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## Man Down South

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MAN DOWN SOUTH

by

Joseph B. Plicka

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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Graduate Committee Approval

John Bennion – Chair

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Final Reading Acceptance

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## ABSTRACT

### MAN DOWN SOUTH

Joseph B. Plicka

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Master of Arts

In this novella, the main character, David Crumm, is getting older and decides not to wait around and die on his frozen ranch, but to retire to warmer climates. He leaves everything with his daughter, gets in his truck and drives south with his dog. In Florida, he accidentally hits and kills a migrant woman on her bicycle. The woman has a young son who survives the accident and, through a number of converging factors, David is compelled to personally take the boy back to his relatives in Nicaragua. The book then deals with David's experiences as he heads farther south, picking up more passengers along the way including his old friend Tom, on the run from the law; Frank, a strange American ex-patriot; and a beautiful tourist in Acapulco named Sheila.

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I wish to thank my friend Ryan Shoemaker, without a doubt the man who got me into all this. When I met him a door opened, and his love for literature and the craft of fiction was something I immediately wanted to share. His influence is there every time I sit down to write. When I put down a good book, he is the first one I want to call.

To my parents, Joe and Sally, thank you for keeping me alive well past the cut-off date of eighteen years, and for gifts and blessings too numerous to enumerate.

To Ruby Jane, Diego's living shadow: I love you.

Finally, I thank my wife Emily, who I most desperately try to impress with every sentence, and whose companionship is, at the bottom of everything, the only explanation for why I'm not selling insurance right now.

## ONE DAY IN MARCH

One day in March, I drove off my property in St. Cloud, Minnesota and never went back.

That winter had just about shrunk my testicles into raisins and made my lungs brittle as the ice that rimmed the trout pond. I figured spring was on its way, but when Jim fell through and almost got killed, I decided it was time.

Jim was my dog, raised by a rodeo clown down near Henwick, and he was a nutter. He chased rocks, anywhere and everywhere. He would track them like wild animals, even to the bottom of a frozen pond. So when my son-in-law's shifty nephew hefted a big one through the ice, Jim barreled in after it. I swear his gums were blue when we pulled him out.

I lied when Lana asked me where I was going.

"Going into town," I said, like it was the finest damn thing I'd ever do. She wondered why I needed two suitcases and three guns just to go get a beer.

Of course, I was a dummy. As if I hadn't been planning that very moment for months. It was stupid of me not to have been open with her, but I didn't want to break her rhythm. Cattle was a hard business, especially during the winter, and even though she had Harold and the Mexicans to help her, having her crippled father run off might be a distraction.

"Do you know where you're going?" she asked impatiently.

"Yeah, I know," I said.

Ten seconds of silence, then I laid away my clever intrigues and spoke up.

“I’m moving on, Lans. Another winter and I’ll be useless.”

The angry twitch rippled down her full figure, but she spoke softly.

“And where the hell would you go, dad, a three-fingered old crock with a retarded dog and a rusted-out truck?”

But that was as bad as it got. She pitied me more than anything and so—after a brief discussion about what to tell the grandkids—I left.

I had a ride, a room, and a friend in my ‘84 Ford super cab. Her dull golden-brown paint was flecked and scratched, and she hollered like a moose when she started up. That’s why I named her Bullwinkle, Bully for short.

Bully’s supple brown, fake leather seat was coated with grime—the kind of dirt that takes years to accumulate and doesn’t come off on your fingers, just becomes part of the seat. She had a tendency to give out on warm summer days, but you could drive her into Canada in the middle of January and she wouldn’t even sputter. Her bed was scuffed from hooves and hooks and tinted by generations of manure, but she had never been rebuilt.

I thought I knew where I was going that Thursday afternoon, with Jim panting in the passenger seat and Lana watching us drive away with her hand over her mouth. I had a friend in Florida named Tom. I was going to his place for a while to get my bearings, acclimate to the weather, and figure my next move. If I had been able to see too far ahead, I probably would have crumpled with doubt and stayed.

It would have been easy to stay and grow weak, slide into a prepaid cemetery plot. My own stool at Sugar’s with the pine grain worn nicely into the shape of my butt.

Regular visits to the doctor, frequent excursions to the pharmacy, pills and tablets, tonics and syrups, lotions, pomades, diets, suppositories, bills, debts, bedsores, delirium, embarrassment, frustration. Trips to town planned a week in advance, with the tank filled up the day before and a shopping list pinned to the front of my shirt. My children dragging me out to church every Sunday to say hello to a handful of friends who may or may not still be alive. Grandchildren whispering as they creep by my room. Hearing my name spoken in the empty, dusty tone reserved for the not-quite-dead.

No.

I peeled out from our gravel drive onto the highway, listening to my Frank Sinatra tape at full blast. Would it be too much if I told you he was singing “My Way”?

About ten o’clock that night we crossed into Iowa. St. Paul had come and gone without a hint of brakelights. As the miles ticked on I couldn’t help but feel a vague wave of nostalgia that had me trying to catalog the events of my last fifty-odd years. I was rearranging them up on the timeline in my head like sticky notes. Actually, the timeline started before I was born, since there were certain events that always just seem to stand out when I start reflecting on the past.

1932 – Al Capone walked into my grandfather’s butcher shop in Berwyn, Illinois and bought a bunch of bananas. My mother was drawing on the floor behind the counter with a pencil and a roll of brown butcher paper. He asked my grandpa if he knew the cops had shut down a bootlegging operation in a nearby warehouse. My grandpa said no. Growing up, I heard my grandpa tell the story to everyone he met—with the added speculation that Capone had been trying to see who in the area had ratted him out. I

never told anyone that as a teenager I sometimes imagined how hip it would be to have a grandfather who was killed by Capone's mob.

1945 – My father died in the Philippines in WWII. He died of malaria.

1946 – I was born.

1965 – I graduated from high school in St. Cloud.

1967 – I married Sasha. I was living in Chicago with my aunt and uncle when I saw her one Saturday morning sitting at the docks with her pants rolled up, feeding the birds. I marched up and sat down next to her and we talked for an hour. It was the bravest thing I've ever done.

1982 – My older brother Joseph died of cancer. That left me with a 279-acre ranch, one mother and two out of three kids, since Sasha wouldn't leave Chicago and Olivia, the oldest, stayed with her mother. She eventually decided that we would be better off as friends. It was a murky year.

1983 – I lost the ring and pinkie fingers on my left hand. A lot of people ask me if I lost them in the war. They assume I went to Vietnam, which I didn't. I drew a high draft number in the 1972 lottery, but the draft was cancelled shortly afterwards. Others who get to know me a little better might think a tractor munched them, or maybe a car wreck. Truth is they just withered up one year and had to be removed, much to the amazement of several doctors. They ran test after test, finally just telling me that it must be damaged nerves and blood vessels from some long ago trauma. If I was traumatized, I sure as hell don't remember it. But that's what happened. I hardly ever think about it anymore.

1989 – I got a call at about 4:30 in the afternoon on a windy fall day from my sister-in-law telling me Sasha had drowned. She walked off the end of a pier into Lake Michigan. No one was around. She didn't leave a note, but she did leave presents for everybody. Mine was our wedding album and \$20,000. The \$20,000 I spent on the ranch. The wedding album, minus one picture, is buried where even I can't find it: at the bottom of Lake Michigan. That single event came to shade my life like a skyscraper. It drove me out into the barns long before the sun came up. It filled me with a restlessness and an agitation that has never quite left.

And that's as far as I got. The night swallowed me up in a calm black trance—a little longer and I would probably have driven right off the road and into the cornfields and just kept on rolling into the world to come.

Luckily Jim nuzzled my ear with his leathery dog snout just in time for us to get it together and take the rest stop exit.

## ST. PETER

That night I slept behind a utility shed at the rest stop in an old army sleeping bag, green canvas, very un-waterproof.

Right before I fell asleep, I decided to pray. I wasn't in the habit, but under the circumstances it seemed appropriate. Actually, it ended up being more like thinking really hard, trying to bore through the flabby outer layers of the brain and reach some core of hidden knowledge or inspiration. God knows I needed it. I don't know who was

listening, but as I closed my eyes I heard the wind stop, the highway fade out, and the whole rest stop hold its breath.

I slept heavy, but strangely I remember this: St. Peter came up to me as I lay on the ground and put his hand on my neck. Why St. Peter? Because that was the name tattooed across the inside of his forearm. The sky was orange, and a low hum rattled the ground. He seemed to be trying to find my pulse, and when he touched me I felt relaxed, maybe a little numb. He whispered something I couldn't understand. I reached out to touch him when suddenly I realized that I had all my fingers. It scared me, but I didn't look away, just studied the hand like it was someone else's—it almost looked like a baby's hand to me, all plump and smooth.

In the morning I woke up feeling mighty, the day warm and the grass already dry. My fingers were still missing. Getting up slowly, I noticed definite footprints—places where the grass was matted down just so—leading away from my bed towards the parking lot.

They could have been mine. Still, when we got back in Bully's cab I told Jim I was changing his name to Peter, after my favorite apostle.

## THE REAL BEGINNING

My first priority was just to get far enough south to sleep outside without shivering. After that first slumber at the rest stop in Iowa, a late-season cold spell had set in. Peter and I (I was trying hard to stop calling him Jim and he was pretty good about it, answering to Peter most of the time except when he was tired) ended up sleeping in the

same sleeping bag the next two nights. After waking up the second morning with dog drool on my balding head, I was determined to scoot fast for Tom's and that sunny Mecca called Florida, land of the wrinkled.

Once there, we could at least find a quiet spot in some everglade while thinking about our next move. I had enough for a motel, but figured I should save it for future rent money, or for the likely event of an unexpected emergency.

That, the unexpected part, came just a couple days after we crossed into the Florida panhandle.

We had celebrated our arrival in paradise by spending a night on the beach in a town called Destin. The next day we walked the pier and had a bite to eat at a grimy fish grotto where owner laughed as he fed Peter fish guts and eyeballs, his lumpy belly protruding so far in front of him it looked like he was going to fall over.

After talking to a few local transients, we decided to head for a national forest nearby and stake out a campground. I bought some boiled peanuts from a sweaty adolescent girl in a red and white-striped circus uniform and ate them slowly while trying to brush the sand from Peter's gray fur with a plastic fork.

We started down the road after watching the sun plunge into the ocean. If I had known what was to happen next, I probably would have plunged right in after it.

It's a basic tenet of decent American folk that happiness hinges on our own efforts, attitudes, and decisions. And so, many a good man has been sorely disillusioned by accidental horrors that come like fiery hail from the sky, unforeseen and unforgettable.

It was the next day, around dusk. I was nearing Ocala, on my way to a friend's house, when I made a right turn from the main coastal highway onto a pine-rowed lane, right before a dilapidated gas station.

The woman and her bike ended up under the truck, while her son was thrown from the handlebars into the white oleander bushes nearby. But I didn't know these things had when I got out of the car.

As I opened the door, I heard her soft moaning near the front left tire.

*"Ay Dios mio, Padre Eterno, bendito sea tu nombre."* The words were red hot, seared into my mind. I tried to write them down best I could that night on an old napkin from a donut shop in St. Cloud, my hand shivering with dread, but it wasn't until months later that I found out what they meant: *Oh my God, Eternal Father, blessed be thy name.*

At that moment, everything was wrong. I disappeared—a shell, a void, only thick adrenaline and cold pools of blood. I thought of finding a place to sleep, somewhere dark and cool. Legs quivering, my gut lurched, sending shards of fish and peanuts dripping down the side of Bully's fender.

Then the nerves began to fire, sending my rickety body flying over to the gas station looking for a phone. It took me a few moments to realize that the gas pumps were gone, the station was abandoned, no pay phone. Nothing but the purple silhouettes of fir trees and, of course, telephone poles. I was probably five miles past the last tiny town. I squinted and ground my teeth as I tried to remember a map I'd looked at back in Destin.

Standing still, I heard nothing except my Ford's idling engine. I rushed over and turned off the car. A high-pitched yelp came from the hedge of overgrown oleander, then

the wobbly sound of crying. The plant's sharp, musty odor hit me. I parted the branches wildly, trying to sound normal as I repeated "Where are you?" over and over.

The heat, the silence, and the darkness were overwhelming. I shuffled along the wall of vegetation, calling and groping. I thought of the woman under my car. *I killed someone*, was like a mantra being pounded out behind my face and reverberating down to my knees. How long had it been, ten minutes? Thirty seconds? Then, a white sock, dangling off a tiny foot.

I reached in and grabbed hold of the kid at his armpits, steadily lifting him out and setting him in the dirt. I darted back to Bully's cracked grill and threw myself down on my side, edging under the bumper.

"I'm so sorry, I am so, so sorry," I said into the blackness.

"My son," said a weak voice. My eyes were starting to adjust to the almost complete darkness under the truck, and I could barely make out the woman's face only two feet away from my own. Shreds of moonlight reflected off several wet spots where her blood was trying to sink into the asphalt. "Yes, your son, I found your son," I said eagerly. "I found him, he's right there, he—"

"His name is Diego Lagos," the woman said. Her accent was heavy, I assumed from Mexico.

Sliding my body forward I tried to grab her and pull her out, but my clammy fingers slipped off her arm, coated with warm blood. She writhed around, gasping and banging against the undercarriage of the truck. I froze, watching her body convulse in slow motion. When I reached out to her again, she only said "no" with such clarity and conviction that I recoiled.

I don't know how but I knew. Weeping, wailing, long farewells and parting testimonies are the prelude and epilogue to dying; but for one who has seen the veil of death and is ready to walk through it, the moment is purely practical. I knew I had to wait. You could call it a premonition—call it the wheels of heaven—a vague churning, like the ocean in the distance, but we were miles from the beach.

“Take . . . my son.” Her voice was even, though she was straining to be heard.

The words were like specks on the horizon. What was I supposed to think? All my organs cranking, grinding and smoking, forming words, logical words, questions—no breath could be wasted.

“Where is your family?” I asked clearly.

Her mouth seemed to hardly open: “Nicaragua.”

“No, I mean here. Who is your husband? Where should I take your son?”

She turned her head slightly, a half-shake. “Not here,” the Spanish vowels rang out, “Nicaragua . . . only . . . Managua.”

“No, what about friends,” I pleaded. “Who do you know?”

The churning was closer, like a gust through an open window, a soft roar. But no wind, in fact the air was extraordinarily still. I glanced behind me—nothing, just the oleander bushes, although the moon seemed to be casting a brighter, whitish light on the slick leaves. I turned back to—what was her name? I didn't even know.

“What is your name? Please, tell me what to do,” I said. Desperation pummeled me. I was motionless, hovering.

Finally, she enunciated slowly, “His name is Diego Lagos—”

“I know! What's your name?”

A pause. “Suyapa.”

“Suyapa Lagos? Ok, where are your friends? Who do you know?”

The churning was beginning to envelop us, it was under me, inside me. I trembled and leaned forward to hear what she was saying.

“... Managua . . . San Pedro . . . por favor . . . Diego . . . gracias Jesus . . .”

I didn't try questioning her again. The churning had stopped. Suyapa Lagos had moved on.

## OBEDIENCE

Diego Lagos lay straight and stiff in the exact same place I put him down. His white oversized t-shirt said *Gordon Family Picnic '98* in thin blue cursive—obviously a thrift store buy—and was hanging off one shoulder.

I picked him up and laid him on the seat in the cab, wrapped in a sleeping bag. He wasn't bleeding, or crying—a damn miracle. In fact nothing seemed to be wrong with him, except that he was in severe shock, like he was hibernating.

Just as I closed the truck door, a car came around the corner and I stood out in the road to flag it down. Twenty minutes later, I was talking to two policemen while an ambulance crew zipped Suyapa into a bag and loaded her up.

“She had to be one of the migrant workers around here,” one of the policemen was saying. A skinny, clean-shaven kid, probably Hispanic but no accent at all. His belt and shoes were brand new, gleaming in the swirling red lights. I was dazed, hazed, and

everything else. The hormones were starting to drain, like runoff from a storm, and I was shutting down.

“Lots of orange orchards, lots of illegals,” his partner said, a chubby man with big, flat pancake-hands. “We don’t even know where to find most of them. They live in camps out in the trees. Usually the farmers bring food in for them, since most don’t have cars.”

They really didn’t ask me many questions. They did get my address in case they needed to reach me. I told them I was from Minnesota, looking for a place to settle down. I gave them my old information, Lana’s information, and they seemed satisfied. But I didn’t tell them about the boy in my truck. Maybe it was the stress. Maybe I forgot. I had questions, concerns, but could hardly see clearly.

“So we don’t know where she lives?” I asked the policemen.

“All we found on her was a ten-dollar bill, and this,” said the skinny one, holding up a silver cross on a leather string.

“Can I see that for a second?” I asked. I wanted to touch it.

“Sure.” He handed it to me just as the radio in his car started going nuts. Both cops gave me the just-a-minute wave and ran to listen. I held the necklace between my fingers for a few seconds, then put it in my pocket.

The ambulance was pulling away when the two came hustling back.

“We gotta go,” said the chubby one, his flat hands waving nervously around his waist. “Look sir, Misterrrr . . . Crumm? Everything’s alright. Will you be alright?”

I looked at him but couldn’t say a word. Will I be alright? I hadn’t even thought about it. But now that I did . . . no, I probably wouldn’t be alright. I just killed a woman

and the cops are telling me it's alright. Doesn't someone need to know what happened? Aren't I supposed to go the station for a debriefing or something?

“There was really nothing you could do,” said the skinny one. He nodded, trying to assure me, then glanced back at the running patrol car. I hesitated, taking a look over at my truck, twenty yards past the cop car in the oleander shadows. Instantly my veins started to thump again. The boy was standing in the window. I could barely make him out, standing on the seat on the passenger side with Peter right next to him. His mouth looked like it was stretched open, maybe crying, but any noise was smothered by the droning police engine.

The chubby cop continued to talk fast: “In a case like this the state really handles everything, if they can even find a next of kin. Usually they just wait until someone comes to them . . .”

All the arguments came at me within seconds. *It's surely illegal. You don't know how to take care of this kid. The cops will know what to do. They'll find him a good home. He's already been through too much. You'll get caught, charged with kidnapping.*

Telling the cops about Diego was really the only logical thing to do, and I'm still not sure why I didn't do it, if for no other reason than complete exhaustion. I guess it has a little to do with guilt, but more to do with obedience. I'd never spoken to God, still haven't. Hadn't even read the Bible that much. But one woman spoke to me on the cusp of darkness and her dying words were like a revelation—if not from God from who?

I said nothing.

“Sir, are you OK?” the skinny one said.

I nodded and gestured to them with a lame smile and an open palm. *They don't have time for this, I thought. They're part of the system. She told me she had nobody. He's an orphan, doomed to drown in a maze of foster care or worse. It's my responsibility now. Only mine. Besides, I can go to the camps, I have time. Someone will know. I'll find them. And if it doesn't work out, I can leave him on the steps of the courthouse.*

“Sir, you need to go find a place to sleep, OK? If you need help, if you need someone to talk to, you can go to the station, alright? Seven miles ahead, you can't miss it. We really need to get.”

I nodded again, the radio crackled. They each walked backwards several yards, watching me, then turned and drove away. I made it to Bully, stepping carefully, and steadied myself on the hood.

Diego was sniffing when I opened the door. Peter was lying next to him, calm, boxing him in against the seatback. As soon as I sat down my neck went limp, floppy, and I didn't even turn the key. I slept, head on the steering wheel, on and off for three hours, with Peter holding strangely still and an occasional whimper from the boy.

DIEGO

When I came to it was still very dark. I felt numb and cold. Peter started to whine and for the first time I found myself staring steadily at the kid on the seat next to me.

“Diego,” I said slowly, trying to get the vowels right. “Diego.”

The boy was slumped against the door, facing me. He shifted a little, one hand on the seat back, one sliding against the window. I reached over to lock the door just in case he pulled the handle and fell out. As soon as I leaned towards him his eyes closed and he started to cry. Haltingly at first, then louder, longer, until finally he was braying like a mule. I looked around the truck half-expecting someone to be there, to have heard the boy's wailing, or just to be out looking for him. I was starting to regret my decision to hide him from the police. I asked myself what the hell I thought I was going to do? Raise him as my son? Drive him two thousand miles to Central America and find his family with no address, only a last name? Without speaking Spanish? Impossible.

Diego was still crying, except that now his screaming was broken up with a kind of plaintive groan—while he was catching his breath—that was worse than the crying. It was more desperate and more sad. Did he know his mother was gone? As in gone from earth? I don't know. I needed to do something, so I started to drive, eyes glued to the road, the back of my throat burning with sorrow, driving until the boy couldn't cry anymore.

TOM

Thomas Lapler. I was on my way to his house, no more than 60 miles away, when all misfortune came crashing down on me. A former classmate of mine from college, we got along great, despite the fact that he could border on the outlandish, or maybe because of it. We still talked fairly regularly. From what I understood he had bought an orange grove somewhere in Florida and was establishing himself against

doomsday. He had transferred all his money into gold. A real pirate I guess. He had a fleet of generators and enough gas to drown an elephant. He didn't pay any taxes. Not that the government was losing out—it had probably been fifteen years since Tom brought home any real income. He puttered around the orchard, usually with dried orange juice glistening on his chin, growing herbs and muttering about politicians—their verminous ways, their attempts to codify every aspect of our lives into law so they could skim off the top, so to speak. And when I say growing herbs I mean both kinds, the kind you cook with and the kind you smoke. Sometimes when Tom was on one of his mountain highs he would start calling people. He called me more than once.

“Crumbles,” he would say in a swooning falsetto. That was his affectionate tweak of my last name. “Crumbles, what the hell are you doing up there in Alaska? I've got the magic medicine down here. Solve all your troubles.”

“I live in Minnesota, Tom. Remember? Or have you already lost your mind.”

“Crumbles, don't mess with me now. What have you got, arthritis? Scabies? Shoot, I'll take care of it man.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

“Seriously, man, up there running around with cows in the frozen tundra. Can't be good for your constitution.”

“Well, it's been nice talking to you, Tommy. Don't drown in your bathtub.”

“You too, David. Just wanted you to know I'm thinking about you.”

That's not always how it was with Tom. He could be very sharp. He was a bio-engineer, though he was convinced that bio-engineering was going to kill all of us. He made some good money modifying tomatoes for Monsanto before buying his land and

retiring from life as a “corporate pig-jockey.” His words. He once told me that all the major strains of Roma tomatoes grown in the U.S. were his contribution to genetically modified food. But he considers it a mistake, and considers his penance to be his hands, which shake uncontrollably at times. He said it was from all the pesticides he had worked with.

I didn't necessarily think Tom could help me out of my situation, but it seemed like a good place to go and think about things, to form a plan.

When I pulled up in front of Tom's place the sun had just gone and dusk was lingering. On cue, swarms of mosquitos invaded the air. I sat in the truck for a few minutes and watched them bounce off the windows.

The house was a rambling, three-story country manor, a la Disney's haunted house ride. It was hard to believe that a solitary man had the time or desire to take very good care of it, although the paintjob looked reasonably new, the shutters were all attached, and there even appeared to be curtains in the windows. An old Subaru wagon was parked next to an unpainted garden shed with tools and empty pots spilling out of it.

Diego was asleep on the floor of the cab, on top of my sleeping bag, with Peter draped over his legs. It had been almost twenty-four hours since I killed his mother. The thought gnawed at my guts. We had driven most of the day to get here, stopping to nap in a Burger King parking lot. I was pinging along with a few hours sleep.

I got out of the car quickly to try and keep mosquitos from coming in, and softly to avoid waking up Diego. As I was climbing the creaky stairs onto the front porch I heard a thrashing noise behind me. I turned to see a man running out of the orchard

directly in front of the house, about fifty yards off. He was wearing a black ski mask and holding a small spade in one hand. The ground in the orchard was soft and uneven and he was watching his feet as he stumbled along, kicking up dried leaves. Even though I suspected it was Tom, I couldn't tell for sure, and my first impulse was to run over to the gardening shed and grab a hoe. This I did. Better safe than sorry when there are men in ski masks running around.

When the man reached the firm ground of the sparsely-graveled drive he stopped and took a close look at my truck, pacing around to the front to read the license plate. Suddenly he looked toward the house and spotted me by the shed, one hand gripping a stout hoe slightly cocked. He raised both hands in a defensive pose, spade pointed toward the sky.

“David?” a muffled voice said through the knit mask.

“I assume that's you, Tom,” I said, lowering the hoe.

“Oh, yeah,” said Tom. He peeled the mask back to show his sweaty face. He looked young, younger than he should have. Of course, all I could see was his face. He was clothed from head to toe, including gloves, and his pant legs were closed around his ankles with thick rubber bands.

“Mosquitos,” Tom said emphatically, as if I had never heard of them. “They will digest you if you stay out here too long. Hence, the mask.” He smiled. “Plus, one needs to protect one's identity when working around highly classified plant specimens.” His eyes were slightly bloodshot.

I tried to smile back.

“I can’t believe recognize you from the eyes alone,” I said. “I mean it’s only been, what, ten years?”

“Fine, fine. I’m didn’t imagine you would be so thin, you monster, you must be down to 230. But let’s talk inside—look at yourself, you’re covered.”

I looked down and saw two mosquitos planted on my arm, pumping for all they’re worth. I reached back and brushed several off of my neck, which sent me into a panicky type of jig where I touched just about every part of my body in the space of a few seconds.

“I’ve got to get something out of the truck,” I said and dashed off. When I opened the cab door Peter was squinting at me with sleepy eyes. “Get up,” I said. “Go.” He hesitated, then leapt out. I scooped up Diego and practically ran up the steps.

Tom opened the door just as I reached for the handle. When he saw the boy in my arms he hesitated for just a moment, a confused look passing over his face. He beckoned with a shaky hand.

“Hurry in.” And then, “Is this your dog?”

## HIDING OUT

“You kidnapped a child,” was the first thing Tom said when I explained the situation.

“Of course not, I just spent half an hour telling you the story,” I said.

“Is it your child?”

“No, obviously not. I just spent half an hour—”

“I’m just trying to point out to you the seriousness of the situation,” Tom said. He was opening a beer, some organic micro-brew. “Want one?” he offered.

“No, not now—yes, yes I want one,” I said. I sipped it. Pretty good for some hippie in a basement. Diego was sitting in the La-Z-boy rocker, wrapped in Tom’s quilt. I didn’t understand how he could be so still. Every kid his age I knew was like a motor without an idle. *Post-traumatic stress*, I kept thinking. I wondered how much irrevocable damage was being done to his psyche as we spoke. That was probably reason enough to take him to someone in social services, get him some help. I wasn’t a psychologist. Tom was trying to tell me this was a crisis I couldn’t solve on my own. But I had some big reasons for doing it on my own.

For one, I didn’t leave Minnesota to start my new life in jail. What do I say when I bring in a little boy with no known family on record? And what do they say if I tell them I killed his mother three days ago and was just hanging on to him for a while? Or do I lie and say I just found him on the side of the road with no one around? They could believe me. Or they could detain me until they got some answers. Maybe they look past it like the cops at the accident scene. Just a migrant woman and her orphaned son. No harm done. Or maybe they decide it is kidnapping, and I spend the next few years watching my money and health disappear as I fight my way through the legal system, if I get out of it at all. I tried to explain all this to Tom.

“Look,” I said, “I realize that none of this would be a problem if I had maybe acted with a little more sense at the accident scene. But here we are. Nothing can change that.”

And there was still the question, I thought to myself, of Suyapa's request and my conscience's desire—no, need—to honor that. It was a feeling that was always there, day and night, like white noise. In quiet times it gripped me and made the hair on the back of my head prickle. Now there was something worthy of a little psychotherapy. As if somehow I was going to be able to escape the burden of this tragedy by shuttling around her helpless child. I looked down at my shoes. I hadn't taken them off since the day before last. They were only a couple months old, but they looked like they had been hiked through the jungle; the soft leather was deeply scored, probably from pushing myself around on the asphalt as I was trying to get underneath my truck. . . . The memory of the moon and the blood and the groaning was a little too much right then. I did something I hadn't done yet; I put my face in my hands and sobbed. God, I'm done for, I thought, and dared God to hear me. I whispered it to myself. I messed up in a way I could have never imagined, but I couldn't help but feel victimized right then, "who's going to take care of me" and all that. *I* ended a life. A woman with a son and a voice and a beating heart, now absent, her memory fading fast. Maybe she ended up in some heavenly starlit majesty, with mansions and giant flowers some new shade of red so sharp we mortals couldn't understand; but I was still here. Nothing could hide me from it all.

At this point Tom, who had gotten up to grab a bag of pretzels from the kitchen, sat back down across from me. He was stripped down to his undershirt, dingy yellow under the arms, and I noticed how thin he had become, rather bony and bent like a wire hanger. His gangly arms kept sliding off his knees as he knitted his fingers together in anticipation of what he was about to say. The skin on his face was getting papery, maybe prematurely (he would attribute it, again, to his working with so many chemicals), but

there was nothing doddery in the way looked at me. His grey hair was still stacked thick on the top of his head, which was more than I could say for myself. He shook some pretzels into a blue stoneware bowl and offered the bowl to Diego, who plucked out a single one and began testing it on his young teeth.

He turned towards me with the bowl outstretched. “Look, David. I know you had an experience there with this boy’s mother. Something happened that night. Some force grabbed you by the neck and took you to the edge. I’ve never had to face a scene like that, not ever, and I’ve seen some weird business around here. This is Florida, man, alligators and cocaine and Mickey Mouse and anything else your imagination can cook up, we’ve got it. So, I’m not denying anything she said, or anything you felt. But listen, why was this woman so adamant about you, an old white dude, wearing work pants and a cowboy hat, taking her boy to Nicaragua?”

He had gone out of his way to cushion that last question. But before I could begin to respond, he continued, “This is what I mean: she was dying, her brain was shutting down. Who can say what goes through someone’s mind at a time like that?”

“So you’re saying maybe she didn’t mean what she said.”

“I’m saying, maybe she couldn’t fully understand the implications of what she was saying. She knew she was going to die, of course she’s going to be concerned about her son. Dramatically concerned. And she had little time, spoke little English. The main message she was trying to get across was, ‘Please, don’t abandon my son. Make sure he gets to where he needs to go.’ That much is to be expected. But not necessarily taking him there yourself. By car. I mean, even native Central Americans don’t drive there. They fly.”

“They don’t have enough money to fly,” I said, not ready to address the larger point he was making, which was that I was crazy.

“That’s why they only go home once every five years.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I’ve lived here for twenty years. White people hardly live out in the country anymore, at least the middle-classes. I’d say most of the surrounding towns are mostly Hispanic. From Mexico on down.”

“You know people from Nicaragua?”

“Maybe. Probably. I don’t speak very good Spanish, but I know a few familiar faces at the bars and grocery stores around here.”

“Holy hell, why didn’t you tell me?”

“That I know people from Nicaragua? I told you I don’t know for sure. Besides, what difference could it make? Your friend lived an hour away from here. It’s like them asking you if you know Donald Trump.”

That gave me pause. It was the language Tom used. He said “your friend.” The word surprised me, crashed inside of me somewhere like a tray of wine glasses. He had obviously said it without thinking, for lack of a better term. But it was weighty right then. The sounds formed on my tongue and started to swell, reaching back into my throat. Tom was wrong, not in using the word “friend” but in his interpretation of Suyapa’s communiqué. This woman, Suyapa, she died alone. She saw no loved ones, said no goodbyes. Just slid off the dock and floated away. I was certainly not her friend then. But what about now? I know nothing about eternal laws or other worlds. But whether it was guilt or insanity, I didn’t care, I was bound to her and wanted it so. There

are few things you can offer someone in death, but it seemed to me then that friendship was one of them. At the very least, it seemed to me that sending her out of this world and then turning my back on an innocent boy, alone in every way and destined for tragedy himself, was in violation of something. Decency for one thing. It would be almost inhuman, and if I was nothing else I was human, and hoped to stay that way.

## STALLING FOR TIME

I am a rather large man. I have shoulders that round up like hillocks and thighs like oil drums. When I walk I lean back a bit and thrust my legs out. My hands are vises, trained to grab and not let go, useful for detaining cows and steering tractors. Sasha used to laugh when she saw me trying to perform dexterous tasks like tying my shoes or shelling pistachios, fumbling around with my stubby sausage-fingers. “I’ve seen rhinos more flexible than you,” she liked to say. It’s true, I can’t touch my own back, and can often be seen scratching on door frames and tree trunks.

It’s amazing how losing two little fingers can mess with your equilibrium. I had to adjust to the new feel, and my left arm got a little bigger than my right, but I was lifting feed sacks and pounding fence posts until the day I left home. You can’t go around telling yourself you’re useless just because you had to part with a few ounces of bone and muscle. Life wouldn’t work that way.

The good thing about being big is that people allow you to stand by your decisions. It just seems natural. No use arguing with him, he’s a mammoth, let the big brute go his own way. So Tom didn’t try very hard to sway me once I told him I was

committed to leaving with Diego. Diego, for one, didn't seem to object. He didn't make much noise at all, which believe me I was constantly grateful for. Him screaming and banging around all the time probably would have been enough to make me give him over to the government, regardless of the consequences. Not to say that he was doing great. I'm not naïve enough to think that silence can't be a mask for some kind of pain. I couldn't help but feel the strong ebb of guilt when I considered his situation, this orphan by my hand. The kid was very withdrawn, and I know enough about kids to know they don't sit still for long. That whole first day at Tom's he spent in the cushy rocker, shifting his weight around, pulling the quilt over his mouth and brooding quietly. He refused to let us feed him, just picked at the bread and orange slices we left in front of him. And when we tried to pick him up, he cried out. So we kept an eye on him from afar. He's much too young to brood, I thought. Brooding is for teens. *Oh David, what have you done, I'd think, you've caused this child to skip boyhood completely and go straight to the bad stuff.* Nothing I could do would free me from the violation of his innocence. Not taking him to Nicaragua, not giving him a college fund. Nothing.

He even slept in the rocker, and I slept next to him on the worn leather couch, waiting until he was asleep to try and shift him into a more comfortable position and put his arms under the blanket. As for the bathroom, well, pooping wasn't a problem (at that point) because he didn't do it. Kids can go for days when they're all wound up. Every five or six hours though I would pick him up—and yes, this was one of the few times he did make noise, lots of it—and rush him to the bathroom. He seemed to be familiar with the toilet was because he could sit comfortably on it. He would cry until I left and about a minute later he would come out, pants up, and resume his perch on the rocker.

Sometimes there was nothing, sometimes there was a fluorescent tinge in the water. And of course, sometimes my timing was off. I went and bought a pack of undies at the Wal-Mart so if he started to stink of urine I could rip off the old ones and slip on a fresh pair. I wasn't about to attempt a bath quite yet, so things got a little sour after awhile. I washed the quilt. With the rocker, we tried scrubbing it down a few times but I eventually just apologized to Tom and told him I'd get him a replacement when things settled down. I still intend to, but as far as I know it's still there, tolerably clean with a faint ring of urine stains at the back of the seat cushion. Tom was always gracious like that.

By the third day at Tom's Diego seemed to come back, just a little, from whatever guarded world he had been hiding in. He was becoming more aware of his surroundings and it lifted my heart considerably to see him eating more and moving around. He was getting down from his rocker and exploring, slapping the hickory floor with his bare feet and putting orange leaves in his mouth.

During this time there was one who was able to reach Diego better than the rest of us: Peter. A lot of people say that dogs, some dogs, have a way with children, and I think that has to be true. I'm not one to romanticize our relationship with animals. I have respect and awe for God's creatures and in that sense they truly are majestic, from fleas to elephants, but I'm not the guy who dresses his dog up in sweaters and lets it sleep in the center of the bed. Dogs are dogs, not angels disguised as dogs. That said, there was no doubt in my mind that Peter knew his role in all this. He was rarely more than twenty feet from Diego, curling himself into the rocker seat while the boy buried his hands in the

long gray fur on his neck. And when Diego started to run around the house, Peter was right there with him.

I don't remember exactly how long we stayed there in central Florida. Despite my conviction to head south, I was stalling. I knew that, disagreements aside, Tom wouldn't force us out. He had an open-ended compassion bred from years of working with plants. He was a lover and also somewhat indifferent, paradoxically—a live and let live kind of guy; you have to be when you're growing pot and hiding from the DEA. But I didn't want to stretch his generosity, or make him uncomfortable. This wasn't his problem.

I do know it had been over a week when I began to get very restless. I woke myself at nights with my own snoring and leg twitching. My appetite was light. Most mornings I ate oatmeal with Tom in the kitchen before he went into his orchard, and then snacked for the rest of the day on saltines or broccoli or chunks of pepper jack cheese. My thirst, on the other hand, was unrestrained and I often drank what seemed like liters of orange juice, fresh-squeezed of course. The OJ was one thing Diego could always be plied with—and turned out to be an important bridge of trust for us during those first days.

I had been trying to get Tom to go into town with me and ask around to see if anyone knew a Suyapa Lagos. He insisted it was a frivolous mission, better to just go the distance if that's what I wanted. I agreed that it was probably fruitless, but my Midwestern pragmatism caught hold for a moment and told me it was a sensible thing to do, unlike the journey I was about to undertake. It was just in case. I was a just-in-case kind of guy, a boy scout in a former life, extra socks and underwear, always prepared for

the unexpected. I was the guy who carried a pen at all times, kept a binder full of coupons at home, as well as a file folder full of instructions and warranties for purchases dating back to the 70's. (I just never cleaned it out, OK.) Not obsessive though. No, you could ask anyone who knew me well enough—I was thorough, but I wasn't the kind of personality that set people's teeth on edge. I was dependable. I remembered when most everyone else forgot. What if, what if. What if, by some crazy convergence of fates, there was someone close by who knew Suyapa? It was possible, right?

The reason I needed Tom to come was that he spoke a little Spanish. A leetle Spaneesh. His agricultural background meant he'd spent plenty time around fields where Spanish was the only language the tomatoes and alfalfa ever heard. And, he had been in central Florida for many years. Who picked the oranges? Not the trailer trash. They were checking the mailbox, smoking Luckies and killing cockroaches. It was the migrants. The Mexicans, the Salvadorans, the Hondurans, the Nicaraguans. They picked citrus like machines, like it was gold, because to them, it was. They were paid by the pound. Tom told me about the little shantytowns in the trees, villas of tarps and plywood where the workers slept and fought and got drunk around the fire.

They were a forgotten people, a land of the lost in the middle of the most modern nation on earth. They drove into Ocala, the biggest town in Tom's area, on the weekends in their thumped-up Buicks and bought bread and chicken and cigarettes. Sometimes they stayed for dancing and drinks at La Gata Brava ("The Feisty Cat" according to Tom's translation), a friendly cantina on the edge of the city. Knowing that, I decided that Saturday night would be the best time to show up and ask around. Tom reluctantly

agreed, and when Saturday afternoon rolled around we put Diego and Peter in Bully's back seat and headed off.

## Ocala

Ocala is in middle of Marion County, which is in the middle of northern Florida, closer to Georgia than to the Keys. Other cities in Marion include Citra and Orange Springs. Floridians are so nuts about their oranges they have a department in state government called the Citrus Bureau. I don't know what they do. Maybe they sew little jackets for the oranges so they don't get frosted in the winter. Most likely they are out to make sure that Florida oranges are never devalued as a brand name and the state's most valuable export. I know a thing or two about economics. Why do you think the Spanish came to Florida in the first place? That's one of Tom's favorite jokes. Sure they hoarded all the gold they could get their swashbuckling hands on, he says, but they knew gold was a limited resource. Somewhere along the line, some genius figured out that oranges were where it's at. The Indians were probably just kicking around on the beach all day, orange juice glistening on their chins. They didn't appreciate what they had, so those industrious Catholics came in and commandeered the groves in the name of the God. Citrus for the King and all that. But they were soon ousted by the True Capitalists, those pesky Americans. The rest is history, right?

We entered Ocala at about 4:00 in the afternoon. Population 45,000. Past Burger King and KFC, past a couple of no-name fill stations with dogs and cats sleeping out front. It was barely spring, but the air was hot and dull. The sun fell towards the horizon

but not without sending a parting burst of energy our way. We stopped at Dairy Queen and got some ice cream. The attendant was a large Samoan who looked like a sweaty Buddha. He handed us our Blizzards upside down, a trick of the trade. We ate outside at a grimy red table shaded by an oak tree and watched a rather disgusting trail of roaches milling about near the dumpster.

Diego ate his small Oreo Blizzard with gusto, smearing it across his lips and licking the spoon after every bite. For the first time, I realized how odd, or even suspicious we might have looked, two old white men with a little Hispanic kid. I felt strangely exposed, even pulling my baseball cap down a little over my eyes. *What an idiot I am*, I thought to myself. *Of course, this is how it will be, all the way down the Pan American highway, with people wondering who the hell I am and why I have a little brown kid with me.* Every day seemed to produce another reason not to go.

I began to think about what it would really be like with Diego. Right then things seemed fine, but what about when we got to where people spoke his language and even looked like him? I didn't even know if he could talk. For all I knew, he could just be waiting until we got around someone who spoke Spanish so he could tell them that I wasn't his grandpa and that, in fact, he didn't even know me. I could get my teeth kicked in. Even worse, I might not get him to his kin. It was a slightly irrational sequence of thoughts, but then again, the whole thing was on the shady side of reason.

We got back in the car. I sat stiff as we pulled into the parking lot of the Leon grocery store. The outside was a cream stucco with semi-circle windows filled with stacks of charcoal and dog food. Above the windows blocky blue letters spelled "Leon",

with a crown over the L. Tom said this was the store where most of the Hispanics shopped. It was owned by a Mexican family out of Jalisco.

“Now what?” Tom said. He turned and waited for me to look at him. I stared straight ahead towards the store, watching a couple of *muchachos* in cowboy boots push a cart inside.

“We need to go talk to some people I guess.”

“*We* need to go?”

“Well, yeah, I thought that’s why you came. To help me talk to some people.”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know. ‘Hi, we’re looking for somebody from Nicaragua.’”

“Then what?”

“Umm, well . . . maybe just ask if they knew a migrant woman named Suyapa Lagos. Or know. Know a migrant woman. We don’t want them to know we know she’s dead. Just in case.”

Tom’s eyebrows pointed towards his scalp. He turned and looked out his window while rubbing his knee. I knew what he was thinking, he wanted a toke. He seemed to do a lot better, generally, when stoned. I know how marijuana affects your memory and your motor skills and all that. But when you’ve been doing it as long as Tom the stuff seems to, how do I say it, rewire things in your head. Tasks like gardening and cooking and cleaning actually become easier when high. And for Tom it was a social lubricant just like alcohol, but without the blackouts.

“You can’t smoke in here,” I said. “Not with Diego.”

“I know, Sparky. Geez. I was looking over at that dumpster. I could just duck behind it.”

I started to laugh in disbelief. “Come on, Tom, let’s just do this.” I rolled the window down and got out of the car, and told Peter to stay with Diego. Tom looked pale. He turned the door handle slowly with one hand, and brushed his shaggy bangs out of his face with the other.

We loitered near the pay phone outside the automatic doors. I pretended to read the free classifieds while Tom feigned interest in a pallet of early season watermelons, eyeing people coming out of the store. We let pass a squat woman, her coffee-colored skin bulging out of her tanktop, with two kids hanging onto her skirt and whining about the candy machine. “She might have been the one,” I whispered to Tom. “She’s about *her* age.” Several more people filed out and I started to get fidgety and breathe heavier. Tom gave me a wide-eyed look that told me to hold on. Then the two guys in cowboy boots we had seen go inside ten minutes earlier walked out with a 24-pack of Tecate.

“*Perdon,*” said Tom in a clumsy burst of white-guy Spanish. “*Tango oona pregunta.*” The utter surprise on the gentlemen’s face was apparent as they both turned toward us. I had put my paper back on the rack and was taking small steps towards them.

After a few moments of everybody waiting for someone else to say the next word, one of the guys said “*Si*” and motioned to Tom to proceed. He was a slight man, the one who spoke, with a thin, dark moustache and droopy eyes. He wore a blue and black flannel shirt, tucked in, no belt. His friend was a good six inches taller, wore a stiff black cowboy hat, not unlike one I used to wear on the ranch, and held the beer in both arms.

They shifted on their feet, looking us up and down, surely wondering if we were cops or worse.

I could almost see Tom's head vibrating as he searched for the words to pose our question. Right then the whole trip to Ocala seemed futile and rather silly. It was worse than a needle in a haystack—there was no needle, and the haystack was burning.

But the men waited while Tom readied himself. They probably saw that we were truly harmless and began to be curious about our earnest attempt to communicate. Tom spoke a little softer this time.

“*Conoce . . . umm . . . una mujer llamaaa . . . Suyapa.*” He said Suyapa's name clearly and snapped the last two syllables—*ya-pa*. The hair at the base of his scalp was wet with perspiration, but he stood smiling and with his hands out.

“Suyapa?” asked the men. We nodded. “She has . . . last name?” We nodded again.

“Lagos,” I said. The name burned on my tongue. I think I even steadied myself against the pay phone. My innards slipped around a bit. The men contemplated for a moment. “No *senor*,” the short man said. “We no know her.”

The man with the beer looked relieved and started to walk. The short man apologized in Spanish and followed him, his boot heels clunking against the concrete. Tom and I looked at each other with raised eyebrows. No luck, but at least we asked. That success gave us the confidence to try for another 30 minutes or so. Still no luck and we headed back to the truck to check on Diego and Peter. Diego was hitting Peter with a stick he had brought from the orchard, and Peter was playing along, trying to bite it. As we neared the car I thought I saw, on Diego's face, the slightest hint of a smile which,

when we opened the doors, was replaced with his usual poker face. As I sat down I could only think about his mother and what her smile might have looked like. I would never know. But in that moment I prayed, really prayed, that Diego would remember it despite his age and the muddle of years to come.

### CALL ME CRAZY, BUT, A VOICE

I should probably tell you something about me and prayer. I've always called on God to perform various tasks in my favor—who hasn't at some point? I was born a Catholic in a Midwest full of Methodists and Lutherans. When I was ten I my mother disavowed the Catholic church. She was dating a short man from Iowa named Bernard. He wore spectacles, not glasses. Glasses help people see, spectacles help people look the part. He was a deacon in the Presbyterian church and fed my mother all sorts of hype, popular among many Christians at the time, concerning the evil, wayward nature of Catholicism. Vilifying the Pope is the easy part—too many popes have gotten tangled up in politics and war to leave much for careful believers to grab onto. But he didn't stop there. He effectively dismantled my mother's faith in doctrines like infant baptism, confession to celibate priests, and the changing of wafers into flesh. What do they call it? Transmutation? Transubstantiation? Not that my mother needed it very much, Catholicism that is. Ten years after my father's death she had gotten what she needed from the church: friends, comfort, and a quiet place to think on Sunday mornings.

I remember one morning I was putting on my Buster Browns for Mass when my mother came in and told me we were going to the river for a picnic. She wasn't dating

Bernard anymore. And that was it. We never went back. Of course, nothing really changed. My mother still read the Bible from time to time after breakfast. She still prayed with us on occasion before bed. We still dressed nice on Sundays. My brother Joseph rejoined the Catholics before he died, but he was the only one.

I had a fit of religiosity in the early 80's, after Sasha left, when I read Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew. On clear mornings right after sunrise I found that just turning those tissue-paper pages made me feel a little more prepared for the day. I even had a cross around my neck for awhile, until it fell off in Lake Superior one August evening. But I never went back to church. I had a Mormon friend who invited me out constantly for many years. He was rich as hell and generous to boot, so I figured maybe there was something there. Once, I made it to the front doors, but was overwhelmed by a brace of black suits and turned back.

Like I said though, I never stopped praying. Sometimes it was perfunctory, a habitual exercise in positive thinking. Sometimes it was soulful, a tearful plea for divine providence or an angry question directed towards an invisible, failing master. I can never remember a dramatic answer to any of these prayers. They didn't save my mother, or my brother, or my marriage. But I kept doing it, maybe because I feared to lose sight of that part of my heritage. Maybe because I still felt faintly hopeful every time I talked towards heaven.

There was one time though, when I prayed myself into a place I'd never been before. Not a place per se, but a state of mind maybe. It was part of the reason I decided to leave Minnesota in the first place.

Lana had made waffles for dinner and I was sitting at the table with her and Harold and my two youngest grandchildren, Mike and Sara. Mike was a loud little guy with big teeth. He was mashing away on his waffle smothered with peanut butter and trailing on about how he loved those big trucks on TV that smashed other cars like “shit-cakes.” Lana started in on him about cussing and then Harold started telling Lana to ease off. Right then, Sara, who was only three and didn’t say much, pointed out the window at a line of heifers that was crossing the driveway and heading out to an open pasture. Apparently, someone hadn’t secured the gate properly. Harold let out his own string of naughties and threw his napkin down as he made for the front door. Mike looked at his dad and then back at his mom with a “gotcha” look, which sent Lana off the deep end. And Sara started to scream with delight as she watched her dad trying to beat the cows back to where they came from.

I got up and wiped my hands on the back of my dungarees. I was about to retire to my bedroom when I saw thick orange light from the setting sun on the white tile of the kitchen counter. I decided to go outside instead and watch the sunset on the stone wall I had built at the end of the driveway near the road, something I had done many times before. When I got there I sat on the wall and watched the blazing light seep down through the fir trees. I decided to say a prayer, as I often did in moments like this. But this time, nothing came out. Sasha had been gone for twenty years, and as hard as I tried not to, I was beginning to lose the need to mourn. I had my family around me, all healthy. I wasn’t responsible for anyone anymore, except myself. There was nothing to pray for. So I just started talking. I can’t even remember how it started. *Hi God, it’s me Dave, or something like that. Dandy sunset again. Do you make this stuff up as you go*

*or is everything on, like, an automatic timer, like a sprinkler system? After awhile I found myself lying on my back on top of the wall, looking at the stars, still talking. So, I know that you might prefer me not to, but I really like to smoke cigars every now and then. Swisher Sweets. I know they're a gas station brand and everything, but they remind me of fishing with my kids. You'd probably go for a fine Cuban or something, but I still have to buy my own, you know?*

Somewhere along the way, I asked a question that came into my mind like a freeway sign, big and plain. It came from somewhere deep, somewhere I didn't even know existed. I said, *You know, God, I've been praying to you my whole life, off and on. And I think things have turned out alright. But for someone who I've talked to so much, I don't really feel like I know you very well. I mean, you know everything about me. My name, my address, my favorite singer, my sins. But I don't know much about you. Where do you live? What do you do on the weekends?* I knew I was probably starting to sound foolish. But underneath it all there was an earnestness and a real desire. I had nothing to lose. Whether he cared or not, or if he was even really there—I just wanted to know. Either way I figured I would die somewhat peacefully in the next ten or fifteen years.

And you know what? I got an answer. Not a just a nice feeling or some tired scriptural remembrance. But an actual voice. I heard it, like someone standing behind my saying, "Come find me David." Yes, that's exactly what it said. "Come find me, David." And you know what I said? "OK, I think I will." That's exactly what I said, and I got off the wall and walked back to the house, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

I stayed in Minnesota for over a year after that. Sometimes I even doubted that the whole thing happened—I didn't tell anyone about it—but I didn't doubt the growing urge inside of me to leave. Even as I headed towards Florida under the pretext of a kind of retirement, I think I was hearing the echo of that voice and the feeling like there was something more for me out on the road. Some kind of discovery, or at the very least, a step forward.

## LA GATA BRAVA

After leaving the Leon grocery store, I decided to try a prayer. What the hell, you know? We decided to stop at La Gata Brava and ask around a little more. I prayed that if there was anyone around who had a connection to Suyapa, we would find them. By now it was dusk and I was worried about leaving Diego in the car, but I certainly didn't want to take him inside. I pulled a sleeping bag out from under the seat and put him in it, then gave him a piece of bread and pointed my finger at Peter, warning him to stay awake and alert while we were gone. We locked the doors.

Once inside, I almost forgot why we were there. The bass of the *Norteno* music was bouncing and beating through everything and everyone. The strong smell of cheap cologne and beer was intoxicating, as were the pink and green lights around the dance floor. There was a shelf above the bar with rustic-looking kegs and baroque sombreros whose slick embroidery glinted in the light.

"I've never been here at night," Tom said. "During the day a guy named Federico works the bar, but I don't see him." The bar was lined with men in dark jeans, crisp

white shirts and cowboy hats, and women in short skirts, pantyhose and thick makeup. Couples shook and snaked their way around the joint. “We should probably order a drink,” he said.

Tom ordered a whisky and I drank a Budweiser. We surveyed the area once more. My eye kept returning to a table in the center of the room with two men and a woman who seemed to be trying to carry on a serious conversation in the middle of the hoopla. Tom tried asking the bartender if he knew any Nicaraguans there. The man had the thickest, blackest goatee I had ever seen and a nose like giant walnut. He grunted and motioned for us to look around.

Again, I looked at the center table with the two couples. They looked different from the rest. Not homely necessarily, but more plain, a little out of place in the midst of all the crisp collars and hairsprayed bangs. I walked in their general direction, scanning tables as if I was looking for someone in particular, but directing my longest gazes at their group. They appeared to be two married couples, all had rings, and the women were wearing flat-soled loafers instead of pumps. The men were clean shaven, no mustaches, and were both noticeably short. In fact, they looked like they could be brothers—they both had high, angular cheekbones and flat foreheads that sloped right down at the same angle, but reversed, that their noses protruded.

I motioned to Tom, who was still sitting at the bar, watching a couple of pretty girls shaking their hips vigorously to the beat of a peppy *merengue*. When I got his attention, he got up and met me at the edge of the dance floor.

“See that table in the middle,” I said, pointing with my eyebrows. “I think we should talk to them.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re different. I figure most of the people here are Mexican, and they seem different,” I said.

“OK,” Tom said. “But after this I think we should go. It’s too loud to do much. Nobody will understand me.”

“Fine,” I said and we walked leisurely over to the table, me in front and Tom behind, squeezing in between chairs and standing groups of revelers.

When we got to the table, nobody seemed to notice us. The couples were focused on each other, trying to hear each other over the clamor. We stood there for maybe 20 long seconds before Tom leaned into their conversation, it must have been the whiskey, and abashedly held his hands together in front of him, indicating he needed a moment.

“*Perdon,*” Tom said, just like he had at the grocery store, “*hablan ingles?*”

“Yes,” said one of the women. “I aspeak English.” She spoke quite well, in fact.

“Oh good,” I said, leaning over the table. Tom stood up straight and folded his arms, giving me the green light.

“Do you know a woman from Nicaragua?” I asked the woman. I was sweating heavily, smoothing out my soggy eyebrows with the backs of my knuckles.

“Well,” said the woman. She eyed her companions. “Maybe. We are from Guatemala, but we know many people.”

“Do you know a woman named Suyapa Lagos?” I said, trying my best to put a Spanish zing on her name. The woman’s face went slack. Everyone at the table was doing their best to inspect us without seeming too obvious, scooting their chairs, reaching for napkins, looking for a gun, a badge, a hint of authority.

“How do you know her?” the woman asked. It almost sounded like there was something accusatory in her voice, but it could have just been me knowing that the answer to that question was a itself a heart-shattering, self-inflicted accusation. How could I answer that question? I hadn’t even thought of the possibility that she would ask. I hadn’t wanted to. My palms grew wet and cold. It felt like someone had me wrapped tight around the chest with a length of baling wire, slowly sinking it into my numb, clammy skin.

The woman could see I was struggling to speak, almost choking on words that wouldn’t come out. She looked at the men at the table, both of whom looked like they were ready to jump up, either to run for the door or give me the Heimlich. Almost like a dream, I heard Tom’s voice from somewhere far away, syrupy and faint, saying, “She was a friend of his, and he hasn’t seen her for weeks. He’s very worried about her, and I think it makes him emotional.”

I looked up and made helpless gestures, wagged my head and pinched my Adam’s apple as I tried to clear my throat.

“*Senor*,” said the woman. “Eet is funny you should say that, because we are also worried about her. She lived out in the camps but she couldn’t always work with her son, so I let her clean houses for me. I have a leetle business. But I haven’t seen her since last Monday.”

“I see” Tom said. “I see.” He looked at me, unsure of what to say next. Many things went through my mind right then. I thought about how the woman in front of me had known Suyapa, worked with her. She knew exactly what she looked like, while I only had a grim, blurry picture in my mind cloaked in shadow and shame. This woman

knew Diego, could probably pick him out in a crowd. She had probably touched Suyapa's arm, not covered in blood, and laughed with her about some fleeting joke or minor catastrophe. I had the devastating urge to tell her everything, to take all my guilt and all my anger and all my grief and hand it to her like a file folder. Here, read this, then we can work this thing out. I wanted to grab her face in my hands and let her know I was sorry, let her smell it on my breath, let her look in my eyes and see the agony.

Instead, I gathered myself for what I knew would be my final question, one that I knew, somehow I knew with certainty, she wouldn't be able to answer.

"Ohh," I said, and paused to try and heighten the impression of spontaneity that I wanted to accompany my next sentence. "Hey, do you happen to know how to get a hold of her family? Maybe they'd know where she is."

"You know," said the woman. "All I know is she was *Nicaraguense*. *Fijese* I don't even know where she lived. She rode her bike into town. It was a long way but I didn't have time to go pick her up, that was part of the deal."

"Ohh," I said again. I felt like we were the only ones in the entire place. No dancing, no music, no Tom, no Guatemalans. Something passed between us, a look, a vibe, some mutual awareness that this conversation was more than casual chitchat, how much more she had no idea, but she knew. She shifted from one elbow to another, turned her chair a little more towards me.

"I'm sorry, what was your name?" she asked. I was ready this time.

"David, my name is David, and yours?"

"I'm Margarita. Margarita Paniagua. So how do you know Suyapa?"

It was starting to dawn on her that I was an unlikely “friend” of a migrant woman who lived in the sticks and cleaned houses. So, I knew what I had to do. Telling her the truth seemed inconsequential all of a sudden. Maybe even detrimental. It was final. Complete. Exhausted. We would leave tomorrow, Diego and I. And Peter the dog. We would get in the car and drive into the void, braving the nameless challenges that lay ahead.

“Thank you for your help,” I said, trying to sound as sweet and harmless as possible. “I just hope she turns up soon.”

I waved to the others at the table and swept Tom in front of me with an outstretched arm.

“Excuse me, sir,” came the woman’s voice from behind us, rising above the skipping notes of a trumpet and a rapping snare beat. I pretended not to hear. I heard the shuffling and scraping of shoes and furniture.

“Excuse me, David. David! How do you know her?”

We were just clear of the tables and walking back past the bar when I did probably the worst thing I could have done. First, I looked back, and saw eight eyes following us through the crowd. Margarita was standing up, holding her arms out as if to emphasize the question she had been posing. Then, I ran. I pushed Tom in front of me and we ran, flinging the heavy oak doors against the walls and flying across the parking lot.

“Holy smokes,” Tom said. “This is something else.”

We shot out of our stall in reverse and I threw it in drive without even hitting the brakes. I made for the far exit that would dump us onto a side street, but keep us from having to drive past the front doors.

“Hold Diego down,” I told Tom as I turned the wheel.

“He’s asleep,” Tom said, his voice rising. “David, this is nutty. This is really nuts.”

When Bully’s back tires cleared the gutter I hit the gas again, hard. We turned right onto the main drive and accelerated, passing the *cantina* from a safe distance away. I looked over my shoulder as we passed, catching a glimpse of Margarita standing on the landing under a tubular canopy that had a frazzled-looking cat on the front, and under it LA GATA BRAVA in looping cursive letters. One of the men was walking up behind her and pointing in our direction. They didn’t look livid. Margarita was clutching a small purse in both hands, holding it up to her navel. Then the man was putting his arm around her, lowering his head to her neck and undoubtedly whispering something in her ear. Something consoling. *Don’t worry, Suyapa was probably looking for a green card and that poor sap an easy wife. Or maybe, She went back to Nicaragua, to take care of her son. Or maybe, Come inside my love, let’s dance.*

#### WHAT I DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT TOM AT THE TIME

I knew Tom was growing marijuana. I didn’t know he had been growing trunkloads of it and giving it away to cancer patients and the like.

Tom is a man of passionate ideas, and he has a streak of missionary, eager to take what works for him to others who might need it. In this case, what worked for him was the mellow buzz of cannabis. It released him from particularly intense episodes of shaking, the chemically-induced retirement gift from his former career. He didn't know how it worked, didn't care. He was done with the science and the skepticism of doctors, scientists, pharmacies, whatever. He felt good. I'm sure I would too if I smoked a pound a month.

He had always kept a little plant or two in his bathroom that he nurtured for personal use. The idea hit him as he was shaving one day, the plant at his feet under the sink. He was breathing in the sharp smell of his minty shaving soap and listening to the tick of each stubby hair as it gave way under the blade of his straight razor. It was some kind of inspiration I guess, and I'm the last person in the world to question it. I think he saw himself in the mirror—a lonely, aging man with no one to care for, and it just made sense. He didn't have the money to be a philanthropist in the popular sense of the word, but he could provide something. He could do something magnanimous and kind and become somebody else, a kind of groovy Robin Hood. Immediately, he got dressed and took his plant to the back of his property, the part farthest away from the road.

Tom's property runs up against a hill, part of a huge ranch owned by some church out of California. The dividing line is a gully at the base of the hill with a low barb-wire fence running right down the center of it. Sometimes the gully is dry, sometimes it fills with mossy water and frogs. The edges of the gully are overgrown with giant foxtails, maidencane, and clumps of yellow irises. It was a perfect location—Tom had never seen anyone on that side of the hill, not even a cow. And there was a potential water source.

That year Tom grew a thick swath of cannabis that ran along the gully for about 50 yards. The problem, however, was how to distribute it. Naturally, he was nervous. He wasn't going to be selling to high school kids in city parks at night. He didn't even want to be giving it to high school kids in the park at night, and understandably so. Adults smoking pot in their own home seemed fine, but not bored kids with driver's licenses and a penchant for bad judgment. *This is for people who need it*, he told himself. For awhile, he just harvested his crop and stored it in a locked closet in the garage. Needless to say, his own consumption spiked.

He found what he was looking for while browsing a copy of *Newsweek* in the grocery store. In an article about the medical marijuana debate, he read about CARPS, an organization that lobbied for medical access to cannabis and even total legalization. The acronym CARPS stood for Citizens' Alliance for the Relief of Patient Suffering, and they happened to have a chapter in Florida. Tom had found a distributor.

## WHAT WAS WAITING FOR US AT TOM'S HOUSE

Cops. About five of them. We hadn't really talked about what happened back at La Gata Brava. I think we were both mulling it over still when we saw the lights from the road, and Tom's face turned so white it seemed to glow in the black country night.

"Keep going," he hissed as he squeezed my elbow. I drove past the long driveway and down the road about 200 yards.

"Pull over," Tom said, and I stopped at a sandy turnout. "Now, you just drive around for about 30 minutes and pick me up back here. Unless there are cops on the

road.” He got out and stood looking at me with a wincing smile. “I can’t believe this,” he said and shook his head.

“What, are you a serial killer?” I said. “What gives?”

“I’ve just got to go see, I’ll explain later.”

“Explain what? Tom, the whole gang is there. Are you going to commando your way in and karate chop each of them on the back of the head? If you want to see, let’s just drive in. It’s a bit less suspicious than being caught in the bushes.” I was beginning to get that deep, sick feeling in my stomach again, like the night of the accident. It was always there, like white noise, but now it was snarling like a caged animal, ready to leap through the bars.

“I can’t just drive in. Not yet. I’ll be fine, I know exactly where to go. I just need to know why they’re there.”

“No kiddin’? Just find out why they’re there?” I was feeling desperate, and a little scared. Police. Questions. Tom was supposed to be my protection against such scenarios. I wondered if maybe the officers were looking for me.

“David,” Tom said. I felt obliged to meet his gaze. “This is *my* business. Please, just come back in 30 minutes. If I’m still not around after an hour and the cops are gone, try the police station.”

“Try the police station,” I droned. “OK. Look, Tom, I hope this doesn’t have to do with me. For your sake.” With that Tom gently pushed the door shut and crept off into the trees.

## FLIGHT

Thirty-two minutes later, I rolled past the turnout, heart pounding and palms sweaty. I could still see police flashers from the road. Tom was nowhere in sight. It was almost 11 p.m. and the road was empty. I started to make a three-point in order to turn around when I felt a weight settle on the back of the truck. It was Tom, standing on the bumper, holding the tailgate with one hand and waving with the other, not saying a word. I stopped. Tom jumped off and came around to the cab.

“Well,” he said when he got in, “let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To Mexico, or Nicaragua, or wherever you’re headed.”

I decided to be unflappable. Obviously something was afoot, and I wanted to proceed carefully. I liked Tom, but I realized that I couldn’t really know him. Not after so many years apart. Whatever it was, I didn’t think Tom was violent. Wasn’t a pedophile, a rapist, a killer. Did like to smoke dope. Wasn’t sure how that fit in yet.

I drove on, not really sure where I was going, stewing inside, trying to reassess the situation. Was this it? Was I leaving the country with the sleeping boy in the backseat? I hadn’t planned it like this. Not in the middle of the night, with Tom, without our bags. I felt unsettled, unfinished, a little out of control.

Tom called out directions softly from the passenger seat. We were traveling west on a dark country road when I saw an interstate sign with an arrow pointing straight ahead. The anxiety continued to rise inside my throat until it kind of forced its way out in the form of a heavy sigh. As I exhaled I looked over at Tom for the first time in what

seemed like many minutes. If I could have seen myself, I think I would have looked slightly crazed, eyes bugging out, cheeks tense, mouth downturned. Tom didn't miss a beat, just started right in on the story.

He told me about his crops, his distributor, and his philanthropy. He even got a little emotional when he started talking about the letters he had gotten from people thanking him for his donation. Moms with cancer, geezers with glaucoma, young men with rare neurological disorders. He started to curse the people who didn't understand his motives, who compared marijuana to heroin, etc. I didn't want to be insensitive, but I had heard it all before. I cut him off.

"Tom, I'm sorry, but what happened at the house?" I asked. "I need to know." I could guess pretty well, of course, but I wanted to know exactly what we were into here.

Tom muttered a soft, "Sorry," and cleared his throat. He told me about how he had indeed snuck up to the house undetected and crawled on his belly in the darkest shadows under the lowest trees until he could see the letters on the police uniforms. Marion County Sheriff. There was a Blazer and three Ford Escorts with lights flashing, and one windowless van with at least three giant antennas waving around on top like sapling trees. The van read "Marion County Narcotics Task Force" on the side in bold black letters and was backed up to the garage. Several men in tight, dark uniforms and bulletproof vests were coming out of the open garage with armfuls of baled marijuana. He could see lights on in the house, and at least one cop was shining his flashlight under the deck. Next to the Blazer a potbellied man with a blond Tom Selleck mustache and a park ranger-type hat, presumably the Sheriff, was talking on a cell phone.

At one point the Sheriff started talking particularly loud and Tom, lying perfectly still and cocking his head to the side, thought he heard him say something along the lines of “Slowaki didn’t lie.” Howard Slowaki, according to Tom, was one of the board members for CARPS, a tall, hairy man who liked to tell the story of how his dear Moravian grandmother was able to live another five years in peace after she was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease because the marijuana took the edge off her chemotherapy.

At this point Tom, his head spinning, managed to crawl back to a safer distance, where he stayed until the engines started and the cars filed out, their lights getting dimmer and dimmer until they disappeared somewhere around Road 97.

“So, did you go into the house?” I asked, my clammy hands gripping the wheel. We were headed north towards Louisiana. A truck rattled past me in the right lane, its Mississippi license plate coated with dust. Its flatbed trailer was carrying several giant spools of black cable.

“I did,” Tom said after the noise of the truck faded. He swallowed hard. “I did.”

“And?”

“Well, obviously they had a search warrant,” he said.

“Trashed?”

“No. No, not too bad. Just some drawers opened and furniture moved around. I just grabbed our stuff and headed for the road. I was beginning to worry they’d left someone behind to wait for me, so I came back through the trees.”

“If you grabbed our stuff, where is it?” I asked. Tom pointed to Bully’s bed. I scanned the road ahead and then shot a look back to see my big army duffel and Tom’s frame-pack against the tailgate. I felt a bit relieved. At least I had my stuff.

## BETRAYED

Tom couldn’t figure out exactly what went wrong, but he assumed it had something to do with Slowaki. He never liked the guy, couldn’t figure out why he was with CARPS in the first place. Yeah, there was the whole grandmother thing. But whenever he told the story it felt like ammunition, trying to prove a point or establish credibility more than share a heartfelt experience. Tom usually just avoided him.

Tom’s theory was that Slowaki was using CARPS as a front for his own side business as a seller. Maybe he got caught in some law enforcement net and made a deal: I’ll tell you where I get my product if you go easy on my sentence. Then he sold Tom down the river. Slowaki wasn’t a prison guy; you’d never see him in a jumpsuit. He was the guy who would weasel out of every jam you put him in, watch his friends eat the consequences, and still walk around with his head held high.

Tom told me about the last time he saw Slowaki. He had gone to Miami to meet with Rick Sweet, president of CARPS. Rick was the reason Tom decided to work with CARPS. He was a quiet man with a short beard; he always wore stiff jeans with a white polo shirt tucked in. They had become friends fairly quickly, exchanging phone calls at least once a week. Tom trusted him completely.

On this particular visit, Rick and Tom were having coffee in the CARPS conference room when Slowaki walked in acting like he was lost. He was wearing a black pin-striped suit, silver cuff-links, and his dark hair was gelled to perfection. He coughed and apologized, then asked where the bathroom was. Sweet told him. Slowaki started towards the door, turned back, and looked at Tom.

“Lapler, right?” he asked with a chlorine smile.

“Uhhh, yeah,” Tom said.

“Great. OK, see you guys later.” He walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Tom turned to Rick and said, “What’s the deal with that guy?”

“He’s kind of goofy,” Rick said, his eyes on the open folder in front of him. “But he brings in a lot of our funding.” He continued to read for a few seconds, then closed the folder and looked up. “So, we’ll send a car up next week?”

## SOMEWHERE IN MANAGUA

*A recreation of what was probably going on during this time in Nicaragua, based on my observations to the best of my ability:*

The sky seems farther away here. Clouds whirl towards the horizon like currents in a giant river. When you are away from the road, stop and listen. The sound of birds is almost overwhelming, for someone new. In the evenings they can sound like a cascade of falling metal, making it hard to think. You wouldn’t associate birds singing with

something so unpleasant, but it's true, it takes some getting used to. Then they begin to sound like birds again, serenading lovers, guarding their nests, calling out coordinates.

On the corner there is a restaurant. Crumbly concrete walls, faded yellow paint. On one front, there are no windows, just the words *Comedor Maritza* in blue cursive letters. On the other front, the wall is only four feet high, opening up onto an airy dining area with several round iron tables. At night, after closing, a heavy security grate rolls down and is padlocked to the top of the low wall.

At 5:00 in the morning a woman rolls up the grate and opens the restaurant for breakfast. She wears a black cotton dress with sleeves to her elbows. Her legs are shaved and she is wearing low-heeled black shoes with a strap in the back, the same shoes she wears to church. Her wet hair is combed straight back and held with bobby pins.

By 5:15 people are waiting for coffee. Mostly laborers on their way to the cane fields. In long flannel shirts, carrying machetes over their shoulders, their lunches in grain bags. They drink black coffee. One, maybe two cups. Maybe something to dip. A cookie or a *rosquilla*.

After they leave, the next wave arrives. Merchants, bank tellers, taxi drivers. She serves eggs and red beans, tortillas and avocados. Sometimes ham. She sends a boy out to get more oranges for juice. He runs barefoot out the back, splashing through gutters and ducking under clotheslines. When he reaches the bus stop there is a wooden cart filled with lumpy citrus, some of it already packed in clear plastic sacks. He buys two sacks. One in each hand, he menaces a bony dog that chases him all the way back to

*Comedor Maritza*. He gives the dog three stale tortillas. As it eats, the sun finally rises over the roof and comes through the trees, glinting off the tip of the dog's long, black tail.

## RUN FOR THE BORDER

We weren't really fugitives. Well, except Tom, but he was small potatoes. No one would be looking for him at the border.

I will say I was glad Tom was coming with us. Like me, he had made a rash decision. But like me, he was too old to deal with shit like lawyers and courts and prison. His heart was in the right place and all that. He wasn't a drug dealer. He outlined it all for me as we drove, basically non-stop, along the Gulf Coast and towards the border crossing at Laredo.

He told me, "Maybe I walk. Maybe I don't. But I don't have any reason to stick around and find out. I've got less than five years before my brain short circuits and I start talking to walls. I'm full of all kinds of crap. DDT, benzene, aluminum phosphate. I'm a wet sponge. You know, David, I haven't told anyone this. But twice I've driven into town and parked at the mall, only to forget why the hell I came. It's almost an hour drive, you know."

"I think we've all done that before," I said.

To which he said, "You can feel it, David. When it's coming, you can feel it." Then he broke off and didn't talk for a long time. The atmosphere in the cab was real heavy. It was serious. Tom wasn't going to ask to turn back. We were in it deep, and we were in it together.

I knew Tom was struggling a bit to come to terms with things right then, but still, I couldn't help but say a little prayer of thanks to God. For the companu. Is that dumb, to pray about stuff like that? Sasha would have certainly thought so. She called herself a rationalist. Boston-bred with a sharp American pride, brunette, a brisk talker, she couldn't imagine anyone bowing down and giving thanks for something so chancy. Not that she didn't believe in God, but she was like a deist in the Jefferson/Franklin tradition. God started the ball rolling and then stepped out back for a nightcap. What happens after that is up to us and the cosmos.

It was late afternoon on a Tuesday when we passed a sign that said U.S./MEXICO BORDER, PREPARE TO STOP. I craned my neck around to look in the back seat. Peter was asleep, his eye and nose twitching from some doggy dream. Diego was still strapped into his seatbelt, amazingly, and was playing contentedly with the action figures I had bought him at the Walgreen's a few stops back. A chiseled Indian with full headdress and oversized tomahawks, and some bionic surfer dude with a bazooka for an arm. He was making the same swooshy noises my kids used to make when they played with army men.

Tom was daydreaming out his window towards the pawn shops and dingy insurance brokers that cram the blocks leading up to the border. I nudged him. "Tom, listen, I need you to throw a blanket over Diego." I felt that familiar pinch of guilt again. Treating the boy like a piece of cargo. Tom leaned back and talked softly to Diego, getting him down on the floor behind the seat and arranging our sleeping bags and pillows over him haphazardly. He seemed to be fine as long as the action figures stayed in his hands.

“Shhhhhhh. *Ser tranquilo, ser tranquilo,*” Tom was saying. *Be still,* I guess.

There was no line at the border—at least twenty booths and only two were open. The asphalt highway widened into an expanse of oily concrete. A handful of vendors sat dejectedly on a shady curb to the right, their baskets on the ground overflowing with tortilla chips, cups of chopped melon, candied peanuts. Others had bundles of Mexican blankets and T-shirts with beer logos draped over their laps. They watched us creeping towards the farther booth and didn’t even make an effort to approach us.

The Mexican man at our booth was dressed in a green uniform with large, official patches on the shoulders. His stiff hat with the small, black vinyl bill practically floated on top of his head. I rolled the window down and tried a casual smile, something that said, *I’m back for the umpteenth time, just a regular old border rat that’s me.*

The booth man said, “Coming from Minnesota, eh?” His English was clear, if slightly spiced. His mustache obscured his top lip when he talked so I was having difficulty gauging how friendly this inquiry was. I had forgotten about the license plates. How many people from Minnesota just bop down for a quick jaunt into Mexico? My original story about a shopping trip seemed suddenly incongruous. Or did this guy even care? He probably saw hundreds of license plates from dozens of states every day. Still, I concocted another explanation on the spot.

“Yeah, we’re a long way from home. Just chasing the sun. Gonna do some fishing, drink some tequila. We like it down here.”

I sound like a bloated, grinning ass-face, I thought. He probably thinks we’re going to hit up the whorehouses while we’re at it. I swallowed my pride. It was, after all, probably best that he thought that way. Just two more stupid Americans getting their

kicks in the fabled land south of the Border. *Ain't no God in Mexico*, Waylon Jennings once sang.

Now the booth man was peering into the truck bed, jostling our bags.

“Where are your fishing poles?” he asked nonchalantly. I still didn’t know how to read these questions. Small talk? Just harmless, obligatory prying? How serious is this test? All I had to do was come up with a reason, but I was forming sweat beads under my eyes and over my brow.

“We’re going to use the ones on the boat. We’re going with a company,” I said, still trying to smile normally.

“Oh yeah, deep sea fishing? Where at?” Now he was looking in the windows. Right at the pile of bedding where Diego must have been sweltering underneath. If the boy so much as stuck a hand out where the agent could see it, we were in for a long, long day. I tried to think of any Mexican geography that had ever entered my thick skull.

The border agent was still waiting for an answer. He had turned away from the back window and was now facing me. His mustache was still drooping, his lips pursed at an ambiguous angle. I knew I had to say something so I just started to talk: “Ahh, well, we’re going back to our usual spot. Going back to . . . the . . . sea . . .” I was trailing off. Alarms were going off in strange places, red lights, bootsteps, it was only a matter of time. I looked at Tom. He was steadying himself against the dashboard, pale as moonlight, looking back at me with a quizzical half-smile. Human taxidermy.

“The Sea of Cortez?”

I snapped back to attention at this last question. The booth man was still looking at me with his measured stare, a practiced expression of waiting on his brown, rough-skinned face.

“Yes,” I joined in with last-ditch gusto. “The Sea of Cortez. It’s wonderful this time of year.”

I could only hope it wasn’t a trick question. I tried to feel the Sea of Cortez like it was my home away from home. Tried to picture its coarse, white beaches and warm inlets. Tried to shoot this feeling out my eyes towards the booth man. No matter where we end up after this, I decided, I do have to visit the Sea of Cortez.

“It *is* wonderful,” said the booth man. He made some marks on a weathered clipboard. “Enjoy.”

And he waved us through.

When we couldn’t see the border anymore I reached back and pulled the sleeping bags off of Diego. He was asleep, his head and collar soaked with sweat. The thing was, though, his legs had been sticking out the whole time—his bare knees, his shoes and socks.

All I could do was say another prayer.

## CLOUD WATCHING

When I was a kid I got scarlet fever. My mother told me I was in bed for two weeks. I thought I had only been sick for a few days. I remember staring at the ceiling for hours at that chalky plaster, textured so it looked like fake snow. I would see things

in the ceiling. A horse, a face, Bugs Bunny. It was like cloud watching. I didn't want to move, took too much effort. Just lay there, holding my blue quilt to my chin and feeling myself sink deeper into the moist sheets. Occasionally my mother would come in and force a white pill into my mouth while my brother Joseph propped my head up. This went on for two weeks. Two weeks. They tell me I came close to passing over. "I could never tell if you were breathing or not," my mother said.

The first few days in Mexico were kind of like scarlet fever. I really don't remember much. Just flashes of images—the desert, two lanes of broken highway, the shantytowns of tarp and cardboard, and gas stations with green logos (I would later make the connection that these were Pemex stations, the official gas company of Mexico).

Maybe the border spooked us. Maybe we just didn't know what else to do, strangers in a strange land, but we just drove. Drove south, hardly stopping to eat. What did we eat? I don't even know. I'm pretty sure I drank enough Coca-Cola to kill most mortals. I do remember taking a leak on the side of the road and getting swarmed by red ants. *Welcome to Mexico!* they were saying as they chomped down on my flabby legs. If only I had been a little quicker, I probably could have picked them off with my acidic piss. I ripped off my shorts and waved them around like a surrender flag, swatting at ants as the bites began to harden and turn white. I remember Tom laughing. And I remember being grateful for the laughter.

We were on a toll road with few exits, few cars, and a lot of *policia*. For much of the time it was easy to imagine we were still in Texas. At some point, Tom located us on the gas station map. Almost 400 miles in and approaching La Paz, not La Paz in Baja, a different one.

Diego had taken to staring out the window for long periods of time. He and Peter. I don't know what we would have done without Peter. We wouldn't have had to smell his fetid breath filling the cab on hot afternoons. But it was a small price to pay for his expertise. Neither Tom nor I were acting like much more than a provider for Diego. I because of guilt (I'm ashamed to say it, so selfish, so indulgent) and Tom, well, because he didn't know how.

But Peter, he was like a canine Mary Poppins. When Diego cried, Peter nuzzled him. When he became listless, Peter became playful, barking and sticking his tail in the air. It felt like I was living in a Disney film. Throw animals and children together on a continental voyage of epic proportions and watch the magic happen. Peter was a saint in dog's fur. Truly.

## TWO OR THREE THINGS

Two things happened when we got to La Paz that threw us out of our semi-hypnotic nomad state. Actually three things.

The first one happened just outside of La Paz. We were winding down from the a high pass in the Sierra Madre Oriental mountains, and I cannot emphasize how precarious the road had become. Narrow is a bland word. Dirty brown cliffs dotted with cactus and scrub pine, plummeting towards the craggy valleys below, and all this just feet away from our tires on both sides of the road. Diego had stopped looking out the window. Peter pretended to snooze but couldn't stop shifting from side to side. We were all praying, wishing, whatever, to touch down again on flat ground when a semi clipped a curve and

took Bully's driver's side mirror clean off. Literally sliced it off. Whistle and watch as it sails 3000 feet to the canyon floor.

For that split second I thought we were dead. Falling with grace to a twisted end. When I realized what had happened, I had to push another lump back down my throat. It's an emotional thing to stand down death.

The second thing that happened was that we got a ticket for running a stop sign. Could have sworn on my life there was no stop sign, but saying this in our broken Spanglish made the policeman visibly irritated. He kept telling us to go back and look at it ourselves. Well, we did, and it was there—completely hidden behind thick, low-hanging tree branches. But that didn't change the fact that we had a choice between paying the ticket on the spot and a court date for two weeks later. A court date! There was no way we were going to stick around for two weeks in this damn town. But we didn't want to be under condemnation in two countries at the same time. We paid it, on the spot.

I tried to be generous with my judgment, but come on, this was too cliché. Crooked cops, helpless tourists. It's everything you hear about, but aren't supposed to believe because it's politically correct to think that all countries are created equal. No. All people are created equal, all bureaucracies aren't. It's a systemic thing, not a race thing, I realize that. Hell, maybe I would have done the same thing. But it's not as if the guy's going to just take the money back to the courthouse and stick it in the coffer so some other low-ranking magistrate can put it towards a new car.

“We did run the stop sign,” Tom said as we drove away.

He was right. We did. What did I care what happened to the money? Maybe he'll use it to buy groceries. Still, the whole experience was deflating.

We pulled into a Pemex and drank more Coke while Diego and Peter played on a weedy patch of dirt next to the road. I was so exhausted I didn't care what anyone thought, wasn't afraid of what anyone would say. *He's my son*, I'd say if anyone asked, *how dare you insult us*.

And that's when the third, most maddening thing happened that would change our course that day. It was unbearably hot and we had left the doors to the truck open while we sat nearby. The gas hose was still sticking out of the tank. It had stopped pumping minutes before, but on a lethargic afternoon no one was pulling in behind us. A smiling station attendant with a crisp, white, short-sleeve shirt and matching pants approached the car and waved as he removed the nozzle from the tank and screwed the cap back on. "Gracias," we said several times. After a few more minutes we packed up and got in the car. My wallet was missing. I had put it in the side pocket on the driver's side door, along with some maps and tapes and other junk. I fished around, got down and practically crawled under the truck, looked in all our bags, under the seats, near the road where we were sitting. Finally, I let my worst suspicions take hold. It was stolen. I had just used it to pay for gas and drinks and now it was gone. The young man who had replaced our gas cap was nowhere to be seen.

We tried talking to the other attendant working the cash register inside. Communication was impossible, he didn't understand or didn't want to. The feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, fear and rage that arise at times like this were magnified by the culture shock, the language barrier, all that. It's the feeling of being socked in the gut

while you're not looking. Here I was in Mexico, barely across the border relatively speaking, and already I had lost everything. I mean, it seemed like everything. I had cleaned out my checking account at an ATM in Houston. 640 dollars cash. My credit cards, gone. Driver's license, gone. And my pride too. I was a wad of chewing gum on some gas boy's shoe.

The cash register man was raising his shoulders up and shaking his head. We were about to drive away when Tom came running back to the car from the bathroom.

He said, "David, I think he's in the bathroom."

I said, "Did you see him?"

"No, no, I couldn't get in, it's locked," Tom said. He was short of breath. "I turned the knob and I heard someone moving around. Quickly, you know, not like they were just in there washing up, and then it was quiet. Whoever it is isn't coming out."

"It's gotta be him," I said. Hand on head, I paced to the pump and back.

Tom was wild-eyed. "We could bust down the door," he said. "It's just particle board."

"We've got to tell the guy inside," I said, not wanting to become a vigilante just yet. Tom snorted. "We've got to try," I said.

Just then, if you can believe it, a police car, the same guy who ticketed us, pulled in. We motioned to him and he got out. I nodded at Tom.

"We . . . *robar. Nos robo*," Tom said, trying to be calm. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, where it had been resting safe and sound, and pointed at it, then at me, then at the bathroom. "He stole it," Tom said. "Gas boy. *El chico de gas, roba, robar.*"

The policeman understood us. I know he did, no question. He looked at me and then at the bathroom. He tried to get Tom to repeat what he had said, giving amused and bewildered looks, but in the end he had to know. We practically dragged him over to the bathroom door, knocked, listened. Then he knocked and listened.

“*Lo siento,*” he said. I’m sorry. “*No hay nadie.*” There isn’t anybody.

We begged. We bordered on belligerence. We asked him to ask the cash register guy to unlock the door. He gave us another amused look and went inside. The two talked in rapid Spanish for about a minute, then the cop turned to us, his large upper body rotating around like a crane, and tried to relay it for us in English.

“Hee says, ummm, broken,” he said. I swore and rolled my eyes, because I knew that we were getting panned. “*El bano,*” the cop continued, “no work . . . ees broken.”

We cut our losses. No use pushing the thing to the edge for some money and plastic.

“Let’s go find a pay phone somewhere else,” I told Tom. “I need to cancel those cards.”

The cop gave us that familiar shrug and apologized, somewhat sincerely. It didn’t matter. We were steamed, and a little afraid. The question in our minds, unspoken, was whether or not we could hold our own on the road down here. We were both sour, tight-mouthed and exhaling forcefully out of our noses, you know how you do when you get all worked up.

“Unbelievable,” Tom kept saying as we rolled past tireyards and painted cinderblock houses with window bars. I agreed completely. *What are we doing here,* I thought. *We need a new game plan.*

## DETOUR

So there we were, still stinging from our spate of bad fortune, parked outside a supermarket, Gigante was the name of the store, and I had just hung up with the credit card company and the bank. I still had a few thousand dollars in a savings account, but wasn't sure how to get it out. I could transfer it into a new checking account—I didn't want to risk putting it back in the old one now that my ATM card was gone—but with a new account I would need new checks and card and I obviously had no place for them to send that crap to. We needed to settle somewhere for a day or two and work things out.

I got back in the truck where Tom had been studying the map. I slammed the door and leaned forward on the steering wheel, my forehead sticking slightly to the worn rubber, worn by years of gripping and dirt and skin oils.

“David, I've been looking at the map,” Tom started to say.

A police truck drove down the aisle in front of us. Two young men sat on the wheel wells in the back, each holding a shiny machine gun.

Tom said, “I've got some ideas.”

In short, Tom had seen a town on the map called Real de Catorce only a short distance west from La Paz. He said it was a tiny ex-mining town, it had become somewhat legendary among backpacking tourists for its exotic ghost town charm and status as a peyote-gathering site for Huichol Indians. Tom knew this, believe it or not, because he actually knew someone in Real de Catorce: an old peacenik named Frank Voila.

Tom had met Frank, of all places, in a riverboat gambling hall in Mississippi. Tom was with some old friends on a pleasure cruise. He and Frank were both holding whiskey sours and were both going in backwards for the same barstool. They bumped rumps, apologized, laughed that they were both wearing turquoise bracelets and carrying the same drink. Thirty minutes later, Tom had found out that Frank was on his way back to Mexico from visiting family in Detroit and had always wanted to float the river. Lived in a tiny old mining town in the Sierra Madres, he said, called Real de Catorce. Tom remembered the name because he thought it odd, *Royal of 14* literally translated. Here was another eccentric ex-pat who wanted to forge a simpler life, walk the ancient paths, keep living the dream, if you will. Frank said he lived in an adobe house in the shadow of deserted silver mines, sipped fresh coffee in the morning silence, clouds shrouding the barren peaks, and traveled by *burro*. Very romantic. Tom gathered, but was never told directly, that Frank made a living hosting young, hip adventurers looking for the authentic *peyote experience*.

“You can tell the ones who have done a lot of psychedelics,” Tom said. “They live with one foot somewhere else. Not always a good thing.”

## MAGIC MOUNTAIN

We figured we could use some advice.

I told Tom, “If this guy has been living in Mexico for this long, he can tell us what roads to take, what places to stay.”

Tom said, “Yeah, maybe. We should at least go check it out. It’s pretty weird that we ended up so close to this place.” Not just close, real close. Maybe 15 miles on a clothesline.

“Divine providence?” I said to Tom with a nudge.

Tom coughed, wiped his nose. “Ha ha,” he said dryly. “Maybe bad karma.” He paused and then said, “Maybe good karma, I don’t know. Is fate divine?”

I looked back at Diego eating an avocado. He was stuffing it in his mouth and letting Peter lick it off his fingers. I cringed, but only because I had known Peter longer and seen what kind of things he put in his mouth. On the seat next to them was a stack of fresh corn tortillas wrapped in white paper, only about 50 cents American. The two of them had probably eaten twenty in less than five minutes; I’m sure Peter had more than his share. It was easy to eat well down here. Back in Minnesota I felt like I had to save for months just make a little guacamole for the Superbowl.

The best way to get to Real de Catorce was to take a bus from a town called Matehuala. We had finally bought a guide book at the supermarket, a big fat one, in English, with blurbs from *The New York Times* and whatnot. Tom bought it. He was pretty much paying for everything right at the moment. The book said to start at the cathedral in Matehuala, walk one block up Hidalgo, left on Guerrero, then walk two blocks to Mendez. We parked Bully on a street behind the cathedral and got our bags. Diego carried one of the sleeping bags and I tied the other one onto Peter’s back just for fun. We must have been a sight trekking to the bus station.

When the bus left I could see why you weren’t supposed to drive to Real de Catorce. It was like a bad version of the road we almost got knocked off of before La

Paz. Steep grades, crumbling shoulders, hairpin turns. It was like a roller coaster in slow motion, which made it even scarier because you could see each potential catastrophe coming from a mile away. But the kicker, the absolute polish on the potato, was when we had to get off the bus and into another smaller, shorter bus in order to get through the tunnel that would deliver us to our fabled destination. I'm surprised we didn't have to ride in mine cart.

When we did emerge from the darkness, however, we were paid in full with a spectacle from another age. It was everything Frank said it was, stunning and eerie at the same time. The guide book told the tale of a booming mining operation, thousands of residents, then the Mexican revolution, bloodshed, natural disasters, flooding, the abandonment of the town, and the resulting frozen-in-time feeling of the place. The cobblestone streets remained but were in disrepair. Rusted-out mining equipment rested under thorny bushes and piles of broken rock. Still, the place seemed to be making a comeback. People walked the streets. I saw a few young couples, hairy as all get-out, huge nylon backpacks stuffed to capacity with water bottles and hiking boots hanging off. A bulky, chalk-white cathedral, The Parish of the Immaculate Conception, dominated the townscape. Our bus stopped in front of a freshly painted café that advertised JUICES FRESH FRUIT SMOOTHIES LICUADOS in a garish pink script.

When we got off we were met by a woman selling candles. Her hair was gray and thick, coarse like grass. It was pulled back in a ponytail. She may have been fifty, but her skin had a younger quality to it, wrinkled, yes, but beautiful like an old tree is beautiful—solid, twisted branches tell the tale of a thousand moons, rain and sun. She had a low wagon cart and she was kneeling behind it on a broom head, with a gap-

toothed grin, beckoning us to buy. I looked in the cart. In addition to candles, she had several pictures of a Catholic saint, different prints but the same saint. Each of them was set in a crude wooden frame, certainly handmade and held together by cast iron tacks. One of them was the exact same picture I had seen as a sticker on the roof of the second bus. It was a portrait of a man with a friar haircut, bald on top with the ring of scalloped hair all the way around, wearing a brown robe tied with a white rope around the waist. His hands were wrapped in gauze. Two thin segments of mustache seemed to grow out of each nostril, brushing the corners of his mouth and ending in fine points that were even with the top of the rounded cleft of his chin. The mustache made him look almost Oriental, like he should be holding a samurai sword. The face itself was expressionless except that his eyebrows were slightly raised, eyes looking straight ahead, giving him a look of almost bored anticipation, like *Can I move yet, I have meditation at 5 and then a whole lot of good works to perform?* A gold disc, obviously a halo, framed his head, and he was covered with birds: on his shoulders, on his forearm, and a gray one with a peach throat perched on his piously posed right hand. In the foreground was the largest bird, some kind of horned owl, sitting in the saint's cupped left hand with its back to the viewer, but its head twisting around almost 180 degrees to face forward, and its round yellow eyes looking, like its master's, straight out. Even today, when I look at the scene, I'm convinced that owl knows something.

I pointed to the pictures. "Saint," I said several times. "Saint?" and I raised my eyebrows, left my mouth open.

"Francisco," said the woman, nodding and pointing. She said something in Spanish. Tom said she was telling us that Saint Francis was the patron saint of the

village. Saint Francis of Assisi. I had heard the name but had no idea what he did, and neither did Tom. Miracles, probably, that's a requirement. And he seemed to be friendly with animals, especially birds. When I pointed out the animal motif, Tom said he remembered singing a hymn as a kid that he swore was written by Assisi. Something about the Creation and hallelujah.

I whispered to Tom, "I need one of those pictures."

"Need?" he asked more loudly than I would have liked. Surely the woman understood enough English to know the word "need" and what it implied as far as pricing.

"I'll pay you back," I said. "Can we get it?"

Tom said, "You're like a little kid," as he took out his wallet. "Do you think Diego wants one too?"

I started to say I didn't know when Tom shoved a five in my hand and hissed, "Kidding."

I bought the picture of Saint Francis and stuffed it in the top of my duffel. That's when I noticed Diego. He was standing, his arms slack at his sides, and staring at the candle woman. She was smiling at him, a real smile, not her selling smile. Diego waved at her, the first time I had seen him do that, a limp-wristed wave with his hand over his head. The valves in my heart swung open and let the blood rush out like a surging tide. Suddenly I was breathing deep. I think it was the first time I had seen Diego truly acknowledge another person, besides Peter, who might qualify as a person but not really. The thought came to me that the boy knew where he was. Not the name on a map, but he knew who he was looking at. His grandmother, his aunt. His mom.

In the frantic hustle of the road, I had been starting to keep a fairly safe distance between me and the immediate past, between me and the raw memory of that night. I was living in the moment, chatting with Tom, treating Diego like a grandchild along for the ride. Our purpose, our destination, of course, was a ghost in the mirror. But it had been easier to ignore.

Not then, not at that moment. I turned around and faced the road, and pretended to gesture in awe at the ring of cactus-studded peaks surrounding us, so no one would see my face puckering and turning red as I fought back the tears.

#### HURLY-BURLY HANDSOME

I married Sasha on a cool day in September. An hour before the ceremony, she asked me to shave. That's just how she was: demanding in a way that made you love her all the more. She had an eye for shapes and colors, and once she decided something wasn't right, that was it. Take the curtains down, put another pair of shoes on, and call the painter back, he mixed in too much white.

To some we were a strange pair. She was big city educated, Catholic school in Chicago, born to immigrant parents, Moravians, her father a famous clockmaker and her mother a pale aristocrat. They came to Chicago looking for excitement and freedom, always holding out the possibility of returning to the old country once things with the government straightened out. Things didn't straighten out, of course, until the 80's when they were long since dead, resting gracefully under a limestone obelisk in a Berwyn cemetery.

Sasha's mother always told her that she married below herself. I'm not sure if her mother ever got over the fact that in America they didn't have enough money to hire servants. She, Sasha's mother, hated to cook, yet every night the dinner table looked like a still life, with crystal goblets and gilded china, exquisite looking grapes, apples, cheese, and sometimes a large, dead animal in the center. A goose. A lamb. A lobster. I was surprised never to find her husband's bloated head in the center spot, a basted plum crammed into his mouth. Sasha's mother liked to act as if she had been dragged off her velvet pincushion by Sasha's father and thrown in the cargo hold of an ocean liner.

"Aii Sasha," she would say over afternoon tea, "if we were home, I would take you to a show. These barbarians here, they don't know what the word 'symphony' means. I played the cello. How can I play the cello here? They chop down a pine tree and call it a cello. There's no music here. How can I hear the music when I live in a glass tower? When *he* brought me here, I cried for two years. You don't know that."

To her mother, I was one of the barbarians. Never directly did she criticize me, she was too well-mannered for that, but I'm sure her mother's displeasure was, for Sasha, part of my appeal.

Her father was somewhat more curious about my real American background. To him I was John Wayne and he often invited me into the parlor after his wife had gone to bed.

"David," he would say in a thick Slavic brogue. I don't think I ever liked my name so much as when he said it. It was like melted butter on a thick piece of black rye. "David, tell me about Minnesota." For him, Minnesota was like Nevada, the wild frontier.

“What do you want to know?”

“How did you get the bulls to make more cows?”

He was fascinated with the subject of animal husbandry. I explained the process of artificial insemination to him many times, and each time he laughed like an 8<sup>th</sup> grader in science class, holding his hands under his belly as it threatened to burst out of its flannel prison, all the while interjecting with interested, sophisticated mmms and ah-huhs.

We were married for 15 years, Sasha and I. A relatively short time. Not long after we met, I heard her describe me to a girlfriend as “hurly-burly handsome,” a rather exotic description if you ask me. Not that our relationship didn’t go any deeper than her slender hips and my iron jaw line—our life together was an awakening, an affair to remember, blood sweat and tears—but it is obvious to me now that she never intended to follow me very far. And I never intended to stay in Chicago. She’s not her mother, not inclined to take comfort in a stuffy pretentiousness, but there was too much pure blood in her. She wanted a table with a view. I just wanted the view.

## EL FRANKO

It wasn’t hard to find Frank. Or at least a trace of Frank. El Franko, the villagers called him.

He was obviously friendly with people in town, but there was a peculiarity to the way people talked about him. Like he was a rain cloud or a mountain lion.

“Oh, yes, El Franko. He comes around.” Around where? “El Franko, he sits up on the rock by the mine shaft.” He sits? Like what, a Buddha? Doesn’t he live in a house?

We found our way to the mine shaft, one of them, a half a mile up a burro trail. There was a house about 30 yards in front of the gaping entrance, with gray mud walls and a roof of corrugated tin. It was Frank’s house, but Frank wasn’t there. His door was locked, pointlessly I thought, with one of those mini-padlocks that people put on their suitcases. We could see, through a window too small to crawl through, actually it was more like a ventilation hole, that Frank slept on a wide hammock and cooked on a traditional mud stove with a heavy iron skillet. The fire was completely out, no smoldering coals, no firewood stacked nearby. The floor was dirt, but looked freshly swept. At the base of the stove we saw an open bag of salt and a couple tin mugs.

We also saw what must have been the infamous rock where Frank apparently perched during the day like a scraggly guru, waiting for starry-eyed vision seekers and bored villagers to come and bring him libations. I almost laughed trying to picture it. But that didn’t stop me from climbing to the crest of the egg-shaped boulder and sitting cross-legged, of course, because it was the most comfortable position. I looked down at Tom and Diego and Peter below, and waved.

And Diego waved back.

It was an unexpected moment, with me waving harder and breaking out in an unbridled lunge of gladness that almost sent me toppling off the rock, and Diego just looking at me, his face calm and steady, mouth set softly on a flat line, and his stare meeting mine for several long seconds, a long-awaited look of recognition that said, in

essence, that he had accepted me as a part of his life. In his own childish way, according to his own logic, however circuitous or unknown to me, he was beginning to emerge from the protective capsule he had been living in since the accident. Provided by angels or nature, I don't know, but it really was like he was stepping into the world again, not as an innocent, but as a survivor, scarred and wise, still vulnerable, but watched over. I saw a vitality that had been absent. I was beginning to see Diego: a boy that would become a man someday.

Is that too dramatic? I don't know. To me, it was a gift. That single experience, it was an brief antidote to the some of the gnawing sadness inherent in this strange, uncertain journey. It was an affirmation, if still incomplete and addled with guilt. It was hope.

It seemed strange that Frank could have left town without anyone knowing.

We returned to town and asked again at the *Mil Amores Cantina*. The place was owned by one of the oddest people I ever saw: an obese Mexican transvestite named Senor Bu (as in BOO), who wore excessive eye makeup and a talked in a low whale voice that could rattle the glass chandelier over the bar. Senor Bu seemed like someone who would know Frank. He did, but didn't even know Frank had gone. He invited us to ask around.

So we did, but no one could give us an answer until a cook overheard us trying to ask an old Indian at the bar, a prune-faced guy who obviously didn't speak Spanish and was staring at us with dark, watery eyes. "El Franko?" the cook shouted over his sizzling grill. "Hees een Mazatlan."

“Mazatlan, where’s that?” we asked together.

“*En la costa*,” he said. The coast. He had gone to the coast, and we were practically in the middle of the country.

Why was he on the coast? Again, no one knew, except the cook who said he thought he owned a hotel there. Or something like that. The idea of El Franko owning a hotel on the beach seemed patently ridiculous to me, even though I had never met the guy. “Yeah, he just left his mud hut in the mountains to go check on his multi-million dollar investment 400 miles away.” Then again, what if Frank Voila was crazy *and* rich, not an uncommon combination I suppose. What if he did own a hotel at a major tourist destination? He really would be someone we needed to know.

We left for the coast that night, in pursuit of the elusive El Franko.

## THE PARISH

After we decided to leave, but before we got back on the short bus to Matehuala, I persuaded Tom to visit the church. It was something I had to do. In my former life, I wouldn’t have thought of stepping into a church other than to admire the architecture, which I could usually do comfortably outside. But I was operating on instinct now. Sasha would have laughed and then accompanied me inside, feigning interest and sarcastically admiring what she called “Jesus kitsch.” My mother probably would have told me I was wasting my time. She was a Lutheran by birth, and didn’t return to church after my father died. She told me, “Some folks got a good imagination, think they can know what it’s like up there,” and she pointed towards heaven. “Truth is, nobody knows,

son. You think God, or whoever, needs me, Cora Lynne Crumm, to worship him in a rotten old church? No sir, he ain't that insecure. Either way, I'm gonna die someday, so I'll just wait and see when I get there."

I had developed one of those imaginations my mother claimed not to have. I wanted to go in the church because I imagined the possibility of something inside, something more than the artwork and gothic arches. I believed in inspiration, and nobody was around to make me feel foolish about it. Not even Tom, who tried to be rational, but was an admitted sucker for the occasional epiphany while magic carpet riding. "They come from somewhere," he said. "It's more than just drug-induced schizophrenia, I know the difference, trust me. You can never force it, though. It just happens. It's like a part of my brain has opened up that I never even knew was there." I agreed with him.

The church of the Immaculate Conception was, like I said, the biggest building in town. A main attraction for pilgrims and the curious. The main altar was devoted to Christ and his mother, but even more popular, of course, was a side altar with a statue of St. Francis. If I live to be a million years old, I will never forget the room to the left of that altar.

It was a room covered wall to wall with scraps of sheet metal, all of them painted with a picture and a dedication to St. Francis for some miracle performed. I couldn't decide if it looked like a calculated installation of folk art or a kindergarten open house. Padre Domingo, a short priest in a robe like St. Francis's, explained to us in broken English that some were painted by artists in town who make a living off of their commission. Others were done by the faithful themselves; I liked them the best. There were narrow escapes, unlikely healings, children found and pets brought back to life. I

saw a produce truck hovering off a cliff, a field of cattle being watched over by a man in a cloud, a family holding hands. St. Francis himself was often featured in the paintings, a glowing crown topping his holy head. And the inscriptions dated back to the 1940s. Tom could translate them more or less accurately with a little help from the Padre. I remember one that said: *I give thanks to San Francisco and our Lord for giving my wife two more weeks to live after she was dead from drowning in the mine, trying to save our daughter.* There was a power in that room. The combined effect of a thousand answered prayers. I wanted to add my name to the tableau of devotion, wanted to wring a miracle out of the air and force it, squirming, into my pocket.

Padre Domingo must have seen the desperation in the way I stood planted in the center of the room, my knees ready to fold. And he must have known, in the way he stooped down and looked Diego in the eyes, holding Diego's hand firmly between his palms, that the boy was the reason we were there.

"You look like you want a blessing," he said to Tom, who had been translating as we made small talk about the room. He turned to me after saying this. I nodded.

"Well," he said, "how about this? If you would like, you can take with you any of these paintings that is dated before 1960."

"How can we just take one?" asked Tom. "People put these up here for St. Francis."

Domingo smiled like priests do in old movies. Infinite compassion, and a steadiness gained from trying to rein in all those carnal desires. I was glad I wasn't a priest, but liked to think that I could have been. Again, Sasha would have laughed. And she would have been right about the self-deception. It's hard for me to believe that

anyone could truly live like that, not unless the Catholics had invented a process for leaching all the testosterone out of a man's system. Still, I liked the priest. He was what he was, a man who wanted to believe.

“We wish we could keep them all but we don't have enough room,” the priest said. “We have a stack already waiting to go up.”

Tom's painting reads: *Our blessed Lord and his servant St. Francis. Thank you for curing my goat when he was sick from a bloody cough. Humbly, Santos Benavides, third house, near the ceiba Gigante, Municipio de Talanga, Honduras*

Here is the message on the painting that I chose. Tom found it high up on the far wall, and as soon as he started deciphering it I knew I would take it. It has a picture of St. Francis on a throne with an ornate collar on his black robe. A separate scene shows a man on a horse, a tile-roofed town behind him and rolling gray hills behind it. A boy is praying on his knees off to the side. The words are printed clearly in capital letters:

*Lucas Games entrusted his son, Felix, 6 years old, to our Lord and to Saint Francis of Assisi. Felix was missing one morning, and they called to Saint Francis. Having found him on the road, a man picked him up and took him home. He was lost 18 hours. His parents marveled and were full of happiness at this apparent miracle, and so dedicated this humble retablo. June 15, 1956, Pozas de Santa Ana, Municipio de Guadalcazar, San Luis Potosi*

## THE PACIFIC SIDE

The shore of Lake Michigan is pleasant enough. There's sand, water, even waves sometimes. We—Sasha and I—went there often during the summer to picnic on our bath towels. The kids threw things at the gulls and I fished. Sasha smoked menthols and wore a headscarf. She had these big, brown sunglasses and when the wind blew her bangs across her forehead she looked like a magazine ad.

But we didn't swim, not really. Sure, people got in and cooled off on really hot days, but swimming was something you did at the YMCA, for exercise.

The first thing I noticed when we got to Mazatlan was all the people in the ocean. Hundreds of heads silhouetted against the sparkling blue expanse, people just standing in the water like flamingos.

“Man, I can't wait to jump in there,” Tom said. “Ride some waves,” he added while making a goofy hand signal and sounding, in my opinion, like an old fart trying to smell young again. I tried to imagine it and felt pity for him, a grown man on a slab of foam getting pummeled by the surf. He said, “It's about time we worked on your tan a bit, big man.”

“No thanks. Not a chance I'm taking off my shirt,” I said. Not that I cared what people saw—mine is a run-of-the-mill gut, soft and saggy, nothing the people there didn't see everyday—but the few times I've laid about in naked view of the burning orb called “sun” I've ended up with throbbing sunburns, no matter what lotions I slather on, no matter how conscientious I am about the heat. I'm no beach bum, and I have no pigmentation in my skin. What would I need a tan for, getting chicks?

Though finding love was the last thing on my mind, I sensed that Tom was considering the possibilities—maybe an exotic lover looking for a *gringo* gravy train; or maybe a single American woman sipping margaritas in her bikini, living it up after an unexpected divorce—as he flirted with a desk matron, a chesty Mexican woman whose fluent English was seductively accented with soft “i”s and sharp “e”s, and who worked at one of the first major hotels we came to on the tourist strip. It surprised me. Never married, Tom had sort of given up on relationships a few years ago. He knew most of the women in his area in Florida, and dating in general had become sort of a drill for him—“you, me, a couple of drinks, and a whole lot of dirty laundry to air.” He didn’t want to get married, felt like he was too old and “quirky” for that, and he had already been a father: he had one child with his college girlfriend, a daughter, Flora, now in her 30’s, who lived in Santa Monica with her DA husband. He and Flora talked several times a year, but the husband didn’t like Tom, always suspected him for his rogue lifestyle and unanchored past, and it had been almost five years since they saw each other.

Tom wasn’t an unattractive man—six feet tall, trim, lots of hair. In his day he was a meaty guy, played a lot of baseball, and had these amazing forearms like Popeye. He had gotten skinny (that seems counterintuitive), but still moved with a raw energy, almost like a crab, limbs driving and bending. Women, older women, seemed to notice him. But, if he was to be believed, his body was outlasting the strength in his mind, an observation both strangely positive and cruelly glum. That he saw this trip as a kind of ride into the sunset was beginning to become clear. Why not find a woman to love? This was the place to do it: no past, no future, just his looks and charm and nothing to lose.

## EL GALLO DORADO

Believe it or not, it didn't take us long to find Frank Voila. We just drove down the beachfront and asked at every hotel we saw. It did take all day, in between taco breaks and Tom and Diego dipping in the unbelievable pool complex at the El Cid Megaresort. (We're talking three interconnected lagoons with waterfalls, slides, swim-up bars, and a snaking line of lounge chairs four rows deep, almost all of them draped with a giant orange hotel towel and/or oily pink tourist.) As usual, Peter had to wait in the truck. Once, we tied him up to a shade tree in front of a construction site where the workers fed him corn on the cob and mangoes. He loves mangoes now, oddly enough, and will bite his own ass for a slice.

After about twelve or thirteen hotels we came to a place called El Gallo Dorado. *The Golden Rooster*. It was about ten stories high, the entire thing painted a deep purplish-blue with magenta trim around the windows. In front was a tidy courtyard of turf grass cropped like a putting green, with two fountains—made of colorful tile fragments—placed on either side of the central walkway, some small palm trees, and, appropriately, a golden statue of a five-foot tall rooster in mid-call. The statue appeared to be made of plaster and spray-painted, and I remember feeling satisfied that it wasn't made of gilded bronze or something—it was appropriately friendly and informal. A doorman waited by the glass entryway, but he wasn't decked out in tassels and a cupcake hat, just slacks and a blue denim shirt with an embroidered rooster. The overall effect was inviting, if unimpressive compared to many of the larger hotels on the boulevard. If El Franko owned a hotel, it might look something like this.

*If* he owned a hotel. You figure a hotel owner wouldn't be out planting marigolds by the pool. But that's exactly where we found Frank, in his overalls, bending over a sandy flowerbed, sweating profusely. "Frank Voo-i-la?" the receptionist had repeated after a bewildered pause. You'd figure the owner's name would be instantly recognized by his employees. But of course, Frank wasn't the owner. Wasn't even a manager. Frank Voila, El Franko, was the 50-year-old nephew of the owner and a proud member of the grounds crew.

"You look familiar," Frank said as we walked up. Tom reminded him of the riverboat connection and then, since Frank seemed lost for words, proceeded to explain the entire situation before I could really react. It wasn't until he was getting to the part where we went searching in Real de Catorce that I started to wonder if we should be telling Frank so much. We had made finding him an impromptu part of our fraught adventure, but we didn't even know him. Too late. Frank, for his part, appeared to listen, without interrupting or even moving. He rested on his hands and knees, staring at the black brick of the path beneath him. When Tom finished Frank sat back on his heels and looked us over, like he was evaluating us according to a rubric in his mind. *Appear harmless, check. Kid from story, check. No dog, hmmm. Overall, though, it seems to add up. What the hell, we'll talk it over at dinner.*

"You know," he said to Tom, "I knew I brushed fate when we bumped into each other that night. I got that voodoo vibe, like we were just acting with a script, you know. I'm not even surprised to see you again." *OK, I thought, weird, but better than expected. He's already accepted us as part of the cosmic karma that directs his life.*

Actually, apart from the “voodoo vibe,” Frank was a lot more normal than I imagined. I could tell right away from the way he planted flowers: confidently plunging the spade into the dirt, twisting it deftly to open up a shallow hole, then grabbing the plant, breaking up the roots slightly and situating it before dirt slid back into the hole. The dirt would fall around the roots, he’d smooth it out in one circular motion with the edge of the spade, and done. No packing with his fingertips, no tugging at the stem. Anyone who could work a garden like that was more than an overgrown burnout. Frank had a deeper past.

That night, over carne asada at the hotel restaurant, we learned that Frank grew up in Flint, Michigan. His dad and uncles worked in the car plants, and Frank was going to school to become a dentist when he was caught in the middle of the riots in Detroit. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time: running out of a bakery after hearing the sound of glass breaking. There were people everywhere and three days later he woke up in a hospital. He thinks someone clubbed him with a crowbar. But while he was out, he had what he called his “first extra-dimensional experience.”

“I wasn’t dreaming. I was somewhere else,” he said, then grabbed a piece of meat with a wet tortilla and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. “It wasn’t necessarily a friendly place, like heaven or anything,” he said. “There were good beings and bad beings, just like here. I talked to these pyramids with, like, a thousand eyes. They said I was in the ninth dimension.” He chewed for a little while and then added, “I don’t give a damn if you don’t believe me.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t believe him. I just didn’t know what to say.

After the hospital experience, Frank dropped out of school and worked a bunch of jobs. He drove trucks, worked at a nursery in Wisconsin, and was a bailiff in a California courthouse. He said, “The judge was one of the best men I ever knew, a big black guy, Judge Samson, and he would shout ‘Jesus, please stand,’ and we’d say ‘Ummm, Judge, I think it’s HAY-SOOS, you know in Spanish,’ and he’d say ‘Don’t you tell me how to say Jesus, I’m a sixth-generation believer, son.’”

And the whole time, Frank was looking for something, something to compare to his journey while he was unconscious. He said, “When I was in the hospital, it was like I was released from some kind of irreality that I had been living in my whole life. Nothing ever felt so real, even though it was so strange. I just wanted to feel that again.” He got baptized a few times, went and meditated with some Yogi in San Francisco, dropped acid, and read every religious text he could get his hands on. “I did everything except hit myself over the head with a crowbar again,” he said. He joined a commune in Tennessee and raised tomatoes. It was there he tried peyote for the first time. It was what he was looking for. Eventually, he found his way to Real de Catorce and became a resident, except when he needs money; then he goes to Mazatlan and spends a few months taking care of El Gallo Dorado.

## WORKING FOR THE MAN

Frank’s uncle Jan, Norwegian by birth, first visited Mazatlan in 1967 when it was little more than a village and a strip of oceanfront trailer parks for tourists. He had that kind of naive, entrepreneurial boldness common to the age—political colonization was

over but the economic colonization had just begun—and forged ahead with plans to build the finest lodgings on the beach.

Frank remembers visiting Mazatlan when he was a kid. The whole family drove down with their Airstreams—it took a week to get there—and spent two weeks clamming and fishing for sea bass, maybe a tuna or marlin if they were lucky. In the mornings he would go into his Uncle Jan’s trailer while his parents were still asleep and have corn flakes with goat milk. Then he and aunt Marja would play several rounds of pinochle and watch the pelicans diving for their breakfast. I’ve spent a few mornings watching the pelicans myself. Sometimes they fish in huge flocks, dozens of birds circling, then their broad wings suddenly fold in tight, their bodies stiffen, and they hit the water like a stone—though hardly a splash—and disappear for a few seconds. You should see how fast they fall. It amazes me how quickly they go, propelled by one last downward thrust, and unflinching, trusting the water to open up and receive them as they break the surface with their beaks, like the fingertips of a high diver, having abandoned flight to become feathered missiles plunging with fixed precision. And most of the time they come up with a fish—maybe mackerel or corbina—jiggling around in that weird throat-pouch of theirs. Frank said it was his favorite part of the day, and it became mine, too: in the morning it is quiet except for the murmur of the ocean and the faint echo of the birds. The waves barely rake the shore, and the sea air is cool and fresh like after a thunderstorm. The sand is unbroken by footprints or tire tracks. Each time it feels new, and for a moment names mean nothing—Mazatlan, Thailand, Tahiti—I could be anywhere.

Frank saw the way Jan embraced Mexico, the way he loved it all—the poverty, the dirt, the heat, the cuisine. He said his family still jokes about the time, on that big family trip, when they went to one of the few restaurants on the beach, a palapa with a few wooden tables slanting on the uneven sand. Everyone got shrimp tacos, a pretty safe bet, except Jan who ordered what they translated as “squid cooked in its own juices.” It came out in a shallow bowl, looking like someone had scraped it off the ocean floor along with a handful of mud. “That’s Jan,” said Frank. “He wants to experience it all, wants to feel life when it’s raw. I think I learned that from him.”

Frank said Jan was 87 years old, but still took an active role in running the hotel. He flew down twice a year from Phoenix to walk the grounds, prowl the corridors, and check everyone’s work. He had people who had been working for him since he built the place. He and Frank had an open agreement, Frank could come work whenever he liked, but he had to buy his own meals and pay for his room, albeit at a discounted rate.

“What happens when he dies?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Frank. We were pulling weeds along the side of the hotel, a narrow bed of bushes that hugged the adjacent property line. There was no sidewalk, no path, it was an area no guest would ever see. Frank stood up to stuff a handful of weeds into a black garbage bag. “He’s not going to give it to me, if that’s what you’re getting at.” Then he smiled. “Not that I’d want it. God. Can you imagine?”

No, I couldn’t imagine Frank running a hotel. He was a thoughtful guy, smart even, but like Tom said, it’s hard to predict what’s going on in his mind. Sometimes he would drift off in mid-conversation, only to return a few minutes later having completely forgotten what you were talking about. He had a vaguely feral look about him, with a

lazy eye and a heavy limp from a motorcycle accident he was in in California. I pictured poor, unsuspecting guests standing flat against the wall as a shabby man with riotous white hair charged towards them, dragging his left leg behind him, waving and burbling in a deep voice, “Hope you have a great stay,” with one eye staring off in another direction.

There is a small placard on the wall next to the hotel’s back doors—the ones you go through when you’re returning after sunset pina coladas to rinse the sand off your legs and put on a fresh linen shirt for dinner—that tells the short history of El Gallo Dorado. On it there is a black and white photograph of Jan and his wife Marja; they look to be in their 60s, Jan is wearing a white Oxford, solid black tie, and thick glasses, and Marja is wearing a dark dress with tiny polka dots, a single strand of pearls around her neck. Both are smiling like they just got back from an all-you-can-eat buffet on seniors night, contented and slightly bloated. But they look like the salt of the earth. Good folks, is what we called them in Minnesota. I’ve never met them, never even talked to them, but that’s how I choose to remember them. I do know that the day after we found Frank, he called his uncle at home and told him our story. Jan put us on the payroll for a month, said we could work under Frank and he’d give us the same deal—that we pay room and board, and take pride in our work, even if it was raking flower beds and plunging toilets.

SOFI

*Another recreation of what was going on in Nicaragua, based on my experiences and observations. The letter, however, is absolutely real. And the part about the coffee. I find it easier to tell this part of the story in third-person, since I wasn't really there:*

Sofi hadn't heard from her sister in two months. She usually got a letter about every three weeks, several handwritten pages on college-lined paper, Suyapa's long, lazy script jumping over and under the lines—hold it away from your eyes and it looked like a dense mass of scribbles—and a \$10 bill. Sofi was worried, but what could she do? There was no phone to call, and she couldn't afford it anyway.

Ricardo had been helping more than usual, running errands in the morning, taking his little sisters to school, sweeping and selling *paletas*. But he was sixteen and starting a pre-engineering track at a government prep school in January, and nothing could be more important to Sofi than seeing Ricardo rise above her world of sweat and grease. Ricardo, her only son who by pure grit had studied under a bare light bulb, hours into the night, with the sounds of his ramshackle poverty blaring in—the shouts of his friends, the tin echo of a dozen radios, televisions, and megaphones from passing vegetable trucks.

When Suyapa left she told Sofi she would only be gone a year. She had a connection in Florida: Jose, the father of her child, who said he could get her across the border and promised she could take home \$3000 if she worked hard. Maybe Jose felt guilty for not wanting to marry her. It was his half-hearted way of supporting the baby

boy he had invited into the world, a boy he had audaciously asked Suyapa to name Jose. She named him Diego, after her grandfather.

Hard feelings aside, Suyapa wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to secure the future success of the restaurant she ran with Sofi, *Comedor Maritza*. It was a family business, but with both their parents gone, and no husbands, they found they could barely keep up with the cost of maintenance. The plan was to use the money Suyapa made to buy a freezer, another stovetop, and lighting for the dining area so they could do more business at night.

That was the plan. But after a year Suyapa had barely saved enough for the trip back to Nicaragua. It was a slow season for citrus, and she was having a hard time finding more work. And then there was Diego, who had been sick and who needed diapers, milk, and clothes. If Sofi didn't already have three kids, Suyapa would have left Diego with her. Only two other women at the primitive migrant camp had kids with them. It was no place for a child. Sometimes during the workday Suyapa traded babysitting with the other woman. Sometimes she carried Diego slung on her back. As he got older, she started tying him to a tree with a rope around his waist, where she would check on him every hour or so to fill his bottle. It wasn't what she wanted, and she begged God for forgiveness each night, and for divine protection for her fatherless son.

Suyapa's last letter sat on a creaky dresser next to Sofi's bed, anchored under a cheap porcelaine figurine of a ballerina that Suyapa had given Sofi for her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.

*Picking is undependable*, the letter reads. *I still live at the camp, but I've been working several days a week in town cleaning houses. Even the small houses are very beautiful, with air conditioning and white ceilings and all the furniture you could ever*

*need. It actually pays better than picking. I'm lucky I met Margarita. I met her at the market on a Saturday when Diego was flirting with her. We started talking and she reminded me so much of you, very opinionated and funny. She came from Guatemala six years ago and hasn't seen her family since, only in pictures. But she is really smart and learned English pretty fast. Now she has her own cleaning service. The only problem is I have to ride my bike five miles into town in the mornings. Then I have to ride back and I don't get home until after dark. At least it's flat, no hills. Diego rides on the front, but he loves it, he loves to feel the wind on his face. I think I will stay here another year. If I work for Margarita, God willing, I could save \$5000! We could have the nicest restaurant in Los Pinos. Tell Ricardo I am very happy for him. I love you and miss you everyday. Suyu. Suyu was Suyapa's nickname. Suyu. The first time I heard Sofi say it, it sounded Japanese.*

With the \$10 in Suyapa's letter Sofi bought a whole month's worth of coffee for the restaurant.

## LIKE A STONE THAT ROLLS FORTH

Frank had a friend at Banamex named Alberto. I couldn't believe it, Frank had a bank account. Anyway, Alberto helped me get my money out of savings. It took about three weeks, and in the meantime we had developed a comfortable routine at El Gallo Dorado. We'd get up at about 8:00 a.m. and have coffee. Actually, Diego was up before that watching cartoons on the hotel cable. We taught him how to turn on the TV and get his cup of milk out of the mini-fridge. He learned quick.

At about 9:00 we went with Frank and did whatever needed to be done. We tried to work outside in the mornings when it was cooler, and saved the plumbing and indoor stuff for the afternoon. Diego and Peter usually tagged along, playing on the beach or in the rooms where we worked changing light bulbs and replacing faucets. Though it was technically unprofessional, much of the staff tended to look the other way, for Diego's sake. Sometimes the maids would even take him with them, letting him ride on their cleaning carts through the halls while he made a rumbling engine noise in his throat. The kid was usually easy to please, we just had to keep finding new things for him to play with—spades, empty spray bottles, curtain rods, anything could turn into a game between him and his dog. We even started putting him down for naps in the afternoon, based on the advice of a concierge named Sheila. When nothing else worked—sometimes he just needed to cry, an almost ritual instinct for his young soul—we gave him a sweet roll and carried him on our backs until he calmed down.

The days passed quickly and some of the fear and urgency we had felt earlier in the trip started to fade. The new worry, well, my new worry, was Tom. He wasn't complaining, wasn't in pain, in fact he seemed quite happy—busy during the day and chatting up the ladies at night. There was one woman in particular, named Linda, who Tom met almost every evening at the hotel bar for a drink at sunset. She was beautiful in a mature way, tan and muscular with dyed black hair that didn't seem too out of place for her age. But even though he wasn't sick, I couldn't help but notice his memory and his reflexes, which seemed to be getting duller. I had tried to dismiss it as my imagination, but his shaking was definitely getting worse, even with the marijuana he scored from one of the deck waiters. (I wouldn't let him smoke it in the room, so he ate it.) He dropped

an entire box of those long, fluorescent lights down some stairs, spreading white dust and glass flakes over two floors. He preferred not to drive and I preferred him not to, especially in the city where darting mopeds and speeding trucks required a quick foot on the brake pedal. I didn't say anything about it, but he often asked me the same question two or three times, not that we all don't do that sometimes, but it was happening a lot. I tried not to think about it, tried to put it out of my mind. I just needed Tom to help me get Diego home, then I could worry about him.

When I got my savings, I did what all common sense says you shouldn't do: I took it all in cash, 2952 dollars and 46 cents. There was just no way I had the time or the language skills necessary to navigate the banking system in two or three different countries (we would have to go through Guatemala and Honduras to get to Nicaragua). But don't think I put it all in one place. Between my wallet, my sock, the glovebox, the ashtray, my duffel, the bottom of my sleeping bag, Diego's backpack, a hole in the driver's seat, and the spare tire under the bed, I figured I could stay clear of another total disaster like the gas station.

Neither of us wanted to leave. Diego was stable. Tom was happy. I was almost beginning to forget why we were there and just live in the moment. But about a week after I got my money, we finally sat down and had the talk both of us had been avoiding. That morning, Frank had told us he would be leaving soon, back to Real de Catorce.

"It's getting hot," he said. "You just wait until June! It'll smother you like a plastic sheet. I gotta get back to the mountain air, the dryness, clear my mind a little. I've got saltwater on the brain."

We figured that meant we needed to get going too. So we pulled out the map and hovered under a lamp by the window. Diego was asleep in his pile of blankets by the door. Peter dozed on the foot of my bed, occasionally lifting one eyelid to peek in our direction, knowing that he would soon be asked to take his place on the floor.

“I figure if we go straight through, without car trouble, without border trouble, and without weather trouble, we could be in Nicaragua in three weeks,” Tom said.

And then, a knock. It was Frank. I opened the door but he stood in the doorway until I said, “Come in,” and put my finger to my lips to signal quiet. He tried to walk lightly but just couldn’t, I don’t think his nervous system could manage the finesse required, and his tramping roused Diego who sat up and gazed around the room with droopy red eyes.

“What’s up, Frank,” I said, slightly annoyed. I liked Frank, had every reason to praise his name for his generosity, but didn’t want to deal with getting Diego back to sleep when I wanted to be asleep myself.

He said, “Boys, I just wanted to say good luck.”

We smiled, nodded in appreciation, but he was leaning in like he wanted to say something else and so we waited, ears cocked.

“So, good luck,” he said resolutely. It was anti-climactic, not only for us but for him, we could tell. He took a step back and put his hand on his head, pulling on his fluffy hair.

“What is it, Frank?” Tom asked finally.

“Nothing. Hey, have you ever been to Nicaragua?”

“No,” I said and laughed. I thought this was fairly obvious.

“Well, neither have I, but I’ve been to Guatemala, and Belize. Great places. Lots of history, ruins and stuff. You know, if you think Mexico is fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants you should see Central America. Like the wild west. My buddy lived in Honduras for awhile, said he never saw people armed to the teeth like that, at least in the countryside, machetes and pistols, they’re not violent to outsiders really, but mix it with alcohol—whatever they can get their hands on, he said he saw men drink rubbing alcohol because they were so beat down and broke they couldn’t find anything else—and even the smallest squabble can turn into a fight. He saw two brothers hack each other’s hands off over a woman.”

I couldn’t tell what he was getting at, and I must have looked confused, or shocked, or both, because Frank quickly changed gears, his voice lightening and his arms returning to his sides.

He continued, “There are so many beautiful things I haven’t seen in this world. So many stones unturned. I just think you are going to have a real trip. I mean, this is what it’s all about, man, living close to the bone. The farther away you go from home, the more you have to rely on your inner eyes to get around. Nothing is as it seems, you know. You’re not two guys in a truck.”

“Oh, what are we?” I said.

“You’re warriors, man, riding the wind, crossing borders.”

I looked at Tom. He was smiling as he packed his toiletries into a plastic grocery sack, not looking up, making it hard for me to tell if he was interested or trying to end the conversation. I, for my part, liked what Frank was saying. Sure, it smacked of mumbo jumbo, but there was always a genuineness to Frank’s philosophizing, nothing feigned.

He was odd, but committed to figuring things out—life, death, whatever—as best he could. In that way we had enough in common.

“That’s cool, Frank. But what are you trying to say?” Tom asked. He wasn’t frustrated, but there was obviously more to Frank’s visit. It screamed out in the way he lingered, fidgeted, looked at us with eager eyes.

“OK, here it is,” he said. “I was sitting on the bluff down the beach, meditating, talking to the ocean—she’ll speak to you, you know, if you find her rhythm—and I’m not ready to go back to Catorce. I kept thinking about you guys, and this incredible quest you’re on, and how you’re taking this boy to his birthplace and how that right there is a recipe for good karma. It was all in the waves. You know, I speak decent Spanish, too. I’m a little more seasoned in these parts.”

“And you’ve never been to Nicaragua,” Tom said.

“And I’d love to go.”

We were speechless. Tom made an inquisitive sound and returned to his packing. I looked at Diego, who had fallen back asleep on his face, his body bent in half, butt in the air. Frank waited, shoulders back, palms open, a half-grin pushed to one side of his mouth.

“Shh-uure,” I said. “We’ve got room.” It wasn’t a very strong “sure,” my voice was wavering, but Frank took two steps towards me and grabbed my biceps.

“Thank you, David,” he said, and hobbled off into the stillness of the night.

### THREE IN THE BACK SEAT

I'm a little embarrassed to say what we did then. Neither of us had expected Frank to want to join us. We were caught off guard, and without time to talk it over I had just answered. But upon further discussion, both Tom and I felt that Frank was maybe one *gringo* too many for this expedition. We were indebted to him, yes, impressed by his humanity, but not quite ready to invite him into our cab. But neither of us had the balls to explain that to him. And so, we tried cowardice.

The next morning we got up at 5:00 a.m., when the sun was just a soft panel of reflected light on the horizon, and loaded everything into the truck, including a sleeping Diego. We looked longingly at the sea, the outline of the giant patio umbrellas against the pale sky, the giant purple building looming in shadow, and then started the engine.

As we were pulling out from the parking lot onto the main highway, we heard the clunking sound of something landing in the truck bed and felt the seat shudder slightly from the impact. Almost immediately the back door on the passenger side opened and Frank slid in, causing Peter jump up and scramble to avoid being sat on.

“Sorry I almost missed you,” Frank said in between panting breaths. “I totally forgot to ask what time you were leaving.”

I looked at Tom in awe. He was equally floored. How Frank managed to catch us I'll never know.

I still didn't know how to ask him not to come, and now that he was sitting comfortably in the back, seatbelt buckled, my objections were evaporating. I was too tired to even try. One more voice, one more body, I thought. We're all just wandering

souls, right? I was starting to feel that if Frank was shrewd enough, or lucky enough, to find us in the dark of the morning, maybe he was supposed to join us. When I told that to Tom later he said my trust in providence was beginning to cloud my judgment, and that it was a fine line between faith and laziness.

“Thanks for coming, Frank,” I said cheerfully. I touched Tom’s arm and mouthed “It’s OK.” It wasn’t that Tom didn’t like Frank, it was more of a general nervousness. Too many people and we would begin to draw more attention. Plus, as a “responsible” drug-user, I think Tom was particularly unsure about Frank’s unrestrained employ of hallucinogens and his otherworldly meanderings. “He’s nice, but how can we know him when he probably doesn’t really know himself,” Tom said while we were filling up a few miles down the road.

To which I replied, “I’m not sure. But I know we can trust him.”

“I’m not disagreeing,” he said. “I just want to be careful.”

“Gentlemen,” Frank said from the back, “I want you to know that as of now, we are brothers in time and space, till death do us part.”

Tom scowled at me, not a mean look, but definitely an I-told-you-so. I smiled back and shrugged, pushed on the gas pedal, and tried to throw worry to the wind.

## THAT DEEP DISH PIZZA

In Chicago I used to eat at Pizzeria Uno every Thursday. It was the original deep dish pizza. Each slice seemed to weigh a pound, I always got the combo—sausage,

mushrooms, tomatoes, peppers, olives, all of it fresh—and the leftovers could feed me through the weekend.

I started going at the end of my freshman year at the University of Chicago, first with my roommates—Tom, of course, and a Jewish kid from Pittsburgh named Sam—and then with Sasha. She loved it, it was one of the few things in our marriage that never faded; we could always count on pizza on Thursdays, and somehow, no matter how mad we got, that time in the restaurant squeezed into a narrow booth under the dim lamp, with the bouncy green vinyl seats and the burnished table with little worn depressions on the edges from years of people resting their elbows, was always golden. We chatted like old friends, smiled as we pulled cheese off of each other's chins, and left arm in arm.

When I graduated in history—the American revolutionary period was my favorite—we moved into a little house in Berwin, an old two-bedroom, white with black shutters and a huge backyard, probably gone by now. Sasha always hated how steep the front steps were, the kids practically had to scale them like a rock face. But I remember those times as the prime of my life. I built a fort for the kids in the giant walnut tree in the backyard. Laughter seemed to seep out of every door crack and window jamb. Sasha wore sun dresses with sharp floral prints and cooked schnitzel on Sundays. We planted a garden; I favored vegetables while Sasha tried to reserve as much space as possible for her flowers—big peonies and lilies and, her favorite, pink roses. We were handsome and lost in the boundless energy of youth—nothing could get us down, despite the disappointment in my career.

Originally I had planned on getting a PhD in history and teaching college and writing much-lauded books about men like Benjamin Franklin and George Washington.

I was full of ideals—there was still much research to be done, my professors would say, so much Americans don't know about their founders—and I was sure that I would take my place in academia as a respected scholar and the man who took American history to the masses. I was thrilled with the prospect of it all. The textbooks were all so dull, I would turn history into adventure for millions of readers. How many people knew about Ben Franklin's popular ballad about the pirate Blackbeard? Or how George Washington notoriously refused to kneel in prayer during church service, sometimes walking out before the eucharist? I told my mother all this, to which she replied, "Maybe you should start by learning how to write a letter to your dear old mother. You can't even cut a log, how are you going to write a book?" She was wrong, I could cut a log, it's just that one time I missed and drove the axe into my foot, and she never forgot it. But even this helpful encouragement from my mother didn't deter me from my plan.

What stopped me was an admissions committee. And, then, my own fear and self-pity. I failed to get into the graduate program at University of Chicago. There were a lot of applicants that year, plus pared-down funding in the department. We had landed on the moon. Computers were just starting to heat up. It was all about science and engineering, technical achievement and the progress of man. And the committee tended to favor applicants who had graduated from other schools. They recommended that I apply again next year, and that I look into studying somewhere else, it looked better on paper.

But Sasha didn't want to leave Chicago, didn't want to leave her parents and our house and her friends. I didn't really want to leave either, but I was baffled at her attitude—she was an urbane city dweller and a homebody at the same time.

Cosmopolitan tastes with a provincial heart. Wait until next year, you'll get in, she said. They just want see how serious you are.

In the meantime, I had a job at a dry cleaners. Pretty soon I was made manager over two locations. I was making enough money to buy a sedan, a green Dodge Dart convertible—Sasha had always wanted a convertible.

You can fill in the rest of the story. By the time a year had passed I looked around at my kingdom. I had a house payment, a car payment, two kids and a brother who was sick with cancer. (I had been only helping pay for his hospital stays, though by the time Joseph finally passed away nine years later I would be paying for his treatment in full.) People talked about how hard it was to find a job at the university level, and there was certainly no guarantee that I could stay on at Chicago. It's hard to explain, but part of me felt satisfied watching my dreams be martyred for what I told myself was my red-blooded duty to my wife and kids. If I failed, I could secretly blame Sasha, or the vagaries of "family life." I convinced myself that there was nothing I could learn at school that I couldn't teach myself at home with a book, which is true except that I never had enough time for books at home. I came in at night sweat-soaked and covered in lint. Sasha would hand me a scotch or a brandy and lead me to the bathroom where she helped me undress and get into the shower. I can still smell the feathered scent of the lavender soap Sasha always bought from the Shady Lane Market around the corner. When I walked out in my clean 501s and undershirt, the kids were seated at the table ready to eat. We usually had a pleasant meal, teasing and asking questions, and afterwards there might be charades, or go-fish, or television programs like *McHale's Navy* and *Gilligan's Island*.

I'd read to the kids, put them in bed, and, if I was lucky, make love to Sasha before falling asleep.

So, you see, it wasn't a bad life. By all accounts, it was a good one. But I still wonder, like everybody does, about what might have been.

## GETTING DEEPER

Travel down the Pacific side was easier than traveling inland. Maybe it was because we had Frank with us, who could hold his own speaking Spanish. Maybe it was because more people spoke English and weren't surprised to see us in those areas. The roads were flat and the weather was friendly. We often camped on the beach, or stayed in motels.

And we all benefited from having Frank's cargo along, which happened to include a deep-sea fishing pole. We tended to eat on the road, but every other day or so we would dash over to the ocean from the highway and take turns casting into the surf. Usually we baited the hook with sandcrabs—small, insect-looking creatures that live just under the sand near shore. Whether they're real crabs or not I have no idea. To catch them you simply stand in the shallow water and wait until the water pulls back, revealing little colonies of tiny antennae twinkling in the sun, then scoop up a handful of sand and you can feel the little guys wriggling against your palm as they try to burrow deeper through the muck. With sandcrabs we caught cod, sea bass, even an occasional rockfish or barracuda (not good eating, barracuda, but lots of teeth to delight Diego.) Frank would clean them with his pearl-handled filleting knife, cutting off the heads, slitting open the

belly and throwing the organs to Peter who licked them right off the sand. Then we would build a little fire on the beach and roast our fish right there. We usually had enough to stuff ourselves and feed anyone else who happened to be hanging around.

Crowds often gathered when we were all out in the open together. No surprise, and it usually wasn't a problem, but we couldn't help but wonder if we were being foolish to draw so much attention. Tom, especially, worried that we would attract criminals looking for loot or general crazies looking for trouble.

For my part, I could only trust in that strange, elusive God who had gotten us this far in the first place. If we were going to be attacked, robbed, swindled or kidnapped, there was not much I could do about it, other than the usual precautions. It's true, we were sitting ducks, and would be as long as we were in this foreign land. All I could do was have faith in the value of my mission, whatever it was, be it caring for a helpless boy or, more selfishly, trying to make good on a promise, or even trying to erase a multitude of sins. This faith was a strange thing, being on the one hand admirable and even noble, and on the other hand laughable and unfounded. Apart from my weird and wonderful experience with the voice in Minnesota, any godlike intervention that had come to me and my traveling partners could be seen by a typical observer as dumb luck. I chose to believe it was more than that. I had to. Being the agent of faith brought me courage to face a bizarre twist of fate in my life that, had I settled for an icy universe where lifeless odds pound and pulverize us feeble accidents of swirling matter, would have tormented me into hopelessness and oblivion.

And so we drove on. Past Puerto Vallarta, a city created by the tourism industry, past the barges and cranes of Manzanillo, past Zihuatanejo with its shell-hunters and

fishing nets, past countless villages lying dormant under the spell of the stagnant July heat, and into a little place called Acapulco, where yet another astonishing being seemed to tumble out of the heavens and land in our increasingly low-riding Ford.

## BATH TIME

I had heard of Acapulco—who hasn't?—and its gleaming corridor of hotels like tall white boxes coming off an assembly line. Travel agents in the 80's were sending people there in droves to pump the town full of greenbacks as they melted into lounge chairs, leaving behind puddles of daiquiri and coconut oil and maybe, just maybe, catching a glimpse of some Hollywood jerkface with a tan. My aunt Doris called an 800 number on TV and then dragged my uncle Lon down there for a week during February one year. She just up and called and made the non-refundable reservation for the very next week, causing Lon to almost lose his job with the garbage company. He was hearing about it from his boss for a long time afterwards. It probably cost him an extra year of heaving dripping trash cans over his head and herding disposable diapers into the dumpster at the K-Mart parking lot. But they were the envy of us all, leaving the dreary skies and crunchy snow of a dead Northern winter for a fancy postcard vacation. The next Thanksgiving I had to look at the pictures, mostly close shots of them wearing sunglasses and tipping a beer bottle towards the camera, the glowing sheen of their lobster-skin sending heat waves out of the photograph. The few shots of the town showed a destination in its prime: neatly manicured streets jostling under the weight of a thousand smiling shoppers, brand new cars and as-yet-unsoiled buses, festive paper

chains strung in between towering palms, gauzy curtains blowing carelessly out of open windows, it was everything the magazines promoted.

Things had certainly changed by the time we got there. Grime is the word. Rickety slums that start behind the line of fading resorts and never end. To be fair, the beaches still seemed pretty nice, where the only thing more abundant than the white sand and rolling surf was the streaming booze being schlepped by an endless caravan of sweating rural-transplants who came to the promised land a decade too late. There was a desperation that filled the city, right down to the way people walked, with stiff arms and a bullish stride that betrayed even the most soft-spoken salesman. If the rapidly evaporating torrent of visitors had slowed to a trickle, the ferocity of vendors and restaurateurs looking to wedge themselves into the path of the remaining cash flow had only been amplified.

We arrived at dusk and decided to call it quits for the day. If there was any town where we could find a cheap bed and indoor shower, this was the place. We rumbled down the main drag. The action on the ground was dull, but glassy eyes peered out of the shadowy twilight like bats anticipating the nightly hunt. When we came out on the other side of town we found just what we were looking for, the Motel Jardinero. *Gardener Motel*. A few nicely tended pots of azaleas looked pleasantly Spartan against the fine blonde dirt of the parking lot, drawing our gaze to the front office where an older Mexican woman sat behind a tattered screen door, drumming numbers into an adding machine. A single desk lamp threw a circle of light onto her hands as they would hit a few keys, grab at a pencil, jot down a number, and then do it all over again. The only

other light in the room was the dim, leftover glow from the fluorescent lights that were on at the laundromat next door about 50 feet away.

“*Que quieren?*” she crowed without looking up.

Frank stepped in and spoke some steady, if slightly jagged-sounding Spanish. Tom and I were impressed. Having Frank along might be worth it for his language skills alone. He understood virtually everything and could speak more than enough to get by. We were tired of getting dumb looks from most everyone we approached with our simple requests. The woman’s response was polite and short, she was obviously wrapped up in her finances.

“She says it’s 20 bucks per night, but we get the room with 2 queens,” Frank said. I could see Tom doing his own calculations in his head—two large beds, and I would probably insist on sleeping with Diego, which meant that he would be sharing a bed with Frank. His expression turned slightly acidic, but he motioned with his hand to go ahead and grab the room which meant he was also resigned to his lot.

“We’ll take it,” I said.

“Oh, and she said there’s a community bathroom at the end of the building, but no hot water,” Frank added. “They had to disconnect the water heater because the bills were too high.” The woman looked up at us and gave a tilted, sympathetic smile before handing us a key. I took it and she returned to her tapping and scribbling with aplomb, signaling the end of the conversation.

We hauled our stuff to our room and took turns showering in the cold water. I hauled Diego into the bathroom and set him in the tub, where he looked up at me with big, oval eyes that seemed to be bloated with tears, ready to burst at any moment. I

turned on the faucet and the water gurgled into the yellow-stained tub, flooding up around the soles of his feet and causing him to wince and suck air through his teeth. I reached in and felt the water and when I touched it, I actually drew back in surprise. It was colder than the tap water in Minnesota. As the water continued to rise up to his ankles, Diego flapped his hands and shifted his weight, the early signs of panic. I knew I had to work fast.

“You’re dirty,” I said, trying to make it sound like a compliment. “You stink. You need to get clean.” I made flapping motions with my arms and hands, pretending to wash under my arms and in my groin pits. We had done this before—not nearly enough I fear—but not usually with such cold water. I began to ease off his ratty red T-shirt that said CENTRAL WISCONSIN ENVIRONMENTAL STATION underneath a rather well-done silk screen of a beaver, another thrift store buy, while he continued to shake and moan in protest. Once he was naked I tried to get him to sit down in the tub, pushing behind his knees while I held my other hand on his bony little plate of a chest. I could feel his heart whirring like a wind-up toy.

“Come on Diego. I’ll make it fast, buddy, I promise,” and I pushed him down so his rear hit the water with a weak *slosh*. Maybe it was the icy shock, I don’t know, but something switched on inside of that quiet brain of his, some buried instinct was unleashed, and the boy let out a sustained feral yelp that echoed harshly off the hard concrete walls as he started clawing his way up my body like a wet tiger. I’d never seen him move that fast, ever. I tried to steadily place him back in the tub, the water still roaring out of the rusty faucet, but he clung to my arms and waist, squirming and twisting

and latching back on as fast as I could pry him off. Eventually he slipped out of my grip, hit the floor and took off running right out into the bright, moonlit night.

There was something of elation in the way he streaked, naked, past the row of motel room doors, his wet feet slapping on the walk, looking over his shoulder at me with a mouth curled on the brink of laughter, a look of realization—the realization that comes to all young children of their own power to choose. In a way, it was a milestone in our relationship. We were no longer polite strangers, striving to maintain the status quo, unsure of how the other would react to bold behavior. We were entering into the realm of the parent-child relationship, where mothers and fathers and sons and daughters inflict their wills on one another in a battle of wits and endurance. I was no stranger to this fight, but at the moment it had caught me completely unprepared. I just stood there outside the bathroom door, wiping my wet hands on the front of my pants, watching this soggy, bare-bottomed kid wobble his way to the end of the building and disappear around the corner.

I started to walk forward, slowly at first, then faster, and then Diego stuck his head around corner to see if I was coming. We made eye contact and he let out a squeal before vanishing again, causing me to begin a full-out run after him. I rounded the corner, no lights on the side of the building, but I could see and hear Diego crashing through a patch of sandgrass behind the motel, laughing with something just shy of delirium. He was headed towards a hole in the chain link fence that enclosed a huge vacant lot behind the motel, a beachfront property and undoubtedly somebody's real estate dream at one point, now stalled out. The lot was piled with moldering scrapwood and the skeletons of old cars, and probably a lot of broken glass. I tore across the broken

landscape like a clumsy comet, stumbling and lurching as the sand gave way under my feet. Diego was a good twenty yards from the fence when I scooped him up and pulled him to my chest with an “Ah-hah!” Predictably, the laughs turned to whines, and before long, the introductory chortles of a long, wailing cry.

I stomped back to the motel with Diego thrashing the whole way, the unclothed captive of a determined soldier of cleanliness. Back in the bathroom, I gritted my teeth and held Diego down while I poured water over his head from an empty can of chili I grabbed off the floor of the truck. He could choose to resist, but he couldn't choose not to bathe. Those were my orders. While he squawked and flailed like a trapped bird, I rubbed a handful of Tom's minty, organic shampoo from head to toe. Gradually, his wriggling slowed, his wailing descended to a low, choppy groaning, and by the final rinse he was almost limp, resigned and numb to the chilly water coursing off his head.

Back in the room, Frank and Tom were nowhere to be seen. I put Diego's sweatpants on him and wrapped him in blankets, then turned on the television to a rerun of *The Simpsons* in Spanish. Peter looked up from his nap by the window and sighed before rising with great effort and throwing himself up on the bed next to Diego.

“You have no idea,” I said to Peter. “You just sit around and play with him, all day long, like a couple of chimpanzees, and here I got to do all the hard stuff.”

Peter turned away with impunity and went back to sleep. I leaned back in a creaky folding chair that looked and felt like it had been brought back from retirement in a church basement. A few minutes passed and Diego was snoring, splayed out on top of Peter in a typically uncomfortable-looking position. The ruckus past, I was able to muse

to myself about the whole thing: Diego, my sweet, compliant, tight-lipped little orphan, had thrown his first temper tantrum.

It was well past midnight when I really started to wonder about Tom and Frank. They just took off as soon as they showered. (Well, I'm not sure if Frank showered. No matter what he did, he always smelled like a soupy mix of cut grass and patchouli oil.) Not that I thought I should be keeping tabs on them, but it was just unusual.

At about 2 a.m. I heard the door creak open and both Tom and Frank tiptoe in. I was laying on my back, not sleeping, but trying to keep still with Diego asleep next to me. I was tired, annoyed, but not wanting to act like it. I carefully extricated myself from underneath the flimsy polyester bedspread and motioned for them to wait for me outside.

"Where were you guys?" I said once I had closed the door behind me, trying to sound like a giddy teenager and not a scolding camp counselor. Tom looked like he was trying to beat back that huge flapjack grin he sometimes got when he had been smoking.

"Are you high?" I asked. The grin exploded on his face like a firecracker. "You're high, aren't you? I thought you said you were going to try to cut back while we were with Diego?"

Tom started giggling and turned his head to try and compose himself.

"I'm not high, David. At least not in the traditional sense," he said before turning away again and arching his back, his hands on his hips, taking a long breath.

"Well, what's up man, I haven't seen you like this since . . . since we left that frozen block of piss under Sam Roth's bed in college." I was starting to get into the act a

little. Tom burst his seams again, laughing so hard he had to sink down against the decaying stucco under the window and heave for air.

“Ohhh, man,” he said. “I totally forgot about that. You remember how he—how he kept on—he kept on asking us if we let a cat into the apartment? Then he spent about half an hour on his knees rubbing the carpet and smelling his fingers—“ With this he broke again into unrestrained wheezing. I gave him a hand and lugged him back on his feet.

“Seriously, though,” I said. “What’s up?”

Tom ran his hand through his limp hair, still not completely dry in the humid Mexican night. He looked like he was arranging note cards in his head, preparing to make a speech. Finally he looked me right in the eye.

“David, I’ve met somebody,” he said, emphasizing the word “met” in keeping with the cliché.

I said, “Great. You know, it’s not like we’re dating.”

“Ha-ha, yes, good one,” Tom said. “What I mean to say is, can we squeeze one more person into the truck?”

I didn’t even think before I spoke. “What? Are you kidding? You were the one who was fretting about bringing Frank along, no offense Frank,” I said, shooting Frank a glance. I told Tom he could stay in Acapulco and we would pick him up on the way back if really wanted to dither around with some drunk floozy who would probably bleed him dry before going back to her drill-toting husband and her job as a toenail painter in Dallas. I was tired, and I stopped myself when I saw the hurt starting to emerge in the

creases on Tom's brow. Plus, I was out of breath. Tom stood like a wooden peg, unsure of what to do next.

"Holy crap, I'm sorry, Tom," I managed to say in my best meek voice. "Look. Tell me what happened."

Tom remained still for a little while longer. Slowly, he pulled his hands out of his pockets and cracked his knuckles on his thighs. Then he started in:

"OK, so I just wanted to go into main part of town and look around. So I walked forever until I saw this head shop, you know, something for the kids on spring break, where they go to get their papers and bongos and their nasty T-shirts and penis-shaped shot glasses—"

"Yes, yes," I said, "I know the ones. They're all over Florida. So then what happened."

"Well, I just stopped to look through the door, you know, just to get a feel, I didn't want to buy anything, didn't even want to go in, but all of a sudden this guy grabs me and pretty much yanks me inside, little guy with a wispy beard, and he smells like he's just soaked in alcohol like one of those cotton swabs or something, and he says 'What do you want to buy,' but it sounds more like 'Whad dew yew wan tobi,' so I kept saying 'What?' and he kept asking me, and he's got his hand on my arm the whole time, until finally he kind of shoves my arm away from him so it swings around and knocks over this glass hookah thingy behind me, it had a big long hose for puffing on, like the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland, and then he says 'Now what do you want to buy?'"

"So he blackmailed you?" I said.

“Pretty much. He acted like the broken hookah was no problem, you know, it happened and he wasn’t going to make me pay for it, but he just keeps asking what I want to buy. Kind of a payback thing, like the least I could do for breaking his stuff was to spend some money in his store, and he’s leading me around, holding his arm out to show me all his fine merchandise, and I’m thinking about saying I don’t think I’ll buy anything but I’m scared he’s going to go nuts on me, when all of a sudden I smell this fresh, sharp flower smell coming in and almost overpowering the alcohol man’s stench, and I look behind me and see this tall, well-built woman, and she’s walking over and her bright yellow dress is billowing behind her like she’s coming in on a cloud and she has the most beautiful gray hair I’ve ever seen hanging just above her shoulders and a face like a goddess, just these deep blue eyes that, like, are flickering with this power, and her lipstick so red you could eat it, and this stunning—”

“Tom.”

“Right, so she comes over and holds up a box of film and tells the guy she wants to buy it. And he looks at her kind of like ‘Yeah, OK hold on a sec,’ but she says again, ‘I want to buy this, now,’ until finally he grunts and goes behind the counter and rings her up. So she buys the film and then she walks over before he can get out from behind the cash register and she takes my arm, you know loops it under mine like we’re a couple or something, and we walk out with the guy shouting something in Spanish behind us. It was incredible.”

It was incredible. The way Tom was acting was also incredible, like a kid opening his first beer. He was manic, he was all puffed up.

“So, Tom, is she your soul mate?” I asked. Obviously, the answer was yes, but Tom ignored the question.

He continued, “We spent the next three hours sitting by the pool at her hotel, just talking. We covered the whole shebang. Life stories, childhood dreams, deep dark secrets. Did you know we were only born eight days and ten hours apart?”

“Oh boy, Tommy. What happened to you?” I said.

“Do I even need to say it, David? Sheila is all I can think about right now. I’ve never had an experience like tonight. Never.”

“So, her name is Sheila?”

“Yes, Sheila. She’s from Houston—you were close with Dallas—and she’s divorced like me. One time.”

“Tom,” I said. “I think it’s wonderful. Seriously. You’re radiating . . . like a . . . like a bonfire or something.” I laughed reflexively at my own lack of eloquence. “I mean, you’re beaming.”

“She’s checking out of her hotel tomorrow,” Tom said. “We decided the best thing would be for us to do some traveling together, get to know each other, make sure it’s right.”

“Can’t she just meet you back in Houston? Or you could go Houston with her?”

Tom stepped up and pulled me into him. We were so close I could see an ingrown hair under his chin. Where his hands touched my back they seemed to be humming with a lively force, something electric. He whispered with such intensity I thought he would pop and sputter into the sky right there like a leaking balloon.

“David, this might be my only shot,” he said. “This could be it for me.”

He pulled back and looked at me, not a pleading look, but something more demanding, desperate and firm.

“Houston’s not an option,” he said in his normal voice. “I’ll explain everything tomorrow. Sheila’s supposed to be here with us.”

“Oh,” I said. “Supposed to be here? Is this something—I don’t know—like fate? Something divine?”

“Something,” he said with a sheepish smile.

“Look,” I said. It was probably close to three in the morning at this point. “If this is as big as you say it is—I mean, do what you need to do. You’ve come this far with me, and, really, I couldn’t have done it without you. So, you know, let it roll. It might be a bit tight.”

Tom grinned so wide I thought his ears would be pushed to the back of his head. “You’re the boss, man,” he said. “We’ll sit in the bed if you want us to.”

He ran off to a pay phone to call Sheila in her room. And for the first time in about fifteen minutes I noticed Frank, leaning against the wall, smiling as if the whole charade he had witnessed was staged just for him.

“And where have you been?” I asked him. He looked surprised—he had to think about it.

“I really don’t know,” he said after some face-scratching. “Here, I guess.”

“You mean you weren’t with him,” I said, pointing at Tom talking on the phone inside the laundromat.

“Nope.”

I shook my head and walked back inside.

SHEILA

The next morning we left our motel and drove to the Hotel Tres Pesos to pick up Sheila. Tom got out while we sat inside with the engine running. Diego had a roll of toilet paper he had confiscated from the communal bathroom and was tearing it into shreds, throwing it at Peter who nipped halfheartedly at the floating white streamers. Frank had a dog-eared copy of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and was flipping indiscriminately to different parts of the book, reading a page at a time. Now and then he would let out a garbled sound from deep in his belly—I think it was a laugh—that sounded like *ha-gra, ha-gra*.

“What’s so funny?” I asked with an air of obligation. Frank regarded me for a passing second and then returned to the page. I continued to stare at him, too lazy to turn away. He looked up again and sighed with a punctuated impatience.

He said, “It’s The Guide, man. Are you telling me you’ve never read this?”

“I never got around to it. I think I even left a copy back in Minnesota. I think Tom may have sent it to me.”

“Oh, Dave. This is it, man. Even if you don’t like sci-fi, this transcends all that stereotypical bull. Puts things in perspective.” Frank was the only person who called me Dave.

“How’s that?”

“Like how the earth is just a giant computer and we’re the parts, man. We’re the question and the answer.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I said. Just because Frank was earnest didn’t mean he wasn’t bizarre.

“Look, it’s just a story. Alright? But it slaps around the people who think they can fit everything into a little box, like the sun and stars, black holes, musical savants, parallel universes, the curious texture of seaweed. Life isn’t an encyclopedia waiting for us to browse its pages. It’s just . . . life, man. Life is the question, and the answer.”

“Right, it’s just life,” I said, but I was distracted by a commotion among the doormen in front of Hotel Tres Pesos. They were scrambling around, adjusting their caps, lining up like the Queen of England was about to exit.

Sure enough, the doors opened and out popped Tom, the advance guard, holding his hand over his eyes and assessing the area. He had the movements down, but seemed to be missing a gun and a radio earpiece. A few seconds later the doors opened and Sheila emerged. I assumed it was Sheila, even though I’d never seen her. She was indeed a very attractive older woman. But more than that, she obviously had everyone, not just Tom, wrapped up in her charm. The doormen lunged for her bags—there must have been five or six of them, bags that is. The parking attendant gently cupped her elbow in his hand and led her down the chipped concrete stairs. They looked like a parody of a movie star entourage, with Tom out in front still scanning for Bully. Finally he spotted us hiding in the shade and signaled to the group to follow him.

I got out to greet Sheila.

“Sheila, I must say we weren’t expecting you, but we’re glad to have you,” I said, holding out a hand. I realized my hand was pretty damp from sitting in a hot car, nervousness maybe, and I wiped it on my pants just as she was gingerly offering her hand

in return. Embarrassed, I babbled about the heat. She just kept her hand out, frozen in mid-air, until I less enthusiastically reached out again, this time with both hands and gave her a chivalrous shake.

“David, so nice to meet you. You’re just everything Tom said you would be, kind and generous and—ohhh, is this Diego? Oh, honey, you are so cute.” She pressed her face up against the cab window and looked down at Diego, waving and making little cooing noises. Diego turned from his toys and looked up in awe at this sparkling woman with giant gold hoop earrings and long orange fingernails tapping on the glass. I don’t think he knew where to begin with her. Then Sheila turned back to me and said, “I’m sorry about my stuff. I knew I was going to be down here for awhile, so I packed it all, you know.” She laughed cheerfully and I could see a large piece of green gum in the side of her mouth. “Thank you, David,” she said and put a soft hand on my arm, then gave me a peck on the cheek. She smelled like coconuts.

Sheila turned around, reached into her purse, and started giving bills to all the hotel staff who were lined up like they were waiting to go through the buffet line at Sizzler. She thanked each of them in turn, pressed a few pesos in their hands, and sent them away with that sweet-smelling kiss on the jaw. Tom just looked on, smiling like an idiot.

I was confused. With that many bags and people doting on her every step, I expected some kind of lip-curved diva. She dressed the part. But everything out of her mouth was lovely, coated with a thin Texas drawl and delivered with a surprising intimacy. You couldn’t not like Sheila. It wasn’t possible. I had to consciously try to keep from falling in love with her myself.

“It’ll be fun,” Tom said to me after he had escorted Sheila safely into the back seat and was walking around the truck to get in on my side. He patted my shoulder before climbing behind my seat and plopping down on the shallow bench. We had decided on Tom and Sheila in the back with Diego in the middle, Frank and I up front with Peter in the middle. At first I think Diego was a little distressed to be separated from his canine traveling companion—he squirmed against his seatbelt and reached towards the front, saying, “Peeter, peeter,” in his hushed voice—but Sheila got him started on some coloring books she pulled out of her baggy Mexican purse and he settled in nicely. Every few minutes Peter would jump up and put his paws on the seatback, facing Diego, to monitor the scene. Diego would laugh and try to put his hand on Peter’s paw, with Peter pulling it off the seat before he could touch it. Then Diego would go for the other paw, and Peter would switch to the previous paw, and so on, and so on, all a game, until Diego would catch on and get a hold of a hairy, bony dog foot and laugh even harder, looking at Sheila for confirmation of his cleverness, before returning to his coloring.

Yes, it was a bit tight. But there was no remorse for having Sheila in the back seat, her lilting voice like music filling the car as we bounced down the broken road towards Central America.

#### DEEPER AND DEEPER

This part of the story is harder to tell than the rest. Not that it wasn’t eventful, or urgent. You would think this is where I would really slow down, as we got farther and

farther away from the familiar. You think I'd want to drag out the details, give a taste of how exotic, how astonishing it is to drive the highlands of Guatemala, to cross into northern Honduras on the tail of a minor hurricane, to climb the sheer staircase on the front of a Mayan temple, to eat clams and sweat to the tune of "Cielito Lindo" plunked by a rough-skinned gentlemen with a tinny guitar. But really, this was the easy part—just traveling. Probably no more exciting than looking at pictures from your friends' summer vacations. *Look, this is the ocean, isn't it beautiful? Oh, and here's us at that little shrimp place near the hotel. I can't believe we found that place. Oh Harold, do you remember that waiter with the face of a turtle? Wasn't he friendly?*

What's important is that we were together, all of us. We should have been robbed, or detained, or separated by love and money and whatever else. But we weren't. Maybe it was the oddity of us all—the strength in numbers—but we moved like oil sliding through and around any impediments or complications. For about three weeks.

Sheila never once asked for special treatment. Not that we wouldn't give it to her. When she got sick in Choluteca, one of the last big towns in Honduras before Nicaragua, I spent a lot of time scouring the neighborhood for bland foods she could eat. Frank gave her herbs he found in the market, coarse mixtures of bark and leaves boiled into tea. Tom never left her side. He sat by her bed and talked to her about his orchard and about the first time they met. He read her horoscopes in Spanish and fanned her constantly with a couple of manila folders. She had a high fever. We consulted a pharmacist in town who gave us some malaria medicine. She didn't want to go the hospital.

This is the part that's harder to tell, because Sheila died in Choluteca about a week after we got there. It was on a Thursday afternoon. Frank was out wandering

around. I was sitting in the little courtyard of our hotel with a Spanish-English dictionary, watching Diego and Peter run circles around the planter beds, when Tom called down from our room on the second floor.

“David!” he yelled. “David, get the truck! Now!”

I ran, got the truck. But by the time we got to the hospital, Sheila had stopped breathing. Tom said she never even opened her eyes. She was sleeping. Her breathing got quick, and then slow, and then slower.

I cursed a lot. Tom cried. He picked Diego up and held him. Diego didn't try to squirm away, just let Tom cradle him like a baby for probably twenty minutes. Then Tom was on the phone with Sheila's relatives in Texas. She had a sister in Houston and another one in Kansas. There was a lot of confusion. They threatened him, told him that there would be an investigation. Apparently, only one of the sisters had even heard of Tom, in a phone message from Sheila about the time we left Acapulco.

Tom was on a plane that night with Sheila's body. When he left he was shaking worse than I'd ever seen. His bags rattled off his shoulders.

“You think they'll arrest you at the airport?” I asked.

He said, “I hope so.” The sky was beginning to get dark, and I could hardly see his eyes beneath the brim of his “Welcome to Mazatlan” baseball cap.

Frank and I and Diego and the dog watched Tom through a glass wall as he climbed the stairs from the tarmac onto the tiny plane. He would get on a jumbo jet in Tegucigalpa, about an hour away by air. As the plane revved its propellers, we walked back to the truck in empty silence. With Tom and Sheila gone, I felt like I was back to square one. The moon looked down with the same indifference it had on the night I hit

Suyapa. The night I met Diego. There wasn't much to do except just be numb. Frank had found some melons when he was out earlier. Cantaloupes and watermelons. They were the sweetest, worst-tasting melons I ever had. We split them open with Frank's filet knife and ate them in the dark. That night I laid in the back of the truck and didn't move. I hardly closed my eyes before dawn came.

## NICAS

It was early in the morning on July 7 when we hit the outskirts of Managua. I marked the date on the back of an old registration card in Bully's glove box. We were too far away to see the city center, but there was no mistaking the signs of urban sprawl. We snaked our way through a muddy river valley with towering slums on all sides. The hills were barely visible beneath the mash of shacks and shanties, the twinkle of a thousand tin roofs. Clotheslines shot in every direction, draping the scene like garland on a Christmas tree. Colors sprung out in every frame: a whitewashed wall with blue lettering, a flatbed truck painted bright red, a small girl in a pink dress, a green papaya tree leaning over someone's roof.

We stopped to eat oranges and rolls at a roadside cart.

"Now we've just got to visit all the Lagos' in town. That should only take a few years," he said, looking around. "Provided they're all in the phone book. So our first job is to get everybody phones."

"You got a point," I said.

"Is this the part where we pray?" Frank asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. Frank wasn’t opposed to praying. Someone is listening, he’d say, even if it’s just yourself. Maybe so. There was no rhyme or reason to things anymore. Whatever I heard in Minnesota had seemed to stay in Minnesota. I was tired and my knees hurt. Too many days driving, sitting, pushing the pedals. For the first time since we left Florida, I was really starting to feel foolish. Here I was, an old ranch man, so big and uneven. I could raise a barn in a week. For thirty years of my life I was up before the sun. I could sleep on a horse, milk a cow with my eyes closed, scare back an animal with the force of my voice. And here I was, finally, toting around a boy in a land where I was nothing more than an outsider—a fat tourist and a target for cons. I had a dog and a near stranger who spent hours staring at the horizon and claimed to have visited other dimensions. My only friend had gone home to face his fate, however nasty it might be. Maybe it was time for me to do the same. And I wasn’t thinking about jail time. I could unload the boy. I could leave him at any orphanage in between here and St. Paul. I could drop him off in Florida where I found him. I could leave a note. I could disappear and never be heard from again.

Since Sheila died Diego had been more thin-skinned. Since Acapulco, and especially when Sheila was with us, he talked more. In his soft mumbly Spanish he would make pronouncements that no one could understand. He started to point at things and laugh, and to repeat new words in English and Spanish. He had a working vocabulary of basic English commands and requests: eat, drink, more, stop, milk, bishy (blanket), and moon. For some reason he grabbed on to that noun and didn’t let go. Every whitish sphere was a moon. Polka dots on a shirt, donuts on a billboard, plates in a

restaurant, the sun as it set: all moons. When night fell he was a moon-spotting machine, craning around and searching for the luminous glow.

Diego was in the truck when we drove to the hospital. He and Peter were up front with me as I slid through corners, throwing up dust and breaking up packs of stray dogs along the road. I hadn't even bothered to buckle him in. He stood and looked into the back seat where Tom had Sheila laid out, her head in Tom's lap, and him slapping her cheeks and asking her to wake up. I wasn't thinking about Diego, wasn't thinking about how this was the second woman he had seen die in front of his eyes.

Now he acted more like when I first found him. Not completely traumatized—he at least had some familiar faces around—but he was more sensitive, more given to whining and crying for little or no reason. Kids have bad days. They wake up on the wrong side of the crib. But I could see that this was more steady. This was more sorrow. It was almost too much. For me. I reacted badly, not wanting to hear it, thinking of my own grief when what the kid probably needed was someone to hug him, feed him cookies and talk softly. I could do all three. I tried. I filled the backseat with roasted nuts and shortbread cookies. I carried him around wherever we went. I think it was the talking part that failed me—I tried to be comforting, aiming my words right at his little boy heart, but it didn't matter if he couldn't understand me when I could barely understand myself. I was the fool. The man who gave it all up for nothing, then tried to be a hero. I needed to find someone else.

Managua is built near a lake. Lake Managua is not small, neither is it particularly clean, which is as expected for lake with a third world capital city near it. Still, it's

something to look at. People depend on it and for that it is beautiful. It's everybody's fishing hole, bathtub, washing machine, sewer, rec pool, dumpster, scenic lookout. Plus, it had the cheapest motel we could find.

So we started at the lake.

Frank struck up a conversation with a restaurant owner. His name was Salchi. His place was in a decent part of town within view of the water. People rode bikes along a pier. Nearby was a shoe store and a drug store. A bus passed by with people hanging out the windows. Salchi wouldn't really tell us anything until we were seated and being served hot tortillas with butter and salt. We ordered, of course. Some kind of sausages. Frank said they were special.

"How would we find a family in this city named Lagos?" Frank asked.

"That depends which Lagos you want to find," the guy said. "I know some Lagos. I think I'm related to some Lagos too." Now there was an idea, just go around to all the Lagos families you can find and start tracing the family tree.

"This particular family," Frank said, "had a daughter in the United States. She died, and this is her son." He pointed at Diego, who was standing on his chair and eating tortillas with gusto. Peter was tied up in front, whining and barking at strays.

"This boy?" asked Salchi. "Is an orphan?"

"Yes, we are trying to find his family," Frank said.

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard," said Salchi. "When people die in the United States, word gets around. People talk a lot around here. People love to hate America, too. What was she raped, murdered?"

"Neither," said Frank. "It was an accident."

Salchi said, “Well, maybe. I’ll ask around. Come back tomorrow.”

“The problem is her family may not know she’s dead,” Frank said. “She died without identification.”

Salchi looked confused. He had a dirty white towel draped over his shoulder and he used it to wipe his hands and face. He said, “If she died without identification, how do you know who she is?”

I would have been feeling very uncomfortable right about then, but I didn’t really understand what was being said. Frank translated, relating most of the conversation to me afterwards. Essentially, he told the guy our story. The short version. Salchi kept looking at me and then Diego with darting eyes. He stood the entire time, fielding occasional questions from his kitchen staff.

He said, “You drove here with this boy because you killed his mother?”

He was looking at me. I nodded.

“Guilt,” he said. “I think that guilt and love must be two bones in a dog’s mouth.” At least that’s what Frank thought he said. He might have said, “Guilt and love are two mouths on the same dog.” Frank had trouble following.

“You have to eat here tomorrow. I’ll ask my wife, she hears everything. But this is a big city,” Salchi said.

“How big?” Frank asked.

“One, two million,” Salchi said.

“How many Lagos?” Frank asked.

“Thousands,” said Salchi. “Thousands. And how can you find them all? We don’t live in computers like you in the United States.” He said that. Live *in* computers.

## THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY BANDSTAND

We stayed in a motel near Salchi's restaurant. All night long I listened to the clatter of buses braking and accelerating, and the thud-thud of taxis with their stereos turned up. Some in between all the noise was a family waiting to hear from Suyapa. Maybe they had a picture of Diego on wall as a baby, all black hair and dimples. Sometime they would be sitting at the table, leaning back after a meal, and they would notice the pictures and start to remember. They would get out a letter or a postcard, maybe tell stories about when Suyapa sang in the school play, kicked the neighborhood bully, brought Diego home from the hospital. Then someone would start to weep. There would be hugs. Questions unanswered.

In the morning we found a phone book. There were only about a hundred Lagos listed. Frank called the first five on the list. Two didn't answer. One was a boy who said he had no relatives named Suyapa. One was a doctor's office. The other was an old woman who hung up on Frank before he could finish talking.

Around lunchtime we wandered over to Salchi's. He wasn't there. The cook said he was at church. On a Tuesday afternoon? Oh, he plays in the band, said the cook. He's at practice.

Frank was ecstatic. "I love holy rollers," he said. I was having a hard time imagining Salchi in the band. What did he play? The organ? His fingers were too fat. Maybe the drums. He had arms like billy clubs, I could see them firing like pistons to the gospel beat.

“Maybe we should wait until he comes back,” I said. “We can make more calls. That way we don’t have to go traipsing around town.”

“Traipsing? Dave. Good things happen at church, right?”

I said, “Good things don’t just happen. Bad things happen. Good things develop.”

Frank said, “Not so, man, not so. Well, maybe. But this is all about providence, remember? What’s the upshot? It’s the only thing you know for sure, and I know you know. We’re like pinballs. We try to bounce around as much as possible, and eventually we hit the ramp. Maybe today, maybe next year. But you have to throw yourself into the cosmic mix, so to speak.”

“The cosmic mix?” I asked.

“Yeah, the mix, you grumpy old bastard. I thought you were on a mission here.”

That stopped me up for a few seconds. I was irritated and surprised at Frank, but I didn’t want to show it.

“Frank, how do you know about a cosmic mix?” I said. “What are we, hors d’euovres?”

“All I’m saying is we keep moving,” he said. “Actually, I’d like to go check out the east coast. I think they call it Blue Fields.”

I said, “Okay, let’s go.”

Again it seemed I had underestimated Frank. He was still around. He was willing. Just when you least expected it, he lit up like a lamp post. Ding. Meta-physical. One word or two. That was Frank. He was always there, never quite all the way, but just enough to tip the scales every now and again. That’s my definition of metaphysical.

We hooked a bus up and away from the lake, into a neighborhood called Las Palmas. The driver scowled when he saw Peter, but I could tell he didn't even want to deal with us. Pete was obviously no stray. On the bus I held onto Diego as he stood on the seat and looked out the window. I think he loved being able to ride without a seatbelt. He pointed a lot and talked in gibberish, however I did understand one word that I hadn't noticed him say before. When we got to the church he pointed at it and said, "el oso, el oso," which in my limited Spanish means "the bear." He said it over and over, and I couldn't figure out what he was talking about until we got off the bus and got a good look at the building. The church was a large white adobe structure. A façade in front gave the impression of a vaulted ceiling—the actual ceiling was low and flat—and a large adobe cross grew right out of the façade where the "roofline" peaked. Above the door was written HOLY CHURCH OF OUR BLESSED LORD CHRIST, and above the name was a painting, rather faded, of Jesus hunched over carrying a cross. Both the cross and the Lord's rough robe were a muddy brown. Diego continued to point at the picture. "El oso." From far away, I could see how the image resembled a large, strange bear lumbering along.

Ratty palm trees stuck out of the bare dirt around the church. We could hear the echo of drums and a microphone coming from inside. Outside two men stood talking. One had on cotton slacks and an old white dress shirt. A thin black tie hung down past his waistline like an old rope. The other man had a machete over his shoulder, and hanging off the end of the machete a nylon sack with something heavy in it. They stopped their conversation and flat out stared at us as we walked up. When the machete man saw Diego he smiled, reached into his sack and pulled out a mango, a small yellow

one with black and green spots. Diego clutched it, held it close like a football. We mumbled some thanks, unsure of what to do next. The men were obviously associated with the church in some way. We hesitated, leaning toward the door.

“Que Dios les bendiga,” said the man with the tie. He beckoned toward the door and we went inside, but he didn’t follow us.

Salchi was the singer. A regular gospel crooner, something I hadn’t anticipated at all. Inside that short fat neck was a set of roaring pipes. We walked in with the band at full tilt. A three-piece drum set, electric bass, steel-string guitar—no organ after all—and Salchi in front. In one hand he held the microphone, brushing it against a luxurious black moustache, while the other hand held the mic cord away from his body.

“Tengo gozo en mi corazon, gozo en Cristo,” he sang repeatedly. *I have joy in my heart, joy in Christ.* The drummer hacked out a steady march while the bass and guitar alternated between two chords. I imagined it sounded better with the congregation singing along.

We stood at the back. There were no pews, just rows of rickety folding chairs. In front was a table with a podium, and behind that a stage on cinderblocks where the band performed. A string of lights drooped along the wall behind the stage, along with several small frames of Jesus walking on water and healing a leper. Salchi didn’t walk around on stage, he just stood off to one side of the podium and sang with his eyes closed. The rest of the band didn’t seem to notice us either.

Then, abruptly, everything stopped. The drummer lost a stick, the bass player looked up, Salchi opened his eyes and lowered his mic.

“Amigos!” he said and threw up his hands. “How did you find me?”

Frank gave him the short version. By the end, Salchi was talking rapidly to his band mates and pointing at us.

“These are the guys,” he said. He clapped us on the backs, picked Diego up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Diego acted indifferent, looked at the ground. Salchi played with his hair.

“So, what did you find out?” Frank asked.

“Okay,” Salchi said, rubbing his hands together. “Okay okay okay.” He looked like he was trying to think of something to say on the spot. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” he said. “In two hours we’re having a meeting, a celebration!” He was visibly excited. “Stay here, and when the congregation comes, we can make an announcement to everybody.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Frank. He clapped me on the back.

“Ask him if he found anything out,” I told Frank.

“Obviously not, Dave,” Frank said. He turned to Salchi. “Would you speak for us? I don’t feel comfortable speaking Spanish in front of so many people.”

“Yes yes yes. Yes my friends,” Salchi said. He was really juiced up. Religious rapture or something. Sweat rolled down his neck and soaked the front of his grey t-shirt.

For the next couple hours, we wandered around the neighborhood. Someone had turned their living room into a store front and was selling ice cream. I got rum-raisin, and found it to be very rummy. Diego got chocolate. Frank got a beer and drank it in one breath.

There were kids everywhere, running in alleyways and between houses, playing soccer with hard, plastic, un-poppable balls and throwing rocks. Smoke hung in the air,

the smell of burning wood and trash. We saw women carrying buckets of ground corn. Every once in awhile a taxi—usually an old Datsun or Toyota wagon—rolled down the dusty street, or a pickup full of fruits and vegetables with a megaphone mounted on top, blaring, “Melons, melons, melons! One cordoba one cordoba! Apples, mangoes, carrots, corn! Eggs three cordobas!” People came running with their money. The sun began to sit low in the sky, coloring everything a dirty orange and dropping the temperature a few degrees. Somewhere deep in my belly I began to get that feeling again that I’d had in Mazatlan looking out at the unbroken ocean. There was something marvelous about it all. I tried to remember that part of the feeling must be exoticism, the enchantment of foreign lands. The evening was probably less than marvelous to some careworn people hoping to feed these children running through the streets. But where is the nation that isn’t filled with people who are careworn? In my clearest memory, there was something beautifully straightforward about the whole scene.

By the time we got back to the church the chairs were mostly taken. Word got out that two Americans were going to be at the service—most likely a first for the Holy Church of Our Blessed Lord Christ. Roaming the neighborhood with boy and dog must have generated even more curiosity, and soon there were solid bodies from wall to wall. There were freshly-bathed parishioners, street kids in rags, women with babies hanging off their breasts, even a few stray cats and dogs being kicked about.

Salchi seated us on a single row of chairs behind the podium. I would much rather have been standing in the back. The pastor was the man with the thin black tie we saw talking outside earlier. He came in the front door, sliding and pinching his way

through the crowd up to the front. The air was filled with the humming, jagged sound of a hundred voices.

“I’m very pleased that God has brought you here tonight. I am Pastor Dan,” he said, leaning over to shake our hands. He stopped when he got to Diego, placed his hands on the sides of Diego’s head and pulled him in close. “And you, my son, are in God’s hands as well.” As Frank translated this last part to me, I got a little creeped out. I think it was the way he said, “my son,” with such breathy sharpness.

But Pastor Dan didn’t seem to creep anyone else out. He was clearly well-loved, and as his sermon that night progressed, more than one worshipper was caught up in pious fervor. Shouts of “Amen!” and “Thank you Lord!” (*Gracias Señor!*) began to reverberate in the humid room. The band cut in and out on cue, Salchi ranged high and low with his praises, the crowd swayed and turned. A short man with long hair fell to the floor and began to speak the most outlandish words. “Gotayami unbocu chayamus” and similar phrases. I had never been to a Pentecostal church, but I’d heard about them. I’d read about the day of Pentecost, Peter’s famous day, with the flaming tongues and the mass conversion. We sat up in front, sweating generously, taking it all in. Frank looked like he was about to get up himself and enter the fray.

“This is a trip,” he said.

I said, “Why did they have us sit up here and not even introduce us?”

“Good question,” he said. He turned back toward the audience, focusing in on a pretty woman with a low-cut blouse wiggling around near the front, her eyes rolling back in her head.

Diego sat quietly at first. When the music played he got up on his chair and danced a little. But after awhile he started to whine. When he tried to climb onto the stage I hauled him back and held him in my lap while he squirmed.

After about an hour some of the curious had left, but the crowd held on. Pastor Dan seemed to be building toward something. Right when I started to think we would be better off heading back to our motel, Pastor Dan raised his hand to command a moment of silence. He opened a sleek, leather-bound Bible and read Peter's lines from the second chapter of Acts: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

He shouted to the congregation, "Tonight, brothers and sisters, we have been visited by some from afar off. The Lord God has called them here." Every gaze fixed on us. The evening's climax was near at last.

"They are wise men, men who made a promise to God and who were promised guidance in return. They are looking for the family of this young orphan here," said the pastor.

Frank was translating, stumbling over his words. I started to feel anxious. Something was off. I looked back at Salchi who was looking at Pastor Dan with knuckled anticipation, the microphone dangling around his knees.

Pastor Dan continued, "And even though they may not know how they got here or why they are here, we know, brothers and sisters, we know because we have been visited tonight by the spirit of prophecy. The spirit of prophecy rests here right now, ready to speak. So, my children, let it speak!"

Even though I didn't immediately know what the last exclamation meant, I felt it crackle in my bones. The silence was jarring—it engulfed the room, silence so thick it seemed to force our words back into our throats. I tried to say something, anything, but couldn't make a noise.

Finally, a voice punctured the air. Time unfroze and I heard and understood clearly what it said, in Spanish, down to the last word.

“I know this boy!” was the shout.

The crowd parted to reveal a woman in a navy blue skirt with a white t-shirt. She was slight, with a strong nose and perfectly straight hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her mouth gaped open wide in an expression of amazement. I didn't recognize her at all.

“God has brought him home!” she cried and lunged forward with her arms stretched out in front of her. A cheer went up from the throng. A hundred hands shook in the air.

“Hosana!” shouted Pastor Dan. “Alelujah! Bendito!” The congregation joined in.

My recollection of what happened next is distorted and hazy. I remember a dozen shapes, people, bodies, crowding in. I remember crying and music. I remember Pastor Dan shaking my hand like he was congratulating me. Diego all but pried out of my arms while I protested in broken Spanish, basically “no” and “por favor.” Salchi talking to Frank and looking toward the door.

I remember asking Frank what the hell was happening.

“That woman. She said her brother was married to Diego's aunt. She knows where the family lives. Somewhere close by, in a place called Los Pinos,” he said.

“Where’s Diego?” I asked. I was close to throwing up. Nothing about this felt right.

“They took him to Los Pinos, I think,” he said.

I said, “Dammit Frank.” I couldn’t say anything else. I was sobbing.

The church was almost empty. People were talking in groups outside. The band was packing up but Salchi was nowhere to be seen. In a corner at the back of the stage I saw Pastor Dan talking to the woman in the low-cut shirt. I ran toward him. Without thinking, without shouting, I ran to him, and when I reached him I grabbed him with my full-size hands and smashed him against the wall.

“Tell me where he is,” I said. “He’s my boy. I’ll take him home.” The pastor snarled, understanding nothing of my angry English, straining violently and trying to hit into my body with his fists. I felt the low-cut woman tearing at my shirt and hair. I brushed her off with a broad forearm swipe. Soon the band was on me, pulling me off, yelling. Then Frank had my arm, leading me toward the door.

“Let’s go Dave. You’re going to get us hurt,” Frank said. I didn’t care. I wanted to get hurt. I wanted nothing at that moment but a fight. I burned like the man who knows he will lose and wants to lose big.

Somehow we ended up outside. People backed away as we came near.

“Where is he?” Frank asked. “Where is the boy? Where is Diego?”

“He’s gone to God,” said one bystander.

“Go home gringo,” someone shouted.

“You’re not his family, friend,” said another.

At the entrance to the church Pastor Dan stood pointing at us. He was talking to a bearded man with a face like a tombstone. I felt a chill.

“OK, Frank. Take us away,” I said. “Quick.”

We all but ran around a few corners until we found a taxi. My arms were stinging. In the streetlight I could see they were scratched and bleeding. In the car, I buried my head in my arms and leaned against the seat.

“Just wait, David,” Frank said. “Just wait.”

I didn’t say a word. I felt I had failed completely. And for the first time I noticed Peter was gone, too. I’d lost passenger number one. The only creature who had seen it all from start to finish. I cursed God. Cursed him in my heart and hoped to die.

## PHONE HOME

The next day I called Tom. I knew he wasn’t back in Florida, and the only number I had was Sheila’s sister’s. We walked to a phone company building with a bank of phone booths out front. There was gum stuck on the glass, and graffiti in permanent marker. I sat down on the little bench inside. Right across from me was a scribbled message that read “Die!” in English. Below it was another message, in purple ink, “Jose Maria y El Amor Verdadero.”

Sheila’s sister picked up the phone on the fourth ring. I introduced myself.

“You’re Tom’s crazy friend?” she half-asked, half-accused. “You have nerve to call here, *Dave*.” She emphasized my name for maximum effect.

She said, “My sister died in your truck.”

“I don’t think we know exactly,” I said. “I was hoping to get more information.”

“Actually, I need more information, Dave,” she said. “Your friend Tom is in jail. He’s a drug dealer. You’re running around down there with crackheads and orphans. What am I supposed to think? She hadn’t spent an hour in the hospital since the day she was born. This trip was supposed to rejuvenate her, not kill her.”

Sheila’s sister—Marcia was her name—actually sounded quite steady as she said all this. It was a line of questioning she had been practicing in her mind.

“Did you do any kind of an autopsy?” I asked. But I spoke again before she could respond. I didn’t like the way I sounded. Like a cop or a lawyer. So I said, “I’m sorry. I’m asking too many questions.”

“You’re what?”

I said, “I’m sorry. I should have said that first. I’m so sorry about Sheila. I know I hardly knew her, and that almost makes it worse. We liked her very much. I liked her very much. She was a beautiful woman. And kind. People wanted to be near her. We thought the world of her.”

“Thank you,” said Marcia. There was quiet on the line for a long time.

“I guess I need to get Tom’s number,” I said finally.

“Oh, you mean the number for the county jail? Yeah, I’ll get it,” she said.

“Marcia, Tom isn’t a drug dealer,” I said.

“Don’t even talk about it to me, dear,” she said. “Don’t. I’ll worry about it another day.”

I tried to explain more.

“Here’s the phone number,” she said, proceeding to talk right over me. I jotted it down on the inside of my arm.

“We’re going to want to talk to you some more, you know,” Marcia said.

“I’d be happy to,” I said.

“I think you owe it to us,” she said.

“Yeah, I do,” I said.

“How’s that boy of yours?” she said. I couldn’t imagine trying to tell her everything.

“He’s fine,” I said. The blood started to thump in my ears. “Still looking.”

More quiet. I started to clear my throat when she said, “Will you please call me when you get back to the States?”

“Yes. I actually think I still have some things that belonged to Sheila. Small things. Like a hairbrush, and jewelry. Stuff they left on the bathroom sink,” I said. I could hear her trying not to cry. “So, I’ll talk to you later. It was nice meeting you,” I said, then cringed. It sounded trite.

I hung up and waited a few minutes before calling Tom. I hadn’t slept a second the night before. I was starting to hate this place. The morning light had to be fake. The whole previous evening could in no way have ever happened. I was sick with disbelief. Drowning in it.

Frank wandered around farther down the street. I could see him coming out of a bakery with a loaf of bread wrapped in white paper. He wasn’t drowning in disbelief. Maybe denial, but not even that. He believed everything and anything. In his universe one thing was just as likely as the next. There was some distant trace of reassurance in

that, an almost effortless devotion to being in this world. He worried little about final outcomes, but always seemed sure about the next step. “We’ll visit Salchi this afternoon,” he had said that morning. “We’ll wring his fat neck until he helps us out.” He was perfectly reasonable about it.

Across the street was a two-story house, flat-front, painted dark blue. A fat wooden door, unfinished and worn smooth, opened up right onto the sidewalk. In the corner of the doorframe sat a flower pot with red flowers. Red with orange around the edges. Next to the door was a window and leaning out the window was a very old woman with long grey hair and a striking purple sweater. The woman looked out onto the street with a judicious satisfaction that seems to come to certain types of elderly people. People who have seen eye to eye with themselves in the mirror and accepted the ground rules. People who regret very little, whose wrinkled skin masks a childish willingness to bend but not break, to climb inside of suffering and laugh until suffering can’t bear the shame and hangs up its coat. People who embrace defeat while stabbing it in the back. I wanted to be that old woman. Somehow just feeling that gave me enough incentive to pick up the phone and call the jail.

Tom had to call me back. I waited in the booth for another fifteen minutes, sweating and wiping my brow with my shirtsleeve until it was soaked through. When the phone rang it startled me into a standing position. I picked it up and said hello.

“David?”

Here was Tom like I had never heard him before. He was a thousand miles away, but sounded like he was talking from the end of the galaxy.

“Tom, I just talked to Marcia,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“She’s understandably upset,” I said.

“Yeah. She hasn’t let me say more than fifty words to her,” said Tom.

“Tom, I lost Diego,” I said. I wanted to say it so bad, I couldn’t have waited another second.

He said, “I thought you might.”

I said, “You thought I might? How could you possibly say that? Is your head in a vice? What have they been doing to you there?”

“David,” he said. His voice hadn’t changed pitch since word one. I was irate. I didn’t let him speak. I was a bucket of acid spilling over. I threw curses, profanities, bits and pieces of the scene at the church, anything I could think of. When I was done, Tom said, “David, I’ve only got three minutes left.”

He spoke slowly: “David, it has nothing to do with you. Listen. The night before Sheila died, we were sitting in front of a gas station, drinking a Pepsi. She asked if I thought we would find Diego’s family. I said yes. She said she didn’t think we would.”

He paused. I could hear shouting in the background.

He said, “I was surprised. I told her she could at least hope. I even asked her why she bothered coming along at all. She said, ‘No, it’s not that. We won’t find Diego’s family. I think they’ll find us.’”

I wasn’t sure what to think. “What was she a prophet then?” I asked. “No offense. But I’m semi-serious. What kind of a comment is that?”

“I don’t know,” Tom said. “She didn’t act like she was prophesying or anything.”

“Well, what would that look like anyway?” I asked. “Have you ever seen someone prophesy?”

He said, “I don’t think so. Maybe you have, though.”

I said, “Me? What are you talking about?”

I waited for him to say something else. I could hear someone telling him to hang up. A door slammed. Was he talking about Suyapa? Minnesota? Both seemed so far away, even unremarkable in my mind now. His end of the line got muffled. I heard him say “five more seconds.” I spoke up.

“Tom,” I said. “How did she die?”

“Dengue fever,” he said. “It’s like malaria. Her body just wasn’t ready for it. Some doctor told her family she probably would have recovered if she had been in a hospital.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know I can’t quite understand. But a little.”

“I know,” he said. “Bye,” he said and the call cut off.

As soon as we hung up I dialed home. Home as in my daughter, Lana. My ranch in the cold, still North.

She threatened to come and get me. She made me promise to go to the police. She said that Harold was hung up with a hernia and work was harder than usual. Finally, all she could do was offer to buy my ticket.

“Get home Dad,” she said. “Get home and rest. You’re not a detective. You’re not an ambassador. You’re not even a tourist. Let me bury at least one of my parents in person.”

Now that made me laugh. But when I hung up I knew one thing: I wasn't going home. Lana was partially right though—I wasn't any of those things she mentioned. I was something else entirely. I was a man straddling the line between dirt and sky, a man with unimaginable debts and a mandate to move my feet.

## EPILOGUE

If I were to go into detail about what happened next, you might be entertained. You might even believe me. Most likely, you'd say, "That's kind of boring." Truth be told, it is. After I hung up the phone with Lana, I went to the police station as promised. Frank and I found ourselves with a young police sergeant who was eager to help. Maybe he was eager when he found out that I was offering a reward. Maybe he was eager to impress a couple of visitors. Either way, he put a bead on Salchi (actually somewhat troubled by what went down at the church that night), who coughed up Pastor Dan, who coughed up Diego. It seemed Pastor Dan had used his considerable charisma to orchestrate the miracle. Always looking for ways to build his congregation, he was a performer through and through, insisting that he intended to find the boy's real family all along. For all I know, he was telling the truth. What I like to remember most is when we entered the dirt-floored bungalow where Diego was living with the good pastor's sister. There was a teenaged girl flipping tortillas with her hands on a hot griddle and holding Diego on one hip. Upon seeing us Diego didn't cry out or cheer or even smile. He just held out his arms and leaned toward me as children do when they want to be held by

someone else. He put his head on my shoulder the whole way back to the car. Also present at the pastor's sister's house was Peter the dog, who never left Diego's side and hasn't to this day, for all I know.

Sergeant Victor Rodriguez then put us in contact with a newspaper reporter for *La Prensa Mundial*, who ran a couple of stories on page two. Within no time we were sitting at a table on the patio of Comedor Maritza, looking at pictures of Suyapa and watching Sofi Lagos bring her nephew Diego plates of platanos, beans, rice and eggs. How should I describe a meeting that anyone could imagine with near exactness? There were tears and hugs, and pleas for forgiveness. There were promises and long farewells, exchanges and souvenirs. In the telling I've tried to recreate a few scenes, mostly in my imagination, of what was going on in Nicaragua while Tom and I were launching our stumble south.

Don't you see? This is what's supposed to happen. It makes sense. What I've tried to describe are the parts that didn't make sense, and maybe still don't. Like how I ended up in Florida one dark night, at the wrong place at the wrong time. And why everything else seemed to happen in the right place at the right time. And how sometimes I get the two confused, right and wrong, wrong and right. And how people live and die, but especially live, and what guides their lives (admittedly, I have no idea). These were the parts that needed to be told. They still need to be told. Everything else is just the icing on the cake. Or lack thereof.

For instance, you might guess that I live in Florida. Tom died of Parkinson's disease shortly after he got out of prison. His wasn't in very long—I spent a few months working with his lawyer until the judge cut short his sentence. I think he, the judge, felt

bad when he saw Tom shaking in the courtroom during an appeal. Suddenly the term “medical” took on a whole new meaning for him.

Tom left me his house and his orchard. Every morning I am incredibly sad when I look out at the trees and the hills, but I can't leave. My job is to stick around and think about him everyday, and try to enjoy it a bit. Life is what it is. Sometimes I pray. Sometimes I feel like a creature on God's good earth. Sometimes I still wonder why I'm here. What I have decided is that there is something big going on, something none of us need to fully understand. But whatever it is, I want to be a part of it. And that's where the motion comes in. That's all you've got to do, really. It's good to ask for help, but just keep moving your feet. Someone will tell you when to stop.

## Afterword

In his extraordinary book on fiction, *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner says, “No critical study, however brilliant, is the fierce psychological battle a novel is”(Gardner 34). He was referring to *writing* critical studies and novels.

Although I have never undertaken to write a long, involved critical study, I do agree that the writing of a novel is a “fierce psychological battle,” one which requires a mental, physical, and emotional investment. As I look back on the process of writing this story, I realize that in many ways I may have lost that battle. Not that I was demoralized into giving up, but I realize this book will require many more drafts, and maybe many more pages, before it becomes “art” in Gardner’s sense of the word, that is, “a vivid and continuous . . . dream in the reader’s mind” (31).

Writing serious fiction, says Gardner, is “less like a cocktail party than a tank of sharks” (35). When I read my manuscript over, I feel like I’m swimming in that shark tank. I cringe at clichés, pat phrases, careless detail. I am intimidated by a lack of character development, dropped threads, and sluggish sections of plot. How do I turn this collection of scenes and characters into something greater than the sum of its parts?

“The most useful hint is perhaps this,” says Gardner, “Read the story over and over, at least a hundred times—literally—watching for subtle meanings, connections, accidental repetitions, psychological significance. Leave nothing—no slightest detail—unexamined; and when you discover the implications in some image or event, oonch those implications toward the surface” (194). I still have a lot of reading to do. And oonching. I’ve called *Man Down South* a novella in the abstract of this thesis, but in

reality I am hoping to turn into a full-length novel at some point. I would do this mostly by adding scenes to the already existing framework of the story. Scenes that show more interaction between characters, especially David and Diego, on a daily basis, and scenes that delve deeper into the inner lives of other main characters like Tom and Frank, much in the way the flashbacks to life with Sasha serve to flesh out David's character. I feel that at heart this is a longer piece and needs more of what critic Gary Saul Morson calls "prosaics," or "a way of thinking about human events that focuses on the ordinary, messy quotidian facts of daily life" ("Prosaics" 516).

We can indeed know certain things about the world around us, and how we belong to it. But attempting to cram all the events and details of our lives into a historical or sociological mold is ignorant, irresponsible, and ultimately fruitless.

So we start with the small things, the diverse, arbitrary, chance events of an ordinary life. In them we may see things, learn things, but they are always prosaic insights, suited to specific characters at specific points in time, or to us as individual readers in individual places. Novelists shouldn't be concerned with explaining the theoretical underpinnings of events, or as Morson quotes Tolstoy as often saying, sometimes things happen not for any particular reason but just "for some reason" ("Prosaics" 518). Although dramatic events may occur, the majority of Tolstoy's novels are dedicated to "the value of routine family life, of daily tasks that reflect an immediate need, and of unsystematic judgment reflecting a life lived rightly from moment to moment" (Bakhtin, 24). In these things his characters find wisdom, understand love, and set their destinies.

Morson's writings have been a major influence on my fiction. I truly believe that it is often through the depiction of those mundane actions and events that great fiction takes root. In *Man Down South* I think I have attempted to be "prosaic" by describing with detail and relish such things as David's prayer in Minnesota, dinner with Sasha's parents, the purchase of a picture of St. Francis, giving Diego a bath, etc. However, I don't feel there is enough of this kind of writing to achieve the effect Morson describes. There is still a lot of rushing to move the story from place to place, sometimes feeling like a "highlight reel" approach, rather than a subtle, well-paced progression through the characters' lived reality.

That said, I regard the entire experience of writing this book with a great deal of affection and appreciation. The last few years, and especially the last few months, have been ones of intense study, practice, and imitation. I have begun to know more fully the purpose and value of great fiction. I have begun, hopefully, to understand the task of a writer—his requisite commitment and patience—and finally, I have begun in earnest my learning of and experimentation with different fictional forms and techniques.

Human beings are creatures of free will. They choose to believe, to doubt, to love, to hate, to sit, to stand. The writer who writes as if his characters don't have the ability to choose, and to choose poorly as well as wisely, but are merely victims or products of their fateful circumstances, is one who, notes Gardner, "can write nothing of interest" (43). I struggled with this at times in writing *Man Down South*. David Crumm is a character who suffers a horrible misfortune when he strikes down Suyapa Lagos in his truck. But I didn't want him to be funneled automatically into his fate, or into taking

his journey. I wanted him to wrestle with it. To consider the possibilities, and ultimately to make a choice, which in this case may be somewhat unlikely. At least that's what I'd like to believe, because that's what I find so uniquely captivating about fiction.

That is to say, people, real living, breathing people, are the staple of great fiction because they act on their desires and fears, not just because they are highly complex biological specimens of somewhat mysterious origin. The purpose of the fiction writer is to approximate on the page, through language imagery, a person we ourselves can love or hate, cheer or boo—one who we may forget, because of the vivid and continuous dream that is great fiction, is but a construct that lives in our minds. Such characters, places, and events become a safe testing ground for us to explore the “interplay of value against value” (Gardner 43). We don't need to go in search of a desperado whale to feel the ironic *ping* of human effort against the seemingly enormous indifference of the natural universe. We don't need to be charged with a murderous vendetta against our father's killer in order to see the quandary of revenge.

The idea of conflicting values is one that I have heard often from writers and critics. While I don't think writing a story around an abstract principle or set of values is a good idea, it is inevitable that patterns of representation emerge in the writing, which in turn come to represent certain values or ideas—Derrida's binaries may be helpful here.

For instance, at some point I began to see *Man Down South* as an exploration of a main character who is faced with heavy, unexpected decisions, and who has to improvise in order to accommodate the other people who begin to fill his life unexpectedly. He struggles to find that balance between maintaining his own will and submitting it to

something else, be it God or fate or friendship. He is loosely seeking some kind of spiritual redemption from a crime—accidentally killing a woman.

This question then, for me, goes something like this: How do we reconcile our most personal, valued perceptions and expectations with the blunt hand of a seemingly irresistible and arbitrary reality? Or, in plain English, what do we do when things don't work out as planned? David left with a general idea of what the rest of his life would look like: a wobbly retirement in warmer climes, visiting friends, getting in touch with a spiritual yearning that had been building inside him and culminated with his experience with the voice in Minnesota. However, when faced with the consequences of his disastrous accident in Florida, he chooses to follow a new current which gradually takes him farther and farther away from his original destination. In the end, he reaches or begins to reach his original destination: he ends up in Florida after all, via a terribly roundabout route—and he does find some kind of limited peace and perspective. But he had to let go of all inclinations as to what the actual, physical journey would look like. Nothing turned out as planned, and yet in some fractured way he finds what he was looking for.

So, if I were to crudely try to create a set of opposing values (binaries) for this story I might say something like this: free will versus determinism, expectations versus reality, punishment versus redemption, prayer versus no prayer, divine providence versus dumb luck, age versus youth, moving versus standing still.

The hierarchy of these “values,” I believe, shifts throughout the text, and it is often the main character, David, who is trying to figure out which one to value most, or which one is the most meaningful in his situation. For instance, whereas he at times may

think of the accident with Suyapa, and particularly his trip to Nicaragua, as a punishment or a penance for a crime, it ultimately becomes to him some kind of redemption—not a total redemption, but a gesture in that direction. He struggles with his attitude toward prayer: Does it work? Is it a game? Does God really speak to us? And eventually he comes to find a certain trust and comfort in the idea of movement and action as opposed to staying put, which is something that colors the entire story. He leaves Minnesota, leaves Florida, and doesn't stop until the very end, when it seems he has at least brushed up against answer to why he left. Certain images throughout the book—St. Francis de Assisi, the old woman in Nicaragua near the phone booth—play a foil to David's mandate to move, maybe representing the rest and peace that David seeks but can't have until the end. In a way, it is a story about faith, about the inherent value in taking steps in the dark until someone tells you to stop. While David is choosing his path, the success of his journey is ultimately dependent on providence, on some form of grace and fortune that comes after some kind of faith and trust—trust in a divine being, trust in a person, trust in a process—and sometimes doesn't come at all. David is surrounded by tragedy, people who seem to have lost that grace and fortune in this life. Honoring the memory of those persons, and trusting that their deaths don't necessarily represent the absence of providence, is something David has to do in order to keep moving and finish his journey.

It feels strange to talk about my own story like this. It certainly isn't as if I set out to write about ideas like faith, etc. For me, a story always starts out as an impulsive act of character invention, or a string of images. It begins as a jagged assembly of words and pictures, that may or may not gel into something valuable or achievable relative to my

abilities and experience. Only over time can I begin to understand the broader value or purpose of the initial representations of people and places.

And by all means, I *hope* I'm not trying to provide firm answers—admittedly the traces of possible answers are there—to these big questions about the way we reconcile our plans with a shifting reality, or how one grows closer to a sense of the divine. The story isn't a handbook on how to live, not a prescription, but a diagnosis of a certain type of conflict that is a part of human existence. In a recent interview with Douglas Thayer in *Dialogue*, author Darrell Spencer talks about Chekhov's approach to theme in writing, saying, "Chekhov tells us that a fiction writer is not under obligation to solve a problem; an artist's only obligation is to state the problem correctly. Obligation is Chekhov's word" (Thayer 118).

Spencer goes on to talk about how fiction, though it is "loaded with bias and it certainly signifies," can "draw us into a simulacrum of experience itself." "We need that," he says. "We need work that isn't trying to tell us how to act" (118). I don't want to tell people how to act. I don't even necessarily want people to try and articulate the "meaning" of *Man Down South* like I did a few paragraphs ago.

I am more interested in what Flannery O'Connor, in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," calls the "*texture* of existence" (68). To me, the word texture in fiction refers to language and rhythm. In an essay on fiction called "Not Knowing," Donald Barthelme says, "The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they're allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven't yet encountered" (21). In other words, stories are interesting not because they are so completely original—it's been done before,

right?—or because they teach us valuable life lessons, but because of the way the words themselves operate, joining themselves in just the right way through the prism of the writer’s mind, in order to allow a familiar experience become new again. It’s not that fiction doesn’t mean anything, it’s just that it can’t easily be articulated through summary or even analysis. It is experienced through the totality of the language—words piled upon words to an exponential height—that the reader feels when she puts the book down.

Flannery O’Connor says it best:

People have a habit of saying, ‘What is the theme of your story?’ and they expect you to give them a statement: ‘The theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle class’—or some such absurdity. And when they’ve got a statement like that, they go off happy and feel it is no longer necessary to read the story. Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself *the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction.* (73, italics added)

I hope I have represented, through the power of language and an entertaining sequence of events and people described, a *problem*, and not even a general problem, but a *specific* character with a *specific* problem, and not an answer that must inevitably become trite and incomplete. And I can only hope that for most the reading of the story is an *experience*, not an exercise in philosophy or literary analysis, but a practice in language that can only mean anything to someone who has experienced it first hand.

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