oak as he ran past, striding on toward San Bernardo with fresh determination, his new boots, obscured under a layer of fog, chafing the skin below his ankles. He imagined his family around the breakfast table later that morning. What would they say about him? His father would know what had happened and change the subject of their conversation. Henry put confidence in his new plan, the one his father himself had
recommended to him, his father the smart intellectual. Maria would surely join him. His father must know what he was talking about.

He had to slow down when he reached the outskirts of the village, and by the time the steeple had come into view, he was walking slowly. The square was behind him, with its dangers. He had passed the square without incident, but now that the assistant had been wounded there might be danger even on the grounds of the church. He sauntered downhill toward the church yard, swinging his arms casually, even though his shoulder burned. Doors were beginning to open along the main street, and the sky was bright. Anyone who saw him would take him for a tourist on his way to the docks to greet the incoming mail boat—unless they recognized him, in which case they would probably think he was going to school early. He was glad there was no bandage around his head. He plowed a trench through the fog, feeling the cobblestones under his thick soles, and walked as if he were moseying through a field of dandelions, his shins kicking their pale, fuzzy globes and scattering the seeds. Although some shopkeepers were out, he saw no sign of the commissioners looking for their assistant. Maybe the kid stayed away for days at a time and the soldiers just assumed that he was out enjoying himself raping young women.

As he drew near the churchyard, he planned ahead. If he saw anything unusual, he would continue going down the hill toward the docks like a good tourist and circle back to the clinic, where Maria was most likely to be. She would probably not open the café now after everything that had happened. But the clinic would attract danger too. Maybe she had left town already. He felt a surge of apprehension throughout his being, worried that all his plans might have already been ruined. He acted casual, but felt so nervous that the crowing of a nearby rooster made him jump.

When he got close enough to count the pigeons huddled along the ledge of the bell tower, he decided to go directly into the church yard. No military officials seemed to be
around here. He didn’t see anyone at all. He had managed to show up before classes began, even though it was later than he had planned to arrive. He stepped onto the churchyard, stood under the pecan tree, and looked toward the covered walkway.

The door of the clinic was closed, and no light showed under the door. No light showed under any of the classroom doors, either. Maybe Padre Flores would keep the school closed for a while now that there was danger. He headed toward the walkway, intending to cross over to the alley where the café was and look for Maria there. But before he reached the alley he saw a glimmer of light through the large vertical opening between the portals of the church. He stopped, turned toward the edge of the walkway, and looked over the hedges at the church. The sun rose above the brink of the caldera, and as he peered toward the entrance of the church he could see beams of light starting to angle through the branches of the pecan tree. The beams splayed over the yard and picked out bald spots and tufts of grass. Birds chirped, and he realized that they must have been chirping for some time. In his chest the scene made a complicated sensation of desire, fear, and hopefulness.

He crossed the yard and headed for the church, whose two heavy wooden portals had hinges with black metal scroll-work that looked medieval. As he mounted the wide, whitewashed steps, the morning smells filled the air from neighboring huts. The air was laden with the smells of tortillas, frijoles, and chicken. Smoke scented the breezes that washed across the churchyard. He could smell his sweat cooling under the damp cotton of his shirt.

There was a normal-sized door cut into one of the two giant wooden portals, and he opened this door wide, tugging on the wooden handle, and peered inside. In the gloom he could see candles burning inside glasses, dozens of them arranged along the walls under statues. He could smell the charred wicks and the melting wax, but he couldn’t see anyone inside. He stepped over the threshold, leaving the door open behind him, and went into the church.
When his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw Maria sitting at one of the pews. She didn’t turn, but he knew it was her. He recognized her closely cropped black hair from behind and shivered with excitement and fear. Now that he had found her, he wasn’t sure what would happen. Her figure as she bowed her head seemed familiar. Maybe she hadn’t heard him enter. He took a few steps along the aisle between the pews, drawing closer to her spot, and watched her from behind. He could see the bumps of her spine along the back of her neck. She wore a black sweater with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and she seemed to be praying or thinking. He walked quietly along the cement floor, stepping deliberately in his heavy boots.

He drew alongside her pew. She looked over at him, her face startled. She reached up and touched the hollow spot at the base of her throat. Two lines of wet brightness, illuminated by the light of the sun now peeping through the high windows, let him know that something was wrong. But he didn’t know what to do or say. He took a step closer.

“What are the candles for?” he said, feeling ridiculous. But the words were out of his mouth, and he couldn’t take them back. He tried to patch it up. “Are you all right?”

“You shouldn’t be here.” Maria sniffled. “Why did you come?”

“I have to see the assistant.” Henry blinked. Sun was beginning to shine on the stained glass windows set high in the wall. He scuffed his shoes against the floor.

“You can’t see him.”

“Thing is, I just want to apologize.” Henry put his hand on the back of the pew where Maria sat. He looked lengthwise down the long bench toward her. The space between them could have been filled by a dozen people. But even from a distance he saw that she was dressed differently than usual. She was wearing a skirt, the first time he had ever seen her in anything other than pants. Her sweater was black, with only the top two buttons fastened, the rest flaring away over her belly to reveal a cotton blouse underneath.

“We need a private place to talk.” She had her back to the eastern windows, and her teeth gleamed in the shadows.
“We seem to have the place to ourselves,” Henry said.

Now that his eyes had adjusted, he saw more clearly the rows of seats that ran along both sides of the church. There was nobody else here. He brushed the front of his jeans and smoothed his shirt, noticing the spot of blood now drying on his left shoulder. He tugged the strap of his string bag higher onto his other shoulder, the bulk of his rolled up sweater bouncing against his side. There was something wrong, and he sensed he would have to wait.

Plaster statues lined the side walls between the tall windows, which were fitted with different colors of stained glass. The morning sun illuminated the glass in spots, and across the seats were blue and red and honey-colored splotches.

Maria sat at one of the front pews, near the altar. Henry gripped the polished back of the pew ahead of them and sidled down the aisle toward her. When he got close he swung into place beside her, feeling the slippery polished wood under the seat of his blue jeans. Bibles protruded from a shelf against the pew ahead of them. The church was much better furnished than the few other country churches he had seen in Mexico, a tribute to Padre Flores and the volunteers from his Los Angeles parish. But aside from the pews, the building seemed worn, with cracks going along the walls. He traced his finger along the golden edges of one of the Bibles that sat upright in a wooden pocket in front of him. The lettering on the cover had been rubbed off.

“A lot happened overnight,” Maria said.

“Tell me.” Henry squeezed his knees and grimaced at the altar ahead. He was afraid to look directly at her, sensing that something very bad had happened.

“I think everything is for the best now, under the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” Henry felt a clamor of panic in his chest.

“I’m not sure this is the best place.” Maria looked back, and when Henry turned and followed her gaze he realized that he could hear someone chanting, as if his hearing was a function of his eyesight. He looked back toward the door he had left open through
the rectangle of daylight, where he could see an old Mayan man sitting on the whitewashed steps, chanting as he burned copal incense in a corn husk. He must have just arrived. Blue in the gloom, eddies of smoke went spiraling up into the columns of sunlight that shot downward from the top of the facade.

"Where should we go?" Henry said. "The clinic?"

"I would suggest that we stay away from that place."

"We could go to the café."

"No," Maria said. "Let's go up to the bell tower."

From the high windows on the east side, shafts of sunlight angled through the colored glass, splashing the interior with vivid reds and blues. Perched on a pedestal beside the altar there was a statue of a woman clutching a baby. The feet of the infant protruded from a blanket. The toes had been rubbed smooth from the caresses of so many hands, the white paint erased. A mouse pattered along a rafter overhead, slipped and almost fell, then righted itself and continued to scurry along the rafter.

They got up, sidled away from the benches, and walked together down the aisle. Her sandals looked small beside his boots. They walked in silence. She stirred against him as she walked, and his body was like a taut string. At the altar he stopped and looked back over his shoulder, letting her take the lead. She brushed past him, her hair smelling of almond soap.

There was a doorway to the left of the altar and she went into it. He followed. Stairs went up and up, curving around into a spiral as they ascended. He looked up at the back of her legs one time and then forced himself not to watch. But the image of her bare legs, brown and smooth, stayed with him as he climbed up the spiraling staircase. A thin mist of excitement grew denser around him until he felt surrounded by a cloud. He put one hand out to touch the whitewashed limestone walls. Blistered paint flaked off under his fingers. When he looked down at the steps, worn in the center, the flakes of paint were scattered like cracked eggshells.
Dampness chilled him as he climbed the stairs, and he thought maybe he would put on his sweater when they reached the top. He could hear their footsteps echo. The stone walls breathed. There was no railing. The staircase circled several times through the darkness. He tried not to think about the assistant. The first time Henry had gone up this staircase Padre Flores had told him that the church had been built in the sixteenth century, but he hadn’t paid much attention. Now he could feel the oldness of the place.

At the top a patch of brightness glowed. He balanced himself against the wall as he rose from the dark into the light.

Pigeons cooed in the bell tower, and when Henry and Maria emerged a small flock exploded into the air and went flapping away with a plump swishing sound. He went to the ledge, where droppings speckled the cracked plaster, and watched the birds glide down and reassemble on the lawn. The Mayan man seated on the church steps gazed up, blinking through the rising smoke. Henry could smell the copal incense.

He moved away from the edge, crossed the tower, and stood under a horizontal bar on which two dented bells hung. The bell tower was open on all four sides, with stone pillars supporting the roof over their heads. The sun cast shadows over them, but the brightness of the surrounding white walls and the open sky created a vivid impression.

In the distance the enameled blue surface of Lake Atitlan showed through the dwindling patches of fog and glimmered. Breezes blew Maria’s sweater against her breasts. She still had the sleeves pulled up to her elbows, and he could see the sun emblazon the fine hairs on her forearms. He look down at his new shoes, his breast filled with dread. Underneath his fear there was another feeling.

“Well?” He gazed out across Lake Atitlan.

Maria looked around in all four directions, taking more precautions than necessary. It was obvious at a glance that there was nobody else in earshot. Then she took hold of his left hand in both of her hands. He raised his hand, not knowing what he was supposed to do. He shivered.
She said, “He passed away this morning.”

He backed toward the ledge and felt the soft seizure of his heart. Maria tightened her grip. She held onto his hand with both of hers, his arm stretched out between them. He looked over her shoulder at Lake Atitlan with a helpless, desolate feeling, his impressions sharpened but his mind confused. He felt air blow against his throat and goose bumps stipple the back of his neck. This was what he had feared, but now that the words had been spoken he still felt stunned. He stared stupidly over the edge of the bell tower at the landscape in a fearful, challenging way. There was road visible on the top of a ridge on the other side of the bay, and when the windows of a passing bus reflected the sunshine the glimmer was bright. He felt a flash of anger.

“That isn’t true.” He noticed a drop of moisture, bright in the morning sunlight, hanging from one of her nostrils. She saw him look and wiped the drop away.

“He was losing a lot of blood,” she said, “and we didn’t have enough of his blood type to give him a transfusion.”

“You just let him bleed to death?”

“Maybe you need to sit down.”

Her insistence convinced him that she must be right. He slumped against the wall and raised his knees. He put his head in his hands. Then he felt ridiculous in that posture and clamped his hands under his arms.

“We didn’t have much choice.” She remained standing beside him and he looked at her legs. She hugged herself. A gust buffeted the tower, raising goose bumps on her thighs. The morning wind smelled of pigeon feathers and pigeon droppings and smoke and ash and the sun-baked pottery tiles that covered the church roof like fish scales. Sparrows chirped in the boughs of the pecan tree below. Henry clambered back onto his feet and probed his chipped tooth with his tongue. The bay of San Bernardo behind Maria lapped the shore. Sunlight shredded the fog, exposing lead-colored patches.

When she dropped her head, Henry could see her chin shaking. He wanted to draw
her close, but thought that he should refrain. He looked away. In one corner of the ledge a cobweb bellied and sagged.

“What about the body?”

“Padre Flores took care of that.”

“Where is it?” Henry watched a chameleon whose red-scaled throat ballooned and shrunk. The chameleon was doing pushups on the ledge.

“At the bottom of the bay, chained to a cement block.”

Henry scraped grit under his boots. “What will happen when the soldiers ask questions?”

“Don’t wait to find out,” Maria said. “Go back to the United States.”

“I’m going to Mexico.”

She paused, raising a finger to her lips. “Why there?”

“San Cristobal in particular.” Henry explained the circumstance.

“Your dad refuses to go with you?”

“I tried to convince him, but he won’t leave.” Henry took his wallet out of his back pocket. As he opened it he was startled by the trembling inaccuracy of his hands. Broken stems of grass sprinkled his palms. He removed the ticket vouchers and showed them to her, the embossed illustrations of Mayan pyramids bumpy under his fingertips.

“Please come with me to San Cristobal,” he said.

“Me?” Maria stepped back. “Why?”

“The military may know that the assistant stops at your café,” Henry said. “If you stay here, you’ll be in danger.”

“I would be abandoning everyone.” She crossed her arms, covering her breasts. In the hollow at the base of her neck her pulse fluttered.

“You would be helping me,” Henry said. When he felt his chin quiver, he walked to the ledge overlooking the alley. As he gazed past the cliff toward Lake Atitlan, he realized that he could not have thrown the rifle all the way into the water.
CHAPTER XI

Smoke boiled up from the corn husks of incense on the step below the chanting man’s feet, rising from the shadow of the church’s facade into beams of sunlight. He stopped chanting when Henry and Maria came out of the church. Henry pulled the door shut behind him and held his breath before passing through clouds of incense. As he drew alongside the man he looked down at his sandaled feet, noticed an extra small toe on his right foot, and carried the image in his mind all the way across the lawn. The image made him feel unnerved. He heard the man resume his chanting behind them, his voice blending with the coos of the pigeons strutting in the dust and the laments of the mourning doves brooding under the forsythia hedges: ooh-ah-woo-woo.

At the other side of the churchyard he looked over his shoulder at the man, whose ragged clothing seemed part of the smoke. When he turned around Maria was already approaching the clay gully that passed for an alley behind the church. He trotted across the lawn, scattering squirrels and tripping over clumps of weeds that littered the toes of his boots with broken stems and clovers, and caught up with her beside the walkway. A gravel path paralleled the walkway, connecting the churchyard with the alley behind and running along the hedges whose branches had swallowed the wrought iron railing in places. Maria plunged down the path, her knee-length skirt swaying from side to side, her bare legs gliding through sunlight. Henry hurried after her, his boots crunching over the
gravel as he jolted down the path to a place where the gravel fanned out into clay. He paused when he saw a puddle glittering where he had jumped yesterday from the covered walkway into the alley.

The sun burned away the fog. Rays of light slanted down from the sierra and filtered through the tree limbs. Behind the church stood a white poplar whose looming branches cast doily-edged shadows over the alley. A network of roots crisscrossing the alley jutted from the soil, forming webs of natural stairways and triangular depressions in which mud puddles sparkled. The café had been shut down, the umbrellas folded, the tabletops cleared, the metal chairs fitted inside each other to form a stack at one end of the bar. The stools had been turned upside down on top of the counter. In a patch of sunlight Henry noticed a twist of gray mop-string tangled about one table leg. A square window was set into the door going from the patio to the house, and through the glass a sign read, “Cerrado.”

Maria stopped where Henry had stood yesterday when he threw the rifle. The prints of his boots had been washed away. All footprints had been washed away. She shaded her eyes with one hand, her sweater rising higher onto her waist, and looked over the patio.

“Where exactly did you throw that thing?”

“Well, you saw me.” Henry stood beside her and looked toward the edge of the cliff, where boulders were fringed with pines and shrubbery. The mass of foliage would be a forbidding place in which to search for a rifle.

Maria faced him. “I’m trying to help you,” she said.

“I think it went more in that direction,” Henry said, “toward that giant live oak.” He pointed toward a lightning-split, mammoth tree, more than a hundred feet high, with colossal buttress formations bearded with vines. The branches, thick and strong, were wide-spreading and almost horizontal, arranged in layers that extended only to one side because the lightning had sheared off so many limbs. Long trails of Spanish moss hung
from the branches, which were lopsided. The tree looked as if it might keel over.

“That’s a kapok tree,” Maria said, “the only one I’ve ever seen at this elevation.”

They walked further down the alley, skirting the puddles and picking their way down the hill. They passed the oak saplings at the other end of Maria’s house. They passed a dwelling where children played. Henry looked into a ramshackle yard where a boy walked along a rope strung about five feet over the ground between avocado trees, keeping his balance by holding a pole in each hand. The rope dipped nearly to the ground.

When the church and café were behind them, Maria slowed down. Henry kept raising up onto the balls of his feet and trying to peer over the edge of the cliff as they progressed, wondering what was the best way to go about finding that rifle. The task seemed impossible. Trails dropped from the alley and went zigzagging down the ridge through dense shrubbery until they reached the beaches far below. He couldn’t see the beach on this side, but he could hear the waves smash against the boulders. Maria stopped beside a mound of abandoned truck tires.

“I couldn’t have thrown it this far.”

“I know, but the best trail starts here.” Maria said. “We’ll have to work our way back toward the house.”

At the sound of their voices, sparrows darted away from the tires. Henry watched the birds settling on the branches of the white poplar behind the church as he pulled up beside the tires. The treads had been sliced off, probably to use for sandals. The thought of so much hacking made him feel uneasy, even though the mound was nothing more than a mass of black rubber. He peered into a crescent-thin puddle shimmering in the hollow of a tire, where the sparrows had been bathing. The mirrored reflection of his face looking down trembled, and he could see small clouds floating in the sky behind his head.

Until he looked out from the bell tower he had assumed that the rifle sank in Lake
Atitlan. But now, as he gazed toward the rising sun, he could see that it definitely wouldn’t have gone past the canyon wall. The cliff was steep, but there must be fifty yards of land before the water. Breezes buffeted the cliff and tunneled inside his cotton shirt. He could smell the sweat of his fear. Maria had insisted that they look for the rifle.

"Think someone may have already found it?" he said.

She took off her sweater and draped it over one arm. "Could be."

As Henry pointed, fear made his voice waver. "I threw it in that direction."

She scanned the hillside and nodded. "I wouldn’t worry about it."

"But they could be looking for us now."

"If that were the case," Maria said, "they surely would have found us."

"But don’t you think...?" A seizure of hot-hearted gratitude clogged his throat, and he felt as if he had been delivered from an unexpected danger by Maria’s superior knowledge. He blinked, fighting off an insane impulse to plunge his face against her breasts, now more visible through her cotton blouse. He said, "Don’t you think someone might accidentally find it?"

"See that woman?" Maria pointed.

The woman climbed a trail from the thumb-shaped part of the bay. The section of the cliff she climbed was so steep that the only part of her he could see was the laundry piled in a basket on her head. The basket seemed to float up the side of the cliff. But when she made a sharp turn along a switchback her profile came into view. Balancing the basket on her head with one arm, she cradled an infant against her breast with the other.

"What about her?"

"She look dangerous to you?"

"But would she return the rifle to the-?"

"Definitely not."

"Then why bother looking for the thing in the first place?"

"I didn’t say there wasn’t any danger." Maria patted his shoulder. "No tengo
The impression of her fingers stayed on his shoulder after she took her hand away. He stared down the cliff unsure what to say, focusing on the laundry and remembering the times as a child when he had watched ants carry pieces of leaves bigger than they were. Viewed from a certain distance, the leaf-segments would seem to jog along by themselves, like protest signs without protesters, the line snaking mysteriously toward the summit of some anthill. “That basket must feel a lot heavier going up,” he said.

“It is heavier,” Maria said. “Those clothes are probably still damp.”

They braked their ways down a steep trial, breezes carrying the aroma of laundry detergent. Henry pictured a soccer mom on a television commercial pushing a grocery cart, consumed with devotion to her children and her husband as she moved from Cheer to Joy to All.

Maria led the way. The trails formed a maze of connections more complex than a freeway. Sometimes two adjoining switchbacks met, and it looked as if someone could cross from one trail to the next. The pines and ferns tinted the sides of the canyon, their color matching what seemed to be islands of vines below the surface of the water.

Henry indicated the dark patches. “That seaweed?”

“It’s called paxte del lago,” Maria said. “Does this seem about the right area?”

“Must be close,” Henry said.

“What about over there?” Maria extended her arm toward a thin glittering waterfall, where ferns luxuriated in the mist. Henry pulled up behind her and looked over her shoulder, distracted by the loveliness of her arm, slim and brown where her flesh emerged from her short-sleeved blouse. The birthmark on her shoulder was the size of a thumb-print.

“Where, exactly?”

“Where the land drops below that cliff.” Maria tilted her head toward him and stretched out her arm further, wiggling her index finger. Her nails were clipped short,
their surfaces unpainted. He looked where she was pointing, trying to concentrate but
distracted by the musk from her armpit. She meant a spot where the shelf of rock
embedded in the cliff dropped vertically.

"I don’t think I could have thrown it that far."

"Okay, then let’s follow the trail over there." She indicated an intersecting
footpath that went off at an angle along an embankment fringed with vegetation.

They plowed their shins through the undergrowth and searched along the ground.
He thought of the assistant chained to a cement block underwater. He was a murderer. As
he followed Maria this reality sank deeper into him with each step. He plodded through
the foliage in misery, kicking through the vines and tussocks of grass, trying to stay alert
for the gleam of sunlight on metal. But his thoughts kept swaying back and forth between
horror and excitement. Not only was he a murderer, he was a murderer more interested in
watching Maria’s legs than in thinking about how to right his wrongs. He adjusted his
pants.

He dogged her footsteps as the trail plunged down the ravine, cutting through the
foliage. Stones marked the corners of the switchbacks like the metal eyelets that held
shoelaces. He tried not to stare at Maria, but her smooth brown legs kept flashing through
the sunlight ahead of him. He imagined how she looked under the dress and felt a storm
of excitement. He plodded along the trail scanning the vegetation with a bleak feeling,
resigned to a kind of hopelessness. It was impossible not to think about.

Soon the trail forked. One branch angled toward the shore, where a group of
Mayan women waded up to their knees in suds. They slapped clothing against the flat
rocks and leaned into them with a stiff-armed scrubbing motion that reminded him of the
way his mother kneaded bread. She and Jason must have left the cottage by now. He
shielded his eyes and looked where the road wound along the mountaintops, glad that his
father was driving them to the airport. Henry would have worried about bumping into
them if they had taken the buses. Sweat trickled down his chest and under his arms.
Maria took the trail that went up, and Henry followed. They climbed through a stand of pines. The café stood on a ridge above them, hidden from view. The trail skirted the narrow inlet. At their feet appeared a thicket of ferns so big that the ladder-shaped leaves brushed their waists. The path emerged into a clearing, where a series of steps shelved the rocky footing strewn with slate-thin shards and lichen-mottled scree.

The trail opened onto a boulder that commanded a sweeping view of Lake Atitlan. Maria stepped on the boulder and stood in the sunshine against the backdrop of Lake Atitlan. Sunlight glittered across the surface, and the sky reflected royal blue. Her skirt rippled.

"We should head back," she said. "I don’t think we’re getting anywhere."

The black, lichen-scabbed boulder jutted out from side of the mountain. Beyond the boulder the land was almost vertical.

"Does the trail end here?"

"Nowhere else for it to go," Maria said. In the solid sunlight her face glowed, damp with sweat, each pore visible. She licked her lips, flicking the tip of her tongue over her moist teeth, whose whiteness seemed more dramatic against her dark skin.

"Head back where?" Henry was hot in his steaming shirt and ash-smeared, brier-spangled jeans. He checked to make sure he wasn’t showing and picked a curly strand of Spanish moss off the front of his jeans as if that was his concern.

"To the café," Maria said. "But keep your eyes open."

Henry kept his eyes open. He looked among the foliage as Maria led him back up the slope, but the rifle was nowhere to be found.

At the café he waited on the patio and plucked his damp shirt from his skin while she unlocked the door. They stood behind the bar, and when he glanced up at the pipes where she had been tied yesterday he had an image of her naked.

"You can come in," she said.

He crossed the threshold and ducked into the dark interior. He could smell rice and
chicken. He had never been inside her house before. There was another door that opened onto a terrace overlooking the bay. The terrace was completely invisible from the alley. He walked to the sliding glass door that opened onto the patio and looked out over the thumb-shaped part of the bay. The port of San Bernardo, where boats docked, was not visible from here.

“Padre Flores built this house,” Maria said. “It used to be owned by the church.”

“Some kind of a meditation retreat?”

“Something like that.”

“You live here alone?”

“Me and the hummingbirds.” She slid open the door, walked out, and swept her hand toward the aloe vera plants that bordered the terrace. Henry followed her out onto the terrace smelling perfume and noticing that he could see through Maria’s skirt with the sun shining through it. He concentrated on the flowers. Beyond the cliff updrafts washed through the orange-colored blossoms, and the smell of aloe vera blossoms was thicker here than it was at their cottage. Aloe vera crowded the terrace, their thick thorn-edged leaves clustered around tall stalks topped with blossoms that swayed in the wind.

A hummingbird with blurred wings darted away like an alien spacecraft. He inched toward the edge of the boulder and peered down. A waist-level wall of flat rocks acted as a guardrail, but it wasn’t much of a barrier. Far below the waves crashed against the wall of rock, fringing the base of the cliff with a lace-colored rim. The drop made the waves sound tiny. He backed away from the edge. Behind him a bird squawked. He turned around to see a parrot perched on the branches of a pine.

“What’s that, a quetzal?”

“Quetzals generally die in captivity,” Maria said.

“Looks tropical.”

“Some kind of parrot.”

In the house, mats of woven tule reeds covered the floor. Books cluttered the
wooden desk, which had a puddle of wax from candle-drippings. Two canister-thick white candles were rooted in the wax. A wood chair was pushed under the desk. Folded under one of the desk legs was a wedge of cardboard that had the words "Chiquita Banana" printed on it.

"Can I help you with your packing?"

"What makes you so sure I’ll go with you?"

"But you said—"

"Relax." She took a small knapsack from a peg on the wall. "I’m not the sort of person to go back on my word."

On their way down from the bell tower Maria had agreed to go with him to Mexico, partly to help him cross the border and get situated in San Cristobal. But after that, she wasn’t sure where she would go or what she would do.

Henry went closer to the window. There was no pane of glass in the square opening—just two wooden shutters now opened to let in the breeze that washed through the room. He winced when he sat down in the wooden chair against the wall. His whole body ached, but his back especially. A yellowed copy of *La Prensa* lay on the desk under a conch shell.

"Where will you go?" he said. "I mean, after we get there."

Maria stood with her back to him, sorting through clothing that hung from twine-mesh bags suspended from pegs on the wall. "I know people in southern California," she said.

"Will you come back here?"

"I don’t know."

"Things will blow over, eventually."

Maria frowned. "First we have to get out of here."

"At least we’ll be gone before anyone realizes what happened."

"When the commissioners realize their assistant is missing, they won’t waste any
Henry peered through his splayed fingers and watched her pack, feeling guilty and worried.

"I should give you privacy," he said.

"Keep me company." Maria rummaged in a dark corner away from the window. Henry kept his face buried in his hands. "I'm a murderer."

"You are not a murderer." Maria dropped her knapsack on the matting beside her bed. Her bed was nothing more than a twin-size mattress on a crude structure of two by fours. She came over and stood in front of him, took hold of his wrists, and tried to move his hands away from his face. He resisted, and she tugged harder. "Hey, look at me."

Henry looked up, bothered by her closeness. "Where exactly is the body?"

"Listen, I'm proud of what you did."

"Sure," Henry said, "proud of me butchering some kid."

She pressed her hands against his cheeks. Her palms felt cool against the hotness of his face. "You probably saved my life." She fixed him with a direct gaze, the severity of her expression assuming a peculiar molten quality. Her wide-spaced, gray eyes glistened.

"I'll be so relieved when we get out of here," Henry said. "Except for my dad."

"First we have to tell Padre Flores what we're doing." Maria resumed packing.

"He should be at the orphanage right now."

As he crossed the churchyard and headed toward the orphanage, Henry carried the suitcase Maria had filled and felt conspicuously like a tourist. He remembered that Padre Flores was especially proud of the orphanage, whose grounds were separated from the rest of the church. Neatly tended lawns were surrounded by fences that made it hard for children to wander away. Behind the fences were hedges of forsythia and big oaks whose limbs overhung the lawn and cast shadows onto the grass. A stone fountain gurgled in the time."
middle of the lawn. To one side swing sets creaked. Children swung on the swing sets and played in the sandbox. Benches had been installed nearby, where two Mayan women who worked as attendants were watching the children and talking with Padre Flores.

A barefooted, brown gardener tended to the flowerbeds in a white shirt and sandals, passing among the children, dragging rubber hoses across the gravel paths. Fine jets of water crossed each other in graceful curves, sparkling into the sunshine with a pattering sound on the azaleas, and an effect of showered diamonds on the grass.

When Padre Flores saw them approaching, he stood up and walked across the grass. He was barefoot, his Birkenstocks in one hand. He might have been some carefree traveler, except that his face expressed concern. In the sunlight Henry saw lines in the priest’s brow.

“You two look like you’re about to take a trip,” he said.

Maria nodded. “Where can we talk?”

Padre Flores pointed to a patch of shade under an oak tree near the edge of the orphanage playground. They walked over there and stood beside the fence, where Maria explained her plan to fly into Mexico with Henry and then take buses to southern California.

“Is it wise?” The priest stroked his beard and smiled at Maria with a kind of worried concern. “What will you do when you get there?”

“I have some friends who run an organic coop,” she said. “They’ll put me up.”

“What about the café?”

She handed a key to the priest. “I worry about you, Domingo.”

“I can’t leave this place.” Padre Flores accepted the key with his left hand and looked toward the children playing at the playground. “I have to see this through wherever it leads.”

Henry followed his gaze, and as he admired the peaceful scene he understood that the priest deeply cared for the church and the children and took his priesthood seriously.
The man’s quiet goodwill included them all.

“Who are they?” Henry pointed to two young girls approaching them.

“Budding entrepreneurs.” Maria smiled as the girls came near.

Padre Flores said nothing. He reminded Henry of that poet Walt Whitman as he combed his fingers through his beard and watched the children. A gust washed across the playground, went rippling through the treetops, and cut channels into the grass. The priest’s white pants fluttered against his thin legs.

“Cuanto quistan?” Henry asked a girl selling bracelets.

“Dos por cinco,” she said.

When Henry dug his hand into his pocket, another girl piped up: “Compra muneca.”

The child handed Henry a naked GI Joe doll, whose arms had been wrenched out of place. She was the same girl he had seen in the doorway of the San Bernardo zapatería.

“Es muy guapo,” he said.
CHAPTER XII

“We have more important issues,” Maria said. She stood in front of Henry in a customs line, her head turned to the left. “If we bump into them, we bump into them.”

He muttered into her ear: “Easy for you to say.” He studied the Guatemala City airport, where lines snaked toward customs, and considered how awkward it would be if they saw his mother and brother. When their line shortened, Maria stepped forward.

“Give me your passport,” she said.

He closed the gap and handed the blue booklet over her shoulder, his forearm touching her neck. As they neared the customs desk, he glanced up at the interior balcony and imagined police informants emerging from the crowds to question them. Their flight departed in an hour to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas, and he hoped they wouldn’t get delayed. If they could just board the plane and get airborne, everything would be all right.

At customs, Spanish flowed from Maria. The immigration officer seemed amused. A portly man with a mustache and pockmarks, he winked at Henry, granted them visas, and waved them on. They passed through swinging doors into sunlight. He smelled diesel fuel and felt delirious to be going away with Maria. They would arrive in Mexico earlier than he had expected. Their airplane was smaller than he had anticipated, a Piper Cub with a single propeller. Maria led him across the blustery tarmac, her sweater and skirt
flapping in the wind.

She stepped onto the metal stepladder and entered the airplane. He followed her, ducking through the portal. Inside he smelled the aroma of coffee mixed with perfume and the synthetic smell of sunlight on upholstery. He smiled at the pilot, who grinned, and worked his way behind Maria down the aisle. Most of the well-dressed tourists stopped talking and turned away. He frowned at his blue jeans, wishing he had worn his corduroys and the jacket with elbow patches. He smiled at one traveler who wasn’t avoiding him—a blond boy sucking his thumb while sitting on his mother’s lap.

Maria took her seat beside a window over the wing. Henry squeezed in beside her. The seat felt warm. Sunshine streamed through their port-hole onto her lap. She plucked lint off her skirt, slipped out of her sandals, and rubbed the top of one foot with the heel of the other. Passengers resumed talking, speaking German. He whispered, in case anyone understood English:

“What was that all about?”

“Do you have all of your documentation?” She looked out of the window, where another plane was taxiing down the runway.

Henry patted the front pocket of his jeans. “Everything we need.”

“Good,” Maria said. “We’re not out of the woods yet.”

When the engine started, the exhaust belched black smoke that disappeared as the propeller spun. No door shielded the cockpit from passengers, and through the windshield Henry watched the blades blur into a circle. He remembered the rifle he had thrown off the cliff and was glad they were getting away. Wind blasted past their windows and the airplane rattled and shimmied. In the noise and commotion he raised his voice.

“Wish my father would leave too.”

Maria cupped her hand over her ear. Henry leaned closer and repeated himself.

The pilot revved the engine. Henry looked past Maria through their window as the Piper Cub taxied. The wind on the airfield blew toward the airplane and stiffened an
orange windsock as the pilot lined up for takeoff. He said something garbled into the intercom and they accelerated, wheels bouncing over the ruts. Henry leaned back and sank into the cushions. When the wheels left the ground, he smiled at Maria. But she was looking out the window. An oval of sunshine elongated and went sliding from her lap to her breasts.

As the airplane rose, Henry’s ears popped. The wings titled and the airplane banked, sending Maria toward his seat, her thigh pressing against his. The engine whined as the plane soared. Outside the scratched Plexiglas window, the wingtip shivered.

Viewed from above, Guatemala City covered an irregular-shaped plateau. Around the edges the connected land masses tapered into ravines. Houses dotted and clung to these slopes. He asked why people chose to build houses there.

“The city is pushing the boundaries of the available land mass.” Maria spoke into his right ear, her breath tickling his throat. As they gained altitude, it became easier to speak.

“That Antigua?” Henry pointed to houses at the base of a massive volcano.

“Used to be the capital.” Maria nodded. “After earthquakes destroyed most of the buildings, the new capital was created where Guatemala City now exists.”

Away and away the airplane shot, its shadow a frictionless patch flitting over the landscape. Soon the shadow disappeared. They leveled off, heading north, the sun overhead. Henry closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep, but he was too excited. So he pretended to doze. When they hit some turbulence he sat upright, his back ramrod straight.

“What’s happening?” he said.

Nobody else seemed concerned. Maria tapped her finger against their portal. In the distance cumulus clouds floated, bunched into billowing stacks, sunshine rimming their edges. She was better educated than him, but he still yearned to impress her.

“Did you know our sun is a yellow dwarf star?” he said.
“Yes, and when it starts to die it will expand and burn the earth to a cinder.”

“Maybe we will have colonized other planets before then.”

“Mars is a possibility.”

“But Venus is way too hot,” Henry said. He remembered the time years ago when the Viking robot had landed on Mars. He had been with his father and some other scientists in a laboratory at Johns Hopkins, watching as the first picture radioed back to earth appeared simultaneously on all the screens strip by vertical strip, forming the image of the spacecraft’s foot on the reddish, sand-dusted surface of Mars. His father had been so happy that tears streaked his face—the only time Henry had even seen him cry. The scientists had cheered, but he was secretly disappointed. Sure, it was the first-ever photograph from Mars, but why photograph the landing pad?

“Where’s the border?” he said after a long while. “Are we over Guatemala or Mexico?”

When Maria turned toward the window, Henry peeked down the front of her cotton blouse. The lace-edged cups of her bra showed through the opening.

“Can’t tell,” she said.

“But look toward the horizon.” He pointed, blocking her eyes from his with his raised arm, and seized upon the image of her breasts. As the engine vibrated, he thought that he would be spending the night with her in the same hotel room! It was hard to focus on anything other than sex, but he tried. He imagined their airplane rising to the edge of the atmosphere. He had seen photographs of the earth taken from space and pictured their plane going that high, even though it was impossible. He loved the blueness of the earth. The blackness of interstellar space scared and excited him. He had watched the first landing of men on the moon on their black-and-white set. When Neil Armstrong emerged from the module, elation had shot through Henry’s being. He wanted to leap through that snow-fuzzed screen and join the astronauts. Henry Armstrong, first man on the moon. One small step for Henry, one giant leap for mankind.
Maria was exchanging glances with the other passengers. Everyone seemed to be sizing them up as a couple. Henry had the sense that they didn’t like what they saw. Maybe it was against some unspoken code for a gringo to be seen with a Mayan woman. He had never been in public with Maria before, and he asked what she thought.

“It’s nothing you have to worry about.” She looked at him quickly and then glanced down, digging her toe in the carpet. She took off her sweater and folded it neatly on her lap, her arms smooth and brown and straight as broom handles. He was trying not to stare at her when she leaned close and whispered: “I mean, it has nothing to do with the incident yesterday.”

A trickle of sweat dripped down the bridge of Henry’s nose and into his eye, the saltiness stinging. He blinked. “But I’m not just imaging things?” he said.

“Oh no.” She looked out the window, the silence between them growing heavier.

“What is it, then?” Henry said. “Because I’m a gringo and you’re a native?”

“That’s part of it.” She turned toward him and adjusted the black frames of her glasses. “But I’m not just any native,” she said.

“That’s true.” He had no idea what she meant. He enjoyed the vibrations of the plane and thought about their hotel room. They would have separate beds, but one room.

“Stick out your arm.” Maria extended her arm. Henry held out his arm beside hers, the soft down of her forearm tickling him. Her skin was much darker—the knob protruding from her wrist could have been a chestnut. “See the difference?” she said.

“Well,” Henry said, “so what?”

Maria dropped her arm. She looked around the airplane, but nobody seemed to be paying attention to them at the moment. She leaned closer to him, her nose bumping his cheek. “Ever heard the expression Apartheid Guatemala?”

“No.” Henry was bewildered. “I thought that was in Africa.”

“Among the Maya, there are at least twenty-one different ethnic groups. Quiche is the largest, I think, followed by Mam and Cakchiquel.”
“Francisco and Beatriz are Cakchiquel.” Henry blushed, feeling that his comment was irrelevant. But Maria touched his arm.

“So was my mother,” she said. “But there are other ethnic minorities, including the Xinca and the Garifuna.”

“Never heard of those.”

“My father was a Garifuna,” Maria said. “They’re African-Guatemalans who live mainly on the Caribbean coast. Some people call them Black Caribs.”

“I always stick out in this country,” Henry said, “no matter what.”

“Especially when you’re traveling with a black girl.”

“But you don’t—” He stopped himself, having crossed some barrier.

“I don’t what?”

“Is there a bathroom in this plane?”

Maria elbowed him. “Finish what you started.”

He gripped the hand-rests and stared at the back of the next seat, afraid to say the wrong thing. He said, “But you don’t really know what other people are thinking.”

She exhaled. “Sometimes I have a pretty good idea.”

The taxi drove for an hour before nearing San Cristobal, a city sprawled in a mountain valley. As they climbed the valley wall, clouds hung low and wisps of fog clung to the tops of the pines. They sat in the back seat without talking, the silence strained. He worried that he had caused permanent damage through his stupidity. He kept thinking of ways to fix things between them. He wasn’t even sure Maria would stay at the hotel with him.

In the city they careened along streets just wide enough for one car. They passed a woman along the side of the road wearing a heavy black wool skirt and a royal-blue shawl. They passed colonial Spanish architecture, modern store fronts, and adobe huts. Sports cars speeded past horse-drawn carts in the afternoon light. Storefronts displayed
rows of appliances, everything from furniture and bicycles to transistor radios.

The Hotel Mundo was two blocks from the town square, the zocalo, in an old colonial house with a large interior lawn, resident peacocks, fruit and cypress trees, and bougainvillea.

At the front desk, the clerk kept his back to them and watched a black-and-white television that sat upon a stack of yellowed newspapers behind the counter. A wire hanger was being used for an antenna. Henry had noticed the kid eying them through the window as they left the cab, and now he stared at the back of his head in resentment, wondering if he should ring the bell. Was this the same attitude they had experienced in the plane? When Henry kicked the counter, the kid turned slowly. He ignored Henry and smiled a little too nicely at Maria, his black hair slicked back with oil. The welt between his nose and jaw seemed to have come from a knife. Henry watched the scar while Maria spoke with the kid and made arrangements for their room. Kermit the Frog sang a Spanish version of "It's Not Easy Being Green."

"Aqui esta la llave." The clerk set their key on the counter and turned his back. Henry felt an urge to jump over the counter and strangle the bastard, but he took a deep breath. They walked through the lobby and down a hallway. He carried Maria's suitcase.

"I didn't know they had Sesame Street in Mexico," he said. His anger faded as he considered that Maria no longer seemed angry at him. Each step they took on the carpet brought them closer to their room. He was relieved. "I wonder if the kid watches cartoons when that's over."

Maria laughed, and as they went down the hallway Henry looked over his shoulder and saw the clerk glaring at them. He put his hand on the small of her back and padded across the carpet. His excitement grew intense as they got close to their room. He had never been in a hotel room with a girl. His boots seemed too coarse on the ornamental nap of the carpet. He wished he had worn better clothing. He unlocked the door and stepped back, letting Maria go first.
Inside was a hand-loomed rug, freestanding wardrobes, and two old-fashioned twin beds on either side of a fireplace. The beds had carved head and foot boards and pastel bedspreads.

Wooden lattices covered the lower panes of the windows. He pulled back the lattice and opened the window. From the courtyard cool air washed into the room. Maria stood beside him, looking out at the courtyard where a fountain gurgled. Their window had an ornamental wrought-iron balcony with many clay pots full of flowers.

"Zinnias," she said. "They have dahlias, fuchsias, and marigolds. See those flowers shaped like hands on that tree? Those are called mano de leon."

"You really know your flowers." Henry felt that it was a stupid thing to say, being so obvious, but his relief that Maria had apparently decided to overlook his indiscretion was so strong that the courtyard and their room seemed bathed in a new light. Not only was she staying with him, but she had the maturity to forgive him. That was the advantage of an older woman.

"I minored in botany at USC," Maria said.

"What's this?" Henry pointed at a small plant with violet flowers that grew from a crack in the masonry wall.

"We call that flor de pena," she said, "rock flower."

"How did you wind up going to USC?" He had considered applying to USC when he filled out applications before leaving for Guatemala, but decided the school was out of his league.

"Padre Flores helped me to win a scholarship. I was in some trouble at the time, and I needed to get away."

"You were?" Henry watched a cat walking on a rooftop across the courtyard.

Maria said, "Mind if I take the first shower?"

Henry made an open gesture with his hand. After she had disappeared within the bathroom, setting the lock with a click, he realized that he was shaking.
His mind raced as he walked around his new lair. Beams protruded from the ceiling plaster. Wood furniture was arranged against the walls. He set the slide-bolt on the front door as water drummed against the tub. Was she undressing now? He took his sweater and camera out of his bag. He could wear the sweater tonight. He put the camera and airplane tickets in the top drawer of the dresser.

Steam billowed from the bathroom door when Maria opened it, and through the gap he could see her moving around inside, a willowy shape with one white towel wrapped around her torso beneath her arms and another towel coiled upon her head. The whiteness of the terrycloth made her skin seem darker, and he thought about the hotel clerk. She had been discriminated against, and because Henry was with her he got discriminated against as well. He had never been in this situation. He was afraid that they would get hassled, but excited because the circumstances had thrown them together.

She had taken her change of clothes into the bathroom with her, and when she emerged she was already dressed in khaki pants and a short-sleeved shirt. She left coconut-scented air in her wake as she walked past. “Your turn,” she said.

He closed the bathroom door behind him and set his bathroom things on the edge of the sink. Pineapples decorated the clear plastic shower curtain. He imagined her naked behind the curtain, her face peeping out. The smell from the steam heated his imagination. They had just made love, but she was still shy. He imagined her clutching the shower curtain over her breasts.

“Could you please hand me the towel, novio?”

The blue toilet water reflected his forehead. He needed to pee, but wouldn’t be able to aim downward when he was this hard. He thrust against the sink in a kind of agony, and the pressure of the porcelain helped. Haggard eyes stared back at him from the mirror. His sweat-plastered hair hung over his forehead in quills. He picked up a damp towel draped over the tub and pressed his face into the cotton, inhaling Maria’s fragrance. There was some kind of perfume from the shampoo he could smell in the
cotton, which muffled his groan. Pressed against his face, his fingers quivered.

In the shower he determined to do his best to avoid making a fool of himself. He wanted their time to go smoothly together, however much time they had. Probably they would at least spend the next couple of days in Chiapas before deciding on the next step. Maria seemed determined to go to Los Angeles, but Henry wasn’t sure where he would go from here. At any rate, their date tonight would hopefully go well. He found himself shivering in the shower, just from his nerves. He had never been on a date before. If only he had thought to bring better clothes. But he did have money. Maybe he could buy something more formal in San Cristobal tomorrow.

That night they decided to eat out. Maria wore her khaki pants and Henry put back on his blue jeans, feeling underdressed but at least clean. The sweater looked nice though out of place with the snowflake design.

He was relieved to see someone else behind the desk when they left their hotel room. The woman actually smiled at them, and he carried her reassuring attitude with him as they walked out the door into the street, where the evening chilled his damp hair.

“Are you warm enough?” Henry said.

“I have my sweater.” Maria buttoned the sweater and crossed her arms.

As they walked along the winding streets of San Cristobal in the cool evening, Henry thought maybe he should put his arm around her. But no, that would be too forward. Besides, they had just fled the scene of a crime. Every time he tried to slip into a normal pattern of living he found himself up against the harsh reality of his undeniable criminality. Wood smoke scented the air, curling lazily over the red-tile roofs of small, brightly painted stucco houses and more elegant colonial mansions. The smell should have been reassuring, but he imagined it was coming from bodies being burned in furnaces. He thought of the assistant chained to a concrete block at the bottom of Lake Atitlan. Yesterday he had been breathing and alive.

They walked side by side along the sidewalks toward the center of town, until they
reached the zocalo. Here they found what looked like expensive restaurants and hotels to suit the needs of tourists. Henry didn’t want to think of himself as a tourist, but that’s what he must be. Either that or a fleeing felon, maybe both. He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot as they lingered beside one place that was a combined library, museum, restaurant, and hotel. They stood outside brightly lit windows that displayed native artifacts from a local tribe: jewelry, shawls, and canes. Across from the museum was a store that sold souvenirs from a thatch hut with a mass of woven palm fronds tied to branches. The shop sold Lacandon crafts such as flutes and bows and arrows, as well as black-and-white photos.

Henry followed Maria as she worked her way through these displays, the expression on her face growing hard. At least her discontent didn’t seem focused on him now. He looked around and began to see his surroundings through her eyes.

“I don’t see anything for us here,” she said. “That’s for sure.”

“There’s a restaurant across the street.” Henry pointed.

They crossed the street and stood in front of the entrance to the restaurant. The waitresses inside were dressed to look like indigenous Lacandon Indians. Maybe they were. The whole interior seemed designed to give tourists the feeling of an authentic native atmosphere. The light fixtures were overhung with sombreros, and a communal oak dining table was shared by many travelers. Henry wanted to go inside. His stomach growled.

“I think this is supposed to be an authentically Mayan atmosphere,” Maria said. She stood beside him in front of the window, and he watched their reflections looking back. He could hear people talking inside the dining room and cutlery clinking. Behind him on the sidewalk people were passing. He smelled the smoke from cigars. Taxis and bicycles drove past in the streets, and he saw a stray dog go loping from garbage can to garbage can.

“Look at how they’re dressed.” He looked in the windows, past their reflections,
and felt drawn to the atmosphere. He thought the authentic clothing of the waitresses was charming. They were wrapped in deep-blue shawls and coarsely woven wool skirts.

“This is commercial and phony.” Maria said. She turned to Henry, who was shaking his head. “What are you shaking your head about?”

“You won’t like it,” he said.

“Tell me.”

“I’m afraid I’m guilty of some of the same phony attitudes.” He thought that in her eyes his attitudes would seem pathetic. But as he stood there he realized that this was an opportunity for him to come clean. He still felt the need to make up for his insensitive comment on the airplane. So when Maria nudged his arm, he elaborated.

“Last year I track for my high school—the Boonsboro Warriors.”

She nodded. “That sort of name is pretty common.”

“The school’s insignia is a sketch of their mascot,” Henry said, “Chief Wahoo.”

“That’s too much.” Maria shook her head. But she didn’t seem to be holding this against him, and he felt relieved. He went on, trying to drum up a feeling of indignation in himself.

“Chief Wahoo is a brave with his arms crossed over the chiseled muscles of his bare chest. Can you imagine that? He wears a loincloth and moccasins, and an eagle feather droops from his headband.”

“Typical,” Maria said. “And this image is on the advertisements?”

Henry nodded as he watched a waitress dressed like a Lacandon Indian carry a steaming meal on a tray. “I guess we should find another place to eat.”

As they sauntered along the sidewalk, Maria hugged herself against the growing chilliness. “We need to talk about what to do next.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Go to Los Angeles, I guess.”

“I’m not sure what to do.”
“You think you might go back?”
“I hate to leave my father there all alone.”
“I feel the same way,” Maria said. “But it would’ve been crazy to stay there.”

They walked on, and while they talked Henry kept thinking about the Boonsboro Warriors. When they beat the Frederick Cadets last year, the Boonsboro Rag featured a front-page article titled “Warriors Scalp Cadets.” Above the article a cartoon showed Chief Wahoo holding up bloody scalps and chanting a war cry to the Great Spirit. The caption read: “Hey-Yah! This land is ours as long as the grass grows and the river flows!”

To celebrate, the Warriors had an awards ceremony in the school gymnasium—the wigwam. On stage Henry had accepted a blue ribbon from a barefoot, redhead squaw in a fake doeskin tunic. That was the only award he had ever won, but he didn’t tell Maria about that. They walked in silence for a while.

“What are you thinking about?” Maria said.

“I’m thinking about where we should eat.” Henry looked down the street. What he was really thinking about his birth announcement, a card pasted into a photograph album. On the cover was a cartoon depiction of a happy squaw and brave, the brave smoking a cigar. Inside it said: “It’s a boy! Our wigwam filled with heap much cheer now that Chief Thunderlungs is here.” A cartoon baby in a feathered headband was crying. He thought that if Maria knew all these things about his racist background she would probably have nothing to do with him. He had never considered his background as racist before, but now he felt embarrassed about it. He had to find some way to make her think better of him, but didn’t know how.

They kept walking past the zócalo along a street called Guadalupe Victoria, seeing museums and cathedrals along the way. Every building seemed to be topped with a wrought-iron cross. They strolled several blocks before they found a restaurant that Maria liked, a French restaurant called Maison des Crepes.

“What do you think?” she said.
“Kind of ironic,” he said, “a French restaurant in Mexico.”

“I know,” she said. “How incongruous.”

“You want to go somewhere else?”

“What makes you say that?” She laughed. “I just think it’s odd.”

They looked through the windows. The walls were hung with European and local artwork. Candles flickered on the tables. The menu displayed in the window featured French and Italian dishes—including fresh pasta, chocolate mousse, chateaubriand and crepes. There were also wood-fired pizzas and shish kebab.

He followed her into the restaurant, where the tables glowed with a soft light, and they were led to a small round table that stood beside a window looking out on the street with panes that reflected multiple images of the candle. He wasn’t sure whether to pull out the chair for her, but the hostess did that for him. She said that their waiter would be at the table shortly.

Henry sat down and looked at Maria across the table. Behind her a bouquet of dried flowers rested on a ledge beside a fish tank. He could see the orange carp swimming in the background and thought that she was beautiful.

“I’m glad I have you as an interpreter and all,” he said.

He ordered the Crepe Aux Fruits De Mer and she ordered the special entree, Quiche Lorraine and Salade De Poulet. After the waitress took their orders he thought maybe he should have asked for wine. Because he was underage, he had been afraid to ask. His face burned with his embarrassment, and he stared hard at the menu to disguise his awkwardness. He was grateful for the dim lighting.

“What will you order for dessert?” Maria said.

“I don’t know,” Henry said.

“I’m getting La Creme Brulee.”

In the dining room the lights flickered. Henry looked at Maria across from him and widened his eyes. The lights continued to sputter for a few minutes.
When the electricity went out, there was a collective gasp. Henry blinked as his eyes adjusted. The window beside their table came alive with stars, and in the dining room the forms of waiters scurried around to put kerosene lamps on the long ledge beside the fish tank, making the dining room less dark. At a table in the back of the dining room a woman began laughing. Someone made a joke, causing more laughter.

Henry decided to take a risk. "Maybe this will make the evening more romantic," he said, "without the electricity and all."

"You know, electricity has only been in San Bernardo for less than ten years."

Maria seemed determined to ignore his comment. In the candlelight her face had a flickering vitality and glow. "I remember when they first installed it."

"You were living there then?"

"I grew up in San Bernardo, Henry."

"Of course, I knew that." He scuffed his boots against the carpet and felt something under his sole. He put his boot over the object and rolled it back and forth, realizing it was a cork.

"People were scared when it all happened," Maria said. "Superstitious, you know?"

Henry said, "I'm kind of superstitious myself."

"Yes, well it's a very strange thing if you're not accustomed to electricity. I don't remember the exact date that the workers arrived in San Bernardo, but they began installing the electricity outlets during the summer around ten years ago. I was a little girl. The workers were from the National Electric Company, the NEC. I don't know how the rumor started, but the word spread quickly throughout town that the NEC workers were killing people for light."

"I don't follow you." Henry wondered if he should order wine.

Maria laughed. "It was all new," she said. "Natives thought the electric plant needed people for the machine to work, you know, like fuel for a fire." She placed a
finger over her lips.

"I guess that makes sense." Henry watched her face while she spoke.

"When the machine wasn’t fed, it wouldn’t work. I really don’t know how the rumor started, but people were so afraid that they wouldn’t walk around at night after seven o’clock because they thought to do so would be giving themselves over to the NEC workers who would then carry them off as food for the light. There was a period when at nine o’clock there wasn’t a soul on the streets of San Bernardo. The youngsters didn’t go out in the afternoon to fish anymore. Many people ran away when they saw the NEC workers. During the installation period, villagers secured their houses at eight o’clock so nobody could take them away. Women went out in groups of five or ten for protection to shop.”

Henry opened his mouth, but decided not to say anything. Maria paused.

"I don’t know why,” she said, “but some people from San Bernardo thought bad things about my mother. They claimed that she and a friend of hers had an agreement with the head of the electric institute to turn over villagers as food for light. I didn’t realize people were thinking these things until this friend told me. Rumors spread all over San Bernardo. Everyone feared our family and slandered us. Finally, we went to court.”

“Just to stop the rumors?”

“My mother filed a complaint against two people because they were spreading lies. In court she declared our innocence, and the mayor charged each of them a five-quetzal fine.”

“I never could have imagined any of that,” Henry said. He watched Maria across the table, his perceptions sharpened by the smell of melted cheese coming out of the kitchen.

Sweat glistened on Maria’s brow, and her gray eyes flashed. “It was true that the NEC men came to our house a lot.”

“Same house you live in now?”
“No, this was before Padre Flores had that house built,” Maria said. “We had another place, and we sold the workers tomatoes and onions, but the villagers suspected worse. During their stay in San Bernardo, the NEC men never did a thing wrong. The whole affair was fading away when they tried the lights for the first time. With the coming of the light, people again went out to walk, forgetting how afraid they were. Now, when there’s a power failure in San Bernardo, these same people make a fuss about needing the light. But before it came they wouldn’t even discuss the subject.”

Before their food arrived the bouquet of artificial flowers burst into flames with an audible woof. Henry helped to put out the fire, grabbing a metal carafe filled with ice water and dousing the bouquet. Smoke filled the restaurant. Patrons fled.

On the sidewalk outside Maria clutched his arm and said, “That went well.”

They laughed, and Henry felt that in some ways their dinner really had gone well.

“Did you have an accident?” She pointed at the front of his pants, where water had spilled from the carafe. They laughed some more.
CHAPTER XIII

That night Henry listened to the stone mermaid gurgling in the fountain under his window and wondered if they would soon take buses to the United States or stay in San Cristobal a few days or weeks. He felt torn between his reluctance to go further away from his father and his desire to get closer to Maria, whose nearness, signaled by the rustling sheets and creaking box springs in the other bed, filled him with longing. He lay on his back and pictured her limbs shifting as he stared at a stain high on the wall illuminated by a glimmering fan of light reflected from the fountain. Flat on top, the stain was shaped like the state of Maryland. He fell asleep imagining his mother and Jason back home in the old farm house.

Before long the sun catapulted onto his bed. He flung himself onto his stomach and pressed his face into the pillow. Maria’s voice blended with the fountain. Showered and dressed, she stood beside his bed smelling of soap and nudging his mattress. She wanted to walk to the zocalo and the park. He peered down from his pillow, as if peering over a cliff into some mysterious valley. Bare to the knees, her legs were emblazoned with sunlight.

“Get up, Lazy Bones.” She kneed the mattress a couple more times before strolling away, slim and pretty in her sandals, skirt, and sweater.

Even after a hot shower he felt as if he were sleepwalking as they passed through
the lobby and stepped out into a zone of sunlight, where the cool air tasted sweet as clover in his nostrils, tinged with smoke and the smell of tortillas. Goose bumps stippled Maria’s calves.

Henry said, “Maybe you should wear pants.”

“I’ll warm up,” she said.

They strode side by side over the narrow sidewalk, among others going in the same direction, and followed the flow of foot traffic toward the center of the mountain town, where the streets widened and became clogged with honking taxis and buses with pneumatic brakes. A lady hailed them from a sidewalk. They stopped to buy corn from the middle-aged woman, whose nose was a hooked blade. She sold charcoal-broiled cobs of corn rubbed with salt, lime, and chili powder from a wooden cart under a billboard advertising Calvin Klein jeans.

As the stout woman fitted their steaming cobs with holders, Henry glanced at the thin blond model lying on her side larger than life across the length of the billboard, her head propped on one arm, her blue eyes looking east over the valley of San Cristobal.

“Look at that,” Henry said. The model’s eyebrows loomed over them.

“What about it?” Maria said.

“Nothing.” Henry blinked in the sunlight, shielding his eyes with his hand, and thought that the space between the model’s thighs was so large a grown man could fit inside.

He remembered what his father had told him when they had passed through this valley three months ago. According to him, before the Spaniards settled San Cristobal they exiled the native Chamulas, who had relocated six miles away from the valley to the present town of Chamula, the highest and coldest part of the highlands, where the land was too poor to support them. They became migratory laborers, walking hundreds of miles to pick coffee beans in the Sierra Madre farms near the Guatemalan border.

Modern descendants of those Chamulas, now passing along the sidewalk beneath the
billboard, seemed to have nothing to do with designer jeans. He looked at the model
gazing toward the Caribbean. His father had said that off the coast of the Yucatan
peninsula there was an impact crater underwater from a meteorite so large it may have
destroyed the dinosaurs, making it possible for mammals to evolve into humans.

Bits of kernels stuck in Henry’s teeth. They strolled along Guadalupe Victoria
Street with their cobs, pausing before window displays. Maria stopped in front of a store
whose display featured elegant manikins modeling skirts, blouses, and stylish hats. Henry
stood beside her and studied their reflections.

“What do you want to do next?” he said. In the glass he watched her profile turn
toward him. “Go directly to the United States, or what?”

Maria turned back to the display and nibbled her corn.

“Personally,” Henry said, “I’m a little reluctant to leave.”

“You’re not thinking of going back?”

“I don’t know what to do.” He scuffed his boot on the cement, took a deep breath,
and looked at Maria’s reflection in the glass. He was still bothered by the distance
between them and sensed an opportunity to set things right. “Tell me more about
Apartheid Guatemala.”

“How come you want to hear about that?” she said.

Henry chewed. He tried to eat his corn without making a mess, but it was
impossible.

“Boundaries were drawn during the Colonial period,” Maria said. “The Spanish
owned land masses and had access to forced labor. Now it’s the prevailing
discrimination.”

“In Mexico, too?”

“Apparently so.”

“I guess it’s the same in the United States.”

“You guess?” Maria said. “Don’t you know?”
“When they started bussing,” Henry said, “I was at Jefferson Elementary in Berkeley, and all of the sudden a bunch of white kids had to leave and go to the black neighborhoods and all these black kids got bussed to our school.” He wasn’t sure where he was going, but felt that being honest might help things between them.

“But you got to stay in the good school.”

“Tell you the truth,” Henry said. “Kids started fighting in the hallways. Teachers had to spend half their time trying to maintain discipline. I wanted things back the way they were.” He turned away from her reflection in the window and looked directly at her.

“Did you have any positive images of black people?” Maria made a pursy, careful expression with her mouth, like a schoolteacher emphasizing a crucial point.

“Harper Frances was a graduate student of my father,” Henry said. “She lived in Baltimore and attended Johns Hopkins. My father let her sleep in his office to save money. I met her when I went to campus with my father. She was extremely fastidious. None of her family had even graduated from high school, but she was at a top university struggling to do well. My father said she attended school full-time, worked full-time, and spent eight or ten hours each day studying. She was determined to succeed, and he saw her as a model student. I was jealous.”

“Did things ever get better at your elementary school?”

“Things got better after we moved to Maryland.” Henry trembled, uncertain if he was making a good impression. He wanted to change the subject, but it was too late.

“You said Padre Flores helped you get a scholarship?”

“Yes,” Maria said. “Opportunities were limited.”

“I imagine so.”

“Black Caribs are descendants of slaves,” Maria said. “The British exiled them to an island in the Gulf of Honduras for helping the French during the French Revolution. Most exiles migrated to the mainland. Now Black Carib settlements stretch along Central America’s Caribbean coast from Belize to Nicaragua.”
They ate their corn in front of the window. The manikins were dressed provocatively, the top buttons of their blouses left unbuttoned to reveal the swells of their synthetic breasts, but it was hard to get excited about things that weren’t alive. If anybody could do it, Henry figured he must be qualified. Tilting his head, he could see farther into the shop. Behind the half-moon platform on which the manikins posed was a doorway covered by a velvet curtain. The curtain didn’t go all the way to the floor, and in the opening he made out an assortment of detached arms and legs clustered on a lower shelf. The sight reminded him of their apartment in Berkeley over a store whose window displayed prosthetic limbs. He had never gotten used to that advertisement. Now he felt a similar discomfort as he spotted a head on the shelf staring back at him without pupils. The manikins had nipples, but no pupils.

“These things are so messy.” Henry finished his corn and threw it into a sewer. There were no waste baskets. He ran his tongue along his teeth, where the bits of corn stuck.

Henry focused on the glass. Images of people going along the sidewalk overlapped the gallery of manikins. He felt plain in his jeans and sweater.

“You wanted to go to the park?” he said.

He was relieved to get away from the manikins. They walked. Women and children played on the swings and slides. He watched one boy fall off a swing.

“Let’s go sit on that bench.” Maria pointed.

A wooden slat was missing from the backrest of the bench. Peanut shells littered the islands of dirt where shoes had scuffed.

When she sat beside him, he started imagining her drunk and the two of them doing it right here on this bench—Maria on her back clutching the sawed-off ends of the slats over her head, huffing and crying out as her brown calves bounced on his shoulders. He wondered if the cement supports would budge in the dust. He looked down and wiggled from side to side.
"What are you doing?"

"This bench does wobble a little."

"Not if you hold still, young man."

After they had been in San Cristobal for a week, he woke one morning to the sound of water dashed on the courtyard. Sunlight streamed through the lattices, making yellow pencils of light on the floor. He sat up in bed. It was Thursday, the twenty-eighth of September. In the distance he could hear a band playing. The music was still playing when they got outside.

"Folks still partying?" Henry paused on the narrow sidewalk of their street, a street called Ninos Heroes. The sidewalk had barely had enough room for them to walk side by side.

Maria said, "Sounds like Las Mananitas."

"What's that?"

"Traditional birthday song."

The cobbled street wound past buildings with ivied porticoes, Spanish-tile roofs, and barred windows. When they rounded a corner, the music grew louder. Positioned under a second-floor window, the musicians were playing to a young woman, who stood in the window and looked down while holding a baby in her arms.

"The baby is the festejada," Maria said. "They're celebrating the birth of that child." She blinked in the sunshine, and the surprise of tears on her face dumbfounded him. He edged close to her, staring at the musicians, and put his arm around her shoulders. She pulled away, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Violins sweetened the brilliant trumpet, whose fluted horn reflected sunshine. Six violinists formed the ensemble, along with one trumpet player and two guitarists. The round-backed guitar sounded high-pitched and contrasted with the deep-voiced guitar. A folk harp doubled the bass line and embellished the melodies that echoed back and forth.
across the street, bouncing from wall to wall. Many gathered to watch. Middle-aged men wore straw hats and the young men sported baseball caps. At the edge of the crowd a man pulled a comb out of his pocket and took a few swipes at his hair. Elderly women were dressed in black wool skirts, and a girl squatted beside an urn spewing incense. Clouds of white copal smoke stung Henry’s eyes.

The *Mariachi* players wore waist-length jackets and tightly fitted wool pants that opened at the ankles to fit over riding boots. Embroidery ornamented their pants and jackets. Silver buttons glittered. Henry and Maria meandered to the market, the music fading behind them.

Hundreds of Maya trekked into San Cristobal for the daily market. Others lived there in poor barrios on the outskirts of town. Many spoke little or no Spanish, and the shop owners looked down on them. From the early morning, fruit trucks pulled up to the wholesale shops that fringed the big marketplace, carrying pineapple, papaya, avocados, limes, oranges, and tomatoes. The permanent market area was a huge covered warehouse of butchers, bakers, greengrocers, grain dealers, and florists. Henry and Maria emerged on the far side into rows of pottery stalls selling clay pots and jugs. Mexican boys hawked chewing gum. They passed a man who wore a whole tower of cowboy hats, one on top of another.

Stalls huddled beneath tarpaulins and makeshift tin roofs. Clothing sprawled over tables, arms and legs intertwined. Tooled leather goods dangled from overhead, and candles scented the air, their perfume spiced with the smells of herbs. The stalls brimmed with loaves of bread, chickens, tacos, vegetables, and cut flowers. Smells of marigolds mixed with beeswax.

They squeezed onto some tiny stools right in the middle of the aisle. In the back of the stall, cooking pots bubbled and filled the aisle with aromas. One of the cooking pots was covered with what appeared to be an old brass cymbal that bubbled and clinked. In the front breads and cakes were piled high. The lady poured each of them a steaming
glass of milk, rice, and cinnamon sticks. They dunked sweet corn bread cakes into this drink.

"When are we going to Palenque?" Maria said.

"I don't really want to go," Henry said, staring toward a stand that sold hand-carved flutes. The flutes were suspended from strings and hung all around the stand.

"What about me?" Maria said. "Don't I get to vote?"

From the aisle seat, Henry reached past Maria and put his hand on the windowsill.

"Excuse me," he said, leaning toward their open window. The bus driver had parked outside the entrance to the Palenque ruins in the shade of a water oak whose branches cast interlaced shadows over the dust. Another bus was parked across the entrance, but it was empty.

When their driver cut the engine, the windows shuddered. In the stillness Henry could hear insects humming and tree frogs croaking in the lush vegetation crowding both sides of the road. He imagined leaf-veiled eyes looking out from the gloom.

"Nobody in sight," Maria said. She had flattened her shoulders against the back of the seat, and her breasts were thrust forward against her sweater.

"Been that way over five-hundred years." He took his hand away from the sill.

She laughed a peppermint laugh. "Think we missed the tour?"

"Do you have the schedule?" Henry had put off their trip to Palenque for as long as he could, being less excited about seeing the ruins than his father and Maria were. But now he realized that he really was enthusiastic. Of course, he would be excited to go anywhere with Maria. But now whenever he saw his father again he would have something to tell him about, something within his father's area of expertise, and Henry would have firsthand experience on the subject. His father had already paid for a tour, having planned to come here with his mother. The bus Henry and Maria would have taken if they had left earlier in the day was the one parked across the road. Painted along
the side in florid lettering were the words *Passion Island Tours*.

"What’s the island?" he said.

"Hang on a sec." Maria was digging for the brochure in a bag packed with brown-speckled bananas, a Thermos, and Henry’s camera. He wanted to finish the rest of the photographs on that roll of film, and he thought the ruins would be a good place to do it.

When Maria unfolded the brochure, a black hair fell out of a crease in the paper.

"The last tour started at five o’clock," she said.

Henry looked at his wrist, but he had given away his watch. "Seems pretty late," he said. "Must be after five."

"*Ya estamos.*" The driver waved his hat in front of his face and looked in the rearview mirror, the deep creases lining his brow visible even in the shade.

"*Momentito,*" Henry said. He raised his hand with his index finger and thumb close together, pinching a wafer-thin slice of air. The old driver shook his head.

"Maybe we can still catch the end of the tour," Maria said.

At the top of the aisle Henry accidentally kicked a toolbox jutting into the walkway from behind the driver’s seat, the tools making a loud metallic clatter.

"*Lo siento, *" he said, bounding down the steps. He jumped into the dust, turned, and held out his hands for Maria, who grabbed the stainless steel bars and helped herself down. The branches of the water oak scored her face with a delicate network of fine lines.

Behind her the driver was pushing his toolbox farther away from the aisle.

Henry pointed at the other bus as they walked toward the ruins. "What’s the island in *Passion Island Tours?*" he said.

Butterflies zigzagged through the slanted rays of sunlight. It was warm and steamy, and as they walked Maria shrugged out of her sweater and draped it over her right arm. She turned in the direction he was pointing and regarded the other bus.

"Technically," she said, "Central America is an isthmus."

As they made their way toward the ruins, Henry felt the sun warming his damp
back. Maria picked up something in the dust and held it toward him, the sunlight emblazoning the fine down on her forearm. He was trying not to stare at her naked arms, exposed in the sleeveless halter top. She held up a clover.

"Just three leaves," he said. "Hey." He looked past the clover and pointed at the ground, where the sun stretched their shadows far ahead of them. He waved his hand at the gnats circling his head and watched the blurred shadow of his arm. He stopped and marched in place, making the shadows of his legs shorten and lengthen like telescopes. When he leaned toward Maria, their shadows merged into one long-limbed reflection.

"Looks like a gigantic daddy long-legs," he said.

"Or a Giacometti."

"Exactly." Henry stared at the ground in embarrassment and tried to guess who Giacometti was. Maybe some NBA player like Kareem Abdul Jabaar, the center for the Los Angeles Lakers. Or maybe some architect who designed tall buildings in New York.

"Makes me think of Plato, too," Maria said.

"I don’t follow you," Henry said, relieved to have been honest. He knew Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher, but that was all. His idea of Plato came from the movies. He pictured the guy wearing a toga like John Belushi in that new movie. The other image that popped into his head was the Play Dough he used to mold into sculptures as a boy. He felt stupid and wondered if his application to the University of Maryland had been processed yet.

Before entering the ruins, Maria stopped and tugged at his sleeve.

"Look," she said, "there's a big pyramid on the right."

"What did you expect—the golden arches?"

"Abandon all hope ye who enter here."

Henry laughed, but he had no idea what she was talking about.

Two boys dressed in security uniforms were kicking a soccer ball under the jacaranda trees. The ball shot past them and came rolling toward the entrance, bobbling
over exposed tree roots. Henry trapped the ball under his right boot and kicked it back. One of the guards, a boy with black-framed glasses whose bridge was wrapped with masking tape, waved and said, “Hace un calor de chingana.”

They entered the ruins and found themselves in an open area that commanded a view of the plains stretching to the horizon. Henry could see the town they had just passed through—Palenque Town—with its church steeple. Behind the ruins, trees enveloped the land in a fertile green haze swarming with insects. Moss hung from colossal oaks in long banners. Hummingbirds darted and hovered around tropical flowers. Parrots chattered. According to the brochure, there were supposed to be monkeys around.

When they got closer to the pyramids Maria handed him her bag. He stood and watched her go sprinting ahead, kicking up dust in spurts, her dress swaying, her legs flashing.

He caught up with her inside the entrance. Hands on her hips, she was catching her breath. Sweat made her halter top cling to her, and he watched her rib cage contract and expand.

To their right, a tepee-shaped pyramid loomed about a hundred feet over their heads. Mottled with pock marks, the gray rocks seemed tightly fitted together. Loose stones littered the grassy mounds that surrounded the temple. The pyramid had been built into the mountain.

“Nine steps.” Henry counted the terraces with his finger. To their left, a wide stairway rose to the low facade of a palace with a tower. Far ahead, on the edge of what looked like a natural amphitheater ringed by steep hills, sat three smaller temples. A group of tourists in bright clothes stood on one of them.

Maria and Henry headed toward them, forded a creek on planks, and climbed the pyramid, where tourists were snapping pictures. The guide interrupted his monologue.

“You guys with Passion Island?” he said. Maria nodded and waved their tickets.
“Right.” The guide wore khaki slacks and a button-down Oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. Coming untucked, his shirt billowed over his stomach. He had a merry, round face topped with a swirl of hair that resembled lemon meringue.

A tall man with a black goatee snapped a picture. Henry recognized the model of his camera in the bright sunlight; it was an expensive camera called a Hasselblad with a clunky shutter. Someone else took a picture with another camera, and he heard a whirring sound that came from an automatic rewinding mechanism. He fished his camera out of the bag Maria had handed to him and gave the bag back to her. His hands free, he took a picture of the stone hieroglyphs.

The guide said, “Chan Bahlum ruled Palenque from the death of his father until his own death in 702. Due to hieroglyphic records, epigraphers have identified some kings. These three temples are from Chan Bahlum’s Cross Group. There is the Temple of the Cross. Across from that is the Temple of the Sun, and we’re standing on the Temple of the Foliated Cross.”

Maria stepped into a strip of sunshine between two pillars. Henry followed her and looked over her shoulder. Sunshine illuminated the peach fuzz on her earlobe.

“The Spaniards managed to destroy most of the hieroglyphic books written by the ancient Maya,” the guide said, “but other inscriptions and paintings have survived.” He shook his index finger at an illustration on the wall. “This is the central panel of the Temple of the Foliated Cross. The large and small figures are facing each other from the opposite sides of the wacah chan, which is translated literally as a ‘raised-up sky.’ The wacah chan is the life force created when the underworld and the living world are joined.”

A bluebottle fly orbited Maria’s head, and Henry waved it away. She turned a questioning glance at him. He lifted the camera and peered through the viewfinder.

“It is capable of manifesting itself in different symbolic forms,” the guide said. “But it just so happened that for the ancient Maya the most usual form this took was a

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“Bit of a coincidence?” the tall man said. His dark goatee spread wide when he laughed. He wore a short-sleeve green T-shirt and had owlishly round spectacles.

“Whatsoever the reason for the coincidence,” the guide said, “it delighted many a friar.”

Laughter spread through the crowd. Someone said, “How do you explain it?”

“There are two explanations for the appearance of identical forms in separate cultures,” the guide said. “One is dissemination—pretty much ruled out in this case since the ancient Maya had crosses long before the Spanish ever showed up. And the other is some trans-personal archetype of the collective unconscious. You can see right here that the cross is covered with leaves. Here the world tree is represented as a corn plant sprouting human heads. The ancient Maya believed that the original humans were composed of corn and water. But here on the Foliated Cross panel the world tree is not shown growing out of the head of the sun god.”

The tall man said, “Looks more like—”

“The world tree,” the guide said, stepping back so they could all observe, “is growing from the head of some kind of lily pad monster.” He gestured toward the panel. The lily pad monster stared out at them with bulging eyes. “Nothing like Monet’s Waterlilies,” he added.

Henry leaned forward and whispered into Maria’s ear. “Who’s Monet?”

“Claude Monet.” She turned, sounding surprised. “French Impressionist.”

“The ancient Maya saw the water as an entrance to the underworld. The lily pad is a symbol of fertility that resulted from the intersection of the living world and the underworld.” The guide checked his watch. “Now to the Temple of the Inscriptions.”

Most of the tourists went ahead of Henry and Maria, but the guide walked with them as they went back toward the large pyramid, filling them in on what they had missed. They approached the planks that bridged the stream, the guide staying close to
Henry and Maria. Henry positioned himself between them. The man swept his hand to the right, where the wide plaza sprawled.

"Too bad you guys missed the tour of the plaza," he said. "This stream turns into the Otolum River." On its banks in the distance three egrets stood tethered to their shadows. They guide crossed the stream ahead of them. "There's even a separate branch that goes beneath the central plaza through a vaulted, thirteen-hundred-year-old aqueduct."

Henry said, "Indoor plumbing?"

"The Palace was advanced for its time—the residential complex of Palenque's royal family."

To the right the late afternoon sunshine scoured the porous limestone and stucco surfaces. The tourists were clambering up the narrow stairway to the top of the Temple of the Inscriptions to the left, already near the top of the tall stairway. Their laughter and talking dropped down from the top of the limestone steps, sounding far away.

"What about the ball court?" Henry said. "Did we miss that too?"

"As far as we know, there's no ball court at Palenque," the guide said, "but not all of the site has been excavated. There are ball courts all over Mesoamerica. At the Aztec capital a ball court was built next to the Great Temple, with a skull-rack conspicuously nearby."

"Who got decapitated?" Maria said.

"There's still a lot we don't know," the guide said. "Some believe the losers were sacrificed, some the winners. Certainly human sacrifice played a large role in the games. Among the Aztecs war captives were pitted against one another, and the losers had their hearts cut out and offered to the gods. Sometimes their heads were even put into play."

"You mean they would actually use a head as a ball?" Maria said.

"The Mayan version is described in the Popul Vuh. By playing the game the Maya enacted the myth of the Hero Twins. Sometimes they used a rubber ball, and some
anthropologists want to believe that’s all they ever used. But recent discoveries suggest otherwise.”

“Why do they want to believe that?” Henry thought of his father, who often said the only reliable beliefs were those based on empirical evidence. He would remember this conversation later when he talked with his father.

“Because they’re in love with the illusion of the Maya as peaceful stargazers,” the guide said. “They don’t want to see the truth.”

Maria said, “You don’t believe the ancient Maya were peaceful?”

“I believe they were just as capable of violence as the rest of humanity.”

“Maybe we should stop and rest,” Henry said.

“I’m not a bit tired,” Maria said.

The guide talked as they climbed the stairs of the temple. Henry trudged, feeling resentment. He wanted to separate Maria from the guide, but followed them up the stairway. The stacked stones of the pyramid had a porous, bumpy texture.

“Pacal built nothing of his own,” the guide said, “until his mother, Lady Zac Kul, died in 640, twenty-five years after he became the ruler.”

At the top of the stairway Henry turned around and gazed over the Palace and the rest of the Palenque ruins to the north. In the sky an eagle circled.

Five openings led into the temple, separated by four piers decorated in stucco. The tourists took breathers in the shade, although the air had cooled. The sun was approaching the horizon, and breezes played around the stone columns.

Maria fumbled in her shoulder bag and took out a pack of cigarettes. She struck a wooden match against the box, and after she lit the cigarette she waved out the match and slid it under the cellophane wrapper of her cigarette box. Henry could smell the burned phosphorus. As she inhaled, the brightening tip gave her forehead an orange blush.

The guide walked over to the wall, where the crowd was gathered. “This is a representation of Pacal presenting six-year-old Chan Bahlum as his heir designate,” he
said, his voice echoing as he noted a badly eroded frieze. “Pacal is shown holding Chan Bahlum in his arms as Chan Bahlum’s six-toed foot transforms into a serpent. Serpents are symbols of divinity and royalty. In this temple there are 640 glyphs, which constitutes one of the longest series in all of the kingdom of the ancient Maya. They are largely about Pacal’s ancestors. Some people believe the reason Pacal and Chan Bahlum went to such lengths to describe their ancestry was that they had trouble establishing the legitimacy of their claims to the Palenque throne.”

Maria exhaled a plume of smoke. Henry had only one exposure left on his camera.

“This tomb became well known in 1952,” the guide said, “when a Mexican archaeologist found a hidden staircase that went into the temple’s interior. At the bottom, he found a vaulted chamber containing Pacal’s grave. Most Mayan pyramids are built one on top of another so each covers and improves upon its predecessor, but Pacal’s was built from scratch. He was buried inside a limestone sarcophagus which we are about to see.”

Maria finished her cigarette, stubbed it out on the sole of her shoe, and then rolled the roach back and forth between her fingers, releasing the golden tobacco flakes into the wind. They went up the last few steps and followed the crowd inside. At the top of the stairs a heavy metal door had been bolted into the rock. The door hung open.

When someone asked about the door the guide said, “They’ve had problems with thieves.”

Henry stepped aside and Maria went ahead. They filed down wet steps into cool air. Electric bulbs hung overhead, but the atmosphere was gloomy after the sunshine. When Maria slipped, Henry grabbed her shoulders with both hands, almost dropping the camera.

“Thanks, I’m fine.” Maria smiled over her shoulder. In the dark chambers her face softened, seeming more oval, and the whites of her eyes glowed.

Along the way down, the guide paused to point out a stone tube running along the staircase.
“This is the psychoduct. It’s represented as a snake, and runs all the way down to the crypt. The psychoduct allowed Pacal’s spirit, after his death, to communicate with the living.”

At the bottom everyone crowded into the damp room. Henry stood behind Maria, pressing close but not too close. He peered over her head at the tomb. The ornate stone cover of the tomb glowed under the lights. The guide walked over to the sarcophagus lid.

“Pacal’s crypt is thirty feet long,” he said, holding out his hand, “thirteen feet wide, and twenty-three feet high. After is burial in 683, five people were sacrificed in the burial chamber, after which the door was plastered over and the staircase was backfilled with tons of rock.”

“Tons?” Henry said.

“Literally tons,” the guide said. “This rock was so densely packed that it took Ruz Lhullier three seasons to remove it, but he found Pacal’s tomb as it had been left almost thirteen-hundred years earlier. Pacal’s bones were wrapped in the remains of a red burial shroud.”

“Is that significant—the color red?” Maria asked.

Water dripped in the chamber, echoing around them. Smoky residue scented Maria’s hair.

“Red is the color of the east,” the guide said, “the direction of the reborn sun. When they discovered Pacal’s remains, his face was covered with a mask of jade, white shell, and obsidian. He was wearing a cape and rings. There was a royal belt of jade with flint pendants on top of the sarcophagus. A wide band of tubular jade beads covered his chest, and other necklaces were made of beads in the shape of tiny flowers and fruit. There was a jade bead in his mouth, and he had rings on his fingers. Near his left foot lay a jade statuette of the sun god. There were also two life-size stucco heads—broken at the necks. But the most striking feature of the crypt is this limestone sarcophagus lid, carved into one of the most wonderful images in Mayan art.”
Everyone congregated around the lid. Under the electric light, the limestone carving glowed with a greenish tint. Etched precisely into the stone, the figure of man reclined. The man seemed to be falling backward.

Henry said, “He looks very laid back.”

Maria laughed.

“Pacal is falling backward.” The guide held his hand over the carving. “He is falling down the trunk of a **wacah chan**, which is growing out of the open maws of the underworld. He is weightless. Just below him, also falling into the underworld, is the head of the sun deity.”

Maria said, “Which sun deity?”

“The same one handed to Chan Bahlum across the panel of the Temple of the Cross.”

“Hold this please,” Maria said, shrugging her bag off her shoulder. Henry took the bag with his free hand, holding the camera in the other.

As she went toward the sarcophagus lid he centered the sarcophagus lid in the viewfinder. Water dripped in the dark corners of the tomb, where many stone ledges jutted from the wall. The crowd parted to make way for Maria, who stepped forward and extended her hand. Under the glare of the lights, her black hair shined with a blue luster. Reaching across the sarcophagus, she touched the toes of Pacal’s left foot. Henry got the sarcophagus lid into focus and pushed down the shutter release. The camera flashed.

“At the instant of his death,” the guide said, “Pacal is shown slipping into the underworld, like the sun dropping below the horizon. The Mayan notions of death and rebirth coalesce.”

“Don’t you want to touch the carving?” Maria said, looking over her shoulder.

“Can you take this?” Henry handed the bag back to her, set the camera on dry ledge behind him, and took a few steps toward the sarcophagus. But he stopped when he overheard a tourist whispering to the tall man with a goatee.
The tourist said, “Wasn’t there a priest involved, too?”

“According to what I heard,” the tall man said, “it was an American professor and a priest at Lake Atitlan. They both got arrested.”
CHAPTER XIV

After the tall man had repeated the rumor three times, the tourists started leaving the tomb, soon followed by the guide, who said over his shoulder that the tour bus would depart at six. Henry and Maria remained beside the sarcophagus and argued in heated whispers. Henry wanted to fly into Guatemala City, but Maria thought it would be safer to travel by bus. Either way was hazardous, and as they left the tomb Henry became so frightened that he began to feel cut off from his body, as if he were floating up the stairs. He watched his knees thrust upward from step to step and thought they could have belonged to someone else. He climbed the stairs behind Maria, their shadows wobbling over the walls. There was a landing at the top, where they faced each other beneath a fizzling light bulb, gnats swarming over their heads.

“But if we fly...” He took hold of her shoulders lightly and caught his breath. She had put her sweater back on in the chilly tomb, and he squeezed her shoulders through the fabric with urgent intensity. He felt scared and aroused at the same time, the two feelings racing through his blood. “If we fly, we’ll only have the airport officials to deal with.”

“They might be the ones watching for us.” She shrugged his hands away from her shoulders, straightened her sweater, and swung toward the exit. He shivered, wishing he had worn his own sweater. It had seemed so warm and sunny when they left the hotel that
afternoon.

He stared at an L-shaped tear in the back of her sweater, where her white halter top showed. The uncertainty of their plans gave his fear an edge, and when he tripped over the threshold and went stumbling out into the dusk his hands were trembling; they hung at his sides like foreign objects. Outside the openness of the space around them expanded his sense of insecurity. Outer space with billions of stars pressed down upon the pyramid and the ruins, emphasizing vastness and the unknown.

On the landing he looked down and searched for their bus.

“Our driver left.” He had assumed their driver would wait for them, and now thought he was going to get sick.

She said, “The other one will wait for us.”

“Let’s go.” He passed her and jogged to the stairs. “No sense taking any chances.”

In the dusk the nine steps leading down from the top of the pyramid seemed ominous; they were so wide they seemed cut on a scale for giants.

“Henry.” Maria placed her hand on his shoulder, urging him to turn.

He flexed his arm, tightening his shoulder muscles under her grip, and faced her.

“My father and Padre Flores have just been arrested,” he said. “They could be in jail.”

“We can’t help them any better if we freak out.”

From the top of the temple they could observe the bus outside the entrance, its engine idling as the driver read a newspaper. The headlights bored into the darkness. The tourists, dark forms against a backdrop of mottled shadows cast by the starlight through the trees, approached the bus in small groups, a few stragglers trailing. When the first ones entered the bus, the driver folded his newspaper on the dashboard and went outside. He crossed the beams, looking like a goblin, and strolled into the outer darkness, where he lit a cigarette or cigar. Henry hoped it was a cigar. He hoped the driver would take his sweet time. He could still feel the impression Maria’s fingers had left on his shoulder.

Diesel exhaust scented the breeze. Venus hung over the deep blue western
horizon, where stars were emerging. Could his father see those stars now? What did it mean when an American professor and priest got arrested in Guatemala? If they were really in jail, he would simply pay the fine and get them out. Maria was right: freaking out wouldn’t help the situation. He followed her down the first stair, willing himself to calm down. He smiled at the stars and tried to regard them the way his father did—as thermonuclear furnaces blazing in the depths of interstellar space.

“You know where the name for the Milky Way came from?” he said. “The goddess Hera, who squirted milk from her breast.”

Maria said, “This is no time for that kind of nonsense.”

“I thought you wanted us to be calm.”

She stopped. “Where is your camera?”

“Don’t you have it?” He stood on the step behind her and ducked a bat. Out of nowhere bats started flapping all around them. He could hear their wings flapping.

“Are those bats?” Maria sounded rattled.

“They won’t hit you,” Henry said. “They have sonar and all.” As she searched her shoulder bag, he realized that he had left the camera in the tomb. He remembered the dry ledge.

“It’s not here.” Maria gave him a jaded, raised-eyebrow expression. Henry rubbed his thumb against the scabbed knuckles of his right hand, feeling foolish.

“I’ll go back for it,” he said.

“Are pictures of the ruins so important? Just leave the thing.”

“It’ll just take me a minute.”

“You are such a petit bourgeois with your precious little gadget,” Maria said.

“Don’t you realize we’ve got more important things to worry about?”

“But it’s not the ruins.”

“What?” she said. “What are you talking about?”

Henry glanced down toward the nearly full bus, whose driver was still outside.
The glowing tip of his cigar brightened to orange. "I have pictures of my family on that roll."

Maria was quiet for a few seconds. "I guess I'm the one who's freaking out."

Henry dodged another bat. The bats alarmed him, but they alarmed her even more. He smiled in the darkness. "Maybe you should go ahead and make sure the driver waits for us."

"No," Maria said. "I'll come with you since it's that important."

"I don't want to hitch a ride back to the hotel in the dark."

"You're such a worrier."

Henry mounted the top stair. Soon they passed through the doorway at the top and went back down toward the tomb. He led the way, shivering as he went. The exertion of having climbed up the stairs had made his shirt stick to him, and now the dampness was cooling. Goose bumps stippled his upper arms. When Maria lost her balance and bumped into his shoulders, he turned and caught her arm, his hand going around her biceps. He could feel her shaking.

"You don't have to come," he said.

She avoided his eyes. "Will you please just go on?"

As they walked further down the stairs he heard water dripping around them and thought that he never should have set down the camera in the first place. Being in such a strange place with such a knockout was making him lose his grip. He breathed deliberately as he walked, making himself become calm and rational. Their footsteps echoed against the stone walls, and the light bulbs hummed over their heads, casting garish yellow light. He felt as if he were descending into some vast, artificially lit basement under the world.

"This is pretty freaky" Maria touched a spot between his shoulder blades with her palm. When she took her hand away, the spot felt cool, the damp cotton of his shirt sticking to his skin. He looked over his shoulder at her face starkly illuminated under the
electric lights. Her jaw cast deep shadows under the light bulbs, temporarily giving her a
mannelish severity, and the glittering lenses of her glasses reflected what looked like a
string of Christmas lights. She smiled bleakly, and he smiled back. He wanted to reassure
her, but felt that her insecurity increased his own. He had wanted her to be in charge and
take care of everything.

“Almost there.” Henry hurried down the last few stairs, slipped, and forced
himself to slow down and literally take one step at a time. He put out his hands and
touched the walls on either side to keep his balance, the cool stone making him shiver.

At the bottom, he spotted the camera right where he had left it on the hopefully dry
ledge. The limestone sarcophagus lid had a faint greenish tint under the lights. The burial
chamber was so small and the sarcophagus lid so gargantuan that there wasn’t much
room to move around, even with just the two of them. Henry fetched the camera, dry in
its leather case.

“Right where I left it.” He smiled and reached to hand the camera to her. But she
was walking around the sarcophagus lid, again putting her hands over its surface,
touching it everywhere with her fingertips. He watched her close her eyes and trace her
fingers over the carving.

He said, “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Shut up.” Maria laughed. “How did they ever get this thing down here?”

“Come on,” Henry said. “This is no time for that kind of nonsense.”

She faced him with a sarcastic look. “I’m just curious.”

“So was Alice.”

“I mean, no way they could have brought it through that stairway.”

“Maybe they built the temple around it.”

“This thing must weigh tons.”

“Sure,” Henry said. “I’ll bet it’s bigger than the stone tablets that—”

The lights blacked out. Henry gripped the camera more tightly and stood reeling.
He reached out behind him with his free hand, leaned against the wall, and blinked in the darkness. The iron door at the top of the stairway clanged shut.

When Maria said, “Oh, God,” Henry felt her terror.

“Wait!” Henry yelled in the direction that he thought the stairway should be. He felt his way along the wall and skirted the perimeter of the small room until he had reached the first step. He looked up the staircase without seeing anything and yelled. Maria approached from behind him, the sound of her voice moving closer. They both called over and over. No response. He thought he heard footsteps going away, but maybe it was his imagination. He turned and reached out his free hand.

“Where are you?”

“Over here,” she said.

He groped for her shoulder, feeling to the side of the spot where her voice had sounded. Everything was black–totally inked out. The surprise of touching her breast in the blackness startled him, his fingers pushing into her soft flesh.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Put this in your bag.” Henry was handing her the camera. She took it from him with both hands, her fingers brushing his. “Now follow me.” He circled her wrist with one hand and felt his way up the stairs, reaching out into the black space with his other hand. When he knocked his knuckles against the wall, lichen flaked off and stuck to the backs of his fingers.

He clambered up onto the first step, staying bent over in order not to let go of Maria standing below him. Once standing securely on that step, he helped her up with both hands. She stood breathing beside him, the peppermint smell faded. Her breath had a faint odor, the smell of fear. He could feel her trembling in the darkness beside him. Then he reached his right foot up toward the next step, the heavy sole of his father’s boot still feeling strange but solid.
They climbed up the staircase, taking the steps one at a time, pausing on each one. At the top of the stairs Henry kicked against the door. He pounded his fists. Maria joined him, and he could feel the metal door jiggling against its hinges.

"Hello," they called. "Hello, hello." The repetitions of their voices mixed with the echoes, and they seemed to be in an echo chamber, the sounds bouncing off the walls. Minutes dragged, and as he tired out he became more and more certain that nobody could hear them.

"Forget it." Maria stood so close her breath tickled his throat.

"You all right?"

"Glad I have my sweater."

"I'll try some more." Henry pounded. The door shook, but there was no response. He slumped to the stone landing, his back sliding down against the door, and felt the dampness soaking into the seat of his blue jeans. He shuddered with cold.

"Don't sit down," he said, reaching for her. He touched her calf.

"Where are you?" she said. A sliver of gray showed under the door, and as his eyes adjusted he could make out her faint silhouette standing over him.

"I'm sitting down, but don't try it." He pushed himself back onto his feet and brushed his hands against his thighs.

"Why not?"

"Bad idea."

"I'll say."

"I meant sitting down."

"What?"

Henry chuckled. "This would be funny if it weren't for my father."

"Padre Flores too." Maria said. "You probably planned this."

"It's all part of my plot to get into your pants."

"I'm wearing a skirt."
“Don’t you have matches?”
“I think there’s just one left.”
“Better save it.” Henry inched back down the stairway, his free hand touching the walls.

“Where are you going?” Maria followed him to the top of the stairway. She put one hand in one of the belt loops in the back of his jeans and tugged.

“Stop it.”

“We should stay here by the door,” Maria said, “in case somebody comes.”

“Like who for example?”

“Maybe the guards make rounds.”

“They’re done for the night.”

“Still,” Maria said. “Henry.”

“I’m not going to lie down on that wet stone.”

“Who said anything about lying down?”

“Do you plan to stand up all night?”

They went back down the staircase, taking one step at a time. As they got away from the door Henry’s eyes adjusted, but it didn’t help. He couldn’t see anything, as if all the light in the world had been completely drained away. He heard her behind him and waited to let her catch up.

“Now I know how Ray Charles must feel,” he said.

“You’re practically black yourself,” Maria said. “Was it by immersion or injection?”

Henry said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But he was relieved to be talking in somewhat normal tones. Everything was basically all right with them. The security guards would let them out in the morning. All he really needed to worry about was his father and the priest. They were the ones really in trouble.

At the bottom of the staircase he felt along the walls until he found the
“Where are you?” Maria’s voice sounded disembodied.

“He said, “beside the table.”

“It’s not a table.”

“It’s sure not a bed either.” He patted the lid of the sarcophagus, feeling the indentations from the carvings under his palm. “This thing is hard as rock.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m going to sleep on that thing.”

He shivered. His teeth were beginning to chatter.

“What’s the alternative?”

They were at the side of the sarcophagus lid.

“You’re right,” Maria said. “But how do I climb onto this thing?”

“Toss your bag up first.” He heard the bag land on the limestone with a thump.

The camera might have been damaged, but there were more important things to worry about.

“Okay.” Maria stood beside him.

“Hold still.” He wedged his hands under her armpits and boosted her onto the top of the lid. She was very light. She scrambled around up there until she was completely on top, legs and all. When she reached down for him, her hands touched his hair. “You have to come up.”

“I am,” Henry said, “but you have to move out of the way.” He gripped the edge of the stone and kicked his right leg up, getting a purchase. Then he pulled up the rest of his body, hoisting himself over the ledge. With his hands against the stone he felt around for moisture, but it was dry up there. He walked on his hands and knees away from the edge, brushing past Maria.

“We can use the bag for a pillow,” she said.

“Not much of a pillow.”

“What we really need is a blanket.”
"Where are you?" When he reached out, his hand jammed against her shoulder.

"I'll spread out my sweater over us."

"You're going to need that thing." Henry faced the spot where she was, for the first time thinking about how this would really work. She was right: they had to use her sweater. Even with the sweater, they were bound to be cold. "This is pretty bad," he said, feeling his voice falter.

"Stop worrying," Maria said. "We'll be fine." She lay beside him and spread the sweater over her. He lay down beside her, his arms touching hers, and within minutes their body heat warmed up the space beneath the light fabric.

"That's better," she said.

"Getting warmer." He tried to stay on his back, but it worked better if they both lay on their sides facing each other: there was less space for the sweater to cover. The pillow was so small that they had to lay close, the tips of their noses almost touching.

"Is he still in there?" Maria said. Her breath puffed against his face, and he imagined her lying on her side with her head propped on her hand.

"Who?"

"Pacal."

Henry laughed. "I didn't even think of that."

"How can you not think of it?" Maria bump her knee into his. "Sorry."

"What difference does it make?" Henry said. "You can't smell him, can you?"

"Please don't be disgusting."

"He won't crawl out and bite us."

"I think they might have moved him to a museum."

"It's just bones, anyway."

Maria said, "I'm still cold."

"Me too."

Henry shivered, but couldn't tell how much was from the cold and how much was from nervousness. He could feel the cold drafts especially at his back, where
his sweat was still damp. “Maybe you should flip around the other way.”

A silence followed.

“Maria?”

“You’re right,” she said.

After she turned her back to him, backing up against him so that they were nestled together like spoons, he felt himself growing hard. He placed his hand on the curve of her hip. He could feel the seam of her lace panties through the thin fabric of her dress.

“Stop that.”

“I’m trying to get warm.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I don’t know.” Henry pressed closer. Her sweater now draped partly over his back. He felt warmth enveloping his entire body. “This is better,” he said. “Are you comfortable?”

“In the morning they’ll find us and let us out.”

“I know it.”

“Go to sleep.”

“I’m scared,” Henry said. He shivered, and realized it was true. The shivering spasms crept up on him gradually, but after a few more minutes his entire frame shook. He gritted his teeth and wondered if they would be taken into custody when the security guards found them. He saw the two of them—him and Maria—put into some sleazy Mexican jail.

“You crying?” Maria said.

“Of course not.” Henry felt indignant.

He woke in the same position, minutes later, or perhaps hours. The blackness disoriented him. Her breathing had evened out, and he could tell she was sleeping. Water dripped all around them and the walls radiated a damp chill. Pressing closer, he ran his
hand over the curve of her hip under the sweater. Her breathing continued in the same manner, and he was certain she was sleeping. His pulse quickened. He ran his hand lightly over the curve of her hip until he found an opening between her blouse and skirt. His hand lingered there, the water dripping around them, her breath moving quietly in and out through her nostrils, her rib cage swelling and falling. He slipped his fingertips under the hem at the waist of her skirt and touched the warmth of her skin. Beside the bulge of her left hip there was an opening where her skirt didn’t even touch her skin. He lay still for a long time, pulse thudding in his ears.

His fingers first encountered the hem of her panties, which he felt between his thumb and his forefinger. He had seen them before she put them on in the morning, and knew they were white. The lacy trim felt soft beneath his fingertips, and he felt himself growing harder against her. Under his blue jeans his erection was pressed vertically against his stomach, almost emerging at the belt line. He nudged closer.

When she shifted in her sleep, he froze. He pretended to shift in his own sleep, reacting to her movement, and let himself press against her. After her breathing went back into its sleeping rhythm he let his fingertips continue, slipping further into the opening between her skirt and her skin. The sensation of her skin under his fingers made his blood pound in his chest. His fingers came alive. The skin over her hip was so smooth, and he could feel the downy hairs beneath his fingertips. In the quiet tomb his heart was banging against his chest. He felt sweat forming on his forehead, and he could feel the energy flowing through him. When he applied more pressure, something caught in her throat. Her body stiffened.

“What are you doing?”

He pretended to be asleep.

“Keep your hands to yourself.”

“What?” He withdrew the offending hand.

“Please leave me alone,” she said. “Can’t you behave like a gentleman?”
Alive in the electric darkness, unable to fall asleep, he lay on his side and waited for what seemed a full hour. She stayed awake for a long time, but eventually her breathing lapsed into a rhythm, and his fingers came alive. They seemed to have a will of their own as they slipped into the opening in her skirt again. This time he was more bold, and he let his hand glide over her thigh to the front of her underwear, feeling the way her pubic hair made the silky material of her panties smoothly bumpy. Slipping his fingers underneath her panties, he felt the shocking fuzz. His fingers inched farther down, not stopping until he realized that she was crying.

“’I’m sorry,” he said. He withdrew his hand, knowing that he was not really sorry for doing something wrong. He was only sorry for having been caught.

Except that the violence of her crying took him by surprise. Her sobs became more violent, and soon he did feel ashamed. Her frame shook, her reaction seeming out of proportion to what he had done. He lay beside her feeling scared and ashamed. Most guys would do the same thing under similar circumstances, wouldn’t they? Was he so terrible? His feelings began to shift slowly from excitement to fear to guilt to something else.

Maria said, “I want you to listen to me.”

“I’ll listen,” Henry said. “I’m sorry that I can’t seem—”

“I have to tell you something,” Maria said. “I have to tell you something that I’ve only told one other person in this world—Padre Flores.”

“All right,” Henry said. “I understand.”

“Do you understand what it means to have your family wiped out by the army?”

“No,” Henry said. “I only meant—”

“If you already know all about it, what’s the point in my telling you?”

“What I meant was—”

“Shut up,” Maria said. “Please just be quiet and listen for a change.” She turned around under the sweater and faced him in the darkness. “Promise to keep this to yourself.”
“I will.” Henry waited. He could hear her sniffing and he could feel her breath. She was still breathing heavily, taking deep breaths.

“At a young age,” she said, “when I was still basically a child, I married Gaspar, a guerrilla and founding member of ORPA, the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms. He was from a poor family, but he did remarkably well at school and his father sacrificed to keep his studies going, with the aid of a generous church scholarship. At sixteen he was in the eleventh grade, which is, you know, unheard of for a villager in San Bernardo.”

Henry nodded. Then he said: “Yes, it is.”

“One day Gaspar had been in the pass between Volcano Toliman and Volcano Atitlan, tending sheep as he worked on his trigonometry homework from school. A patrol of soldiers found him, and an officer pulled out a list of names scrawled in pencil on the back of a crumpled receipt from a cash register. Gaspar showed his identification card and was relieved that his name wasn’t on the list. But the officer added his name at the bottom and ordered him tied up. They bound his hands behind his back, secured a hood over his head, and prodded him between his shoulder blades with a machete, forcing him to walk. They walked for hours to a remote place in the forest, which he recognized by the smell of pollen from a honey farm.” She paused. “Are you listening?”

“I think I know where that honey farm is.” Henry had once been hiking in that region when the smell of pollen blew over the mountain path. He and his brother had hiked toward the smell. They must have been close, but they turned back before they reached the farm.

“He thought he was going to die. The officer told him that his math papers must be secret codes for the guerrillas and that he must now decode them, confess, and explain where the weapons were hidden. Gaspar protested. He said that there were no weapons—only his school papers, logarithms—and that they should go and ask Padre Flores. The officer said all priests were subversives and told Gaspar to prepare for death. When
Gaspar asked for five minutes to pray, the officer kicked him in the groin and said, 'There's your prayer.' Maria was silent, and Henry wondered if she were crying. But when she continued her voice was still and composed. He huddled under the sweater and listened.

"They tightened a plastic bag over his head," she said, "the kind used for collecting leaves, until he began to suffocate. He passed out, and when he awoke the officers had removed the bag and were pushing him into a gully with mud banks. The gully reeked of sewage that trickled from a metal tunnel, and overhead he saw a rat scurrying across a telephone wire. His hands were completely numb, and his arms ached. At midnight they hauled him out with a rope and said they were taking him to be shot. But instead a quiet soldier pulled him aside as they walked to the square and told him to run home and never speak of this to anyone. When Padre Flores brought Gaspar to the clinic, the teeth in his lower jaw were broken and black rings of flesh circled his wrists."

"But he survived," Henry said.

"Months later he was on a bus riding back from the coast where he had been picking cotton," Maria said, "to make money for me and our son. Soldiers stopped the bus and shot him. My son was killed in San Bernardo the next week while walking home from school. After they were both gone I started having bad experiences about them."

"What kind of bad experiences?"

"Salvador was eight when he was killed," Maria said. "Obviously his death was a traumatic one. For a long time afterward sometimes I would see him."

"You mean his ghost?"

"I don't know what to call it," Maria said. "Yes, maybe a ghost."

Henry waited for her to go on, but when she didn't he said, "Why are you telling me this?"

"I want you to understand why I can never be intimate."

"I see." He didn't quite understand, but didn't want to object. He listened.
"In life Salvador used to love to play this game," she said. "He would roll a bicycle wheel ahead of him by hitting it with a stick. Sometimes I still see him doing that."
CHAPTER XV

The next morning when the lights came on Henry was disoriented. He had been lying on his back listening to Maria breathe peacefully and feeling more at ease with his conscience—on better terms, at least—when the sudden brightness of so many bulbs glaring into his eyes seemed to come out of nowhere. One second there had been darkness, the next there was light. For an instant he didn’t grasp what was happening. The entire ceiling seemed to be wired with bulbs, every inch. Then he flopped over onto his stomach, accidentally dragging the sweater off Maria, and blinked until his eyes had adjusted. The limestone hurt his elbows.

From the corner of his vision he saw Maria prop herself on one arm. She plunged her other arm into the air and gave him a hair-frazzled nod. She slipped her arms into the sleeves of her sweater and fastened the buttons, looking down as she secured the top few. Dirt smudged her chin, and he wanted to reach out and wipe it away. Moisture dripped somewhere. After she climbed down from the sarcophagus, careful not to let her skirt ride up her legs, he handed down her shoulder bag and followed. They shuffled toward the staircase as if sleepwalking.

In his vision red dots bounced up the stairs as he went ahead of her toward the exit. His full bladder made the climb uncomfortable. Near the top he smelled cigarettes before he saw the security guards, who were crouched out of sight on the landing quietly
talking and smoking with their backs against pillars, their smoke trailing upward in ribbons as the sun rose behind them, casting an anvil-shaped shadow of the pyramid over the plaza below.

Henry scraped across the threshold, wanting to be heard, and emerged out onto the landing with Maria close behind. One of the guards stuck his head out from behind a pillar and jumped to his feet, dropping his cigarette. He glared. The partly smoked cylinder of his cigarette went rolling and bobbling across the stone landing and dropped out of sight onto the first step, where a trickle of thin gray smoke rose smoothly before breaking in ruffles. The wide-eyed guard backed up, staggered, and fell onto his butt. The other guard—the one with glasses taped together with masking tape—laughed at the antics of his partner and threw both hands up into the air, letting out a joyous whoop. Grackles burst from a treetop below.

“How much cash do we have?” Maria whispered from behind him.

“I’ll bet this goes straight into booze.” Henry smiled as he reached for his wallet, relieved that at least one of the guards didn’t seem angry, and watched the grackles settle on another water oak, whose leaves caught the first rays of sunlight. He opened his wallet and peered at the bills inside, figuring that this must be a boon for the guards. Maria spoke to them in Spanish, smoothing their feathers.

The two fifty-peso fines the guards charged them, amounting to about eight dollars, left him with nothing more than pocket change.

“Where’s the rest?” Maria said.

“In the top drawer of our dresser with our airplane tickets.”

She looked away, gazing off toward the western horizon, and then finished patching things up with the guards. He was surprised to learn that he and Maria weren’t even the first travelers to have spent the night in Pacal’s tomb. The cheerful guard pushed the bridge of his glasses higher onto his nose, grinned, and said, “Hay muchos.”

After their fines were paid they walked to the road. The sun threatened the world
with red daggers, but the shadows were gray and solid around the Temple of the
Inscriptions.

“We’ll have to hitch a ride back to San Cristobal,” Maria said.

A pair of macaws flew east above the blacktop, the rudders of their long tail
feathers visible. A Ford pickup with workers on back approached from behind, going
toward San Cristobal.

“Don’t flag that one down.” Henry didn’t want Maria to be among so many men.

“Don’t you want to help your father?” she said. As soon as she circled her hand in
the air the driver downshifted, the gears grinding and the truck trailing a funnel of dust as
the wheels on one side dropped off the pavement and onto the shoulder, bouncing over
clumps of weeds.

They reached San Cristobal before noon. As they neared their door at the Hotel
Mundo, Henry realized from the expression on Maria’s face that something was wrong.
She pointed at their door, where the seal of tape she had placed over the opening had
been broken.

“Someone’s been in our room,” she said.

“I didn’t know you put tape on the door.” Henry looked down the hallway in both
directions, but the hotel was quiet. Potted plants trailed vines from their wrought-iron
stands.

“Just a precaution,” she said.

Henry fitted the key into the lock. “Maybe it was the maid.”

Inside he went to the dresser, but even before he gripped the knobs he had a
hollow feeling. The wooden slats over the windows splintered the sunlight over the floor
with a harsh clarity. When he pulled out the drawer, the emptiness inside made him feel
nauseous. He put both hands on the dresser and leaned forward. Maria placed one hand
on his shoulder.

“I should have reminded you,” she said.
“They even took the goddamn airplane tickets.” He pointed inside the drawer at the Spanish Bible with the gilt edges and black leather cover. “Thank God they left us the Bible.”

“Are you sure you left the money there?”

Henry nodded, his head heavy. “It was that jerk from the front desk.” He narrowed his eyes. “The guy with a scar on his face.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “Let’s look around.” She opened other drawers.

Henry limped over to the window. The wooden slats covered the lower half of the window, and he swiped them aside with a clatter and yanked open the window, letting in fresh air from the courtyard. The air smelled of flowers and sunlight on stone. He rested both hands on the sill, ducked his head outside, and had an image of himself leaping out, but there was only one floor below. He would probably just twist his ankle and make a fool of himself. He listened to the water splashing in the fountain and looked down at the stone mermaid, whose hair was crusted with pigeon droppings. He felt angry and scared.

Maria sat down at the circular table between his bed and the window. Outside they could hear the birds chirping, a parody of their misfortune. Henry turned away from the window. He stared down at the wooden tabletop and ran his thumbnail back and forth along the creases made by the grains of wood.

He said, “I would like to wring that little fucker’s neck.”

“Violence won’t help Padre Flores and your father.”

“I know it.”

“We have to think rationally,” Maria said. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“We should report this to the hotel managers.”

“I doubt anything could be gained from that.” Maria pursed her lips and tapped her forefinger against them. A sparrow landed on the wrought iron railing outside the window.

“What should we do, then?” He felt almost at the point of tears and would not
meet her eyes. He slumped into a chair. When his hands started shaking he put them under the table. Someone had stuck chewing gum under the tabletop, the dried wads hard against his fingertips. He put his trembling hands on his knees. He could feel his eyes turning glassy and his nostrils quivering. He looked out the window, where the strands of a spider web, wet with morning dew, glistened in the sunlight, the strands drooping as breezes blew in from the courtyard, and wished that he were back at Lake Atitlan with his parents in charge. The sparrow had disappeared.

“We still have to go back.” Maria tilted her head. “Henry?”

“They could be sitting in a jail cell right now,” he said. “Where will we find the money to get them out?”

“We can worry about that later,” she said. “The question is how do we get to them.”

“We should have enough for the buses, I think.”

“Let’s empty all our money on the table.”

Henry dug into his pockets and clapped his change on the table. He searched their room, finding some dollars and quetzales he had forgotten about, having put them away because they couldn’t be spent in Mexico. Maria got up, rifled through her few pieces of clothing, and came back with more coins, mostly centavos. But she had paper money sewn into a seam of her blouse. They accumulated a small pile of bills on the table—pesos, dollars, and quetzales. He sat down and picked up an old American dime, holding it to his eyes. He squinted at the unfamiliar face. The silver-colored coin had “Liberty” printed across the top and “In God We Trust” under the profile. The year, almost rubbed off, was 1943. But instead of Roosevelt the coin was stamped with the image of some God with wings.

“A lot of good this will do us,” he said.

“We have to save some for the border crossing.”

“How much, do you think?” Henry tried to remember how much his father had
shelled out when they crossed the borders into Mexico and Guatemala, but he had been a carefree passenger then—a child, like his little brother—and hadn’t paid much attention to the financial transactions. He felt a new respect for his father, who had managed to get their family through two border crossings without a hitch.

“We may not even have enough for that.” Maria said. “All those different fees.”

“Maybe we should report this to the police,” Henry said.

“Are you crazy?” Maria laughed. But when she saw the expression on his face she reached across the table and touched his hand. “I’m sorry, but we have to keep a low profile.”

“I know,” Henry said. “What was I thinking?”

“Let’s see what we’re working with.” Maria stacked the bills and coins. After she counted everything, she said they had the equivalent of about twenty dollars.

“A little bit goes a long way here,” Henry said.

“We should hitch a ride to the border,” Maria said, “to save money.”

They didn’t report the theft. Henry bolted the hotel door and wedged a chair under the knob. That night he lay on his back and stared at the wall where a stain was shaped like Maryland. But instead of worrying about his mother and brother he worried about his father and Padre Flores.

The next morning they left the hotel early after taking showers.

“Let’s leave the suitcase,” Maria said. “Travel light.”

Henry didn’t recognize the clerk, a young woman with braids. He dropped off their keys without saying anything. They walked to one of the main roads going out of San Cristobal. Many trucks were going back and forth with workers getting an early start.

When Maria put out her thumb, a flatbed truck rattled past them going in the same direction, then slowed to a stop. It had taken her less than sixty seconds to get a ride.

“Come on,” she said, glancing back over her shoulder. She trotted to catch up. He followed reluctantly and stared at her back with resignation, glad she was wearing her
khaki pants instead of her skirt. Most of the workers crowded on the flatbed glanced at him and then kept their eyes averted toward Maria, looking down with the assurance of established persons who will defend their security by intimidating others.

"Let's wait for another one," Henry said.

"What's wrong with you?"

Henry ran past Maria before she got close to the truck. He stood between her and the driver and hitched his thumbs in his belt-loops. At the door on the driver's side she tried to get in front of him, taking charge as usual. But he pushed her back and looked up into the cab.

"Adonde va?" he said.

"Ciudad Hidalgo."

"Es la frontera?"

"Si, claro." The driver thumbed back the brim of his hat.

Five workers reached down to help Maria up onto the flat bed. Henry climbed up himself and sat beside her, where the workers had made room behind the cab. He sat with his back to the cab and heard the driver and the one passenger in the cab laughing through the window.

When someone on the flat bed said, "Mulata," others shouted with wild and savage laughs. Henry stared at the receding road and felt his mind cringing from the workers, who seemed dirty and crude. He put his arm around Maria as the driver shifted into second gear and went banging over potholes. She squinted toward the horizon and shaded her eyes, even though cotton-shaped clouds blocked the sun. Mottled with red and white dimples, her chin quivered.

"You all right?" Henry said.

"Just pissed off, but not at you." She looked up and smiled.

"Just ignore them," he said. When the men made fun of her, it gave him an ugly feeling. But when she smiled at him, he felt a new stirring of tenderness.
“Easy for you to say.”

“We have more important things to worry about.” He put his hand on the nape of her neck, where her short black hair tapered into down. As the driver shifted into third gear, many workers clapped hands over their cowboy hats. But the boy beside Henry dozed, his shoulder bumping against him, his fingers interlaced over the hat on his lap, his head lolling.

Some men eyed Maria from beneath their flapping brims. Whenever he caught them looking at her, he glared right at them. Some turned away, but others kept staring no matter what he did. And others kept their eyes shyly averted, as if they were ashamed. There were eleven workers on the truck.

The ride lasted a long time, and after the sun had risen high in the sky Henry found himself nodding off to sleep. The sun beat down on the stamped metal of the flatbed, making it warm to the touch. Maria wanted to take off her sweater, but Henry asked her not to. The truck crossed the Sierra Madre mountain range, twisting around hairpin curves where steep drops revealed valleys far below, and descending from the high sierras into the lowlands near the pacific coast. He became thirsty, and when the workers passed around a wine skin filled with water he squirted water into his mouth. He began to feel more comfortable around the workers; they were not such bad fellows. He handed the water bottle to Maria. She took a drink, smiled, and passed on the bottle. He ran the back of his hand across his brow and shook his head.

“Worn out already?” she said.

“Not me,” Henry said. “This is nothing.”

“You look pretty tired to me.”

“If I can run a marathon, I can handle this ride.” Henry felt uncomfortable with his bravado. The truth was that he felt tired and scared of what lay ahead, but he plunged on. “I’m in training for a marathon now with Jason.”

“Your little brother?” Maria said. “How far is that?”
“Twenty-six miles.”

“Wow.” She seemed amused.

The passengers listened to their conversation, paying attention to their gestures and their tones of voice.

“I’ve finished one before,” Henry said, “in New Mexico.”

“Did you win?”

“No.” Henry laughed, feeling relieved. The laughter helped ease the pressure he felt building within. “My father was giving a paper at an Astronomy conference there, so he took me along and I ran the race. I hit the wall at twenty miles, but finished. The next day we had a picnic with some of his peers at this field full of radio telescopes. You know, they collect radio waves from outer space?” She nodded. “He said it’s cosmic background radiation from the Big Bang.”

“Sounds like a lot of energy.”

“That’s what I thought,” Henry said. “But he said the edge of the universe is so far away that the total energy ever received by all the radio telescopes on earth is less than a single snowflake hitting the ground.”

As the sun rose higher into the sky, the temperature increased. Humidity made the passengers sweat. Henry enjoyed the contact of Maria bumping against him. For a short stretch they turned onto a dirt road, and he watched the dust boiling from under the truck and hanging over the road behind them before disappearing. The landscape became more and more tropical. He stared at the blue sky, scattered with cumulus clouds drifting along the horizon, and worried about getting past the border. What would they do if their money ran out? Everywhere he looked he imagined the face of that clerk who had stolen their funds. What would he do with the airplane tickets? They were no use to him.

The truck returned to a paved road and startled a roadside colony of white birds that burst into the air. Everyone watched, turning their heads as the birds assembled and flocked toward another spot. Henry nudged Maria awake and pointed out the birds.
She held her hand over her eyes and looked.

“Snowy egrets,” she said. She started unbuttoning her sweater.

“What are you doing?” Henry said.

“It must be ninety degrees.” She slipped out of her sweater, and heads turned.

Underneath she was wearing her halter top, her arms bare. Henry thought the men could probably see her nipples through the damp fabric, but he was afraid to look. He stared at the passing landscape and gave it fake interest, his face taking on a false feeling as if he were wearing a mask.

They passed broken down cantinas alongside the road, and Henry was glad they didn’t stop. When a bus passed them going the other way, raising a storm of dust and flying gravel, the riders on the flatbed all turned away, some with their faces pressed into their elbows, others covering their faces with their hats. Maria turned toward Henry, and he cradled her face against his chest. The driver seemed determined to make good time. He didn’t stop for any of the other people who were trying to hitch rides. They passed mesas dotted with cedar, the yuccas in white bloom. About five miles from the border, Mexican military checks began. But they were mostly checking for illegal immigrants coming into Mexico, so they waved the southbound truck through.

The truck entered Ciudad Hidalgo as if descending into an underworld. Henry felt unnerved. As their truck entered the city limits and stopped at a red traffic light, he looked around. People shuddered in the tropical heat. A cripple lay on sidewalk in thin strip of shade.

“I wonder if there are gangs here,” he said.

“Didn’t you pass through here on your way to Guatemala?”

“Yes,” Henry said, “but it was different then.”

“Couldn’t have been that different three months ago.”

“Not the place,” Henry said. “I was different.”

“This is a no-man’s land.”
“You’ve never been here?” Henry was relieved when the light turned green.

“I’ve heard about it,” she said. “There are two villages, Ciudad Hidalgo on the Mexican side and Tecun Uman on the Guatemalan side.”

As they entered the border community they could see immigrants squatting here and there beside the road. They passed bars and brothels. Migrants from many Latin American countries seemed to congregate here. Tricycle taxi drivers abounded.

“You think we should get a coyote?” Henry had heard that coyotes smuggled immigrants across the border, usually to the north, where people hoped to find economic salvation.

“We could use one,” Maria said, “but we have to save the money we have.”

They passed a place called Casa de los Migrantes, a run-down hacienda fronting a rutted jungle path that led through foliage to the Suchiate River. They drove through a bus station crammed with buses. Some travelers sat on their luggage and smoked cigarettes. Many were Ladinos who seemed to come from different places in Central America. Many were Guatemalan Maya with wicker baskets and twine-mesh bags, who seemed to be vendors going to markets. Stacks of clothing were all around. One man shouldered a bundle of machetes in leather sheaths with quetzal designs tooled into the scabbards and tassels on their tips. Another man crouched on the cobblestones beside a stack of wooden chairs.

Despite the heat men stood around a fire, cooking tortillas directly on the embers. He could smell wood smoke mixed with diesel exhaust. Here and there engines idled. Orange peels and corn husks littered the cobblestones, where rats darted. A dog lifted its leg beside a crumbling cement-block wall.

After they passed through town, the truck slowed as they approached the border. The workers seemed to know the routine. They fished out their identification papers from their pockets. Henry patted his pocket, glad that they at least had the proper documentation.
“How much do you think this will cost?” he said.

“I just don’t know,” Maria said. “We’ll have to play this by ear.”

First they met a closed gate and a fumigation post where the officials sprayed only the lower parts of bikes. Some vehicles were totally fumigated from top to bottom. Henry watched a truck ahead of them get fumigated with some noxious white gas that spurted from a hose. The workers were getting off the flatbed of their truck.

“Let me help you down,” Henry said. He jumped down first and then reached up his arms to help Maria down. She stood beside him and shouldered her bag.

“I’m glad we left my suitcase behind,” she said.

“I leave suitcases behind wherever I go.” Henry walked to the cab and looked up.

“Muchas gracias,” he said.

The driver smiled down at him. He said, “Vaya con Dios.”

Inside the station they stood in line behind many others. At the desk the official, a short man wearing a green uniform with brass buttons, told them they had to pay ten quetzales.

“Para los dos?” Henry said.

The official nodded and wiped sweat from his brow. There was no air conditioning. After they got through Henry walked beside Maria toward the next station.

“We’re running low,” he said.

“How much do you have left?”

“I don’t know.” Henry reached for his wallet.

“Don’t count the money where everyone can see.”

The next stop was Migraciones, where they waited in another line. The official, a woman, told them they had to pay four quetzales each for the tourist stamps. Henry counted out the bills. He only had six quetzales left. The woman stamped their passports.

Then they walked to Aduana, for vehicle paperwork. But since they did not have a vehicle they were allowed to walk through.
“Thank God we don’t have to go there.” Henry pointed at *Banrural*, a bank where people stood in long lines. Outside the bank there was a giant mural painted on a wall. He let his vision wander over the mural, investing it with spurious interest. He didn’t really care about the drama of the Spanish conquest depicted there, but he read the name of the artist embossed on the metal placard under the picture: Diego Rivera.

They passed more trucks being fumigated and walked to the last cabin, where an official demanded ten quetzales for each.

Henry looked into his wallet and took out what was left. “*No tenemos bastante pisto,*” he said to the official, a short fat man who sweated through the armpits of his white linen shirt.

“*Es un problema,*” he said.

“*Por favor,*” Henry said. “*Tengo seis quetzales.*”

The official shook his head. Whenever he looked at Henry his face was stern, but he looked upon Maria with a curious expression.

“*No es bastante,*” he said.

Maria said something in rapid Spanish that made the man smile. She had spoken so quickly that Henry didn’t know what she had said, but her tone had sounded flirtatious.

“What was that?” Henry said.

She put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Why can’t you just talk to him right here?”

“Let me handle this.”

“You don’t have to go with that guy.”

“We’re just going to talk,” Maria said. She glanced apologetically at the man. Henry said, “We can find a coyote or something.”

“And pay him with what?”

“I don’t think you know what you’re getting into.”
“Do you want to help your father or not?” Maria said. “Listen, I think I can handle this guy.” She put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “Trust me.”

The official led Maria out the front door of the building. Henry followed them as they crossed an unpaved road and headed toward a store on the other side. He could feel people watching them every step of the way. At the entrance to the store, Maria told Henry to wait outside while she negotiated.

“But where are you going?” He scuffed his toe in the dust.

“Wait over there by the river.” Maria pointed across the road. “No te vaya.”

She went inside the store with the man. Henry stood outside as people went in and out. There was a window beside the door where a young man handed out food wrapped in foil to customers, and the boy leered at him. Henry turned and walked back across the road. He avoided the bank and went to a spot where he could watch the front of the store and wait for Maria. He waited beside the Suchiate River in the shade of the cypresses and watched kids playing soccer at a field beside the river. There was a fence behind him, and he smelled garbage from the other side.

The dampness of the river awakened smells. From behind a shoe repair shop on the corner, humidity brought out the scent of tanned leather. From behind the fence at his back, moisture brought out the reek of garbage. In his mind the smells of garbage mingled with his impressions of the border official. What were they talking about? He pictured the trash barrels overflowing with mold-coated papaya rinds, shriveled cantaloupe halves, and banana peels languishing upon mounds of foliage, their sleeves of fungus luxuriant as moss, the odors infusing him with a vivid sense of where he was. He was in Mexico now, beside the slow-moving Suchiate River. Three egrets stood in the shallows and eyed him.

On his side of the road a shoeless man lay on a slatted bench with a newspaper forming a tent over his face. When the man peeked out, Henry recalled a phrase he had heard a Hells Angels biker use in an Austin bar: “Eyes like two piss-holes in the snow.”
Under the bench lay an empty bottle of sugarcane rum.

Henry waited in the shade beneath the cypress trees, growing more and more uncomfortable. He watched a stand of willow trees beside the river, with long, thin branches drooping. A slight breeze blew through the branches of the cypresses. The root system of the cypresses extended along the bank of the river. Cypress knees protruded from the shallows. Over the water a cloud of gnats teemed. In the distance Henry could see makeshift ferries crossing the river—truck inner tubes with wooden slats lashed to them.

He turned back to the storefront and stared at the sign that hung crookedly from a nail over the entrance: *Dos Equis Cerveza*. Customers passed in and out of the store, jingling the bell over the entrance and sometimes glancing across the road at him. Beside the entrance a sliding-glass window had been fitted into an opening in the wall with a counter that jutted out. The boy behind the window watched him, especially whenever he leaned toward the window and handed out *tamalitos* wrapped in crinkly tin foil that flashed in the sun. Spiced chicken scented the air. Under the counter a mutt rested his snout on his front paws. When someone drew near, the dog batted the dust with his tail.

Nailed into the clapboard panels around the counter, hundreds of bottle caps studded the wall and formed the shape of an arch. Within the arch, the assorted bottle caps spelled out the words *Burritos, Tamalitos, and Saboroso*. The words would be hard to read up close, but from across the road the individual bottle caps disappeared into the larger pattern. He stared at the storefront and wondered how much longer he would wait before going inside.
CHAPTER XVI

At the bus stop Maria pressed a few folded quetzales into Henry’s hand, not saying anything and refusing to look at him. She had spoken very little since emerging from the store, except to say that they should walk to the bus stop, and now he felt the need to protect her. He had failed to protect her at the store, and his failure bled into defiance as he shoved the cash into his front pocket and pulled her close. He stood with his back against a Royal Palm, watched the strangers go milling past on the blacktop road, and regarded them with boldness.

He imagined returning to the store, confronting the aduanero and slamming him back against a wall. The thought of what must have happened shocked him, creating an anger at himself for his lack of manliness. In his imagination he kept thrusting the official against a cement-block wall until his body went slack. He murmured into Maria’s ear and tightened his arms around her in a fiercely protective manner, resting his chin on top of her head as he searched for their bus. The driver of an approaching tricycle taxi looked into his eyes and swerved in another direction. Even the street urchins didn’t try to sell him chewing gum.

“What should I be looking for?” Henry said.

“Any bus going to Coatepeque or Quetzaltenango,” Maria said, her voice muffled against his chest. “We can change buses at Quetzaltenango.”
Henry stroked her hair and scowled over her head, torn between hostility and tenderness. When their bus came, the pneumatic brakes gasping, he elbowed their way through the crowd, ushered Maria to the back of the bus—far from meddling eyes—and led her to a window seat, where he sat beside her and dared anyone to look at them.

After they were underway the driver’s helper worked his way to the back with his drawstring pouch and explained that he couldn’t change a quetzal bill. Henry gripped the back of the next seat, hauled himself onto his feet, and glared down at the ayudante, who walked away and soon came back with change.

The wheels of the bus ground broken glass as they picked up speed and headed out of town, dust and heat blowing in the windows and stirring the smells of all the animals within—people, chickens, and pigs. One woman had boarded the bus holding a bunch of dead iguanas by their tails. Henry looked through their window as if he might jump out. Through his eyes, the paved road that took them south along the Pacific lowlands tunneled through hot, muggy country that might have been the landscape of hell. The prosperous officials in blue suits at the roadside checkpoints were the gatekeepers. The farm workers trudging along the road with their hoes over their shoulders and their busted shoes seemed condemned to poverty, toil, and disease. The barefoot young girls in rags were child prostitutes.

The bus traveled through farming country with rocky hills that sloped down into the coffee plantations. The plantations went up the hillsides. Now as the bus went higher there was a wind blowing the coffee trees, revealing the green undersides of the leaves. The road was paved but dusty, and the dust rose beneath the wheels and hung in tunnels behind them. The road climbed higher and higher up the Pacific slope, burrowing out of the jungle and working its way closer to the forests of the highlands until they reached Coatepeque, a village set upon a hill surrounded by coffee plantations. The ugly chaotic commercial center stoked Henry’s rage.

They stopped in a squalid place smelling of diesel smoke. Some passengers got off
and new ones boarded. In the confusion Maria lifted her tear-stained face from his damp shirt-front. He could see where a button from his shirt had indented her cheek.

“You need to calm down.” She blinked, her lashes clotted with dampness. He waited for her to continue, but felt himself boiling over with impatience and rage. She said, “I understand what you’re feeling but–”

“I don’t want to calm down,” Henry said. “I don’t–”

The blare of an ambulance cut him off. Maria was saying something, but her words were drowned out by the screeching wail as the ambulance raced through the center of town, its siren so shrill that the sound made the hair bristle on the back of Henry’s neck. He squeezed the back of the next seat with one hand, feeling the springs give, and waited until his rage faded.

“I must be losing my mind,” he said.

Maria said, “Shhhhh.” He looked down at her face and ran his fingers through her hair. The bus, almost full now, pulled back into the road. She patted his chest, then dropped her face against his shirtfront.

From Coatepeque the bus climbed higher into the mountains along single-lane switchbacks littered with fallen rocks and dented with potholes. The breezes cooled, and Henry felt the sweat beaded on his forehead drying slowly. The spot on his chest where Maria lay was warm and wet. He tightened his grip around her, feeling her squeezing him back, and together they rose up and up, passing thin glittering waterfalls that fell from cliffs and high mountain fields where cows grazed and country people tended to the flocks. He stared out the window and felt as if his mind had blacked out, making him act on instinct.

At Quetzaltenango they got off the bus. He led Maria through the Terminal Minerva, where he found a bus with Solola posted on the headboard. Half full of passengers, the bus was idling in the shade of a jacaranda tree, whose feathery limbs cast herringbone shadows over the road and made seething rustles in the cool, smoke-tinted
In the bus yarn-and-stick decorations hung above the windows and twirled from their strings. Maria took a seat on the right side next to an open window, and he sat beside her. As they passed through the Parque Minerva, he saw bird droppings over the Templo de Minerva, a statue his father had told him honored the classical goddess of education. At the market vendors hawked their wares from wooden carts and zinc tubs. Oranges were stacked in pyramids, and knobby potatoes filled baskets. Wicker baskets were filled with ripe tomatoes and green onions on bolts of red-and-white fabrics woven on foot-looms. The bus took them to Solola, where their window came to a stop right beside a lady selling birds. Maria looked out, and Henry followed her gaze. In a wooden birdcage an umbrella bird shuttled back and forth along its perch.

The next bus took them down the winding road to Panajachel and dropped them off a few blocks from the beach. They walked together along the long straight Avenida Santander toward the beach. Henry urged Maria to go quickly, wanting to avoid police. It was a sunny afternoon, with clouds gathering to the west, and there were gringos sunbathing on the sand. He used to ogle the girls in bikinis oiled up under the hot sun, but now he ignored them as he led Maria over the sand and toward the dock, where the mail boat was loading for its afternoon run. Fortunately the soldiers that patrolled the beach, swinging their machine guns and accepting bribes from the foreigners, were at the far end when Henry and Maria reached the dock.

The mail boat, as rickety as The African Queen, chugged and clopped through the waves as they pulled out into Lake Atitlan, leaving the beach behind them. Winds picked up after the boat left Panajachel. Maria huddled beside Henry in the back with a crowd of tourists congregated on the U-shaped row of cushioned benches. Mostly Asians and Europeans, they braced themselves against the railings, clicked their cameras at the sun hanging over the volcanoes, and watched the couple of young American tourists sitting on the roof above the boathouse.
The girl on the roof had taken off her shirt, revealing the top of a string bikini, and her partner was lounging around beside her in a skimpy pair of Speedos that left little to the imagination. When the guy removed the rubber band from the girl’s ponytail, her blond hair went streaming backward, plunging and rippling in the wind. She raked her fingers through her hair.

“So liberating,” she said. “I feel so totally free.”

Her partner removed the wrapper from a Hershey’s candy bar and dropped it overboard.

He said, “Yeah, man.”

Henry recoiled from them and looked toward the west, where storm clouds were gathering. The roof was often crowded with gringos. In sunny weather sightseers would climb on top and dangle their legs over the paint-blistered frames of the boathouse windows. Sometimes you had to show up early at the dock to claim a spot. Now the threat of rain kept others below, close to shelter. Grunts of thunder blended with guttural hacks of the engine. The propeller churned, gurgling exhaust punctuated with coughs. Henry kept his arms around Maria and looked toward the wake of the mail boat. Behind them, on each side were two folds of water with a few white swirls of foam hemmed within their parting ridges.

The girl on the roof was putting on a show. The couple laughed as the waves splashed them, wiping spray from their faces. The girl’s nipples stuck out. The captain didn’t seem to mind. Henry felt angry and embarrassed to be an American, embarrassed to be associated with such loud and vulgar people. He glanced sympathetically at the Mayan man standing beside him, whose two fifty-pound bags of cornmeal rested on the seat.

Maria said, “We have to split up on shore.”

“Why?”

“It may be dangerous for us to be seen together.”
“We’re being seen together right now.”

“I know,” she said, “but this is unavoidable.”

“When should we meet up?” Henry kept his voice low.

“You go to the cottage and find out what happened to your father,” Maria said.

“Ask Beatriz and Francisco. I’ll find out about Padre Flores.”

“Should we meet at your house?”

Maria shook her head. “Bad idea.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Let’s meet down by the docks.” She pointed toward the bay of San Bernardo, which they were approaching. When the boat got two-hundred yards from shore, the captain throttled down the motor. “Then we can figure out what to do next.”

The church steeple was directly behind Maria. From Henry’s perspective, it seemed to rise from her head. He watched the boulders on shore grow more distinct, their surfaces scabbed with patches of lichen. A seagull perched on one boulder and opened its yellow beak. When a gust washed over their boat, the radio antenna bent and whistled, its tip curving. The tourists shouted and hooted at the rough weather, but Henry imagined that they were egging on the American posers on the roof. He was relieved when the blonde girl finally put on a sweater.

The mail boat dipped and rose, bucking the swirling currents between the blue channel that cut into the bay and the greenish lagoon. In the lagoon the captain put the engine into reverse, his helper leaning out from the bow with a loop of rope in hand. He lassoed a piling on his first toss. Passengers cheered, and after the helper vaulted onto the dock he turned and bowed. The first few raindrops were spattering the weathered planks as he secured the mooring. He gave each tourist a hand when they stepped onto the dock, whose pilings were coated with green sleeves near the waterline. The Mayan man hauled both bags of cornmeal on his back.

After the other passengers had gone away, Henry and Maria were still standing at
the deep end of the dock. He wasn’t sure why she had asked him to wait, but after the others had hurried away to beat the weather he was glad for their privacy. The mail boat, having picked up more passengers and gone back out into the channel, left behind the smell of gasoline. Maria stood beside him and hugged herself, the collar of her sweater flapping. Big raindrops smacked their foreheads. She took one of his hands in both of hers, lacing their fingers together, and led him over the creaking boards to the shore. They stepped onto the sand near a boulder whose base was encrusted with barnacles. The boulder sheltered them from the wind. When Henry faced Maria, he noticed an oil slick behind her making rainbows in the surf.

“Well, I’ll see you pretty soon,” he said. The dark masses of clouds behind Maria’s shoulder looked as if they might release a downpour at any moment.

When Henry was tugging the strap of his bag higher onto his shoulder, Maria placed both arms around his neck, her fingertips cool and soft, and stood up on the balls of her feet. He felt alarmed when she closed her eyes, about to kiss him. He leaned down and pressed his mouth against hers, feeling her lips against his. Her lips felt warm and swollen, and she poured a magic into him that filled him with a storm of tenderness. He pressed harder, his teeth clicking against hers, and poured the intensity of his feeling into the kiss. He felt as if a window that had been closed throughout his entire life had suddenly been flung open.

Afterward he didn’t know what to say. He stood on the shore with his hands on her shoulders and looked down.

“Will you be all right?” he said.

She hugged him without answering, and he pressed his lips against her hair. Her hair was soft yet springy, like moss on a warm hillside, and had the faint woody aroma of sawdust in sunlight. He pulled away feeling stunned and shocked into a new state. He was about to say something when she reached up, touched her fingertips to his mouth, and turned around. She walked away from him, heading up the alley toward the church in
He wheeled around and walked toward the cottage. He just walked. When he reached the far end of the beach, he turned to wave to her. But she had already gone.

He scrabbled over the rock-strewn shore, feeling hollow, and picked a path among boulders. He walked along the main street, where shops were still open in the afternoon. The sun, blotted out behind the clouds now, was so muted that the weather created an early dusk. The air cooled, and little whirlwinds were springing up in the narrow spaces between buildings, catching pieces of trash and spinning them around. He walked as quickly as he could without drawing too much attention to himself, wanting to get away from the center of San Bernardo where officials might see him and wanting to make himself feel more worried about his father. If he hurried toward the cottage, he must be concerned. But as he progressed beyond the roads and onto the trails at the base of Volcano Toliman, his relief at having eluded detection opened him to other worries. His desire to be a good son brimmed over into guilt. He wasn’t worried about his father at all. He was just dwelling on Maria and what had happened between them, and his lack of concern for his father made him feel guilty. This guilt awakened more guilt. He wasn’t worried about Padre Flores or the military assistant he had killed, either. All he really cared about was seeing Maria again. He could still taste her on his lips.

When he emerged from the coffee farm, he felt determined to break through his indifference. He cut through the grove of orange trees to avoid Francisco and Beatriz, wanting to check on his father first—his father, who might be locked in a jail cell right now while Henry fantasized about his girlfriend. Was she his girlfriend? Never mind. The crucial question was: what had happened to his father and Padre Flores? Lights shone through the living room windows. He felt reassured, hopeful that his father was there. If he was at home, he could take charge. More than anything, Henry wanted to let go of the burden of responsibility.
He entered the backdoor, but didn’t see anyone downstairs. He shut the door quietly behind him, smelling cooking smells, and went creaking upstairs. Before he reached the first landing he heard the dog bark. Balam bolted out of his father’s study and growled, her nails clicking on the floorboards as she dashed to the upper landing and skidded on all fours. He walked to the top of the stairs, where she wagged her tail, her hackles still bristling. She shivered with excitement, and as he kneeled on the landing he patted the terrier and ruffled her ears. She kept leaping against his chest, her paws scrabbling.

His father said, “Beatriz?”

“It’s me, Dad.” Henry walked to the doorway of his father’s room and smiled. His father sat at his desk with a pile of yellow legal pads before him. Books were stacked around the perimeter of the desk, leaving a small work space in the center. Through the window behind him the tall stems of the aloe vera plants bent in the wind. Dark cloud shadows went racing across the lawn.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Henry braced himself in the doorway. When he felt his bag slipping from his shoulder he let it drop to the floor. His relief was so great that he thought he might cry. To prevent this he made his expression stern. “We heard that a professor and priest were arrested at Lake Atitlan.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?” Henry said.

“You look as if you were about to kill someone.”

“I already have.” Henry pushed the dog away.

“That wasn’t exactly your fault,” his father said. “See any military in town?”

“Are there more of them?”

“They haven’t knocked at our door,” his father said. “After I saw your mother and Jason off at the airport I came straight back here and haven’t ventured out since.” He
stroked his beard. "Beatriz and Francisco are my only sources of information, and you."

"What do they say?"

"Francisco claims he's seen more military than usual hanging around the town square, but as far as he knows nobody has been bothered."

"So there were no arrests?"

"There were," his father said, "but that was in Santiago."

"The situation is basically the same?"

"You would think they would do something, but I'm glad they haven't come here."

Henry said, "You picked a secluded spot."

"You're wearing my boots."

"I have to go back to San Bernardo."

"Want me to run you over in the car?"

"I think I should keep a low profile."

"If you don't come back within a couple hours I'll know where to start looking."

His father pushed himself up from his chair and padded to the window, where he stood with his thumbs hitched into his belt. Rain pelted the glass. When he turned, he frowned. "Why not wait?"

"It does look gloomy out there." Henry smelled the rain blowing in through the screen door. Rain dripped from the gutters and ticked against the panes.

"After a good night's sleep, you could leave in the morning."

"I have to go back now."

"In the rain?"

"I have to," Henry said. He paused at the back door and looked over his shoulder. "I'm glad you're okay, Dad."

"You be careful," his father said.

Henry decided to talk to Francisco and Beatriz. As he walked up the stone
stairway toward the house Balam danced around him. Francisco looked up from his workbench under the roof, switched off the jigsaw he had been using to cut wood trimmings for the flower boxes he was making, and set his plastic safety goggles over his forehead.

"Mucha lluvia," he said, waving his sombrero before his face. Sawdust sprinkled his hair. The sawdust had collected around the edges of his goggles, making his expression seem outlined with exaggerated astonishment. Henry pointed toward San Bernardo.

"Hay muchos soldados?" he said.

"Creo que no." Francisco pulled his goggles over his eyes, looking like some bug-eyed frog. His apparent lack of concern about the situation in town was reassuring. He said nothing about it. Henry felt that if there was some new danger he should know about that Francisco and Beatriz would surely tell him and Don Foster, as they called his father. But Francisco just smiled and turned on the jigsaw, going back to work.

As he passed by the open doorway of the one-room house, Henry could see that Beatriz was cooking inside. He wondered if she was making dinner for him and his father too, now that his mother and Jason were gone. He could smell meat cooking. He waved. She waved back, a ladle in her hand and an apron across her stomach.

It was a relief to be on his way back to Maria, sweating as he walked along the footpath. His mind wandered. He put one foot in front of the other as raindrops pelted the coffee leaves. All around him the leaves nodded under the barrage. The rain brought the smell of the earth to his nostrils and mixed with the sweat trickling into the corners of his mouth.

At the edge of the coffee farm the path squeezed between two boulders, where Balam waited on her haunches, looking back until he drew near. Then she spun around and tore off ahead on the trail, her paws kicking up little spurts of mud. Soon the trail emptied into the road.
He reached the spot where the road forked, one end heading down the side of a ravine toward San Bernardo, the other going down the opposite side of the ravine toward Santiago. He turned left toward San Bernardo.

Dense forests of trees, mostly oak and pine, bordered both sides of the road, which spiraled around twisting turns as it circled down into the base of each ravine and then climbed back up into the blue storm-light. The hollows were dark and cool. Streaked with waterfalls and streams, the ridge-backs were wind-buffeted crests. At the top of the second ridge he reached a clearing in the trees and he spotted Volcano Toliman looming overhead. The summit of the volcano was obscured by blue-gray masses of cloud that seemed to be moving down the sides of the volcano toward the road. The air had turned cooler. The thunder came louder and louder now, the sound accompanied by dull vibrations he could feel through his heavy soles. The ground trembled so much and the thunder made so much racket that when the vehicle with tinted windows overtook him, he was surprised. He almost dove out of the way.

The vehicle pulled up alongside him, matching his pace. Thunder masked the rumble of the engine. Henry stopped, and when he stopped the vehicle braked and its back door popped open. The fat man sitting in the back, dressed in the olive-green uniform of the army, was the same soldier who had taken his boots. Henry couldn’t tell who else was there with him. The vehicle was black with all the windows tinted. The door hung open, and the man held his open palm toward the space beside him. Balam came racing back.

“Vamonos,” the soldier said. His weight seemed to make the vehicle tilt over to one side.

“No es posible.” Henry leaned forward with both hands gripping his legs over his kneecaps. Exhaust swirled through the air. Leaning forward made it possible to look down without seeming to avoid the man’s eyes. He knew the surrounding terrain pretty well, and neither the vehicle nor the soldier could possibly follow him if he made a break
for it and ran into the woods.

“Aqui esta el perrito,” the soldier said. The driver laughed.

Balam approached, slowing down and creeping in a delicate way. Her hackles bristled. Cigar smoke curled out of the doorway into the road, mixing with the exhaust.

“I do not want to get out,” the soldier said.

Lightning flashed, brightening the darkness. The sun had dropped below the horizon, and as the jeep idled the headlights bored into the dark. He could see rain falling through the beams. Behind the jeep the densely-forested slopes of Volcano Toliman were illuminated a bright green, and the sleek black metal of the vehicle glistened. He walked ahead and looked back. The wide grill in front of the vehicle had many vertical slats, like teeth in a comb, and in the brightness from the headlights he saw that it was a Jeep Cherokee. The driver pulled up beside him. Balam danced backward ahead of the jeep and growled.

Henry approached the open door, and through the opening he could see the driver looking back over his shoulder. The driver shifted the vehicle into park and rattled off something in Spanish to the soldier in the back seat, who shook his head.

“You would be crazy to walk,” he said.

Wind picked up, washing through the pine needles and the leaves of the coffee trees and oaks along the road.

“Que quieres?” Henry said.

“We just need to talk.”

Henry kneeled beside the terrier. He ran his hand over her hackles, which sprung up again behind his hand. He scanned the woods behind the jeep.

“What about?”

“You know the subversives?”

“No tengo informacion.”

The soldier smiled. “We are no going to hurt you.”
The dog growled. Henry slid his hand under the dog’s collar. In the silver studs stamped into the leather, he saw miniature reflections of his own face illuminated by the reflected brightness from the headlights. He got up from his crouch and pulled the dog away from the door. Balam resisted, yearning forward with her nose. Gravel-like thunder rumbled overhead.

“Please to stop el perrito,” the soldier said.

Henry yanked back on the collar. He said, “Ciao.”

He waved with his free hand and turned back in the opposite direction he had been walking. If he headed back toward home, there was a chance that they would not turn the jeep around and follow him. If they did follow him, he could veer off into the trees.

“If you walk away, I will shoot the dog.”

Henry stopped and looked back. The soldier was sighting along the barrel of a pistol. He let go of the collar and rubbed his palms together. They could easily get off shots before he reached the woods. He placed his hands on his hips. Rain pelted the hood of the jeep and dotted the road. He could feel goose flesh rising on his upper arms.

“I’ll never get in that car,” he said. He nudged the dog, trying to get her out of the line of fire. But he only succeeded in making the dog scoot closer to the open back door, in plain sight of the gunman, who kept the pistol leveled toward the dog, one finger on the trigger. When the soldier said something to the man in the front seat, they laughed.

Henry tensed his muscles, knowing that he had to cooperate, and stepped toward the back seat. Rain pelted the trees and dotted the road. The leaves waved. Balam stayed at his side. He put his hand on he top of the door that was hanging ajar and set one foot inside the jeep.

“Go home, girl,” he said. Balam tried to get inside the vehicle with him. He blocked her path and stepped inside, closing the door. Through the dark windows he could hear the dog barking outside. She leaped up against the jeep, paws on the door.

“Put your hands behind your back,” the soldier said. “Deme las esposas.”
The driver handed the handcuffs into the backseat, where the soldier clamped them around Henry’s wrists. Then he tied a bandanna over his eyes and stuffed a wad of cloth into his mouth. The material made Henry gag, the cotton foul and oil-stained. His stomach heaved, but there was nothing in his stomach to come out. As the jeep picked up speed, he wondered why the Spanish word for handcuffs was also the word for newlyweds.
CHAPTER XVII

The jeep went barreling along the uneven road, swaying over ridges and lurching through trenches and ruts. A turn threw Henry against the fat soldier, whose cigar tip sizzled in his hair. The soldier shoved him back across the seat, where Henry’s head knocked against the metal doorframe. The smell of burning protein mixed with the cigar smoke and the stench of oil from the rag stuffed into his mouth, creating an odor that tasted rank in his nostrils and made him think of burning flesh. He felt a queasily spinning terror within the pit of his stomach and told himself to relax. Relax and try to cooperate. He slumped against the window and leaned his forehead upon the cool glass, but it was impossible to relax without knowing where they were going and for what purpose. The bumps jarred his forehead against the pane. When the soldiers laughed, he recognized the voice of the driver and realized that he was the young soldier who had been at the roadside checkpoint between Solola and Panajachel.

The next turn was so sharp that the back end of the jeep skidded sideways, the rear wheels spinning in the muck and sprinkling the rear window with mud and grit. The force of the turn jammed Henry more tightly against the door, and he wondered if it might pop open. Rain beat against the windows, coming down harder as the storm lumbered closer. Through his blindfold he saw a muted flash an instant before the thunder detonated overhead—a booming concussion that made him think of boulders tumbling down the side
of Volcano Toliman, their thudding impacts shaking the earth and rattling the vehicle as it went dipping and plunging down a steep slope. At the bottom the jeep cornered sharply and swung to one side, his door brushing against some bushes that lined the shoulder, their brittle branches scraping and snapping against his window as the jeep slid further sideways. The rear wheels spun in the mud, smoked, and then found a purchase, making the vehicle go hurtling forward and jerking his head back.

He heard the showers hissing in the leaves of the trees alongside the road. He knew the road they were traveling on—the same one he walked along with his brother when they went to school, the same road he ran on when training for the marathon. But as the turns followed more turns, his sense of direction became more and more confused. The Jeep Cherokee had been heading toward San Bernardo, the same direction in which he had been walking, when it pulled alongside him, but now he wasn’t sure which village they were headed toward. There were only two possibilities: San Bernardo or Santiago. He leaned against the doorframe, his arms wrenched painfully behind his back, the handcuffs cutting his wrists, and tried to gauge their direction from the thunderclaps. The storm clouds had been coming in from the west across Lake Atitlan. Now the bulk of the thunder seemed to be coming from his side of the jeep, so they were probably driving toward Santiago Atitlan.

A scratching rasp in the front seat was followed by the smell of sulfur from the match, then cigarette smoke. Henry sneezed. When a truck honked up ahead—two loud blasts—he felt the jeep slowing down. He listened to the truck grind gears as it squeezed past them, so close he could hear the grit from the truck tires peppering their doors. The jeep crept past the truck and time seemed to be creeping too. He tried to estimate how much time had passed since he had gotten into the jeep. Getting his bearings might help him later on. He decided he had been in the jeep for ten minutes. Santiago was only six miles from their cottage, so they should be arriving soon. He tried to keep his head and predict when the jeep would enter the main road.
When the tires broke onto the cobblestones, just a bit later than he had anticipated, he knew exactly where they were—clattering up the narrow main road of Santiago lined with stucco and cement-block buildings, passing the post office and the tannery. He could even smell the hides. This was the turnaround point on his fourteen-mile runs. He could run back to the cottage from here in forty-five minutes—less if he pushed his pace.

After the jeep left the cobblestones, the tires ran over mud, sliding as they made another turn. One turn followed another, and again he lost his bearings. The jeep bumped up onto a hard, smooth surface before the driver cut the engine. The soldiers both got out, slamming their doors. His door opened, mist washing over him and bringing relief from the smoke, and he sat upright to avoid falling out. The fresh air tasted cool and clean in his lungs. He could hear the rain clattering over tin roofs and splashing through gutters.

Someone grabbed his ankles. Henry swung his legs up, wanting to make the process easier, but the hands of the soldier jerked him onto his back. He tried to scoot across the back seat on his own, but his hands—locked into the cuffs and twisted to one side behind his back—limited his mobility. The soldier dragged him across the seat until his rear end fell out of the doorway and dropped onto the cement, his spine scraping against metal. He cried out, light flashing through his mind. He kicked the hands off his ankles and lay curled up on a driveway, his face pressed against wet concrete, the cuffs hurting his wrists. Rain clattered against metal roofs and the hood of the jeep. He could smell the hood of the jeep steaming.

The hands grabbed his ankles and dragged him backward over the concrete, his arms getting badly scraped and the blindfold loosening from his face from the weight of the water. He was able to catch a peek of a cement wall with rusted iron support rods sticking out of the crumbling ledge as the soldier dragged him. The back of his shirt pulled out from his jeans as the soldier pulled him past the concrete and through an apron of mud. There was a doorway ahead, where the fat soldier was unlocking a padlock. Henry watched through a crack in his sagging blindfold as the young soldier jerked him
over the threshold and into a room smelling of damp ashes and motor oil.

From outside a rooster crowed. Hands grabbed him from behind, wedging into his armpits. Together the soldiers lifted his body and carried him swaying between them across the room. He could see the young soldier gripping his ankles and walking backward with short staggering steps. They sat him upright on a small wooden chair. When the blindfold was finally pulled off his head, Henry blinked. He leaned backward, but flinched when the raw cuts in his forearms touched the slats of the chair back. He sat upright without letting his arms touch the chair.

A single bulb hung overhead, swinging on its chain, making shadows wobble over the walls and across the floor. The young soldier pulled the rag out of Henry’s mouth, and Henry felt that he might get sick from the taste of the oil. But he took a deep breath and ran his tongue around inside his mouth. The fat soldier clumped behind a wooden desk across from the chair, looked abstractedly toward a space over Henry’s head, and tapped one forefinger against his lips. The young soldier walked to the door, padlocked it, and returned to stand beside Henry. The soldier behind the desk took a seat, leaned back in the squeaky chair, and put his legs up on the desktop. He crossed his ankles. Henry saw that he was wearing military boots. He was wondering what had happened to the hiking boots that had been stolen from him when thunder broke so loudly over them that he jumped in the chair, and his fright changed to anger as he watched the soldier smile at him in amusement from behind the desk. He imagined jumping up from the chair before the young soldier could stop him. He would like to wrap the chain between his handcuffs around the fat soldier’s neck. But he held himself still on the chair, not letting his lacerated forearms touch the back support, and nodded toward the soldier.

Papers and maps cluttered the desk. The soldier’s boots rested upon a stack of books, but they were not the kinds of books his father had. These books had unfamiliar bindings. Jagged fissures zigzagged through the concrete blocks behind the soldier where a calendar hung. Thunder shook the frame of the one-room building and jingled the metal
padlock that held the two wooden halves of the door together. The soldiers, both smoking now, looked at each other and smiled. The young soldier remained standing beside Henry. Blue layers of smoke clouded the room, shifting in horizontal layers, but he could still smell the motor oil that must have been spilled on the cement floor. He could smell the rain mixed with mud from outside, where chickens were squabbling. From the distance he heard the sound of a dog barking.

The calendar was a coffee-company calendar with an oblong photograph of a young Mayan couple. Beneath the photograph was a light square place where the months had been stacked. Henry could see the two staples that had held the stack to the calendar. All the months had been torn away, leaving a white space surrounded by the yellowed paper and giving him the feeling that he was in a timeless limbo. The bottom of the calendar was curled up scroll-wise from old age and humidity. In the picture the Mayan boy and girl wore the traje of Solola. The girl smiled as the boy leaned close, about to kiss her. The caption read, “Inditos Enamoratos.”

Weapons crowded the wooden palettes that lined one wall. Rifles were stacked into piles, hand grenades were piled in five-gallon plastic buckets, and long strips of ammunition were coiled like tapeworms that sprawled over the palettes. The guns were the same type of assault rifle the fat soldier had used against him at the roadside checkpoint where their bus had been flagged over. That had been less than two weeks ago but seemed to have happened in the distant past. Henry stared at the torn pages from the calendar with a growing sense of disorientation, wondering what was about to happen.

The young soldier moved from beside him and crouched on a folding chair beside the pallets loaded with ammunition. Dressed in tight green military fatigues, he wore black leather boots laced to his calves. He blew a languid plume of smoke up toward the light bulb. Then he started blowing smoke rings, one inside the other. Henry waited, the silence in the room building.

When the soldier behind the desk cleared his throat, the raspy sound had a startling
precision in the quiet room. Blowing smoke rings, the young soldier looked toward the
one in charge.

The soldier behind the desk pursed his lips. “What is your name?” he said.

Not sure how much to cooperate, Henry was silent. He shifted his arms, wrenched
painfully behind him. The fat soldier glanced over at the young soldier, who dropped his
cigarette butt on the floor beside a pallet and crushed it under his heel. Then he
unbuttoned his breast pocket, slid his package of cigarettes up over the rim, and took
another one out without removing the pack. He fastened the flap over his pocket again.
His lighter flared.

“Me llamo Henry Foster.”

“Speak English.”

“All right.”

“Deme su billetera.”

Henry winced as he got up from the chair. The scrapes upon his arms were raw
and painful, and he staggered as he balanced on his feet. The handcuffs forced him to
reach into his back pocket awkwardly. The young soldier came near and took the wallet
from him. He gave it to the fat one, who took his feet off the desk and cleared a space in
the middle, pushing away papers and books. He fished out Henry’s library card and a few
other cards and set them all before him, arranging the identification as if he were playing
a game of Solitaire or reading Tarot cards.

“Where is your home?”

“You tell me.”

“I ask you a question.”

“We rent a cottage outside of San Bernardo.”

“You are subversivo?”

“Sure,” Henry said. “If you say so.”

“Es una pregunta.”
"We've been over this before."

"You admit it?"

"I don't admit anything."

"Probably you will." The soldier removed his military cap and set it on the table. He swiped long thinning hair from his eyes, revealing the mole on his forehead.

"I don't want any trouble," Henry said.

When the soldier laughed, his gut jiggled.

"You already have trouble," he said. He looked at the younger soldier and translated for him. The young soldier drew on his cigarette, whose orange tip glowed in the layers of blue smoke circulating throughout the room. Through the haze Henry could smell wet leaves from outside. There was no point in his being so defiant, but he couldn't help himself. He took a deep breath, feeling lightheaded, and promised himself he would try to cooperate. Rain was drizzling against the metal roof, falling more lightly now as the storm drifted east.

Henry thought of his father, wondering where he was right now and what he was doing, probably sitting in his study and reading or writing while the rain fell outside. The thought of his father made him cautious. He must not say anything that would get him into trouble.

"You admit your faults?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"We know you have contact with subversivos."

"Not true." Henry tried to curb his anger.

"We think it is true."

"If you say so."

"You must tell us who led you to this contact."

"What contact?" He repressed the urge to rush over to the desk. His anger and frustration came out through his tone of voice: "Nobody led me to anything."
“Tu padre?” The soldier drew on his cigar, knocked the ash off the tip, and removed a piece of the cigar wrapper from his lips. “He is an intellectual?”

“So what?” Henry rubbed his eyes. The overhead light bulb had stopped moving, and around the room the shadows were still. He could hear the rain tapering on the roof.

“What is he doing here?”

“Research.”

“He is involved with the black market?”

“He isn’t involved with anything illegal,” Henry replied. “I told you the first time we met.”

“Then it was your Indian novia,” the soldier said, “la mulata.” He smiled at the boy soldier, whose eyes narrowed. For an instant all three of them seemed to be picturing Maria in their minds. The thought that he was joining them in this activity made Henry sick. He was glad that he hadn’t eaten anything.

“She has nothing to do with it either,” he said.

The soldier said in Spanish that those were the only two people Henry had been seen with in public. He sucked his cigar. “You did not come to this country with political contact.”

“What do you want me to say?” Henry was almost at the point of tears.

“Tell us who has the contact?”

“My father has nothing to do with this.”

“Then it was the girl?”

“I didn’t say that.” He stared at the man across the desk with a feeling of hopelessness that made him want to vomit. There was nothing he could say to make them think better of anyone. He took a deep, narcotic breath, feeling more and more lightheaded.

“I do not want to hurt you,” the soldier said. “We will release you.”

“Under what conditions?”
“Digame quien conoce a las comunistas.”

The soldier behind the desk nodded to the younger one, who got up from his chair, crushed out his cigarette under his heel, and walked slowly to Henry. Through the green fabric of his military fatigues his excitement showed plainly. Henry was terrified. He sat down on the chair, his pulse throbbing in his temples. The soldier removed a pistol from his holster, a snub-nosed thing, and pointed it at the side of Henry’s head. He pulled back the trigger, the gun clicking. Henry blinked. He stared straight ahead at the soldier in charge, feeling desperate and scared. Maybe getting killed was what he deserved. But the thought of the physical pain terrified him. The thought of what his death would do to his family terrified him. He stared at the calendar picture of the Mayan lovers for another few seconds before breaking down.

“Es la mujer,” Henry said. He told them her name and that she lived in San Bernardo. He explained that her husband had been a guerrilla named Gaspar, a founding member of ORPA, the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms, and while he spoke he felt a sinking sense of desperation, the back of his mind clouding over with excuses even as the words came from his mouth, so that he seemed to be two people: confessor and interrogator.

The soldier stubbed out his cigar. He said, “Where is she?”

“San Bernardo,” Henry said, thinking that he had said too much and now trying to be vague. His mind raced as he tried to think ahead. They would probably go out and try to find her now, or maybe later. He had to protect her, if he could.

“Qué más?” The soldier behind the desk crossed his arms over his chest.

The young man pressed the gun to Henry’s temple. Henry wondered if the guy would really pull the trigger. He probably had to get permission from the soldier behind the desk, who seemed to want information more than anything else. Maybe they thought Henry was more useful alive, but the possibility of really being shot sank into him like a stone sinking in water. He imagined the bullet exploding from the chamber and tunneling
through his brain. His head would jerk to the side, and a cavity would open out on the other side of his skull. What then? Was death a total knockout? Or would his essence slip out of his body and observe the scene from a different point of view? He thought about Maria's son Salvador. He imagined his own family hearing about his murder and the guilt his parents would feel. Maybe he would float around from place to place, observing their reactions before going wherever he was supposed to go. He could hear the men waiting as rain pelted the roof. He thought hard for them all—his only swerving.

He could lie about the exact location of Maria's house. That might send them in the wrong direction, and it might give him the opportunity to warn her. But when they found out he had lied they would come after him and his father, whose occupation they already seemed to know. No doubt they also knew about the cottage where they lived. Afraid to lie, he decided to tell them the truth and get back to Maria before they could reach her.

He said, "The café behind the church."

The soldier behind the desk nodded, as if something he already knew had been confirmed. What would they do? Maria had said that she would not stay at her house. If they went there, they would not find her. The storm would prevent them from finding her, but they might ask Padre Flores. They might even search the church grounds, but probably they wouldn't attempt that until morning. He would warn her first. He wondered if she would stay down by the docks as they had planned, or wait in her house until the rain had stopped. He was not sure what she would do, and the possibility that he had gotten her into trouble scared him.

"You must not talk to nobody about this," the soldier said. "We will let you go now, but we may be back for more information."

"My hands," Henry said, "please."

The soldier behind the desk put his military cap back on.

He said, "*Quita las esposas.*"
The young soldier unlocked the cuffs from his wrists. He unbolted the door and pulled open both sides. Damp air gusted into the room, rustling the papers on the desk, and the soldier behind the desk clapped both hands over the clutter.

He said, “Vayate.”

Henry plunged through the doorway, jumped down onto the driveway, and staggered through the flickering darkness past the Jeep Cherokee whose tinted windows flashed. The whole world flashed, the puddles at his feet reflecting the electricity on the horizon. The storm clouds were moving rapidly to the east, farther and farther away from the caldera, and the rain fell in bursts now as the clouds went racing across the sky.

In the alley behind the building Henry walked, rubbing his wrists, and tried to find his way out of Santiago. After the rain clouds had passed over Lake Atitlan, the volcanic basin was quiet and glutted with moisture. He stumbled along a labyrinth of allies, hearing the water dripping around him and worrying that precious seconds were being lost. He had to warn Maria. Fog was everywhere. On the main road he had known exactly where he was, but now he felt disoriented again. Where was the main road? He had to find a way back to San Bernardo.

Fog billowed from the puddles, lumbered down the roads, and shouldered its way into allies. Fog muted the sun, about to set. He wandered through the obscurity, trying to find a passage out of Santiago Atitlan. Fog blanketed the roads and wrapped around the houses like snow drifts. He groped forward with both arms outstretched. He flinched when a black dog came lunging at him. But it was nothing more than a garbage bag being used as a door for a cane-walled hut, rustling where it hung.

The smells of tortillas and frijoles came from the houses, mixed with smoke in the cool dusk. Voices echoed from behind the walls and he considered asking for help. But people would take one look at him and shake their heads in fear. Besides, he had already put one life into danger. No need to jeopardize any others. He headed toward what
seemed to be the center of Santiago, but few lights shone on the deserted roads. From block to block, he took the turns that led most steeply downhill. The main road was somewhere near Lake Atitlan, and if he just kept going downhill he should intersect it sooner or later. He had only run to Santiago a few times, always turning back before getting very far into the village, and now the maze of roads bewildered him. A rooster squawked, darting across his path. Henry tripped, fell onto his hands and knees, picked himself up, and ran on. The bird vanished in the fog, a feather spiraling in its wake.

He passed into the center of the village, found the main road, and went on. When he reached the outskirts of the village, where the cobblestones gave way to mud, he found the road that went back to San Bernardo and turned right. As the number of houses dwindled, he picked up his pace. He jogged, passing thatch-roofed adobe houses and cane-walled houses and cement-block houses, all fading behind him now.

Up ahead he saw a boy watching him from a doorway. The boy stood there wearing nothing at all below the waist, and he had some of his fingers stuck into his mouth. There was a puddle where a welcome mat would be, and as Henry passed he could see the images of the boy and his gray reflection joined at the ankles. The boy took his fingers out of his mouth.

“Goodbye,” he said. “Goodbye, goodbye.”

Away from the houses the breezes eroded the banks of fog, and he found that he could see better. Water washed down from the side of Volcano Toliman, pooling into sting-bean-shaped puddles that lined the road. There was nobody on the road, since most people had taken shelter from the storm. That was logical, but he felt as if he were wandering through some nightmare landscape where all the people had been eliminated. He was the last one alive, staggering from one uninhabited place to another. He tried to compose himself. He told himself to calm down and just place one boot in front of the other. Keep going. In many spots the accumulated water was spilling over the road and cutting across his path, the fast currents braiding into gullies that slashed ladder-back
trenches into the mud and ash. He rubbed his wrists as he ran, feeling them sting from the salt of his sweat. Without breaking stride he held up his hands. Scars marked his wrists. He dropped his arms to his sides, swinging them loosely and breathing steadily. He could see rags of breath trailing from his mouth. He was a runner. He could keep running. He looked down and watched his father’s boots.

Pine cones swirled in the currents washing down the slopes of Volcano Toliman. A fragment of tree-bark floated past. Cylinders of cigarette filters spun in the gullies. Garbage floated beside spinning leaves and snapped branches and the white-rimmed shells of split coconuts. His head ached, and as he ran he touched his injured temple. The place where the soldier had hit him with the butt of his rifle was now healed. At the top of an embankment Henry swung his arms more rapidly, in rhythm with his speed as he picked up his pace going down the other side of the hill. Lengthening his strides, he slipped. He slowed his pace, braking as he went down, planting each step carefully on the slick surfaces. He was probably doing six-minute miles now, a brisk pace despite the heaviness of the boots. He could maintain this pace to Maria’s house. He emptied his bladder while running.

Volcano Toliman was to his right, but the low-hanging clouds obscured it from view. There were glimpses of sharply-rising slopes at the base of the volcano, but otherwise there was only the sense of a massive presence, a cloud of unknowing that grew more and more intense when thunder shook the ground. The storm was lagging now, clouds fringing the horizon. To his left, Lake Atitlan seemed to be layered with frosting. He squinted through the shifting zones of fog. He couldn’t see the surface, but he could smell the water as his lungs filled and emptied, keeping time with his legs. The fog drifted across the road in slow-moving tatters and rags that joined together and broke apart with the gusts. Every time he shifted his direction to avoid a big puddle or a fallen tree limb, the snow-tire treads of his father’s boots went skidding through the mud and his arms shot out to the sides.
Maybe he could convince Maria to return to the United States with him. She said she wanted to go to the United States anyway, to attend graduate school. Now was the perfect time. Maybe his father would agree to help bring her back, once he understood the gravity of the situation. He worried about his father, who could be easily reached by car. The soldiers knew something about him, too. He wiped sweat from his brow, and the salt stung his eyes. If they wanted his father, they would have already gotten him. Maria was the one who needed his help.

A ditch cut across the road. The road had been flowing smoothly under his feet and suddenly the rut was before him, a caved-in trench gouged into the earth by fast-moving water. He vaulted over it, his arms outstretched. His boots, when they struck the mud on the other side, skidded wildly and he fell over backwards, his arms flailing. The road knocked the breath out of him, and for a second he lay in the road stunned, his thoughts scrambled. He rolled over and pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. He stood up. He was all right. He felt his right knee, but it was fine. He plunged on, swerving around the rain-carved trenches in the roadway and hurdling over fallen branches.

He was less than a mile away from San Bernardo when he came upon the lightning-splintered trunk of an oak that had fallen across the road, its upper branches submerged in a ditch. As he climbed around the unearthed, clump-laden tangle of roots at the other end, gripping the gnarled wood for hand-holds, he was shocked to see deep tire tracks curving around the roots. The tracks swerved around the tree and went back onto the road, their hollows filling with rain. He had never seen any vehicles drive past him, but there had been a fifteen-minute period after he was released before he got out of Santiago, and the jeep might have left town by another route than the one he had taken. He ran between the parallel ruts until they disappeared, smoothed over by the running water. It might be the soldiers, or it might not. There was nothing he could do about it now, except what he was doing.

In San Bernardo he squinted ahead, into the mist. He raced along the familiar,
deserted roads through tunnels of mist, running down the main road past the shops to the church. The whole village seemed engulfed by the fog. All he could make out was a narrow path ahead and he ran across the churchyard with every ounce of energy he had, almost at Maria’s house. A lightning bolt stabbed a mountain ridge east of Lake Atitlan. When he blinked, he could see the negative image of the lightning against the backs of his eyelids—a fraction of brightness.

Water dripped down his forehead, absorbing the salt from his perspiration and burning his eyes, and his perspective altered. The alley behind the church seemed to merge with the green, wind-lashed saplings outside Maria’s house, and he felt as if he were running toward her house in a dream. He had a sense of futility, as if he were being chased in a dream. No matter how fast he ran, his pace couldn’t carry him to her house quickly enough. Outlines faded, dissolving into each other. The atmosphere around Maria’s house—the saplings, the flagstone patio, the folded umbrellas—seemed composed of hazy dots. Nothing was clear, but everything was palpable, infused with a resonance he could taste but not understand.

He stopped running when he reached the edge of her patio, and the first thing he noticed was the small square window set into the door behind the bar. Someone had busted the window and the door hung ajar. He looked for tire tracks along the alley, but the rain would have washed them away. He approached the door cautiously, picking a path around the patio furniture and looking for other signs of activity. But all the lights were out inside her house and on the patio. There was no sound except the distant thunder from the receding storm. He stepped behind the counter toward the doorway, his heart thudding in his chest, his mind reeling.

Inside the darkness of her house he heard only the muted sound of the surf far below blasting against the boulders along the shore. Waves clapped down and exploded, the sound washing up the cliff and into her house. The sound was remarkably clear, and as he stood in her living room he realized that the patio doors were wide open. He crept
through the darkness of her living room toward the patio and looked out.

In the distance over the bay he could see vultures turning slow spirals like bits of ash drifting in an updraft. He caught glimpses of the water below as he stepped outside onto the porch. Mist carpeted the water, and it was almost dark. The departure of the thunder left a hushed silence.

“Maria?” he said. He cupped his hands to his mouth and called out her name a second time. He squinted through the twilight. Something was outside on the porch, but he couldn’t tell what. He breathed quietly and watched, his thighs feeling rubbery.

When he first noticed the black mound on the porch outside of her house, he wanted to turn back. He was shocked. He hadn’t made any connection between the vultures sailing overhead and the mound beside her porch. Before he reached the mound he made out large birds flapping and jockeying for position around something. Hunched over, their bald heads swiveled toward him casting sidelong glances in the dusk. He smelled the rancid odor of the birds, whose pink necks looped down, and imagined the lice teeming in their feathers.

As he approached the circle of vultures, he glimpsed the head through an opening. Peeled back from the skull like a scrap of shag carpet, the scalp jerked erratically as the birds pecked and tugged. They had already pecked out the eyes.

Under the peeled-back skin, he could see where two plates of skull were fused by a fissure scribbled from the temple to the ear. He could see one of her ears dangling like an apricot. He leaned over, his hands on his knees, his chest heaving. His mind refused to accept what he had seen. He hacked, but his stomach was empty. A vulture broke from the pack and came hopping and galloping toward him, its wings outstretched, squawking as it charged. When Henry stomped his foot on the flagstones, the vulture retreated and shouldered its way into the circle.
He wasn’t sure how long he had spent in her living room, sitting in her chair with his head slumped over on her desk. But at some point he had been jarred awake by the sound of wings. He had looked outside through the sliding glass doors and realized that the vultures were flying away, and now he stood on the terrace across from the remains. He found it hard to make sense of who he was and what he was doing here. He was Henry Foster—that was his name. The skull had belonged to Maria de los Dolores Moreno. He didn’t know where the rest of the body was. Probably the soldiers had thrown it into Lake Atitlan. The light trickling from the stars revealed the scalloped surface of the water far below. The only electric lights he could see were strung crookedly along the opposite shore.

The fact of her skull on the terrace paralyzed him. He kept his distance from it, thinking that he should leave. Finally he just turned his back on the thing. He found himself wondering if ants were climbing on it. He could smell blood in the soil where the flowers grew. Aloe vera scented the night, making the darkness narcotic.

He fled back into the house, whose furniture was soaked in shadows, and tried not to touch anything as he groped toward the square of gray light that filtered in through the broken window in the door leading to the patio. He twisted the cool metal knob, stepped out, and pulled the door shut behind him, making it thump against the jam. Careful not to
bump into the tables or chairs, he wove his way among them, walking across the patio to
the picket fence, where he slowed down. The soldiers might be somewhere nearby,
waiting for him. He peeked out into the alley, but nobody was there. For an instant he
recalled how, not long ago, he had stood on the other side of this fence looking into the
patio. Then he went out into the alley.

His body carried him along, moving at a trot. He went downhill toward the water,
turning left at a road that fed into the main road. Along the way he approached the house
where Padre Flores lived and slowed down, wondering if he should stop. The soldiers
might be waiting there too, but that was absurd. If they wanted him they could find him.
Was Padre Flores all right? Maybe he should stop in and find out. But when he reached
the door he went past the house, telling himself that it was more important to get back to
the cottage and alert his father. He knew that the priest wouldn’t leave Guatemala no
matter what happened. But his father would leave as soon as he understood the gravity of
the situation. They would leave together, but they would not have a chance to say
goodbye to the priest. Maybe Henry could write him a letter after they got back home and
mail it from the United States.

He walked along the alley to the main street, passing houses and hearing domestic
sounds issuing from thin-walled shelters—coughs and murmurs. He heard what sounded
like someone banging a spoon against a pot. He held still, not budging until he was
satisfied that the hollow clanging couldn’t be coming from the soldiers. From the
direction of the village square a dog barked. From the direction of the docks another dog
answered. Soon he could hear an invisible daisy-chain of dogs, one howl linked to
another howl, all of them spreading outward from the back alleys of San Bernardo and
seeming to encompass the entire world. He quickened his pace and headed toward the
cottage. Puddles kept taking him by surprise—black mirrors reflecting up whenever he
stepped over them. Water soaked his boots, and each step squished. He slogged through
puddles. His feet felt raw, and he imagined the skin on his soles to be pale and wrinkled.
The mud sucked his heels back toward the ground.

They would have to leave tonight, if there was time. Surely the army knew where they lived. If the soldiers had not already visited their house, they were certain to do so. Attacks happened more often at night, Padre Flores had said. Henry tried to stay alert, looking to his right and left as he got closer to the trail. He listened for an engine, but there was nothing. A cat jumped down from a garbage can, its eyes green in the darkness, its tail switching. He hurried along the road, ready to dive into the bushes or hide behind trees, watching for the dark shape of an approaching vehicle. The soldiers might keep their headlights dark.

He started to run, breathing the cool, rain-moistened air and finding a pace he could maintain the rest of the way. The darkness seemed to quicken his stride, and he figured he was running less than six minutes per mile. The cottage was only two miles away. He swung his arms loosely to the rhythm of his legs, looking down and watching his thighs flash ahead of him, and forced himself to go faster.

Sweat beaded on his forehead and his sweater clung to his chest and ribs. Not breaking stride, he wriggled out of his sweater and flung it toward the bushes. The sweater snagged on a branch and swayed. They must have thrown Maria’s body into the lake, where it probably lay weighted with rocks, or maybe with a cement block. His image of her corpse—a headless thing rotting down there in the cold depths—made him run even faster. Shocked and angry, he thrust his knees like pistons.

When he reached the trail, he rushed into the woodland and hurdled a fallen log. He warded off branches and fumbled ahead through the darkness. A vine slashed his cheek, leaving a bright, glittering slice of pain. He slowed to a walk, touching the scar, and tasted blood on his fingers. As the trail burrowed through stands of pines, breezes washed through the sodden needles whose tips brushed the shoulders of his cotton shirt. He smelled pine sap. Water dripped down his bare forearms, and after his body cooled he found himself shivering. Through gaps in the branches the stars seemed to swim with
feeling, and he realized that he was crying.

He mentally packed for their trip, looking forward to a fresh change of clothes as if it would make him a different person. He would wear a cotton rib sweater and the black leather aviator jacket that he should have taken to the ruins. He wished that he had a clean, dry pair of pants. Their identification papers would need to be sealed into zip-locked freezer bags, and they would have to take the aluminum canoe. He had seen other modern canoes on Lake Atitlan. Nobody would trace the canoe back to them, even if they left it in plain view on the opposite shore. But driving the Dodge Swinger would be too great a risk, and they would probably have to avoid public transportation as well. If they relied on the buses they might get stopped and identified. There might be some alert out among the authorities, who would detain them.

The porch light was off, as well as the lamppost behind the house. Francisco and Beatriz must have gone to sleep early as usual. He ran down the stone steps to the back door of their cottage, his legs flailing in a loose-limbed, reckless stride, his lungs burning. Through the back windows he could see flames in the fireplace, which illuminated the dark silhouette of his father. Relief flooded through his limbs as he realized that the army had not come here. Now he could tell his father, and he would take charge. Henry was exhausted, and he wanted to relinquish the burden of responsibility. Through the back window he could see the glass chandelier over the dining room table, lit with cut-glass reflections. He panted as he neared the back door, wiped the tears from his face, and turned the rusted brass knob with renewed optimism.

When he entered the kitchen, his father was already getting up from the wicker chair in front of the fireplace. The house smelled of burning cedar logs, scotch, and hot coffee. The flames surged with brightness as he closed the door, the pressure of the door sucking oxygen through the chimney. Dressed in his green velour bathrobe and slippers, his father dropped the folded newspaper onto his wicker chair.

"The same two soldiers." Henry leaned against the kitchen counter with both
hands, catching his breath, and spoke through the opening in the wall between the kitchen and the living room. Sweat dropped from his face onto the petroglyph tiles. “They killed Maria.”

In the living room his father was silent. He tightened the belt on his bathrobe, came shuffling into the kitchen in his bare feet, and stood beside the refrigerator. He squinted.

“You’re quite certain?” he said.

When Henry nodded, more sweat dripped from his chin.

“You actually saw this?”

“I came after, but I saw what they did.” Henry straightened his legs and let go of the counter. His eyes had adjusted to the brightness from the cut glass chandelier, and he looked at his father, whose beard had white hairs mixed into the black.

“What exactly did you observe?”

Henry opened his mouth, but couldn’t speak. He hoped his father wouldn’t be able to see that he had been crying.

“Why don’t you sit down?” His father led him from the kitchen back into the living room, where Henry collapsed onto the bamboo-frame couch. His father remained standing before him, his shadow looming.

“They may have killed Padre Flores too,” Henry said.

His father seemed about to smile, but when he saw the horrified expression on Henry’s face he kept his expression serious. “I doubt that very much,” he said.

“The soldiers were there, right next to the church.”

“Domingo is more savvy than that,” his father said. He shook his head, a doubtful expression on his face. “He wouldn’t let them catch him at the church.”

“I think they killed Balam, too.”

“No, I saw her around here a few minutes ago.”

“Really?” Henry said. “She wasn’t wounded?”

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“What happened to you?”

“They blindfolded me and took me into their jeep,” Henry said. “They took me someplace in Santiago and interrogated me.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That Maria was involved with the guerrillas.” Henry looked past his father into the fireplace, knowing that he was the one responsible for her death. His bones seemed to sink into the couch with the weight of his responsibility. He was responsible for two deaths.

“What else?”

“And I told them where she lived.”

“Are you all right?”

“No,” Henry said. “They may kill us next.”

He started to stand up from the couch. The warmth of the fire made him want to slump back down, but he was scared. Part of him felt like taking a shower and going to bed, but another part wanted to run. He glanced at the window that looked onto the back yard. In the glass the ghostly silhouettes of him and his father were reflected.

“What makes you say that?” His father looked down.

“Because we represent a threat.”

“In what way?”

“Because of your intellectual activities.”

“What do you know about that?”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“When did you become an authority on what I do?”

“I didn’t say that I was an authority on anything.” Henry felt dizzy. Their conversation was spinning out of control. He stared into the flames.

“What are you saying?” His father crossed his arms.

“That we should leave.”
"When you get old enough to start giving me advice, I'll let you know."

"I'm just saying—"

"What makes you so certain that your version of what happened is accurate?"

"I don't know, Dad." Henry unlaced his boots and left them in front of the couch. He limped to the fireplace in his socks. Sometimes his father seemed to him made differently from other people—born blind, deaf, and dumb, to the ordinary things, but to the extraordinary things, with an eagle eye. The front door was open, and through the screen he could hear water lap against the boulders in the cove. A breeze gusted through the screen.

A sound on the roof made Henry start. He looked toward the back windows and saw himself staring back in terror. But it was just a chestnut that had dropped on the roof. He stood still and listened to it roll, bumping and bobbling over the shingles until it landed in the yard. His father gazed toward the rib-cage of knotty-pine beams overhead. Henry sat down on the stones beside the fireplace, feeling the flames warm his damp back, and peeled off his wet socks. The fire cast his shadow across the coffee table piled with books.

The furniture seemed invested with danger, as if at any second the living room might burst into flames. The wicker chairs, the bamboo couch, the wood shelves with dog-eared paperbacks, and the split cordwood stacked beside the fire all suggested urgency. He kept glancing through the back window. If the soldiers pulled up in the Jeep Cherokee, there might still be enough time to go out the front door and make it onto Lake Atitlan in the canoe.

"They could show up any minute," he said. "If they do, it may be too late to get away."

His father followed his gaze, facing the back window. "They follow you?"

"I hope not."

"I think we're okay." His father rubbed his eyes.
“We’ve got to leave this place.” Henry held his arms in front of him and looked at the open cuts in his wrists. The cuts stung from his salty perspiration.

“How did you do that?”

“They handcuffed me.”

“I’ll get something to put on it.” His father turned toward the kitchen.

“There are more important things to worry about.”

“You shouldn’t leave your wrists like that,” his father said. “They must hurt.”

“I wish they hurt more.” Henry looked over his shoulder into the flames. His back was dry now, and he felt his lower lip tremble.

His father shook his head. “What kind of logic is that?”

“I feel guilty.”

His father stepped around the coffee table and stopped right in front of him.

“You must be in shock or something,” he said. “I don’t think you’re being rational.”

“We have to leave,” Henry said.

“We can’t just leave.”

“There’s no time to waste.”

“Why don’t you get into some dry clothes?”

“I’m about to do that,” Henry said. He slid over across the slate stones and leaned his back against the woodpile. Splinters pricked his back, and he sat upright again and shifted his position before leaning back. Beside him a gray log collapsed and embers wheezed. He turned and saw the ashes, tissue-thin, floating lazily up the air shaft.

His father scratched his beard. He picked up his newspaper, dropped into the wicker chair, and leaned forward, and peered toward the fireplace where Henry sat.

He said, “I never intended for all this to happen.”

“Of course you didn’t intend for it to happen.” Henry looked at his father. Soaked with light from the fire, his face was ruddy, and his eyes seemed naked. Henry stood and
wince’d. His back ached. He dug the knuckles of his right fist into the hollow of his lower back.

“Things will look better in the morning.”

“I won’t be here in the morning.”

“We can’t just leave.”

“Your research is not more important than our lives.”

“Maybe not.”

“Maybe?” Henry spread his arms. “How can you say that?”

“There is a certain ambiguity.”

“Not in my mind.”

“Then you haven’t given it much thought.”

“Dad, we have to get out of this place.” Henry pressed his face close to the tire and poked at the pumpkin-colored embers. Heat radiated from the logs. When he turned away from the fire, the air on his face felt cool.

His father said, “There is a real dilemma here.”

“Why is staying in Guatemala so crucial?”

“I have...” His father trailed off into nothingness and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, the whites seemed more reddened. “Let’s just say I have special opportunities here.”

“To advance your research?”

“That is correct.”

“I don’t understand,” Henry said.

“I paid a significant sum of money for a recently-unearthed codex,” his father said, “which will be delivered here any day. It should have already been delivered, and I can’t just leave now. That manuscript could catapult my career.”

“So you’re willing to jeopardize our lives to advance your scholarship?”

“I don’t see it that way.”
“Some things are deeper than your research.”

His father said, “When did you start wearing sandals?”

Henry looked out the back window. “That manuscript won’t do you any good if you’re dead.”

“Thanks for the information.”

“How long are you going to wait?”

“Until it arrives.”

“I don’t understand your reaction.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Can’t you understand Maria was killed?”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Sorry?” Henry said, realizing that he was getting shrill. “This goes beyond sorry.”

He looked into the back window, where everything seemed still. The reflection of the chandelier glittered. “Disappearances, death squads, massacres.”

His father gave him a sarcastic smile.

“Not peaceful and loving like the United States,” he said.

Henry headed out of the living room, stopping to pick up his boots, and pounded up the stairs. He slammed his bedroom door. He stood beside the bay window and leaned close to the canted pane of glass that angled off toward the back of the property, where the Dodge Swinger showed through the pines. He couldn’t see any motion in the outer dark, and when the breath from his nostrils fogged the pane he jerked away from the window, feeling angry and shocked. He glared down at the wet socks on his feet and suddenly nothing in the world seemed more important than taking them off. He crouched down on the Aztec carpet and sat on his rump, his spine curved painfully. He found it difficult to reach his feet. He exhaled, extended both arms toward his right ankle, and peeled off one sock. He crumpled it into a wad and hurled it against the baseboard beside the heating grate. He flung his other sock harder against the wall, where it made a damp
slapping sound and slid down beside its mate. He was crying again.

He ground his knuckles into the carpet and looked from the dresser to the closet to the table beside his brother’s bed where he used to stack his sheet music. Henry wiped his tears. The army had killed Maria. The army had killed countless people and they would not hesitate to kill him, if they wanted. He listened for the sound of a jeep motor while toweling off. He could feel his hands shaking through the terrycloth as he scrubbed his limbs and patted his wrists and elbows, staining the fabric red. When he saw that his mother had washed and dried his corduroys before she left, he felt so grateful he wanted to cry out loud. He stepped into his corduroys and slumped down into the chair. He put on clean wool socks and reached for his boots. As he knotted the laces, he wished his father would reconsider. If he saw Henry go to the boathouse with his gear, maybe he would consider going. Maybe he would go just to look out for his son. Henry zipped his passport into the freezer bag. A photograph lay upon the dresser, taken when they first moved to Lake Atitlan, the edges curled up at the corners. He added that to the bag. When his father knocked, Henry spun around. He hadn’t heard him coming up the stairs.

“What?” he said, his alarm fueling his anger, his anger stoking his determination. He knew what he had to do and he was going to do it. He felt his fingernails digging into his palms while he stood there watching the doorknob twist.

His father opened the door, leaned into the space, and looked at Henry’s change of clothes.

“You really want to do this?” he said.

“I have to.” Henry struggled into his blue cotton rib sweater, belted his corduroys, and pulled on his black leather aviator jacket. The jacket had quilted lining and pockets with zippers.

His father leveled his gaze at Henry’s face, squinting as he peered into his eyes.

“They’re not going to harm you here,” he said.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” Henry walked toward the door with his eyes locked
upon his father. He could feel the power in the muscles of his right arm and imagined slamming the door against his father’s fingers. The image of his father’s fingers being crushed took him by surprise and then drifted away, like the shadow of a hawk passing overhead.

“What?” his father said.

“They.” Henry spat the word. “Who the fuck is they?” His spittle sprinkled his father’s face through the opening.

When his father drew back and wiped his face with the green sleeve of his velour bathrobe, Henry jerked open the door wider with the same violence that he had imagined slamming it shut. He squeezed the edge of the door in his right fist and swung the door against the doorstop.

“What are you doing?” his father said.

“Who is they?” Henry watched his father listening to the sound of the doorstop. They both listened to the coiled metal spring make a metallic twang.

“I meant the soldiers, obviously.”

“They already have hurt me.” Henry went back to his dresser. He jerked the top drawer open and looked inside at the scattered pennies and centavos, his hands shaking, his mind reeling.

His father stepped through the open doorway and stood inside the bedroom. He glanced over at the twin beds and tightened the belt of his green bathrobe. He was thirty-five.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“North, I guess.” Henry was running his fingers through the coins. The change was not much use to him, but he didn’t know what else to do. His bravado was waning, and now he felt afraid to look directly at his father. He could feel his father scrutinizing him.

“You’ll need more money.” His father went toward his bedroom. Henry listened to
the floor boards creaking under his weight as he crossed the landing at the top of the stairs and walked into the master bedroom. He listened to his father rummaging around somewhere and felt relief that he was gone but also fear that he was coming back. It wasn’t the fear of their confrontation that worried him as much as the fear of going off on his own knowing that he had left his father behind. The soldiers would kill his father too, if they wanted.

When his father returned with a wad of folded bills, Henry felt his own defiance and anger collapse inside him from the accumulated weight of carrying it around, as if a cave within him had given under the weight of the earth. He listened to his father wheeze as he stood in the open doorway peeling off twenties.

“So what’s your plan?” His father held out some money.

“I’m not sure, Daddy.” Henry was terrified that he might cry. He gripped the edge of the open dresser drawer and stared inside at the assorted change.

“Take it.” His father extended his arm farther.

Henry watched him from the corner of his eyes, his chin trembling. He felt a current of fresh anger within him, like a channel that coursed far below the surface. He had thought all his anger had washed away, but there it was again. As he reached out his hand to take the money, he felt many different currents of feeling running together. He was moved to know his father was still looking out for him. But at a deeper level he was angry that his father would let him go this way. The man was really willing to do it—just send him off on his own out there.

“You had better give it some thought, pal,” his father said.

“What?” Henry accepted the cash.

“Your plan,” his father said. “You had better give your plan some serious thought before you go dashing off into the—”

“I’m just going down to the boathouse.”

“Yeah,” his father said. “You go right ahead.”
“I don’t want this.” Henry needed the cash, but felt uncomfortable taking it. He remembered all the other times his father had given him cash. His father had taken care of him all his life. His father had paid for his schooling, paid for his food, clothing, and shelter for seventeen years. He felt the weight of the crumpled money in his fist and could not meet his father’s eyes. He wanted to thank him. But now that the moment had arrived, he found that he couldn’t do it.

“Take this too.” His father handed him an envelope.

“What’s that?” Henry said. He blinked at the envelope in anxiety. But before his father could answer him, he realized exactly what it was.
CHAPTER XIX

Henry booted open the screen door, stumbled over the threshold, and lurched sideways, banging his shoulder into the jamb. The jolt inflamed his old wound, making him cuss, dizzy with surprised pain and anger, as he pounded down the three steps, each one a damnation, relieved that he had said what he really believed but also frightened now that he knew his father wouldn’t be coming with him. As the realization took hold of him, he could feel his alarm broadening into a bottomless pit. In his mind he carried an image of his father’s face, gray curls plastered over the horizontal lines in the dome of his forehead, his beard grave, his expression grimly ironic.

He clutched his shoulder and went reeling down the lawn toward the cove, glad for the pain that he probably deserved, fog mushrooming around his knees. The farther he went the deeper the fog became, until it had risen all the way to his belly button. He waded through the murk, feeling the springy blades of grass under his boots, and groped toward the stone path, expecting at any second to bump into the raised level of the paving.

When his father switched on the floodlight behind him the fog changed into a magic carpet going all the way to the other side of Lake Atitlan. Henry wavered. The vision of such vastness spreading out from his feet, unfolding before him, seemed unreal, but there it was. There it all was. He looked down, but his boots were hidden.
"I'll leave the porch light on." His father's voice sounded Biblical, somehow. The screen door creaked and slapped against the jamb. He must be standing at the top of the stairs, looking down with his arms crossed over his green velour robe.

Henry kept his back turned and stepped onto the paving. He could hear waves lapping against the boulders. Balanced on a slab or limestone, he held out his arms and surveyed the panorama at his feet. The fog shelved down from terrace to terrace, crimping his long shadow into kinks. Beyond his shadow the fog expanded into a carpet whose edges were contained by the steep ridges of the caldera. He walked down the path. In the starlight he could see the mountaintops beyond the northern shore. He imagined the carpet rising and carrying him away.

His father said, "Set your ego aside."

Henry paused without turning around. From his father's tone of voice, he might have been referring to a glass of milk. What the hell was his ego? He felt for the next slab.

Aloe vera blossoms sweetened the air. He couldn't see the star-shaped clusters of bristling leaves that looked as if they had been cut from plastic with scissors, but the blossoms nodded over the layers of fog, swaying at the tops of their tall stems as he plowed his way toward the boathouse, scuffing down from stone to stone. The hammock slouched between two avocado trees where the path curved to the left. More stairs. He stepped down from terrace to terrace, the fog rising to his chest, and went further into the darkness toward the fading edges of the flood light, past the submerged rose garden with its arrangements of cactus plants whose paddle-thin blades, hidden now, jutted at angles. He pictured the details of the lawn without seeing them, and as he got closer to the shore he knew it was his goodbye. He pictured the neatly trimmed, stone-edged terraces of lawn dotted with islands of boulders and flowers. He could smell the roses at his feet, and he summoned an image of them to his mind. He saw the orange blossoms from the grove next door. He imagined the sleeping faces of Beatriz and Francisco. They would be
surprised to hear that he had gone home. He hadn’t even given them the courtesy of a farewell.

At the bottom of the yard water lisped. He followed the path to the left, going down the last steps, until he stood on the concrete landing between the dock and the boathouse. He reached for the rusted handles, yanked open the boathouse doors, as wide as garage doors, and ducked into the darkness, waving his hand overhead. When he felt the metal cord, he grabbed it. He could feel the string of tiny metal balls cool against his palm. The light bulb sprang into life, bouncing and jiggling. In the boathouse the shadows wobbled. He wiped sweat from his brow. Fog was snaking its way between the open doors and curling around his boots. The fog looked like anacondas coming out of the water. He looked at the pegboard, where tools hung.

The aluminum canoe rested upside down upon an old grease-stained section of shag carpet. The carpet must have been salvaged from the house when the wooden stairs were exposed. He could see the laddered ridges, worn in the center, and wondered what other families had lived here. He gripped one side of the canoe with both hands and flipped the boat over. He lifted the canoe with both hands, leaned back, and shifted his handholds. The hollow shell pressed against his thighs. He took short, crab-like steps and scuttled down the concrete ramp, the aluminum brushing against his corduroys, and listened for footsteps on the walkway, but nothing disturbed the lisp of water against the boulders. He set the canoe down at the edge of the water and went back inside. Two paddles lay upon the carpet. He took both paddles, went out, and set them side by side in the canoe. Maybe his father would reconsider. He did his best not to think about his father, but it was out of the question. Let him be fifty feet away, let him not even speak to you, let him not even see you, he changed everything. His hands trembled as he removed a life jacket from its hook, fitted it over his head, and synched the strap across his chest. But the bulky orange material would make him more noticeable, so he put the life jacket back. On the pegboard two wetsuits dangled from hangers. He had taken them from the
locker, hoping to entice his brother to stay, and now they looked like ghosts, or the photographic negatives of ghosts.

Light breezes washed through the open doors. Waves lapped against the boulders of the cove with soft slaps, gossiping among the pilings of the dock. The light from the boathouse sent out a yellow glare that lit for a moment the waters lapping against timbers. He thought of his mother and wondered if she had a new boyfriend up in Maryland.

He knew he could make the crossing, but the prospect of doing it in the darkness unnerved him. He was afraid of getting lost in the fog and afraid of the soldiers showing up here. He hoped that his father knew what he was doing. He hoped that he himself knew what he was doing. He wanted to get across Lake Atitlan before traveling by land. If he tried to hitch a ride from this side of the lake, he would more likely get picked up by the soldiers. When he heard a rustle on the lawn he spun around, expecting to see the soldiers or his father. But the terrier shot out onto the ramp, wagging her tail wildly back and forth, her whole body in the effort. He kneeled down, cradled her head in his hands, and ruffled her ears.

“No girl,” he said, “not this time.” He stood up and walked back into the boathouse, the dog prancing ahead of him, her nails clicking on the concrete.

Beneath the pegboard, Maxwell House cans were filled with rusted screws, nuts, and bolts. Some nuts and washers were rusted onto the bolts. He couldn’t imagine why anyone would want Maxwell House coffee with the coffee farm right out the back door. Maybe someone had brought the coffee with them from the United States and then after they got here they just used the cans for odds and ends. There was a waist-level work bench that Francisco used sometimes. The tools here were better than the tools on his other work bench. There was a huge vise bolted into the surface. The top of the work bench was scored with crosshatched lines from the saws, and gouged from hammering. There was an electric drill hanging from a metal peg at eye level, and beside that there were two sear guns. From another peg hung a small band-saw. Set against the back of the
work bench there was a tower-shaped utility chest with many plastic drawers. Henry pulled one of the drawers out and inside he saw washers of different sizes piled up like tires at a junk yard. Most were metal, but there were a few made of black plastic and he picked out one of these and squeezed it between his index finger and his thumb, the delicate tension in the washer for some reason bringing tears to his eyes. He knew he was lagging dangerously. He knew there were more important things to worry about, but he couldn’t force himself to leave yet. There was still a chance that his father might come down to the boathouse and join him for the crossing, and he wanted to give him the chance. He put the washer back and left the drawer open. He smelled sawdust and remembered pressing his lips against Maria’s hair.

Then he remembered the letter from his grandfather zipped into a pocket of his leather jacket. He took out the envelope, relieved to have something new to think about. The pages crackled as he plowed his finger beneath the sealed flap, sawing it open. There were five onionskin pages, typed on both sides. He recognized the font and knew his grandfather had typed the letter on the manual Underwood that sat on the gray metal stand with wheels under its legs. The stand was always beside his grandfather’s desk in the office with two doors, one opening into the screened in porch and the other opening into the room between the living room and dining room, where all the family portraits were nailed to the wall. Most of the photographs had oval frames, and opening the letter brought to mind the pictures of his grandparents’ parents and grandparents, which were mostly sepia-colored and faded. As a child, Henry had loved to pace back and forth along that wall and peer into the galaxy of portraits. His whole world seemed to be reflected in them. There was even a picture of him, but the pictures he spent the most time pondering were the really old ones; they were portholes that opened into another, earlier world, a world in which their family stretched backward in time all the way to Italy, long before Henry had been born. Where had he been before he was born? As a child he used to ask his grandfather that question. He was shocked when he discovered that his grandfather
didn’t know the answer. He had loved to sit in the dining room at the dark wood table with the chiseled legs and hear his grandfather tell the true story about the father of Henry’s grandmother, who stowed away in a ship sailing from Italy to America when he was fourteen.

His grandfather must be responding to the questions Henry had asked in his last letter, but his grandfather had never written to him at this length, and never on the typewriter. He had even replaced the worn spool of ribbon, and the smell of the fresh black ink was intoxicating. Why had he gone to so much trouble? The lines were single-spaced, and the force of the letterheads hitting the pages on both sides had given the somewhat transparent onionskin a crinkled, bumpy feel. Henry closed his eyes and ran his fingers over the surface, feeling that he could almost read the letter that way. He opened his eyes and titled his head back, thinking about his grandparents. He had seen his grandfather type before. In fact, he was the one who taught Henry how to type. His grandfather had strong hands, and when he typed each letterhead smacked against the roller with a whack, like some kind of an explosion.

Henry leaned his elbows against the workbench. Let the soldiers come. If the soldiers were coming, let them come. He found that his hands were shaking. After taking a few deep breaths, he stood upright again and held the pages up to the light bulb. A breeze blew in the boat house from Lake Atitlan. As he read he brushed sawdust off his elbow, remembering his grandfather’s workbench in the cinder-block utility room he had built beside the driveway, and the fragrance of the wood carried him back to an earlier time.

Sunday, September 10, 1978

Dear Henry,

You grandmother and I were pleased to receive your letter. Your interest in family history is one of your finest qualities, and I will be happy to address your
questions here. We are very very proud of you and Jason and we look forward to
his award ceremony. $5,000 is a sizeable sum for anyone to win, let alone a nine-
year-old child. Music seems to be his calling. Maybe history is yours.

The fact that you and Jason attend a Catholic school is all very well, but
you attach too much importance to it. All religions serve a purpose. What matters
is your family, and you are blessed to have a very very good one. Back in the old
days your grandmother and I used to practically live at the Catholic church, but
now we don’t attend. The Pope opened the windows and let the air blow in. No
more Latin Masses. The Gregorian chant went down the tubes. Now they play
ukuleles instead of the organ and everybody shakes hands and all that crap. You
don’t even have to go to confession. We lost interest in the Catholic religion. If
you want to know the truth, our family roots are Jewish—at least in part. During
the Spanish Inquisition our family was called Fosteritz. In the Middle Ages, the
Roman Catholic church was putting Jews to death. So our ancestors got the hell
out of Spain, settled in Italy, and changed their name to Fosterelli. When my
grandfather came to America he changed the name to Foster.

Getting jobs wasn’t easy for Italians, but at least there was opportunity in
America. Youngsters left Italy, which often meant their parents never saw them
again in this world. My grandmother was a big favorite with her father. When he
put her on the ship he went face down, spread-eagled on the dock. For my
grandfather, the streets in America were paved with gold. In Italy he had lived in
Carpinone, a village between Rome and Naples, and he came over to start the
family fortune. He went to Canada, got a job at a railroad, and ultimately followed
the tracks past Niagara Falls and came to Rochester, New York, where he lived
with his brother, who owned a house in Flower City Park. His brother had
temporarily left his wife behind in Italy, and when he drank vino he chalked her
name all over the sidewalk: La Donna Petrolina.
Well, my grandfather was a very very energetic man, and he soon bought that house. Then my grandmother came over with their four-year-old son, my father. My grandfather worked in a construction company building streets. He became foreman and then general superintendent. The Italians had pick and shovel men, but virtually no power equipment, just steam shovels and model-T Fords. He worked for this company for forty-three years. But when the Depression came on, everything changed. For one year he was their only employee. Then they told him the company was in a state of abandonment. No pension, no social security, no anything else. But he had money saved and property to rent.

Flower City Park was a real nice neighborhood. The people were mostly English, Irish, and German. There were only three Italian families on our street, but I had the best childhood I can possibly imagine. Everything was just great. I never gave much thought to anything other than when supper would be served. Many people worked at Kodak. After supper they would play baseball in the street—the children and adults—everybody was mixed up in the deal.

My mother’s brother went to the Eastman School of Music. He was a violinist with Vaughn Monroe’s Orchestra. When he was fifteen, he used to visit my mother—I was raised by my grandparents—and he let me ride on the handlebars of his bicycle, pedaling me to the house of my maternal grandmother. My grandparents on my mother’s side were happy people and music was a big big part of their lives. On Saturdays the youngsters played the accordion, piano, and violin. Girls danced the Tarantella. An uncle of mine had his own five-piece band. He was always arranging music. They played at weddings and later at taprooms. He played the piano, but the violin was his favorite. In those days they had vaudeville. Newspaper critics were always writing him up.

Down the street was Sacred Heart Church and school. My grandfather was
one of the first parishioners. He contributed five-hundred dollars to that church, which is equivalent to about ten-thousand dollars today. Sunday mornings he went to Mass. He put on his Chesterfield coat with a velvet collar and a Derby hat and strolled along Flower City Park, followed by our white poodle who was always dirty from sleeping in the coal bin. My grandfather always sat in pew number fifteen. In those days we had an old-style pastor named Father Burns, and he was really something. If a wife told him that her husband was stopping in the beer joint and not bringing money home, Father Burns went into the beer joint, collared the guy, brought him home, and told the proprietor not to serve him. And the proprietor would not. I mean, that was it. When you grandmother and I got married, Father Burns officiated at our wedding.

Your grandmother lived on a farm in Fancher, between Rochester and Buffalo. She was one of ten children. It was a tomato farm, but they also made cheese for spaghetti. When my grandmother went there to buy cheese, I went with her. After I grew up, when your grandmother visited Rochester she came over to see my grandparents, and naturally she couldn’t miss seeing me there. When your grandmother was nineteen, my aunt told me I had better take that girl out to the movies. Well, I did take her out. The whole thing was basically a set-up job.

Your grandmother’s father stowed away in a ship bound for America at fourteen years old. He saved enough to buy property and raise a family. His house used to be a hotel. He was hardworking and taciturn. He never used two words where one would do. He never used one word where none would do. I went there on Sundays and he barely spoke to me. But one day he made a motion with his finger, as if to say, “Follow me.” In the basement, wine barrels lined one wall. He drank wine all the time. He never got drunk, but he had seven or eight kegs down there, and on one of the barrels was a metal cup. He half-filled the cup, and I thought he was going to hand it to me. But he didn’t. He swirled the wine around
and threw it on the floor to rinse out the cup. Then he refilled the cup and handed it to me. He was saying, "I won't stand in your way."

When I was four, my brother was born. At that time my father disappeared. He just took off, left us stranded, and I never saw him again for several years. My mother was faced with the prospect of raising two children. No husband, no money. She stayed with her parents, along with my brother, the newborn. I went to live with my grandparents in Flower City Park. For eight years, I never had a father. I never thought a whole hell of a lot about him, either. I figured he must be dead. But much to my surprise he reappeared and made himself known to me. After that he popped into town once a year, and I might see him for a few hours.

After we left Rochester, I worked for a company that did business with my father. They were distributors for beer dispensing equipment. My father was a very very smart man, and he was instrumental in my going to Philadelphia. I don't know why I even bothered to go, but I did. And I became successful.

In my life certain people impressed me indelibly. I've met hundreds of people I liked, but a few stand out—people who would help without asking for anything. If you want to know who made a difference in my life, look at my grandfather. Now there was a man.

The day my grandfather died, our house was full of people. There was a doctor with us, Dr. Lombardi, who had a long beard. He seemed very wise to me at the time, and still does. I was twenty-three. Our oldest son was an infant. My grandfather had been living as an invalid for years because of a stroke. I had been taking care of him. We knew it was just a matter of time. I kept asking Dr. Lombardi, "Is he gone?"

The doctor would say, "Not yet." He was an old man himself. He stayed at the bedside for four or five hours maybe. Today you wouldn't get a doctor to sit there that long. But at that time, they would do things like that. They made house
calls. They would be there for more than just medical purposes. Eventually my grandfather opened his eyes. Before his last breath, he pulled me down and kissed me.

With Love from Your Grandfather,
Nicholas Foster

After reading the letter, he went back to the beginning and skimmed over the introduction. Then he found the parts about his grandfather’s father and read those again. Afterward, he folded the letter into the freezer bag with his passport, money, and photograph, and put the freezer bag into a pocket of his jacket. He zipped the pocket shut. When he jerked the cord on the overhead bulb, the boathouse went dark. He shut the doors and walked down to the canoe, feeling more confident now. The dog, dancing ahead of him, bounded into the stern.

“No girl.” Henry smiled, shaking his head, and kneeled on the concrete ramp. He snapped his fingers, but the terrier hunkered down and flattened her ears against her skull.

He went back into the boathouse. He didn’t bother turning on the light, but felt around inside the cans for the dog biscuits. First he touched a pile of staples used to fasten wires to baseboards. Then he found those bone-shaped biscuits and took a small handful. Beside the canoe he waved a biscuit over the dog’s quivering black nose.

He said, “This is the best I can do.”

Balam sniffed at the biscuit and chomped it down. Henry backed further onto the ramp and held out another one.

“Come on,” he said, but the dog settled down into the canoe and whined. Her tail beat against the aluminum. Henry abandoned the biscuits on the ramp and walked to the boat. He patted the dog’s head, circled his arms around her mid-section, and lifted her out of the boat. He luged her over to the pile of dog biscuits and set her down. The dog licked her lips and whined.
Backing his way toward the canoe, Henry launched the boat into the water, keeping his eyes locked on the dog’s eyes. She knew this routine, but this time would be the last time.

“Stay,” he said. He stepped into the stern, sat down, and shoved off from one of the wooden pilings that supported the dock. Rocking over the waves now, he dipped the paddle in on his right, then on his left. The canoe moved out of the cove, and he could see back toward the house. He paused with the wooden paddle in his hands and looked back at the house, whose windows came into view, glowing from the firelight. Breezes cooled his face. He paddled farther away. The prow nosed into the surface, leaving V-patterned ripples in his wake. The smell of creosote yielded to the smell of fog.

Balam leaped onto the dock and ran to the end of it, her nails clicking over the planks. She pranced back and forth from one end of the dock to the other, whimpering out loud, and on one of her circuits to the end of the dock she jumped and splashed into the water. Her head emerged, the fur looking sleek and smoothed back, as she dog-paddled toward the boat. Henry was pointed out toward the open water, and he turned the boat sideways and splashed his paddled in the water.

“Go back,” he said. “Go back.”

The dog made it to the side of the boat, and Henry plunged his hand into the water, feeling her collar against his fingers. He pushed against her chest, and the push shifted the canoe around. He thrust the paddle into the water, moving the boat away from the dog as quickly as he could and hoping that she would have the instinct to turn back.

There were breaks in the fog, and he could see the boulders receding behind him—the same boulders from which he and his brother had caught and photographed a black bass not long ago. But it seemed a long time ago now. Emerging from the surrounding land mass, he could see Balam’s head above the surface. She tried to follow him for another twenty yards, but then she turned around and headed back toward the cove, much to his relief. He couldn’t see Volcano Toliman through the fog. But thinking of the
volcano reminded him that he and his father had never found the time to climb it, as they had planned. He looked down at his boots and noticed the extra paddle in the bottom of the canoe. He had forgotten to take it out.

Fog obscured his surroundings. Soon all he could see was the canoe and a circle of water around him. But he tried to keep his bearings and keep the boat aimed toward the far side of the caldera. To his left, across from the bay of Santiago, was the Volcano San Pedro. To his right was the bay of San Bernardo. He imagined Maria's body reddening the water. He closed his eyes and imagined the redness bleeding from the water into the fog.

When he thought that he must have reached the center of Lake Atitlan, the surface became calm and the fog denser, enveloping the boat. He had never paddled straight across. For a second he stopped paddling and let the craft drift, only the sound of water dripping from the raised paddle. The depths supported him. The possibility of tipping over and falling in made his heart race, even though the surface was calm. He knew that he must be close to Cerro de Oro, but fog encompassed the hill. Soon he couldn't see anything beyond the canoe in any direction—not even the stars. He hoped he wasn't going off course. Fog pressed all around him, leaving fine droplets on his eyelashes and the Sherpa trim of his aviator jacket. He hoped he was doing the right thing. He considered pulling over to camp for the night. He knew he could find shelter. The Maya had lean-to shelters in the cornfields. He could embark in the morning after the fog had cleared, but he needed the darkness for protection.

Maria was there beneath him, somewhere in the water. Henry heaved the boat forward. He struggled to keep the prow pointed toward the opposite shore. Moisture beaded his face, tasting cold on his lips. She was dead at the bottom of the lake, and he found it impossible not to think about her body submerged in the darkness below him. He imagined her headless body suspended underwater. Had they tortured her before killing her? He stabbed the paddle into the water and pressed forward. Tears glutted his eyes. He
paddled the canoe over the smooth surface, doing his best to keep it pointed in the right
direction. He would stow the canoe on the far shore beneath the cliffs and climb the
mountain before the sun began to rise in the morning. If he hiked north across the
mountains, he would soon intersect the Pan-American Highway, which would enable him
to get home somehow. But how? He could not board a bus without risk of getting caught,
and hitchhiking would draw attention to himself. Maybe he could hide in the roadside
bushes and scope out the coming vehicles before he risked asking for a ride. If they
seemed friendly, he might find his way to the border safely.

But then he remembered a filling station that serviced intercontinental trucks. It
was on the way to Guatemala City. He might be able to sneak into the back of one of
those trucks and get into Mexico that way. As the elements of a coherent plan formed in
his mind he felt a growing sense of purpose animate his efforts. His father had been right.
He had better think about his plan. He thought about the army, and his first thought was
whether they were after him. If so, would they send a boat out onto the lake? He had
never seen the army take a boat onto the lake. It seemed more likely that they would wait
for him at certain checkpoints on roads and pull him to the side if he tried to make it
through security. He would be better off trying to sneak across the border into Mexico,
and then he would be fine. He could make his way back to the United States and call his
mother in Maryland and tell her that he was coming home.

He wondered if the army would come after his father. He felt sure that they would,
and if they found him there would be nothing he could say to prevent them from hurting
him. He might never get back to the United States, and the thought of the army torturing
his father made him cringe with outrage. He hated the army, but he hated the guerrillas
too. They were in it together. They took different sides, but they were doing the same
thing.

Maria had claimed that the security forces had a virtual monopoly on official acts
of terror against civilians. This included death threats and threats of violence, like the
letters that she said the military commissioners had sent out to people of San Bernardo in order to extort money. This included all the various forms of torture that he had heard about. He knew the army would sometimes cut off the fingers and hands of people, who bled to death. Maria said that sometimes the soldiers would remove the soles from a prisoner’s feet and then make them walk over salt. And of course they often raped their victims. No doubt the military assistant he had killed had been going to rape Maria. He wondered what the soldiers had done before killing her. He wanted to keep his mind on paddling across Lake Atitlan, but it was not possible to avoid thinking about the acts of terror the soldiers had done. Maria had said that guerrilla violations were more rare, with the exception of the guerrillas burning buses many times with the people inside.

She had said that the only solution had to come through nonviolent resistance. Henry aimed his canoe in what seemed like the right direction, but he was filled with doubts. He spent hours paddling across the lake, and a sweat broke out over his body. At one point he stopped paddling again and let the canoe drift, trying to hear sounds from the shore, any shore. The silence scared him. He lost his sense of direction, but he tried to keep the craft pointed where he thought the northern shore should be. A gust blew an opening into the fog, and he could see a path stretching ahead of him to the opposite shore. He had been heading in the right directions all along. He dug the paddle into the water with renewed hope, marveling at the dense banks of fog on either side of him. He couldn’t see the mountains and volcanoes, only the lane of clear water that stretched ahead of him.

When he reached the far shore, he aimed the canoe for a desolate-looking cove where there was a sandy beach strewn with boulders. Gliding into the cove between two boulders, the canoe skidded onto the sand. He grasped the cool aluminum sides and stood, his spine aching and his balance shaky. He stepped into a pebble-filled space between boulders. Boulders filled the cove, and between them rocks were mixed with sand. He leaned over and found a smooth, flat pebble from the beach. He flung it
sideways across the water. The stone skipped once, twice, three times.

As the fog cleared, he could see more and more. In the sky there were no clouds, and he could see the sliver moon. Tomorrow night there would be a new moon, but now a sliver was reflected on the surface of Lake Atitlan. He tried another pebble, and it skipped four or five times before disappearing, leaving in its wake a line cut into the moon’s reflection. He skipped an egg-shaped rock across the water, pebbles crunching under his boots.

A breeze riffled a tangled thatch of sea oats that grew behind some boulders. The sea oats were rooted in the sandy soil at the base of a cement wall. The wall was crumbling, and ragged clumps of grass sprouted through cracks in the cement. Something was coming apart within him too. He looked at the wall, where vines dangled. Chunks of cement had dislodged from the top of the structure, exposing rusted support rods, now twisted into pretzel shapes. Bats emerged from somewhere behind the wall and flapped past him in the darkness, making him remember the ruins. He listened to their wings beating as they flew overhead, thought of the sonar guiding them, and felt a tide of darkness pulsing deep within his circulation.

Without looking he closed his fingers around another rock and threw it hard at the reflection. The rock went skipping across the surface, cutting the smooth reflection of the moon and leaving rib-shaped, wobbling ripples that spread outward in its wake. He stood watching the reflection. A long time passed before the image of the moon reassembled.
CHAPTER XX

The modern canoe was light, but Henry labored to drag it above the strand. He was tired, afraid of being discovered, and unsure whether he was doing the right thing. Sand rasped against the bottom of the boat. He braced his legs in the grit and tugged the prow backward with both hands, saying, “Huh,” his heels sinking. He staggered back a few steps, planted his boots again, and pulled. He wanted to leave the craft out of reach of the tides, and when he thought he had come far enough he stopped, leaned against the hull, and caught his breath. He may as well leave it right here—out in the open. He knelt beside the canoe and flipped it upside down, the paddles clattering against a crossbar. In the morning someone would notice the sunlight reflected against the stippled aluminum. He hoped the finder would make good use of the boat. When two mice darted away he jumped in surprise and stood watching them go scurrying farther up the beach, where they faded into the shadows.

Cliffs loomed overhead—towers of darkness. He tramped back to the shallows over slipshod dunes and crunched his way into a depression heaped with pebbles and driftwood between two boulders. When he placed his hand on a boulder, brittle flakes of lichen broke off onto his palm, shining bluish green in the light from the stars and the sickle moon. Farther down he could feel that the stone was grooved with a familiar network of ridges resembling the surface of a human brain. Many boulders in their cove
were like that. He found himself remembering the time his third-grade teacher had brought a human brain into class and let the students touch it. He wiped his hands on his corduroys, raked his fingers through his hair, and turned to the cliff. He should make good time before the sun rose in six or seven hours. But something kept him lingering here. He scuffed his boots and imagined writing a message in the sand. But the next downpour would just erase the words. He wouldn’t know what to write anyway.

If a lantern had been shining at the end of their dock, he probably couldn’t have seen it from all the way across Lake Atitlan, even though the fog had parted. He could go back. The crossing would be easier, but the same problems waited. The moon seemed the barest sliver—tomorrow would be the new moon. Beyond the far shore, Volcano Toliman and Volcano Atitlan towered. Volcano San Pedro looked down from his right, as if waiting to see what he would do. Beatriz would probably say something like that. He turned away from the volcanoes and crunched across the margin of tide-polished stones, breathing the raw drafts and feeling anxious to take cover. Being discovered was a real possibility. He approached the base of the cliff, where the dunes gave way to marsh. Loam sucked at his boots. He slogged toward the wedge of darkness where he thought a trail might be, skirting puddles. Crickets fell silent as he came near and then sawed their strings behind him, making shrill music. Bamboo stalks clacked in the breezes. Bullfrogs sounded forlorn. He trudged deep into the gloom, searching for a trail. Cattails brushed against his thighs in the mist, where he smelled slick tree trunks and dripping moss.

When he located the beginning of a footpath he entered and climbed, enveloped in foliage. Above the wetness of the shore, leaves crackled underfoot. He leaned over and picked up a leaf, holding it close to his face in the mottled shadows cast by the trees from the starlight. He could make out the veins in the thinness of the crumpled leaf whose edges curled inward. He pressed the leaf against his palm, recognized the pointed oval shape, and realized with a rush of fondness and longing that it was a mulberry leaf like the ones outside his bedroom in the United States. Canopies of branches hung overhead,
their creased limbs loaded with clusters of mulberries. He could see and smell the mulberries all around him and realized that he must have entered a stand of mulberry trees. He plucked a mulberry and held it close to his eyes. The fruit was green, but he ate the berry anyway and wondered if there were silkworms here. He hiked with the bitterness in his mouth, thinking that the fruit must ripen in some other season.

More breezes stirred around him the higher he went, and in the cool darkness he felt goose bumps stippling his throat. He turned up the trim on the collar of his jacket, but it was covered with dew. But as he climbed his heart beat harder and his sweater and jacket comforted him, blanketing his animal warmth. He planned what he was going to do. He might have to bed down somewhere before dawn and rest up until the next darkness. Padre Flores had cautioned against traveling through Guatemala at night, but now it seemed Henry’s only option. He tried to work himself into a good pace, thinking of the priest and hoping he was safe. He was a vulnerable target for the army, now that they were stepping up the level of violence. He was a sitting duck in that church, and Henry hoped he would find a place to hide. The footing was slippery. He told himself to pay more attention, feeling grateful for the treads on his father’s boots. He climbed more slowly and tried to be patient. He could walk slowly, but he was unable to stop thinking about what was happening in San Bernardo. As he climbed higher the footpath became steeper. He found limestone steps embedded in the soil. His soles scraped the rocks. By the time he got close to the summit, his legs were throbbing. But after all that paddling it felt good to rest his arms and back while his legs did most of the work.

Near the top wind buffeted the ridge, and he zipped his jacket higher. Breezes ruffled his hair, cooling his scalp. He put his left hand against the trunk of a pine tree and leaned for a second, taking deep breaths as he looked back over Lake Atitlan through the openings in the branches. His pulse slackened. Something pressed against his palm, distracting him from the view. He took his hand off the bark and saw a lozenge of sticky sap stuck to his skin. He rolled the sap back and forth between his palms, feeling it
change shape. He could make out an egg-shaped spot on the tree where the scabbed bark had been burned, revealing scorched wood beneath.

More than a thousand feet separated him from Lake Atitlan. He tried to distinguish the spot where their cottage was, but it was too far away, buried in shadows. He wondered if their dog had gone back to Beatriz and Francisco. Breezes rustled the pine needles. Maybe he could live with his grandparents in Florida, but that was something he would figure out later.

He scanned the sky. The Big Dipper hung over Lake Atitlan. He figured that he had about six hours before the sun would rise. It was probably past midnight now. He turned about-face, his back to the water. He was looking up the steep razorback ridge of the ravine, knowing that on the top there must be a road that led to the outskirts of Solola. He forced himself to get moving in that direction and resumed his climb. He plodded up the side of the mountain for another half hour before he reached the top. He had thought he had been closer to the summit than that, and the additional effort tired him out all the more because it had been unexpected. When he spotted the beginnings of a dirt road ahead, his mood lifted. As he started to run, his muscles rebelled, his hamstrings tightening. His shins ached, but he put one foot in front of the other and pressed onward, determined to try reaching the highway before the sun rose. A man didn’t give up just because things became difficult. He loped. As his leg muscles loosened he picked up the pace, the ash-dusted road flowing under him.

Bleached with starlight, the adobe houses that lined both sides of the lane glowed. Behind their walls dogs barked, and now the sound took on a threatening aspect. He had seen dogs run in packs in Guatemala and hoped he wouldn’t have to contend with that. He could hear rustling in his wake as he navigated the allies on the fringes of town, skirting the village. He recognized where he was now, and determined to leave the streets and get back under the cover of trees or cornfields as soon as possible. Solola seemed lulled to sleep. North of town, he crossed a slope planted with onions, the shoots brushing
his legs, and plunged back into the woods.

After leaving Solola, he was lost in unfamiliar terrain. In the past he had seldom wandered from the public roads—and never at night. Now he had only a general sense of direction, which he could approximate by looking at the sky. He turned around and spotted the Big Dipper again, closer to the horizon. Soon it would drop completely from view, but if he kept that constellation behind him, that would have to eventually bring him to the Pan-American Highway. In a field overgrown with tussocks of grass he tripped and pitched headfirst. Metal clattered, and as he got up he realized he had run into a pile of hubcaps; they rattled as he picked himself off the ground. From the edge of the field dogs barked, and a dark window brightened.

He ran to the other end of the field. He saw trees on the horizon and headed for cover, but before he got there he collided with a barbed-wire fence. His jacket protected him from the wire, but one leg of his corduroys was sliced, and something trickled down from his knee. He listened for the dogs, but no sound came from the house. He stepped on the bottom wire, ducked under the top wire, and crawled through the space. On the other side of the fence, he picked up speed, swinging his fists. The muscles in his thighs burned, but he could no longer hear the dogs.

The woodland bordered a maze of cornfields. His water-sodden boots sunk deep into the soft soil that caved in around each step as he pushed off for the next. He felt as if he were running in a quick sand or in a bad dream, one of those dreams in which he was being pursued and could not get away no matter how fast he went. The cornfield became a labyrinth, disorienting him, and he felt trapped. Long dry leaves rustled around his head as he lurched past and snagged his toes on loose clods. He tripped and landed headfirst in dirt. On his hands and knees, he jerked his face out of the soil and scrambled to his feet. Grains of dirt sifted inside the crew neck of his sweater and trickled inside. He blew soil from his mouth and nostrils and wiped the dirt from his lips and eyes, and before going on he turned to see what had tripped him. It was nothing more than a corn stalk, snapped
in the middle.

Cornfields extended for miles. He emerged from the first, only to find himself in another. He slowed to a walk. He couldn’t find the Big Dipper anymore and wondered how much darkness was left. Venus became visible on the eastern horizon to his right. That meant he was headed in the right direction. The sun would rise soon, and the prospect of having to find a place to bed down and hide during the day depressed him and scared him. Where would he hide? As he went forward, thinking about where he could sleep for the day, he began to make out what sounded like an engine. He stopped. Something rumbled in the distance. The sound grew louder and then went lumbering past. He pressed on, going faster now.

He emerged from the corn into an open field dotted with Queen Anne’s Lace. A cow grazed beside a split-rail fence, and beyond the field the familiar two-lane Pan-American Highway rolled over the hills. A curtain of trees bordered the other side of the road. If he went over there, he would be able to make his way along the highway and still remain hidden. That way he could get to the next town, whatever the next town might be. He had to stay hidden and head north, and the simplicity of the plan strengthened his resolve. Once he got to the next town, he could board a bus. No, the authorities might set up a roadblock. Birds chirped, the sound spurring him on. Whatever he was going to do, he needed to move fast. Directly behind the stand of live oaks that bordered the eastern edge of the woods, a wedge of bruised light nudged the horizon. Soon the light started to glow, outlining the maze of branches. He felt his heart banging in his chest as he watched the road, looking both ways for traffic. When the moment was right he left the cover of trees and tore across the road, terrified that he would be spotted. On the other side he kept behind the screen of trees and moved north. A bicyclist pedaled past. The road curved around the edge of a cliff and beyond he saw a valley blanketed with a patchwork of fields.

At the bottom of the hill he spotted a filling station—not the one he had imagined.
but a big enough place. He broke into a run and went between the trees, heading in that
direction. He made good time going downhill, but by the time he got close to the service
station it was light. Another truck whistled past, swirls of dust blowing in its wake. He
hid behind trees and watched as the next truck pulled in for gas. There was a shop and a
comedor across the parking lot from the fuel pumps, and the smell of bacon made his
stomach growl. He had fed the dog, but he had never even thought to bring food for
himself. He jogged across an oil-stained section of blacktop and hid behind a trash barrel
at the edge of the parking lot.

The driver stepped down from the cab and angled toward the restaurant. An
attendant came out and pumped gas into the tank, the meter whirring. The truck took a
long time to fuel. There was a high back with a metal grate, and inside the grate
cardboard boxes could be seen stacked almost all the way to the green tarp that was tied
down over the ribs of hooped metal that curved over the top, reminding him of pictures
he had seen of Conestoga wagons. If he could clamber over that grate, he might be able
to hide under the canvas awning.

When the attendant was finally done fueling, he screwed the cap onto a barrel-
shaped gas tank, replaced the fuel pump, and went back into the shop. Henry checked and
double-checked to make sure there was nobody watching. Now was the time. He jogged
from cover and trotted across the parking lot. At the back of the truck he clambered onto
the high bed, his boot-soles scrabbling over the metal grate, and hauled himself over the
top of the grate, pitching forward onto his hands and knees on top of the boxes.

He lay on his stomach panting on the cardboard cartons, smelling bananas. The
bananas were packed in layers in ventilated cartons with blue foam padding and clear
plastic coverings. Sap oozed from the places where the stems had been cut, a brown fluid
that leaked out of the plastic in places and stained his fingers while he wriggled and
scuffed his way farther into the truck. Through the rectangular opening on top of each
carton he could see clusters of green bananas and here and there a spider among them. He
burrowed farther underneath the tarp, crawling over the boxes toward the cab. When he got closer he relaxed. At the back of the cab he noticed that the truck was a Mitsubishi.

Wax scraped off the cardboard and collected under his fingernails. He scooted forward until he reached a spot directly behind the cab. The rear window was blocked by boxes. He would be out of sight here, sheltered from the weather. He shifted the boxes around, making a gap down the center in which he could lie without being seen. He wedged himself into the gap and eased over on his back. By turning his head to one side, he could see out through a vertical opening between the cartons. The opening was almost paper-thin. He didn’t think anyone could spot him through that. He looked at the boxes. If he got hungry enough he could always eat bananas.

About half an hour later, when the driver emerged from the shop, he came sauntering toward the truck in a lazy way. Henry figured the guy had probably eaten breakfast. He wore a cowboy hat and blue jeans and had an unlit cigar stub clamped between his teeth. He looked toward the cab as he approached. Henry held still, but knowing that he was well concealed he tried to relax.

The cab lurched when the driver stepped up and slammed the door. The engine gave a hoarse, sputtering sound, and Henry crawled closer to the edge and pressed his face near the opening between the boxes and the tarp, watching the gas station disappear as they wheeled around and pulled out into the Pan-American Highway. There was a Texaco sign creaking in the wind, with only one fluorescent tube lit inside it. The driver shifted gears, picking up speed. His rig barreled north and began climbing a series of curves. Wind blew over the cab and whistled around the taut ropes that secured the tarp to the metal cleats on the sides. Overhead the ropes zigzagged, their outlines visible through the avocado-colored canvas. As the truck got higher the sun faded, obscured by mist. Patches of fog hurtled past, blotting out the surroundings. Here and there pines emerged from the mist at the side of the road, and he knew that they must be entering the cloud forests outside Huehuetenango.
He huddled between boxes and tried to relax. He lay on his back, patting the bulging pocket of his jacket. His identification papers and money were safe and dry, sealed in the zip-locked freezer bag. Back at Lake Atitlan, his father was probably waking up about now, looking out his bedroom window at the aloe vera. Was he all right? Had the army visited him? Henry closed his eyes. He let his limbs relax on the boxes and slipped into a slumber, aware of the rocking motion of the truck and the engine’s whine. Once he allowed himself to relax, his limbs seem to sink down into the boxes. After a while, he fell into a sleep and started to dream.

In the dream he found himself back at Lake Atitlan. The soldiers were coming for Maria, and he had to warn her. He entered her house and called, but there was no answer. Waves crashed against the base of the cliff and somehow the sound of the waves was connected with the static from a radio. He crept toward the edge of Maria’s patio. He kneeled at the edge of the rock fence and put his hands on the wet stones. Liver-shaped boot-prints patterned the rock. Rain diluted the puddles, but the color was still there. It looked like someone had painted the rock with roses. The cliff dropped over eighty feet, but in the dream the water seemed closer than that, so close that the surface mirrored his face. He left Maria’s house and ran away into the alley. But instead of going to warn his father, he took a different turn that led away from the cottage and started climbing up Volcano Toliman. He was hiking the volcano after all, but his father wasn’t there with him. Near the summit the path disappeared, and he had to crawl on his hands and knees to make it all the way to the top. Rocks gouged his elbows and shins, and whenever he looked out the surrounding panorama appeared alarmingly far below him. In the dream he felt precarious. He scrabbled for better footing. Slate-thin rocks skittered out from under him and went spinning over the edge of the ridge, which seemed as familiar as the curve of his own spine.

At the summit he found himself on the jagged edge of the crater’s rim, but he was afraid to look over the edge. He was afraid to look inside, afraid of what he might find
there. He gazed out from his perch instead, looking out over the vast expanse of mountains and water, and let out a long, high-pitched wail. He dropped onto his knees and scooped volcanic ash into his hands and mashed it over his face. He stood up again, seeing himself in black-face as if looking down from a distance, and spread his arms out wide. He staggered around the summit of the volcano like a derelict or a madman and howled at the top of his voice. He howled at the reddened water, he howled at the distant peaks, he howled at the star that gave people their lives, seed-dazzled over the foot-battered blaze of the earth.

Jarred awake, he opened his eyes. The truck rumbled on. He propped himself on his elbow and turned back toward the cab. Had he been yelling in his sleep? If he had, the engine would have drowned out his voice. Tatters of mist shot past the truck, and those farther away along the side of the road floated past. The air smelled of moss and evergreens. Mist formed water that beaded under the tarp and dripped down onto his face. He fished a banana out of the rectangular opening in the top of a carton, tore it from the vine, and took a bite. But it was like biting into an apple, and he spat out his mouthful and tossed the banana off the side of the moving truck. He shook a spider off his hand.

Hours later the truck rattled over a bridge, the wheels clattering over steel girders. He thought that they must be getting close to the Mexico border. After they passed through the town of La Mesilla, so advertised by a hand-painted roadside sign, the truck slowed down and stopped. He peeked out from the opening. They were idling behind a long line of other trucks. The exhaust from the diesel engines reeked. The driver put the truck into gear every few minutes and the cab lurched, dragging them forward. Henry crawled deep into his hiding spot. Voices barked over the engines, punctuated by laughter. Portable radios squawked, the static buzzing. They must be at the border now. He closed his eyes and prayed that they wouldn’t search the back of the truck. How could they search all of these trucks? That would take forever. They must select certain ones and let the rest pass through the border. He arched his back. His shoulder blades were
sore, and the back of his skull felt numb. He ran his thumbnail along a groove in his corduroys.

Someone said, "Adonde va?"

"Al norte," the driver said. "Tejas."

They lurched forward again, and passed under a roof with electric lights strung underneath. Some kind of rattling motor blasted clouds of white gas from a hose that was held by a man dressed in what looked like a spacesuit. He had some kind of space mask and the bulky material of his suit made his movements look awkward as he stepped up and down the length of the truck across the parking lot where there was another line, aiming the hose over the boxes. The bananas were going to be fumigated, and before they started on Henry’s truck he worked his way deeper down between the stacks of boxes, unzipped his aviator jacket, and took it off. He rolled over onto his side and draped the jacket over his head and shoulders, pulling the Sherpa trim closer to his face. He lay very still and kept his eyes and mouth shut, only breathing through his nostrils. He could hear the generator explode into action when their truck pulled up to the hose. It was coming from the side he faced, and he quickly rolled onto the other side, but he could still smell the gas in his nostrils. He breathed as lightly as possible. The white clouds emitted from the hose he had seen on the other trucks were dense, and he imagined the chemicals falling down all around him, covering him with a layer of whiteness.

On the other side of the border the truck picked up speed and went barreling along the road, the overhead tarp snapping in the wind. Fresh air sifted in through the boxes, and Henry took deep breaths, trying to clear his lungs and bronchial tubes of whatever the chemicals were. He used the damp trim of his jacket to wipe the skin around his eyes. A fine residue coated his face and the boxes. His palms were dusted white. He propped himself on an elbow and wiped his face with the cotton sleeve of his sweater. Then he worked his arms into the sleeves of his jacket and zipped it up to his throat. Along the
road cows grazed. Between telephone poles the wires rose and dipped, rose and dipped. They were in Mexico now, approaching Chiapas.

He flipped over and tried to get comfortable lying on his back, feeling the bumps in the road through his shoulders and the back of his head, and took the freezer bag out of his pocket. He teased open the zip-lock and craned his neck. The cash was all there, more than enough, along with the creased letter from his grandfather. There was also the photograph he had taken from the top of his dresser, and now he fished out the picture. He cushioned the back of his head with one hand and tilted the snapshot to a better angle with his other hand, catching more of the light that filtered through the green canvas flapping in the wind.

He looked at the picture and recalled the time when it had been taken. That was the morning when they had first arrived in San Bernardo—almost four months ago now, but it felt like a year. As they had walked around the village for the first time, they had stopped to get their photograph taken, a family portrait from one of the roving photographers who had set up shop with portable equipment along the main road. In San Bernardo, they used canvas paintings of country scenes as backdrops for their photographs.

In this photograph, the backdrop shows an oil painting of Lake Atitlan. All three volcanoes are visible on the shore, their summits tapered like avocados. The painter, whoever he or she was, had given a scribble of smoke to each volcano, even though they were dormant. His brother Jason is wearing his blue Superman T-shirt and crouching on the edge of a folding chair. Near the right margin of the picture, he is just beneath Volcano San Pedro. The capital “S” on his red T-shirt decal is peeling. His eyes are turned toward the shore of the real Lake Atitlan. His shoe laces are sprawling.

His mother reclines on a blanket at their feet while the rest of them sit in the folding chairs. She cups her head in one hand and props her elbow on the ledge. Her other arm, slim and bare, lies along the curve of her hips. The curve of her hips matches
the graceful curve of the painted mountain ridge behind her. She is smiling into the tripod-mounted camera, her yellow hair flipped over her shoulder to catch the morning sun. As he admired the picture, he realized that his mother had probably left it on the dresser before she and gone. She had left it there along with his cleaned corduroys, meaning for him to find them.

At her feet Henry leans back in his chair, arms folded across his chest. His father hovers behind him, leaning down with his hands on Henry’s shoulders. His father’s hands, like the rest of him, are large. Even though he is leaning down, his head is eclipsed by the top of the frame, his hair mowed flat by the upper margin. He seems boxed in within the strict geometry of the frame, and he looks surprised, as if his thoughts had been yanked to a new focus by the camera’s flash. He looms on the left hand side of the photograph, in front of the other two volcanoes. Henry and his father are pictured in the same positions as Volcano Toliman and Volcano Atitlan. He tucked the picture back into the zip-lock bag and put the bag into his pocket.

The truck zoomed around a curve, then rocked from side to side. Weariness seeped deeper and deeper into Henry’s limbs. Around his wrists the disinfectant chemicals stung. He closed his eyes and dropped into sleep again, rocking with motion of the truck, and slipped into a dream. He knew he was dreaming, but that didn’t make it less real. Strong feelings infused the dream. He found himself in the hold of a ship, pitching in the dark, and the ship seemed to be an old wooden vessel powered by the wind. Surrounded by many other people, he could only make out the vague outlines of their forms. People muttered in pain among rats and foul odors.

When he looked at his wrists he saw that he was shackled to the bottom of the boat along with everyone else. The ship plunged and tossed, and he heard the wind shrieking in the rigging. He could smell salt corroding the wood slats, seaweed and rotten wood and stale urine. He could also smell snow, and as he looked around he realized that the snow was falling below the decks. Somehow the presence of snow falling in the hold of
the ship made perfect sense. He looked around and saw snow everywhere. Men and boys and women and even infants lay around him, all chained to the bottom of the boat, their limbs covered with snow.

Approaching figures shed light into the darkness—Padre Flores and Maria. They both smiled. Dressed in white, Padre Flores gleamed, as if his clothing were radiant. Maria stood at his side, engulfed in the light. The closer they got the more the snow fell and swirled within the ship. Henry watched, his mind filled with questions. Why were they smiling as people were chained into the hold of a ship? The prisoners suffered, but Padre Flores radiated happiness. As he came closer, the darkness thinned. Most prisoners slept, though a few sensed the priest as he came closer, shedding more and more light into the darkness, more and more snow. His beard glowed. The hair on his head, usually tied into a ponytail in life, now floated around him.

Snow massed upon the limbs of the prisoners. Some of them seemed aware of the blizzard. They leaned on their elbows and blinked into the direction of the vision now confronting them, which shone brightly. Despite the brightness, Henry didn’t need to squint. The light was warm and alive and didn’t hurt his eyes. Snow caught in his eyelashes. He felt the icy coolness pressing upon him and heard the others moaning as the ship pitched through the darkness.

“What kind of dream is this?” Henry said.

Big-flaked snow melted on his skin. He breathed the cool, supreme smell and remembered his reading sessions with his father—how snow had changed the shapes of the stacked firewood and the tilted axe-handle. In the hold of the ship, the snow fell over everyone. He remembered the aroma of hot coffee on winter mornings, the smell of pink erasers, the cedar smell of pencil shavings, and the reverent fragrance of his mother’s homemade bread. Snowflakes laced the air and fell on everyone in the ship. The priest moved closer, Maria behind him.

Henry said, “Did they kill you too, Padre?”
For an answer, Padre Flores spread his arms wide.

"But why do we suffer?" Henry said. "Not just us. I mean..." He wasn't sure what he meant. He wanted to ask why anyone had to suffer in this world and felt that everything depended upon the answer. But in his mind that question snowballed into others, and he became confused. He directed his confusion toward the priest, asking him many questions: Why were these people shackled into the hold of some ship? What kind of ship was this? Where were they all headed, and why was it snowing?

Padre Flores held out his left arm and turned his palm upward. "It's always snowing," he said, "in the country of the blind."