Morning in the Tropics

by

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Thesis Abstract

The past few years have seen the lush tropical backwater that was Panama thrust into worldwide headlines concerning the Panama Canal Treaty negotiations and the late Shah of Iran's exile, yet, past the large type, every newspaper story seemed just three or four paragraphs long and never dwelt with the boundless diversity of native humanity and nature blossoming behind the American aegis. Morning in the Tropics, a collection of six works of short fiction, seeks to expand between the few lines of news copy that people know about Panama and to portray the United States' presence there, to paraphrase Guy de Maupassant, in embellished terms more cogent than reality itself. The author, a resident of the Canal Zone and frequent traveler of Panama for three years, seeks to rebuff the conservative American mentality over the Canal ("We bought it, we built it, it's ours," Ronald Reagan has said) and the endemic colonialism, with its posturing and xenophobia, that treats Panamanians as strangers in their own land. Against the vast backdrop of the timeless jungle are herein played out tales of pride and passion, the deadly sins that fuel human endeavor and human failure.

Extrait

Les dernières années ont vu le tropique luxuriant qui était le Panama enfoncé dans les manchettes universelles à cause de plusieurs drames, parmi lesquels: l'éxil du Chah Iranien et les négotiations pour le Traité du Canal de Panama avec les Etats Unis. Cependant, tous ces reportages n'étaient pas plus long que trois ou quatre paragraphes. Ces courts passages ne se concernent pas avec l'humanité et la nature sans bornes qui fleurissent derrière cette égide Américaine. Matin en les Tropiques, une collection de six contes, cherche à developper ces quelques lignes de journalistes et, pour paraphraser Guy de Maupassant, a embellir encore plus ce qui est la réalité; à comprende encore plus le peuple Panamien. L'auteur a vécu dans la Zone du Canal et a voyagé souvant à travers le Panama pendant trois ans. Il essaie de rebuter la mentalité Américaine conservatrice envers le Canal, le colonialisme endémique qui a traité les Panamiens comme des étrangers dans leur propre pays. Ici ce déroulent des histoires d'orgueil et la passion: les péchés mortels qui nourissent les efforts et l'échec humaine.

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Introduction

In the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., across the statue-studded piazza from the rooms devoted to the Impressionists, hangs a large, dark painting by the great American landscape artist of the nineteenth century, Frederick Edwin Church. Unlike the dappled and swirling etudes of light and color depicting formal gardens and ponds by Monet and Renoir, Church's "Morning in the Tropics" conveys a deeper appreciation, a more concerted meditation, on the wild and majestic beauty of nature. The brooding oil, which dominates the room of metaphysical landscapes, portrays a vast, fecund jungle bordering a wide, still expanse of water. In the distance, barely visible through the lacquered haze of morning, a small boat paddles away from an open-sided palm-frond hut built on a point near the water's edge.

To Church, who painted "Morning in the Tropics" after a tour of South America in 1855, the presence and impact of man in such a boundless and bountiful setting was minimal, yet there is a mysterious, disturbing foreboding in Church's detail. Did the canoe belong to an Indian or to a foreign trapper or hunter? Will the person return to this place with more people or is it being abandoned forever? Is the shelter to be sacrificed to the rising waters of the rainy season or is it the harbinger of encroaching civilization?

Jungles such as the one that Church painted have always attracted men confident that they could conquer and mold the land and its deni-

zens into their own image. This collection of short stories draws as its inspiration Church's portrayal of human incursion into the natural order and its ensuing ambiguous ramifications. From the moment the first Spanish caravel dropped anchor in the calm Caribbean, foreigners have dreamed of possibilities for the narrow neck of Panama, which bridges two continents. There were scores of doomed adventurers dismissing the failures of others and denying their chances of winding up in the same predicament. With a flawless plan it was all just a matter of execution . . . yet weren't the plans of Vasco Balboa and Ferdinand de Lesseps flawless in concept? The jungles of Panama serve as a mythic backdrop, the abiding permanence that continually frustrates man's Sysyphean labors on the hill of days to impose temporal and spatial order upon the eternal earth. To fully appreciate the dilemma, hinted at in Church's painting, of the American presence within Panama, it is first necessary to chronicle the isthmus' evolution at the hand of foreign, absentee landlords; this historical examination will underline the value of Panamanian and Canal Zone society as raw material for Morning in the Tropics.

Christopher Columbus was among the first to explore the uncharted land, taking refuge in Limón Bay (the site of present-day Colón) on Christmas Day, 1502, during his last voyage to the New World. Thus was signaled the onslaught of almost five centuries of foreign exploitation and intrigue of internal affairs; as the years have passed only the complexion of tyrrany has altered, from Spanish to

Colombian to American domination. It was the unfortunate Vasco Núñez de Balboa, and not Keats' "stout Cortez," who hacked his way through vine-shrouded mountains and snake-infested swamps to stand "silent, on a peak in Darien," overwhelmed by the awesome sight of the Pacific Ocean. But the lure of easy gold attracted the wrong types of people to the new land, men for whom a newly discovered continent was not enough when the spoils of war were finally allocated. Balboa was arrested, tried, and convicted on a trumped-up charge of treason by a rival, Pedro Arias de Avila, and in the central square of the town of Acla (since lost forever to the jungle), a town he had founded, the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean was publicly garrotted to death.

Following Balboa's execution the familiar scenario was played out. The caciques, or Indian chiefs, that Balboa had befriended were held for ransom and then tortured to death with all of the ingenuity that medieval, inquisitional Spain could offer. Pedrarias' reign of terror was so extensive that the surviving Indians of the Darien scattered into the forests, disappearing from all historical records for over a century. Panama became a staging area for Spanish expansion in the Americas. Illiterate Francisco Pizarro, the soldier sent by Pedrarias to arrest Balboa, went on from Panama to dismantle a proud, advanced Inca civilization and to empty its coffers. Always, there was the driving force for gold, more gold, and Panama City (founded by Pedrarias in a rare respite from genocide) became the warehouse for the riches wrested away during the rape of South America.

El Camino Real (The Royal Road) was cut through the jungle for mule trains to haul the plunder of the Inca empire from Panama City to Portobelo, which Drake sacked in 1572 with just seventy men. He returned twenty years later, heroic conqueror of the Spanish armada and captain of The Golden Hind, having lost his touch, halfhearted and indecisive, wandering the Caribbean for an easy victory. Rebuffed at Nombre de Dios, his ships were blown by prevailing winds to Portobelo where, like so many others, he died of the mysterious Darien sickness and was buried outside the mouth of the picturesque, pestilential bay, a grave of lost hope, lost youth, lost reputation, a grave to be dug a thousand times in the centuries to follow.

Buccaneers like Henry Morgan, who pillaged and burned Panama City, frequented Panama. The most tragic of European ventures began in 1698, when the Scotch established a trading colony, New Caledonia, on the Caribbean coast. Their leaking ships bore bonnets, kid gloves, clay pipes, periwigs, and Bibles to barter with the naked Indians. Two years later, the handful of fever-ridden survivors hoisted anchor, bankrupt and defeated by the jungle, the Indians, the maladies, and Panama reverted to Spanish control until 1821, when it heeded the call of Simón Bolívar and seceded form Spain to become part of New Granada (now Colombia).

While Frederick Edwin Church was traveling South America, the finishing touches were being applied to the transisthmian Panama Railroad. Built to shorten the journey "around the Horn" of prospectors lured west by California gold, the railroad was the first

successful link between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, yet the triumph over nature had taken a frightful toll: to construct less than fifty miles of track through jungles and swamps cost twelve thousand laborers their lives; "a Chinaman for every tie on the Panama Railroad" died of the dread diseases of the Darien--cholera, malaria, and yellow fever. Fresh from the triumph of the Suez Canal, the French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps began construction of a sea-level canal through the swamps and mountains of Panama. Against the immutable forces of nature the results were pathetic. Disease dug twenty thousand graves while the rains and mud slides broke the French company's fortunes.

Owing to its remoteness from Bogata, the Colombian capital (even today there is no road through the Darien jungles to connect the two countries), there was always a deep-rooted separatist movement in Panama. Resentment over domination by invisible authority finally boiled over, with President Theodore Roosevelt's approval, in 1903 when Colombia balked at signing the Hay-Herran Treaty, which would have given the United States the right to build a canal through Panama, because the cash payment offered by the Americans was deemed insufficient. The American cruiser Nashville conveniently arrived in Colón just hours after the revolution had been declared, American officials of the railroad sent all trains to the Pacific coast, Colombian officers of the local garrison were bribed by Panamanian businessmen, and Panama was independent. Less than a half-dozen shots were fired.[1] The new government was recognized two days afterward by

the United States; two weeks later, Panama signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, granting America "in perpetuity the use, occupation and control of lands and waters . . . necessary and convenient for the construction, maintenance, operation, sanitation and protection"[2] of a lock canal to be built on a site that closely paralleled the French survey. After eight years battling the physical and physiological problems that turned back centuries of dreamers, schemers, and scoundrels before them, the Americans finished the canal in 1914, but to little fanfare; the jungle had the last laugh, for Europe was at war.

The canal was run, except in the most menial of positions, by Americans who lived within the confines of the Canal Zone in towns like Coco Solo, Gatun, Cristobal, Gamboa, and Balboa, protected by a dozen U.S. Army and Navy garrisons stationed throughout the Zone to guard against attack from either foreign or domestic forces. The Panama Canal flourished, becoming a crossroads for world trade, and played a vital role in shipping during World War II. Even Hollywood was aware of the canal's strategic value: Humphrey Bogart, Charlie Chan, and Sherlock Holmes all turned up in Panama to combat those modern conquistadors, the Nazis, whose U-boats preyed on Allied shipping.

But beneath the profitable enterprise there were serious problems. The insularity of the "Zonians" from the natives and the ennui of the American soldiers, continually waiting for the attack that never came, led to many ugly incidents. The so-called "gold and silver" standard wherein American workers were paid four times as much as their Panamanian counterparts exacerbated native sentiment. Simmering tension

finally erupted in 1964, when American students at a Canal Zone high school lowered the Panamanian flag from its standard in front of the school; the riots that followed left eighteen people dead and ninety injured. For the next decade, the general timeframe of Morning in the Tropics, an uneasy truce prevailed, until 1977, when President Jimmy Carter signed a treaty with the late Panamanian leader, Guardia Nacional General Omar Torrijos, that will turn over the zone and its canal to Panama by the end of the century, thus signaling the end of the most visible reminder of empire-building American colonialism. American politicians were outraged by the lack of gratitude shown by the natives for the benefits that an American-built canal had brought them. Perhaps they have not yet learned, as the British discovered in India and Africa and the Spanish realized in South America, that there is no such thing as a happy slave, that a colonizing power has no right to obsequious thankfulness for the "improvements" that are bestowed upon its foreign holdings; those improvements are often undertaken at the expense of native dignity.

There were several reasons for my decision to portray the American presence in Panama through the short story genre. The root of the word "Panama," pan, meaning "all" or "every" and the Greek god Pan, the god of forests and wildlife and frequent participant in debauchery, reflects the multiplicity of natural and cultural elements within the country, yet few Americans leave the Zone to sample the variety of existence. This insularity and estrangement was best conveyed, I felt, through a series of isolated short stories with overlapping themes but few

connecting characters than through a novel of panoramic scope. Panama, as its legions of occupiers have discovered, has proven intractable to the imposition of European order. Production goals and timetable schedules are not met as mud slides erase a week's dredging or wash away railroad tracks and torrential rains cause the Chagres River to rise forty feet overnight. The long, hot days give little sense of urgency to work that could always be completed tomorrow, the "mañana" attitude. The structure of the novel would prove too unwieldly and inflexible for the diverse subject matter and varied tones; the contrived coherence would soon fall apart when juxtaposed against the natural setting that Thomas Wolfe called the "time of rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth."[3] The framework of the short story, succinct and streamlined, lends itself to the natural linear coherence of events.

As a child of double-feature movies and television shows like "The Twilight Zone," I have presented a good deal of cinematic influences in the aim and structure of Morning in the Tropics. As Joseph Conrad proclaimed in "Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'," "My task . . . is, by power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see."[4] Effective writing suggests the visual, as the primary objective of all writing is to convey images to the mind's eye. The short story format, as perfected by meticulous craftsmen like Conrad, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway concerned with the well-chosen word or the well-turned phrase, focuses the imagination into conceptual visualization by eliminating the superfluous.

Conrad, again in his "Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'," felt that fiction, in order to create the moral and emotional atmosphere of a place and time, must appeal to temperament, and to be effective, to reach "the secret spring of emotions," it should be conveyed through the senses and should "aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music."[5] The stylistic emphasis of Morning in the Tropics has been on words that convey the sensual, that help the reader allude to the sensations invoked; allusions to sculpture, painting, and music--to shape, color, and sound--are liberally employed throughout the stories to describe the fruition of the natural order in Panama.

The six stories can be seen as embellished reality, kernels of truth that have been expanded to create a fiction, in the words of Guy de Maupassant, "more complete, more striking, more cogent than reality itself."[6] To write a realistic narrative I have tried to avoid long transitions by fashioning most of the scenes as vignettes, with definite breaks between pivotal events or emotional divergences, a technique owing much to cinematic influences. Concern for psychological duration and realistic, overlapping dialogue led to experimentation with concrete poetry like that of Lawrence Ferlinghetti or the spare prose of the naturalist/explorer/author Peter Matthiessen, particularly in his novel Far Tortuga, and the textured conversations in the films of director Robert Altman (McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Nashville).

Five of the six stories employ the third-person omniscient point-of-view, the all-seeing camera, while the remaining story, "Circle U,"

utilizes a first-person restricted point-of-view. Through the narrator's description the actions of the main character evolve; F. Scott Fitzgerald used Nick Carraway to chronicle the rise and fall of Jay Gatsby, and it is through his comments about Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan that the reader gains an understanding of Nick.

The thread running through this work touches on the most basic of human emotions; against the backdrop of the immutable jungle are herein played out tales of pride and passion, the sins that nurture human endeavor and fuel human failure. As in the plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus, it is hubris that has wrecked the best-laid plans of men trying to exploit the human and natural resources of the isthmus, men who thought they could rape the natives of their dignity and land forever, men who believed they could construct a sea-level canal through a continental divide, men who felt that a big-stick foreign policy at the turn of the century could still be relevant eight decades later. The sins of man were of great concern to Dante when he wrote The Divine Comedy; he considered pride and vainglory to be the head and root of all sin, and purging them from one's self was paramount to redemption of the soul and occupied the first cornice in Purgatory on the steep, mountainous journey to paradise. Morning in the Tropics examines instances of Dante's Inferno and Purgatorio, but not of his Paradiso, for there is no hope yet of redemption. The one chance for hope, in "The Girl With the Blue Eyes," is lost because of egotistical greed. Most of the foreigners in Panama have acclimated themselves to neither the country's culture nor its climate

and live instead in a self-imposed, hermetic hell. At best, they are exiled to a tropical limbo, strangers in a strange land, with no hope of either atonement or dispensation, a tone harkening to the hothouse atmosphere of consumptive melancholia saturating Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past or the blissful ignorance of the British civil servants and their wives in E. M. Forster's A Passage to India.

Concerning itself to a large extent with Panamanian history and its ramifications, Morning in the Tropics is imbued with an awareness of time and experimentation with its narrative possibilities. Myths and archetypal symbols create a timeless background for the stories of human aspiration, "suggesting the cyclic repetition of the same or similar human situation . . . relived as signifying a situation enduring outside place and time--even though they are expressed in the details of an individual character at a definite place and time."[7] This concept represents an augmented version of Friedrich Nietzsche's "eternal return of the same," not unlike William Butler Yeats' "winding gyre," wherein a basic cycle gradually evolves through enrichment by further truths; time is a cumulative process with no limit, a perception of the past mingling with the present. The past meets the present and the future through the medium of language, and experimentation with interior monologues and concrete poetry is designed to lend a simultaneity to the events that transpire, for, as Thomas Wolfe wrote in Look Homeward, Angel, "Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every moment is a window on all time."[8]

Thomas Hardy is a major stylistic influence on Morning in the Tropics, for his work employed classical myth, archetypal symbol, and native ritual in describing the Wessex countryside and its people, pervading his novels with a deep sense of the past. An historical sensitivity, as T. S. Eliot notes, "involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence."[9] By placing his tales against the background of millenia, Hardy transcended the temporal limitations of his characters' predicaments, elevating their qualities to an enduring, mythical veracity.

While history incorporates the mythic, it also involves the mundane, and the relative banality and lack of melodrama in these stories is a reflection of the fiction of James Joyce, who subscribed to a Viconian system of return, where the essential history was embedded in custom and ritual and the daily round of human existence and not in the exceptional, unrepeatable event[10]; I have tried to heed Joyce's admonition in Ulysses for "Local colour. Work in all you know. Make them accomplices."[11]

That man has always been obsessed with the destructive aspect of time, a constant reminder of his own mortality, and seeks to surpass this deterioration through massive construction--the "edifice" complex--is apparent throughout Panamanian history. Many Zonians

cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that the future is constantly gnawing away at their past, that, by the end of the century, the Panama Canal will be returned to Panama in full and America's colonial legacy will have lost its last bastion. There are more than a few Zonians who desire a return to the halcyon days before the 1964 riots. There is a nostalgic urge to find, like Thomas Wolfe, "a stone, a leaf, a door,"[12] a clue like Marcel Proust's madeline or musical phrase that will unlock the door to the past.

The Zonians' perception of the mores and ways of America is usually behind what is actually happening, their only link to the United States being through the Miami Herald and people who have recently gone stateside. Consequently, the Zonians have locked themselves into the prison of the past, have fashioned themselves after an America that by and large no longer exists, and have become "more American than America." Travel is seen as the only means of escaping the manacles of timeless limbo--surrounding Panama is a waystation on the road to destiny, a layover from fate to fame, a wait for Godot. Like the South American-bound steamer in Joyce's "Eveline," the scores of ships daily transiting the canal moan an invitation to voyage, sounding like the echo of a lost paradise. Some people in Panama yearn for freedom through flight, like Icarus, while others seek escape by riding trains, which were used by Wolfe to symbolize ceaseless motion and the inexorable passing of time, as passengers were carried away from the past, seeing glimpses of the present flashing through the windows like motion pictures. While free from

the actual drudgery of existence, these forms of escape only postpone the inevitable, for upon return--and one usually returns--the unyielding hand of fate unfolds.

There does exist hope against the stasis and flux of time, the entrapment and paralysis of circumstance, but that hope of escape is not visited upon Panama. The search continues, but the quest for the irretrievable past very often reveals a loneliness at the core of the present, a darkness at the heart of the future. Already the colors of Church's "Morning in the Tropics" are fading beneath the cracked lacquer. In a few more centuries, just as the graves of Balboa and Drake disappear and Spanish forts become overgrown with vines, so must the painting disintegrate. The Panama Canal, its huge locks designed to accommodate any vessel ever conceived in 1914, is now too small for many oil supertankers. Talk has been revived for another canal, perhaps through Mexico or Nicaragua, that would slip Panama back into obscurity and render the fate of Acla and Portobelo, once the hub of shipping in the New World, upon Colón and Panama City. But the sun must always rise from the wine-dark Caribbean to burn the mist of night from the jungle canopy; there will always be a morning in the tropics.

Footnotes

[1]David Howarth, Panama: Four Hundred Years of Dreams and Cruelty (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966), pp. 231-232.

[2]"The Stormy History of the Panama Canal," U.S. News and World Report, 83, No. 12 (Sept. 19, 1977), p. 23.

[3]Thomas Wolfe, The Story of a Novel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 52.

[4]Joseph Conrad, "Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'" (New York: Doubleday, 1936), p. xiv.

[5]Conrad, p. xiii.

[6]Guy de Maupassant, "Preface to Pierre et Jean," in The Theory of the Novel, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 397.

[7]Hans Meyerhoff, Time in Literature (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), pp. 80-81.

[8]Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York: Random House, Inc., 1929), p. 3.

[9]Herbert H. Muller, Thomas Wolfe (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, Inc., 1947), p. 86.

[10]William Barrett, Time of Need (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 333.

[11]James Joyce, Ulysses (Aylesbury, Bucks, England: Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd., 1960), p. 188.

[12]Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel, p. 2.

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Morning in the Tropics

"Don't you see

That we are worms, whose insignificance

Lives but to form the angelic butterfly

That flits to judgement naked of defense?"

--Dante, Il Purgatorio, Canto X

"Lord, when thy hand is lifted, they will not see."

--The Rev. Francis Borland, on abandoning
New Caledonia, Darien, 1700

"The land wept more than it smiled."

--Lionel Wafer, 17th century buccaneer surgeon

On the Quay at Cartagena

In the late morning chrome yellow haze, the S. S. Santa María wallowed in her berth at the Terminal Marítimo. On the sun deck, a Filipino steward swept the spent copper shells from the previous evening's skeet shoot over the side, and the bright brass husks fell into the greasebrown water of Cartagena Bay like metallic rain. A lone cormorant swung in lazy loops far above the ship, intent on the sound.

Darien Strait lounged in a deck chair and watched the steward with the abrasive broom diligently sweep clean the smooth pewtergray wood. It had been a good shoot, Darien thought. Old Doctor Leach had hit forty-five out of fifty clay pigeons and one live petrel, winning twenty dollars from Darien's father, who had shot only thirty-seven of fifty, with no live trophies. The steward never looked up from his broom to acknowledge him so Darien again opened his father's old college basic conversational Spanish book. Tomorrow they would disembark in Panama.

"Hola, Pablo. Qué tal? Muy bien, gracias . . . el gusto es mío."

scratch scratch scratch

"Soy Juan Martín--soy Darien Strait."

scratch scratch

"Bo-ring," he droned and flipped away the book. He took a sip of his Coke, coughed, and spat an ice cube onto the deck, where it quickly melted.

scratch scratch scratch

To the west, across the wide bay, he could see the Casino, the Hotel Caribe, and the Club Naval on the thin golden strand of Castillo Grande, the waves breaking over the old, submerged Boca Grande breakwater, and the summit of Isla Terra Bomba rising up like a verdant tent. To the south lay

the crumbling stone sentinel, Fuerte de Manzanillo, and the bleached-bone white Escuela Naval building, surrounded by shimmering water and paludal mangrove. Drake sailed past those rusty guns, he thought, and threw the rest of his drink over the railing. The steward looked at him but said nothing. Darien picked up the book and thumbed through the English/Spanish dictionary in the back pages.

"Vacío," he shrugged. "Empty." He stood up to join the whoops and shouts from the main deck.

scratch scratch

There he watched the passengers throw clacking noisemakers and glinting coins into the water. The costeños, descendants of slaves, dove from the dock and dugout cayucos into the flotsam that bobbed against the piers to retrieve the trinkets and alms. Darien flipped a bottle cap and smiled as three dark youths leaped from the pier. They soon surfaced, shaking their fists and shouting oaths.

" Hijo de la puta!

Chupa mi pinga!

Bese mi culo!

Ladron!"

Darien laughed and tossed a bright new penny into the water.

"Tu madre!"

Ligneous Doctor Leach, creaking down the railing and dropping paddle-shaped swizzle sticks and maraschino cherries overboard, stopped and looked at Darien.

"Your mother, Doctor Leach. I mean, <u>their</u> mothers."

"Why, yes. I thought you were cursing them out in the native fashion." He flicked away a bright green stick end over end into the

water. "See that one boy on the quay? There." He pointed a gnarled hand at a small boy with a pink, cresent-shaped scar from hip to shoulder.

"Yes?"

"Shark."

"Here? In the harbor?"

"Where else would he get a scar like that, son? Cancún? Acapulco?" He spat amber tobacco juice over the side rail. A young boy jumped off the pier to where the globule of saliva landed, thinking it to be a large coin.

"Are you going into Cartagena after lunch, Doctor Leach?"

"I don't think so, son. When you've been on these cruises as many times as I have you come to realize that all of the shops raise their prices when the tour ships call. I'm tired of bartering and haggling for wood carvings and leather wallets with people who can't speak English. And there's always the danger in town of pickpockets."

"I'll be sure to warn father."

"Yes. After Port au Prince, I think that I'll stay on board. Someone there pinched my lighter. Anyway, the Purser is giving a lecture and slide show on Cartagena this afternoon in the cocktail lounge. I don't think I'll really miss a thing."

"We're supposed to rent a car and driver."

"Have fun, son. You'll have to excuse me. I want to get a Cuba Libra before they ring us for lunch. Too bad they won't let us skeet shoot in the harbor, eh? I might bag more than just a bird." He winked and dropped his remaining cherries and swizzle sticks and the boys on the quay scrambled for them.

Alone again, Darien stood at the railing and listened to the strains of "Guantanamera" wafting through the louvres from the Wurlitzer in the

Barnacle Bar. Occasionally, a patient's scream or moan emanated from the hospital ship, S. S. Hope, moored across the pier. The scarlet "HOPE" letters, three decks high, filled the starboard view from the Santa María. Darien strained to smell the clean antisceptic hospital aura in the leaden salt air, but only the sour stench from the ammonia and nitric acid plant, built on the bay by an American oil company, burned his nostrils.

* * *

The Straits rode up the steep grade to the ruins of Convento de La Popa. Their guide, Virgílio Cienfuegos, hired off the pier for the afternoon, spoke amiably in accented English as he sped his rattling 1963 Mercury Meteor station wagon, riddled with rust in the tropic air, around hairpin switchbacks and through warm, muddy puddles. Barry Strait turned to his son.

"Señor Cienfuegos' speedometer doesn't work, Darien. Why don't you ask him, in Spanish, how fast we're going?"

"Yes, Darien," his mother chimed. "While you're at it, ask him to slow down, too."

Darien flipped through the chapters of the old book but, unable to locate the desired sentence, he turned to the dictionary.

"Señor Cienfuegos, estamos . . ."--he flipped the pages--
". . . estamos como rapido?"

The driver laughed and his golden teeth danced in the rear view mirror. "Sesenta kilómetros."

"No comprendo. I haven't learned numbers yet."

"About thirty-five miles to the hour. Do not be afraid. I know this car as I know women. We are old friends. Amigos viejos." He swerved to the other side of the road to avoid colliding with another taxi, an old

Studebaker parked in the right-hand lane. Darien recognized the people clustered around the wooden lean-to as passengers from the Santa Maria.

"What were they buying?" he asked. "They looked like pygmy alligators."

"Baby caiman," Cienfuegos said. "The people of Panama catch them and send the hides to Cartagena where they are cured and stuffed. They are very popular with the tourists."

"Can I have one, Dad? Can we stop on the way back?"

"We'll have to see, son."

"If you do not approve of the caiman, there are the toads. Also very popular with the tourists."

"Please, dad?"

"That will be enough on the subject of toads and caiman, Mr. Cienfuegos."

"Mom . . ."

"I hope that we're doing the right thing, Barry. The Times' travel section recommended this excursion over the tour of the forts. They say the forts have become a regular tourist trap." She looked at the plywood and corrugated-tin roofed shacks that clung to the hills below the convent like beggars to a nun's habit. "This does seem a bit out of the way, though."

"There'll be plenty of old forts to see when we get to Panama."

"The walls of Cartagena took over one hundred years to build, Mom. They're forty feet high and fifty-five feet thick. I read it in a brochure this morning, so you didn't miss a thing."

Their driver laughed. "Bueno! Your son should guide the tourists."

He swung the car to a halt at the summit and the Straits stepped out. Below them Cartagena spread out on the alluvial soil, its red tile roofs and white stucco walls shimmering in the heat. Mr. Strait snapped pictures of the view with his Instamatic.

"I can see the ships from here, Dad. I can even read the letters . . . H . . . O . . . P . . . E . . . Hope."

"Barry, be sure to get the fort in the picture."

"Yes, dear."

"This looks just like Spain in National Geographic," Darien said.

"The city is famous for the architecture, both Spanish and Moorish."

"What are those buildings near the point, Señor Cienfuegos?" Mr. Strait asked.

"Some are the edifices of the University, and also of the Cathedral and of the Palace of the Inquisition."

"Dad, can we go see the tortures?"

"Many years ago the instruments of torture were burned."

Darien leaned against the buckled hood of the station wagon.

"You don't look too good, son. You shouldn't have eaten so much at lunch."

"I think it was the eclairs, Barry. Whipped cream just curdles in heat like this."

Darien wiped his glistening forehead with his shirt sleeve. "It was the strawberries, Mom. I think they were too ripe. And that ammonia smell, even up here . . ."

"It is no worse than the diseases your gold miners brought to us on their passage to California. So many died of the cholera that the bodies

were burned in the streets. The smell of death touched even here. Certainly your ship Hope could have helped us."

Mr. Strait nodded and focused on the convent ruins. Bouganvillea sprouted between the cobblestones. Underneath the moss and clinging vines Darien could make out the ancient words carved on the wall: Pereunt et imputantur, and wished his father had also taken Latin in college.

"Did Drake attack this?" Darien said.

"No, but El Draque sailed into the harbor with his golden ships and took slaves, cannons, jewels--even the bells of the churches--and burned house after house until the people of Cartagena paid him millions of pesos in gold and jewels to leave."

"Did Henry Morgan fight here?" Darien continued.

"No, only the brave people of Cartagena, for we were the first of New Granada to declare our independence from Spain. The Spanish blocked all routes from land and sea for almost four months. 'Delenda est Carthago' their priests sang everyday at Mass. 'Carthage must be destroyed.' Our men gave their silverware, and our churches their ornaments, to be melted into shot, and our women cut their hair for torches and ropes. All gave their lives."

"It all sounds like the Roman siege during the Punic Wars," Mr. Strait said.

"What were the Pubic Wars, Dad?"

"I know nothing of that siege, señor, but when General Morillo and the troops of the king marched into the city, they were greeted by only the dead and the dying. Over six thousand dead ones. It was hunger, and not Spanish bullets, that killed Cartagena."

"Muy interesante. Mom, can we go back to the ship? I really feel bad."

"Just as soon as your father is through taking pictures."

Mr. Strait trained his camera again on Cartagena and the beautiful villas with their ornate iron grille work, avoiding the dilapidated tin shacks of the descamisados, the shirtless ones, glowing like ingots in the waning sunlight.

"Just one more picture left, son. Señor Cienfuegos, perhaps you will be kind enough to take a picture of us in front of the convent."

"El gusto es mío. It is a popular shot of many tourists."

"You don't have to focus or adjust the exposure. Just make sure that we're all inside the little square."

"It'll make a beautiful picture for the Christmas card, Barry."

"Don't put your thumb over the lens."

"Relax, son. He's probably done this a hundred times."

"Say cheese," Cienfuegos said. "Queso."

The Straits squinted and smiled into the sunset.

* * *

On the drive back to the Santa María, Virgílio Cienfuegos entertained the Straits with tales of the past--of tribes where men and women spoke different languages, of tribes that worshipped a solid gold statue of a porcupine, of tribes that sold their conquered enemies off to the slavers of Santo Domingo. Darien held out a stuffed toad and tried to make his mother kiss it.

"C'mon, Mom, it'll probably turn into an Inca prince."

The Meteor roared through the narrow cobblestone streets, scattering the children playing in puddles in the road. The car passed through small

plazas with splashing fountains and ornate lamp posts wearing the green patina of age. Cool, flaking pastel colors framed doorways where women cradled babies and spoke with their neighbors. The smells of dinner--of rice, beans, and fried plantains--choked the air. Mummified by the salt air and tropic sun, old men, visible through open shutters, dozed in barber chairs under broken ceiling fans.

"Please keep your window rolled up, Barry. Someone might grab your camera. Darien told you what happened to Doctor Leach."

"What would they take pictures of? Tourists?"

"I should've stayed on board with the Doctor. I could've seen more at the slide show. I feel awful. Doesn't this car have air conditioning?"

"The salt air is most healthy. Bolívar, before he died, came here."

"Did he die from food poisoning, too?"

"No. He was consumed. Tuberculosis."

The car emerged from the barrios of Manga, bounced over two sets of railroad tracks, and stopped at the foot of the Terminal Marítimo.

"Thank you, Señor Cienfuegos. It was a most interesting trip," Mr. Strait said, taking five dollars from his wallet.

"Gracias, Señor Strait." His gold teeth flashed.

Darien got out of the car slowly. The boys were still diving from the pier into the water by the glowing, throbbing Santa María. A high-pitched cry cut through the hot air from the Hope, across the pier. A black magic woman strolled the pier hawking wares from a palm-frond basket filled with bananas, genipaps, and split pineapples. The lights of the villas and the barrios blinked in the darkling hills like small constellations.

"It's amazing, Barry. It's almost night now."

"Sí, señora. In the tropics, no evening. Only night and day."

A thin, elderly cripple lurched towards the family as they walked for the gangplank. The man waved a small, colorful packet of stamps and held out a disfigured hand.

"Can I have them, Dad? I don't have many stamps from Colombia in my collection."

"Well . . . all right. Maybe you can use them to mail a stuffed toad to someone in the States."

The cripple smiled and spoke rapidly in Spanish.

"What is he saying, Darien?" Mrs. Strait asked.

"He's talking too fast, Mom. I can't understand him."

"El hombre es muy agradecido," Cienfuegos said slowly. "El quiera por ustedes a volver otra vez."

"No comprendo," Darien said. "I should have brought that Berlitz book." The five stood silent on the quay. Virgílio Cienfuegos did not volunteer any translation. They could hear the laughter of the swimmers and the water lapping against the splintered pilings and the diligent Filipino steward.

scratch scratch scratch

Darien ran his moist fingers over the laquered bumps on the toad's back. He felt uncomfortable, with a private itch he could not touch in public.

scratch scratch

The cripple smiled and profferred another packet of stamps.

"Darien, tell him no, but be polite about it. He is a cripple."

"I can't find that in the book, Mom. I don't know how to say it."

"No," Mr. Strait said.

The cripple bowed and shuffled off.

"Just like in America, huh, Dad?"

"Have a pleasant stay in Panama," Cienfuegos said wearily.

scratch

The thin crooked smoke flared from her nostrils in the thin grey morning air. Dolores shivered and punched her small, delicate fist through the translucent film of ice floating in the rain barrel and dipped the wide-mouthed olla pot into the chill water. The Americans would need hot water for shaving and bathing. She carried the pot handle with both hands, the cold clay weight straining her arms and knocking her shins to the threshold of the pensión and set it next to the eggs she had taken from the coop.

The mist clung to the base of the steep green mountains girding Boquete, reminding her of the sculpted waves that broke and broke against the clean, hard-packed sand of Playa Santa Clara. The needles of the twin evergreens that loomed over the pensión's sumac-red pantile roof, sharper even than the coarse brushes Tía made her use to clean the basins and bathrooms, cut her stiff, bruised feet as she walked between the pines and into the orchard. The oranges on the trees were as big as grapefruits but still green. Still, she thought she could squeeze enough pulp to make juice for the Americans' breakfast. Dolores pulled six oranges from the tree, where, the night before, the Rose boy had pulled her behind the trunk and kissed her on the mouth. She smiled and dropped the fruit into her folded apron. Even now, her mouth tasted like the beach. But Teddy had wanted her to do something more and she had run from the tree, flailing at fruit-laden branches, crying to the warm, yolkyellow walls of the pensión.

At the beach there had been boys just like this one and sometimes American soldiers and sometimes Guardia Nacional. They had all come

looking for the same thing, parading around like bull elephant seals. She had come to Santa Clara as a small child after her Aegean father drowned while spongediving at Las Perlas when a manta cut his air hose. She shared two small rooms with her mother and widowed grandfather. Grandfather was being gnawed away by time and chronic malaria, his most visible remembrance of laboring on the doomed French effort to best their Suez Canal triumph. Sand had proved easier to mold than jungle. Grandfather would sit in the shade of the open-air bohio shelter and wheeze salt air and stare at the florid pictures in his French-language Bible, looking up now and again to watch Dolores ride the mangy horses of the beach vendors through the foaming shallows, kicking up clots of wet sand and hurdling air mattresses. Grandfather didn't understand French but he would look intently at the illustrations and letters as colorful and ornate as stained glass. When he watched Dolores he would smile as all heads turned as she galloped through the surf, her fingers enmeshed in the flowing mane and her black hair writhing and coiling in the wind like sea snakes. No one called her ojos azules.

But the day after she had written two names in the warm sand laid smooth by the ebbing tide and given her taut olive body to a sailor who laughed when he tried to say her name she was sent away to live with her mother's sister, Tía Lourdes. Lance Buboes was now a memory forever brushing back maize hair to look into her blue eyes. Dolores left Santa Clara with a cardboard suitcase bound by a length of rope and the old Bible, which Grandfather had passed to her through the open window as the bus pulled away. She cried softly the length of the journey through savannah, looking at the ribbon-marked picture in the book of a young girl lost and alone in a field of corn.

Near David, before the bus turned off the Pan American Highway for Boquete and the interior, the grandly named, cracked asphalt road was flanked by living fences, the parallel lines of saplings fettered together with barbed wire to keep the few withered dairy cows from grazing on the tender shoots sprouting on the road's shoulder. Then there were the fruit stands, all selling green oranges and bananas and bundles of sugar cane, clustered along the concrete ribbon like mosquitoes on the raised vein of a clenched arm.

"Dolores." Lourdes had thrown open the blue shutters and stood at the window clutching a robe closed to her neck.

"Yes, Tía?"

"I asked you to wake me at six, but I was not awakened."

"I am sorry. I do not carry a watch with me to tell the time."

"Soon the sun will have burned off the mists. Will the chores be burned up by then, too? You dream too much, Dolores."

"I was thinking of Santa Clara."

"These mountains are too tall for such dreams. You can't hear the beach from here."

"The day the flood and the earthquake came I heard the thunder of the beach."

"The only thunder you will hear is the back of my hand if you don't stop wasting time. Finish your chores or no hike today with the American boy. The Roses will soon be dressed. Use twelve eggs. It's too late now to go get fresh bread so use yesterday's loaf and steam it. But get some other oranges, Dolores. These are as green as the coffee beans Señor Ugarte sells to the tourists."

"Yes, Tía," Dolores cradled the oranges and walked back to the grove on the needle-strewn path, which crunched under her unwashed feet as cold and brittle as fish scales, the sharpest pricking her soles like fish hooks. From the orange trees she could see the pale light in the boy's room winking through the jalousies.

* * *

Dolores and Teddy couldn't leave until she had washed and stacked the breakfast dishes; she promised to change the bed linen later that day. Teddy stood in the kitchen doorway and watched as she sang in a wordless voice to the accompaniment of empty, clacking shells. Tía Lourdes was sitting at the dining table with the Roses.

"She does not work enough as it is. She looks as if she sleepwalks through life. All the time looking off. And at what? She could do far worse than this pensión. Her unconcern has ruined the orange juice, for which I apologize. The oranges were not yet ripe."

"Well it woke me up," Mrs. Rose said. "Very tart."

"Better than that green-bean coffee we tried to drink yesterday," her husband added.

"Better than Tang."

"Tang?" Lourdes asked.

"What the astronauts drink," Mrs. Rose explained.

"Yes, Apollo. The golfers on the moon."

The adults were still considering the finer points of astronauts and orange juice and nine irons as Teddy and Dolores slipped out the kitchen door and hurried down the dew-moist drive. Teddy took Dolores' hand in his own when they turned onto the main road and were obscured from the pensión's view by the orchids planted along the stone and whitewashed

plaster walls. The wide, shallow Río Caldera boiled on the other side of the road. Boulders rested on gravel yards from the river, borne away by the Easter flood. Across the water, the turquoise and pink shell of the Pensión Dos Ríos collapsed into the alluvium, its ground floor gnawed away by the tongue of the river and its stone teeth. God had spared their pensión, though. A miracle, Tía Lourdes said, and she lit three votive candles at Mass every Sunday. Business had been very good at the pensión since Easter. God always provides, Lourdes said, to those who help themselves.

Only the old plantain vendor and several mongrel dogs attracted by the smell of cooking oil were in the plaza as Teddy and Dolores crossed. Lombardi poplars, the trees of civilization, lined the cool flagstone walks, their roots bordered by shells and flowers. Dolores picked up a shell and put it to her ear.

Teddy swung up the rungs on the side of an old narrow-guage train coach, scuffing the freshly painted yellow lettering boldly harkening "Ferrocarril Nacional de Chiriquí" with his sneakers. Off rails forever, the coach's rusting wheels sank into the cold ground sparkling with chips of bright paint.

"I can hear the beach," Dolores said.

* * *

"What do you do besides work for your aunt?" Teddy asked. They were climbing a path into the hills. Small, mangy horses with bloated bellies grazed in the terraced fields lining their trail.

"I don't have much free time, but sometimes I sell chaquira collars or gold huacas I dig from the old Indian graves to the tourists. I've caught

some parrots and a currasow, but I freed them. They caught sick in the cage."

"I sold a butterfly to a scientist last summer. I've hunted hummingbirds with slingshots. I'd like to catch a quetzal bird or a golden frog and sell it. Then I'd have enough money to buy my own minibike."

"What is a minibike?"

"Like a motorcycle, only smaller."

"Yes. Americans rode them on the beach. I rode horses through the waves. You can't do that on a minibike."

"You miss the beach, don't you?"

She stopped and turned. "I know that I don't belong here. The men look at me and whisper. The women look a me and laugh. Ojos azules. Ojos azules."

"My eyes are blue, too. So is my blood."

"Except yours."

"And yours." He took her hand and they looked at the town below, with the russet tones of tile and rusted tin, the thin wisps of smoke, and the cold silver water that cut through the valley like tempered steel.

"I hardly know you," she said. "Just yesterday . . ."

"Then we'll get to know each other." He pulled her close and kissed her, his tongue darting like a small lizard inside her confused mouth.

"You must have many girl friends."

"Some. But none like you."

She pushed him away. "But you want me to be like them. We can't be late. I know a place where we can find golden frogs, or at least some bird feathers and butterflies. I found it about a week ago when I got lost

looking for huacas. You can find something there to take home and sell and buy yourself--"

"A minibike."

"Yes, a minibike."

They climbed. Cerro Volcan rose from the cordillera to meet the sun. The summit they climbed was obscured by clouds. The manicured fields gave way to small, unproductive orchards. The tumorous horses were replaced by scrawny goats. Shivering inside his blue windbreaker, Teddy struggled to keep pace with Dolores.

"Where I live

there are no golden frogs

only toads

in the cool of the night

after it rains

we ride our minibikes on the blimp grounds and the headlights

attract the toads

we beat them into leather with base$_{ball}$ bats$_{and}$ golf$_{clubs}$

toad polo."

Dolores pointed out the shack of Pedro Suerte, ex-welterweight boxer, who often sauntered into town to recite, round by round, his epic losses to Ishmael Laguna and Roberto Duran and to armwrestle for shots of rum. His shack clung to the mountain like a fighter on the ropes. From the hovel could be heard the caged fury of bantam roosters.

"Couldn't we find another mountain to climb? I can't make the grade on this one."

"It is the only place to find the golden frogs."

"Maybe we should forget about the frogs and just look for some quetzal feathers somewhere else."

"The birds are on this mountain."

Teddy stopped walking when they came to a small clearing. Dolores came back to where he rested, leaning back against a huge boulder and struggling to catch his breath.

"The . . . altitude."

"It is strange that you should pick this place to rest."

"It looks as good as any place to rest for a while."

"It is here that Eloi Aguadulce, known throughout Boquete for his rougish and drunken behavior--even as far as David the cobblestones were not safe from his dice or his bladder--committed his final drunken act. He learned that his wife Isabella--may her soul rest in peace--had been unfaithful to him during his binges. He was the last person in Boquete to learn that Pedro Suerte was putting horns on him except for simple Paco, who has ears of stone. To fight Suerte would have been suicide. So he brought Isabella here and strangled her with his belt and hung her from that hollow genipap tree. You could see her twisting, even from Boquete. Eloi was found at the bottom of the ravine. He lived two days but would talk to no one. When the priest came he asked for rum instead of the last rites. Some of the men blamed Suerte for Eloi's death, but no one among the women, for Isabella bore the pain of her suffering with Eloi like the Piéta."

"Right here?" He picked up a small, flat stone and sailed it over the edge of the ravine. "Let's rest." Then, trying to sound offhand, "It must by the cigarettes."

"My father would never allow it. 'Bad for the lungs.' He was such a strong swimmer: he won the race across the Panama City bay three times in a row. He could go minutes underwater without breathing . . . but he couldn't go forever--there is still much climbing to do and we must return to Tía's by afternoon."

"You speak good English."

"Do you think that you are the first American boy that I have spoken with?"

"Am I the first American boy that you've gone hiking with?"

She turned around with such force that her hair coiled around her shoulders like rope. They kept climbing, Dolores leading the way and Teddy scrambling and wheezing to keep pace. There were no more shacks or goats or suicides. No vegetable gardens or well-kept fields of maize. Just cloud forest. Their path was swallowed up in a maze of ferns and vines. They picked their way between huge mossy trees as solid and timeworn as Doric columns, pulling themselves up by the liana vines wrapped around the tree trunks like boa constrictors. They felt the shadows of toucans and macaws, which skipped and sang through the canopy of leaves, upon their shoulders. Epiphytes and branches stretched to greet and interweave in the mist; the thin light filtered through the vaulted cathedral ceiling like delicate lace. From the hanging gardens they could only hear the chattering and scrambling of monkeys and marsupials. The cold wet air reeked of fragrant flowers and rotting wood.

"Look." Dolores noticed a giant tree sloth, matted fur mottled green with algae like the barnacled hull of a slow ship, hanging motionless thirty feet above them.

"That's interesting," Teddy said, "But sloths are worthless. Can you picture someone like my mother wearing a sloth fur coat?" Dolores could,

but held her tongue. Teddy picked up a long strip of decaying bark and swung it against a tree trunk, filling the air with grubs, ants, and katydids. "Are there any golden frogs nearby?"

"They can not be far but where for certain I can not say," Dolores said.

The cold mist was getting thicker. The air buzzed and clicked with insect curiosity. A blue royal danced out of the clouds and alighted on her shoulder. Teddy lunged for it but only knocked Dolores off balance. He scrambled over a fallen log as the butterfly fluttered into the opaque void. Dolores ran in pursuit.

It started snowing. The blue royal, always hovering just out of Teddy's grasp, tantalized them over toppled trees and through clawing thickets to a small clearing and then soared up and disappeared into the falling white mass. How long the chase had lasted, minutes or hours, they could not tell, so intent had Teddy been on not losing the butterfly and Dolores on not losing Teddy.

Virgin snow quickly covered the hard impressions of their shoes. Winded from the chase, Teddy removed his jacket, the back of his shirt dark and wet. Steam rose from his shoulders to mingle with the mist. Small birds darted across the clearing, singing. The flowery mead winked like jewels under the snow. Dolores swept the flakes away and picked several blossoms. Teddy unbuttoned his shirt to his waist.

A narrow creek skirted the far edge of the clearing; the ancient jungle, flocked in sprays of orchids, shot up from the smooth banks where crayfish clutched reeds bent to the current. It was Dolores who saw them first.

"They're here. In the stream."

The frogs were smaller and more delicate than Teddy had imagined, like molten gold pieces. He fumbled to remove the plastic lid of the old coffee can he had carried in his jacket. Perched on wet, black rocks, the frogs glistened with the distillation of a thousand peach-streaked sunsets in the clear, fast water. The perfect creatures, he thought, tree frogs. Amphibious. Arboreal. Golden. Teddy sat on the bank, pulled off his shoes, and rolled up his pants.

"They really <u>are</u> golden."

"Don't cut yourself on the rocks."

"Don't get <u>too</u> concerned." He waded in up to his knees.

"Please . . . wait," she said, voice cracking.

"Relax, will you? The water's not <u>that</u> fast."

"No," she whispered. "Look up. Slowly. Don't frighten it."

Downstream, less than ten yards from them, a jaguar knelt to drink. Only the animal's huge head was discernible; the taut, dappled coat merged with the interplay of light, shadow, and vegetation. Teddy eased over to the stream bank and reached into his jacket.

"This is better than those frogs any day."

The jaguar looked at the couple, water dripping from the stubble of its chin into the current, magnificent pelt speckled with snow, and rose, resting its weight on its hindquarters. Dolores screamed and pushed Teddy's arm up. Long after the jaguar had bounded back into its mountain sanctuary, the gunshot reverberated in the shattered hills, as did Dolores' hysterical cry.

"Thief!"

* * *

They descended through the clouds, half sliding as vines and limbs gave way in their grasp. The snow had ceased; the mist was lifting. Teddy scrambled after Dolores. She refused to answer when he called after her, apologizing.

"Look, Dolly . . . Dolores, I'm sorry. I just saw the jaguar and . . ."

No answer.

"It might have attacked . . ."

"It would have made a nice coat for your mother, no?"

"It might have killed us--at least we could go back and get some of those frogs."

"I was wrong to bring you to them. It is too late to turn back now."

They emerged from the cloud forest and saw Boquete below, flushed in the final melting warmth of the afternoon. Two flocks of cranes flew from the penumbra cast by the mountains, one to the liquid sun, one to the cobalt night. It seemed as if the entire valley, and not just Dolores, was brooding.

The Roses were pacing in the driveway by the packed station wagon with Tía Lourdes when Dolores and Teddy returned. Mrs. Rose was beside herself. The gravel was littered with half-smoked Marlboros.

"You've got some explaining to do, young man." She dug her nails into his arm. "We'll never reach the beach tonight, and your father already has a bungalow rented for us."

"Theodore, do you have the car gun?"

"Yessir." He held out the pistol.

"We have some talking to do tonight. Now get in the car."

Teddy wrenched free from his mother's grasp and ran to Dolores. He smiled and placed a crumpled purple orchid in her hands. She did not look up.

"Theodore!"

"Yessir." He slid over the tailgate into the backseat of the wagon.

"Señora Rose, I apologize," Tía Lourdes said.

"I'm sure our son will have an explanation, señora." He started up the engine, feeding it too much gas.

"I'll write you from the beach and let you know what happens!" Teddy called out through the twilight exhaust. Dolores did not wave. She turned and dropped the flower in the swirling dust of the departed car and went into the pensión to change the cold linen in the vacant rooms. It was Tía Lourdes who finally picked up the orchid from the gravel, smoothed its petals, took it from the night to the pensión, and wistfully pressed it between the briny vellum pages of the French Bible.

"Okay, Boobs, chalk up another one for the old La Grulla Azul," Anopheles said, banking the used syringe into a wastebasket, using the cinder-block wall like Cousy kissing a shot off a backboard. A grey-metallic sound, guttural and unsterile. He peeled off the orange-rind-colored rubber gloves and tossed them in the trash can with the same fluid motion and they landed like soft wasted bodies. He turned to the seaman sheepishly hitching up his bell bottoms.

"Damn it, Doc!" the sailor cried. "You said you wouldn't stick that damn horse needle in my ass until you counted to three. You gave it to me on two."

"Trick of the trade," I said. "Fewer needles break off inside this way."

"You believe everything someone tells you, sailor?" Anopheles asked. "Are you some kind of rube fresh off the boat? You believe every whore in Colon who tells you she's clean and you'll wind up here bare-assed again with your pants down to your ankles, and next time I will use a horse needle."

"Yessir."

"This oughta keep you out of commission for a few weeks now," he continued. "Save the rest for your girl back home or stay away from whore houses like The Blue Goose."

"Get someone's wife next time," I said.

"Yessir." He turned to leave, rubbing his right buttock.

"Go back to your ship and flog your dolphin for a while instead."

"You're mothballed now, kid," Anopheles said.

"Yessir. Thank you sir. Goodbye." We smiled and watched him go out the door and fade away behind the frosted office windows like a beer can disappears when you drop it off the dock on the bay.

"Damn kids," Anopheles said.

It was the same old story. Punks that still looked like their sophomore high school yearbook pictures came off the destroyers and LPDs for a few days of I&I (Intercourse and Intoxication) while their ships took on supplies and all they had on their minds was finding Bamboo Lane so they could blow their pay to come and then come down with a classic case of the crabs. The smart cats stayed on board. More than a few girls from the local high school went down to the piers to get down in their sleeping bags. Not bad looking, either. Clean, too. Sometimes Anopheles and me would pick up a couple of them up at the movies when he came on like Tab Hunter and talked them into the old blimp fields for an accelerated physiology seminar.

Anopheles sat down heavily in a swivel chair like a duffel bag full of dirty laundry and slowly turned the chair around and around. I flipped on the radio and a Panamanian station blared out bouncing brass and organ sounding like a Herb Alpert lp at 45 rpms.

"What time is is, Boob?"

"Almost sixteen forty-five," I said. He didn't have a watch.

"I mean <u>real</u> time. Civilian time." He smiled and swung a stethoscope in a lazy loop.

"Quarter of five, Doc."

"Almost quitting time. Let's shoot a few drinks at the EM Club when we get out of this free clinic."

"Fine with me, Doc."

"Doc, my ass." He fired a rubber stopper at me with a wooden tongue depressor. It missed my head and ricocheted off the wall and into the basket. "Damn, but I'm hot today!"

Neither of us was really a doctor. We were just corpsmen. But Anopheles had been at it longer than me and he had taken some supplemental training from matchbook universities offering correspondence courses in neurosurgery. The training never came in handy anyway because we dealt almost exclusively in sutures for the heroes who got cut up cleaning out Colón bars and penicillin for the swine contracting textbook vd cases down at dives like La Grulla Azul. Every now and then one of the officers' wives would come in sunburned and we'd fix her up a napalm balm. Chief Hawser's daughter came in once for birth control pills. Anopheles told her to try the finger method. What method? she asked in demure drawl. A real coquette. The finger method, he said, crossing his fingers and winking. She was a feast for the retinas, too. I saw her down by the piers the last time the fleet was in.

Anopheles turned the radio to the SCN channel, the only American station. "Purple Haze" filled the room. He yawned.

"Boobs, you wanna buy a sports car? TR 4? Cheap?"

"Not really, Doc. Where would I drive it?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . Panama City, Portobelo, Gatun, Colón . . . Santa Clara."

We both laughed. Except to screw the natives, there was really no reason to go off base, unless you were a history freak or subscribed to National Geographic and wanted to wander around the jungle looking for

Balboa's lost chamber pot or Indians with lip discs. We had our swimming pool, our PX, our movie theatre, our EM Club. No need to babble Español with the rabble. Everyone at the Club understood our English, even after we'd had a few Buds and Cuba Libras.

Taps finally sounded like a fading bell through the slow damp heat. We threaded our way through the maze of grey office corridors as convoluted as intestines and walked out into the heat to watch the limp American and Panamanian flags being hauled down like gallow's bodies. The Marines were extremely adept at the flag detail. Of course it had taken the jarheads months and months of practice to get the entire process perfect and they could fold the flag to the size of a dinner napkin. Everything came to halt. Trucks idled in the road, their drivers erect and saluting on the coral shoulders. Overhead a heron hovered in the tradewinds, a burnished mobile suspended from the sun.

It was a short walk to the EM Club. It was a short walk to anywhere on base. Anopheles took it in long, measured strides with his thin insect legs, taking care to avoid stepping on the many cracks in the pavement. I pumped my arms and legs like a sprinter to keep up with him. Palm trees with freshly painted white trunks and (U) insignia lined our path. Marine handiwork. Colonel Mustard had dreamed the operation up, thinking that it gave the boys a sense of purpose and identity. Each man encircled. Everybody became somebody. An MP pickup towing an insecticide sprayer passed us spewing its thicksweet translucent mist. Malaria and yellow fever were probably no worse in the long run than inhaling this crap every day. Anopheles paid no attention to the gas attack, cantering along like a blinkered horse.

By the time we got to the EM Club I had enough sweat on my forehead to make a rosary. The blue work shirt clung to my back like a second skin. Doc was as cool as ever. We nodded at the sailor working the door and went inside and ordered two beer--dos cervezas. "Proud Mary" blared from the Wurlitzer.

A dark little woman, new to the Club, brought us two Buds and a paper plate heaped with fried plantains.

"We can't eat this shit, " I said. "Bring us some potato chips."

"¿Qué?"

"Papas fritas," Anopheles said, grabbing his beer.

"Sí . . . papas fritas." She smiled and scuttled away like a crab.

"I was weaned on this bilge water," he continued.

I grinned idiotically and poured the head of my beer into the ash tray. "Just trying to help Gorgas eliminate the mosquito problem. That ashtray looked like a probable breeding area. Just doing my part to make Coco Solo safe for democracy."

He smiled and lit a Camel hanging from his lower lip and arched the flaming match into the ashtray, where it fizzled in the beer foam like a caterpillar does when you light it with a Zippo. One time he caught a gecko and fed it gin through an eye dropper. It keeled over and lay on his desk for three days before coming out of its coma. Catatonic through gin and tonic, he said.

We watched a local band, the Atomic Greasers, set up their equipment on the mess tables jammed together in the corner between the "head" and the pinball machines. All the place needed was a few lava lights. Several sailors stood at the foot of the stage while the band hooked up guitars and amplifiers, as intent as if they were watching a small arms demonstration.

From the jukebox, Jim Morrison sang "Light My Fire" in a young, dying voice.

"Bet you a beer they play 'Proud Mary' at least twice tonight," Anopheles said, leaning over the table. As he talked the cigarette moved in his mouth like a conductor's baton, punctuating his thoughts with small grey mounds of ash on the black formica table.

"Hell, Doc, I bet you two beers they play that song at least three times tonight." The Greasers weren't really that bad, just a collection of high school juniors and seniors with zits and sun-bleached hair and Levis and paisley print shirts practicing on Saturday afternoons in basements or family rooms to copy the latest 45s, note for note. The lead singer, E. O. Hippus, an EM spade from Dogma, Mississippi, crooned creditable Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding impersonations.

"Hear what the MPs did today, Lance? They shot a dog over on the point by the BOQ. It swam across Manzanilla Bay, all the way from Colón."

"What kind of dog?"

"Your basic Panamanian mongrel. Looked like he had a lot of hound in him, near as I could tell from what was left of him."

"Why did they shoot him?"

"Shark bit off his hind legs." He took a long pull off his Bud, throwing his head back, then crushed the empty can with his long, fine mosquito hands. Beer dripped from his clenched fist onto the table and mixed with cigarette ashes, giving off a sweet burnt aroma.

"Testing onetwothree onetwothree testing," a Greaser intoned.

"Chief Petty caught a nurse shark off the pontoon-boat pier last week," I said. "Got himself a rope with a meat hook and three pounds of beef shank that one of the cooks gave him and tied the whole mess to a

binnacle out there. Had a shark on it the next morning. Almost ten feet long. Me and some jarheads helped him pull it in. Chief let it sit out all day and that damn thing was still alive come evening. Had to get the MPs to come over and put it away. They love to shoot at anything."

"Damn dog still made it here . . . on only two legs." He dropped his Camel into the ashtray, where it floated with the other butts in the warm beer like the pictures of VC dead bloated and bobbing on the golden Mekong that were in Stars and Stripes or the Miami Herald.

"Petty must have watch again tonight," I said.

Aquanetta Petty, a compact, tapir-faced woman with a pearshaped body was at the bar trying to wrap her short, hairy hamarms around a tall, blonde sailor's waist. He looked familiar, clinic familiar. In the wet heat her dyed auburn bee-hive hairdo looked like an anthill after a monsoon. She had three empty highball glasses in front of her on the bar. She liked the sound and the feel of a Tom Collins trio.

"Catatonic through gin and tonic. A grunt told me that she drinks martinis out of mason jars at home. No need for constant refills. And it saves on olives and cocktail onions."

She laughed at some unknown joke, her mouth a ruby abyss, and slapped the sailor on the back, coughed, then spit a mangled plantain onto the floor, bugeyed. Southern femininity gone awry.

"She should leave that kind of stuff to the girls down at La Grulla Azul," I said.

"Before she met Petty she used to work at La Grulla Azul, dummy. It's the old story . . . hometown girl makes good."

"And keeps on making it as long as she can . . . poor Chief."

Anopheles looked at her ample bosom, nipples almost visible beneath her wrinkled white blouse, heaving with laughter. "Yeah . . . poor Chief. Let's get another round, Boobs. 'Twilight excites madmen. We become ill at dusk.'"

"Huh?"

"Paris Spleen."

"That's a strange title for a French medical journal."

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The drummer was almost through the solo of "Inna Gadda Da Vida" and sweating like a pig. It was tedious, like standing under a tin-roof shelter waiting for a cloudburst to finish. The Greasers had played the Iron Butterfly standard once already. Crushed Bud cans littered our table like spent syringes; I had won the "Proud Mary" bet. Anopheles' head nestled in his folded arms on the wet table. The beer spills looked like oily puddles after an afternoon shower. I felt like Death, eating day-old pizza. Aquanetta was gone now, probably to the old blimp fields. Anopheles stirred.

"I cannt move. I feel like I'm inna big clay jar and I cannt move."

"The natives used to bury their stiffs in clay pots."

". . . hoped they didn bury live guys in em," he slurred.

The drummer continued to pound away like the telltale heart in the Poe movie starring Vincent Price that we saw at the theatre last week.

"Doc, I'll buy you a beer if they play 'Proud Mary' next."

"Wanna . . . wanna buy Triumph? TR 4. Seven hunred."

"It's only worth five and change."

"You're mother ain't worth five and change. Hottest car on the 'lantic side. Seven or never."

"Six. You know yourself the salt air's eating the Triumph alive. The carb already looks like a barnacle. Where the hell am I gonna get parts when that car starts dissolving? Not to mention a decent mechanic. Nearest Triumph dealership is probably in Jamaica, for Chrissakes."

"Seven dammit," he said, pounding his beer on the table like Khrushchev's shoe. "Six or nix." I had him by the short hairs. Sooner or later he'd have to unload that hot rod and it wouldn't be for any sevengoddamnhundred dollars either. He wouldn't have any use for it at the Cam Ranh Bay base that's for sure. Not many rallyes in Nam. I could wait another week. I could wait another month. Like a tiger, feasting every fortnight. Time was on my side.

"Seven." He shook his head vigorously, like an animal bothered by small insects, and dropped another Camel in the ashtray. The bloated cigarettes looked like a miniature pod of beached whales. "Boobs, that Triumph . . . worth at least eight or nine." He waved his beer. "No way I sell it for less than seven . . . wone give her away."

"Suit yourself. That car may just rust away before someone meets your price.

"Won't . . . urp . . . let that happen."

He slouched back in his chair. It was a real ordeal for him to part with that car. He had practically rebuilt it, even sending to California and to London to get special parts. The band finished the song in a blare of feedback and hissing cymbals and segued into the familiar descending chords crashing from their chrome-plated, mail-order electric guitars. EeOh jumped around onstage. Several sailors shook their heads, grabbed their beers, and left. Others shrugged and coaxed their wives, their

girls, their waitresses, their maids, their whores onto the dance floor glistening with beer and sweat to dance one more time beneath the blinking Christmas lights.

"Big wheel keep on turnin'
Proud Mary keep on burnin'
Rollin'. . . Rollin'. . ."

"Rollin' on the river!" Anopheles shouted into the din. A few EMs not stone drunk or with women gave us glances. "Get us two for the road, Lance, and let's blast out of this joint. Meet you outside. Head first though. You don't buy beer, you just rent it."

He knocked his chair into the back of some Marine at the next table as he stood and weaved to the head cautiously, like a lizard on a window pane. I flapped my arms like a crane at our little nutbrown waitress and she came scuttling over in crustacean eagerness.

"¿Sí?"

"Two Buds, and make it snappy. We're leaving."

"¿Qué? No comprendo."

"Dos cervezas. Ahora." Good thing Anopheles taught me a few important lines to get by on. Spanish was a royal pain in the ass. I wonder what Jack Nicholson would have done with the waitress if he was in Lance Buboes' place.

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Outside, with the heat and the cicadas and the grasshoppers and the mosquitoes, it was like listening to an insect symphony. The flight of the bumblebees. The rusting shells of the old seaplane hangars, with their shattered windows and collapsing roofs and struts, were looming monoliths against the still water of Manzanilla Bay. The winking lights of Colón were carried across the dark surface almost to the Navy docks in red and

green shimmering streams. Anopheles walked unsteadily but confident, swinging his beer in his left fist like a walking stick, careful not to step on the weeds sprouting from the cracks in the asphalt. An MP cruised by like a shark, headlights illuminating the sexual efforts of two matted stray cats on the hot, crumbling pavement.

"Wonder if they swam here from Colón," Anopheles said.

"Hey sergeant, come back here and put these two out of their lovely misery."

"Come back here and put four out of misery." He took a chug of Bud, gargled like a drain, and spat on the sidewalk. The wild palms with their starchwhite trunks and smirking (U) faces lined our walk. Sirens wailed from up the road and from beyond the trees, across the water. La Grulla Azul must be hopping now. Tomorrow would come with its stitches and syphilis, its reveille and taps, its revelry and naps. Marines and sailors painting trees or mending fences. Feeble salutes at faded ensigns. We could hear the birds now but couldn't see them. Still, they were always up there, even at night, riding the tradewinds.

Down the street the BOQ was lit up like a flagship on port-of-call. Inside the brass would be maneuvering around their drinks and their women.

"Doc, let's drive out to the Legion or the Elks Club for a few beers after work tomorrow. There's a real nice straightaway we can open up on. The Legion's supposed to have a stripper this week that's as good lookin' as the one they had last year. Remember her? The anthropology major from Berkeley who was runnin' around the jungle bareassed with the Choco Indians?"

"Good lookin' woman, Boobs. What happened to her?"

"Last I heard she went to Chile to do some skiing and lay back and get her act together. She just stopped writing her thesis. Agraphia in literate Choco Indians."

"Why don't you drive? Seven hundred and the car's yours. Let the straight convince you."

"Six hundred."

"You know it's worth seven."

"Six."

There was quite a crowd from the BOQ out in the street now. Women in clinging cotton dresses and men in dress whites or polyesters standing and sweating with drinks in the blueandred blueandred blueandred of the MP's lights. The MPs were hauling off two slight, wiry Panamanians who clutched tennis rackets in hands cuffed behind their backs.

"Damn hoochies," a lieutenant said. "They didn't even have the lights turned on. Who ever heard of playing tennis in the dark?"

"Honestly," said a tall, flush-faced chief's wife we'd treated for hemorrhoids, "I don't understand why they want to learn how to play tennis anyway. There aren't any courts in Colón."

"I don't know why they try golf, either," said a glazed, walleyed NCO. "MPs caught a few of 'em last week on the dogleg out at Fort Davis taking mulligans out of the fairway. They should stick to boxing and baseball. Now that Rod Carew can hit."

"Shit," Anopheles muttered. He stumbled beyond the palm trees and the blueandred to take a leak. ". . . have my answer tomorrow on the TR. Anyplace in Colón open this late for a beer? I'm dry as a desert."

"Plenty." I smiled. "Bamboo Lane never closes on Uncle Sam."

"Great. I'll drive."

"They make good jockeys, too," we heard behind us as we walked away.

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The dispensary was only a ten-minute walk from the mess hall, but after bilious coffee and runny eggs that looked like a pap smear, Anopheles climbed into his TR and spun through the post gates doing almost forty and still in second gear. I walked to work slow and alone. Shots and stitches today, maybe a few antibiotics.

The sun was already up, burning through the morning haze like a pilot light. The warmth felt good beneath my shirt, but soon there would be a dark pool down the length of my back. A few jarheads were carefully touching up the U's with red paint. At the high school across the street, ROTC kids, the future cannon fodder of America, raised the flags in the traffic circle in front of the building and primped for morning inspection.

The sharp slap of metal against wood halted the flagraising; the banners hung motionless, halfway up their standards. Across the old blimp field, Anopheles was driving his TR hellbent through the roadside palms like Jean Claude Killy on a slalom run. Birds rose flapping and crying from the mangrove swamp behind the road. Anopheles smashed the right rear quarter-panel pretty well by cutting the last tree too close and the TR sagged like an exhausted thoroughbred. He spun it around, kicking up sand and grasshoppers, and began another run through the gauntlet of trees. I ran, hoping to reach him before the MPs did. I tripped in a crab hole and was almost trampled by school kids and sailors swarming across the field to get a better look at the one-man demolition derby. A cheer went up when Anopheles finally skidded and broadsided the car into a large palm, buckling the hood and dropping cocoanuts onto the windshield, which fractured

the glass into a crystal web. He hopped out of the car and surveyed his Triumph like a doctor diagnosing a terminal patient, pulling at the mangled fenders and kicking at the spoked wheels. He reached into the well behind the driver's seat and pulled out a machete, raised it above his head like an Aztec priest, and brought it down full force onto the steering wheel, which fell apart like soft, ripe fruit. He kicked in the headlights with the flair and relish of a storm trooper and then brought the blade, molten in the morning sun, down again and again and again on the hood until it crumpled like tin foil. The trunk went in just three blows. He was doing quite a job on the wheels, hacking at them like a butcher, when the MPs raced up. They jumped from their pickup, crew cuts already glistening with sweat, clutching nightsticks. Seeing them, Anopheles grinned and raised the machete and brought its full fury down one last time upon the windshield, shattering the glass like a gunshot. Triumphant, he flung the machete into the smiling (U) face on the palm the TR was wrapped around, and sat down on the grass, looking into the searing sun. The haze was beginning to burn off now.

The MPs took him without a fight. He just shrugged and held out his hands. When the MPs hauled him back to the truck, billyclubs against his kidneys and shoulder blades, a few kids applauded.

"Far out!" said one thin, greasy kid in a blue Nehru jacket.

The ROTC kids and the sailors looked at the wreck and shook their heads. I ran for the MP pickup circling around the TR and the trees.

"You bastard! I would have given you seven hundred!"

"How the hell did I know, Boobs?" he shouted, leaning over the MP sitting next to him. "I said nothing less than seven!"

"Six was just a ploy."

". . ."

The pickup receded against the shimmering blacktop. I turned, wet with sweat, and walked back to the broken Triumph. The birds hung high above the trees, circling the wreck on great outstretched wings, punctuating the silence with their cries of release.

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With Anopheles in the brig after that, things got pretty hectic down at sick bay. La Grulla Azul must have had a Nickel Night. The vd cases just paraded in. Even one of Captain Kiel's sons had the clap. I thought about going to see Anopheles several times but I always changed my mind the minute I stepped out into the heat. Doc hadn't gotten in touch with me and he might still hold a grudge.

A Colon scrap dealer tracked me down, since I was Anopheles' closest friend, and gave me one hundred and fifty dollars and hauled away the broken shell of the TR, undoubtedly destined to become a two-bedroom apartment in the countryside. I should have held out for more because the leather bucket seats were in fabulous condition, with only a few slight tears from the glass.

I finally had a few shots of Jack Daniels at the EM club, which filled me full of Kentucky courage, and wove my way down to the stockade to see Anopheles. Only the jarhead Marine MPs were there, half-shouting every answer in their clipped lawnmower fashion.

"CO sent him home early on R&R, Mr. Buboes, sir! No forwarding address released as of now, sir!"

"Thanks, soldier."

"Yessir!"

I stood there in the stockade heat, unglazed clay in a kiln, looking at the breaks in the rusting chain-link fence, the orderly painted palms, and the mass of jungle beyond, which rose up like a dark green tidal wave. I guess Doc hadn't been able to get in touch with me before he left. I spat on a run-over frog, tongue and guts a florid mosaic spewing from its mouth, working their leathery way into the hot asphalt, turned, and walked back towards the EM Club, taking care not to step on any sidewalk cracks. A cold Bud would taste mighty good right about now. And one hundred and fifty bucks would buy a hell of a lot of rounds. I'd feed the jukebox a roll of quarters and punch nothing but Q-2--"Proud Mary"--on the buttons. Just for old time's sake.

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The Man Who Waved at Trains

Chief and his Iguanas leaned out the open train windows and waved to Chief's wife, Squaw, who stood on the Gatun platform and waved back, looking like a shrinking metronome.

"Thanks for the M&M cookies!" Elbert Gordon, the catcher, shouted into the gaining rush of wind and leaves. The shin guards strapped to his legs clacked against the metal footrests.

"She's Mrs. Southerland to you, you fat jasper." Chief called everyone on the Little League baseball team "jasper."

"Right, Chief!" said Andre Voltigeur, jumping up and down in the aisle, his chalk-white face bouncing beneath a cracked and weathered green Iguana cap. Andre seemed to be forever in motion, circling under descending pop flies.

"Iguanas, pipe down and listen up!" He furrowed his bushy eyebrows and glared seriously.

"Listen to Chief!" Elbert said. Everyone called Mr. Southerland "Chief" and his wife "Squaw" because he used to run Camp Pow Wow, a summer baseball camp in Gatun, and she was the camp cook. Chief played for the '54 Cleveland Indians; a slick-fielding second baseman who could hit and run, he came up as a September baby and played in twelve games. He batted .286 and didn't make an error and sat in the dugout in the World Series. He met and married Flora Hoke during the winter, then went to spring training and tore his knee up on a double-play pivot and never made it to the majors again. He would talk to the Iguanas for hours about Bobby Avila this and Bob Feller that. They would smile and ask him the same questions they always asked about Vic Wertz and Satchel Paige and Larry Doby and nod

and wink to each other when Chief went behind Ivan's popcorn truck between innings to take a nip from the hip flask of rum he always carried.

"We'll be in Balboa in about an hour. We're walking from the station to the ball park, so save some of your energy for the walk and the game. You too, Joey. You're starting, so rest up."

"Right, Dad."

"These Balboa kids are good," Chief said, "but we're good, too. We can beat them. It just takes execution and concentration--and no mistakes. So think about the game. Don't beat yourself in a game. Okay, let's get some rest."

The Iguanas settled into the creaking wicker chairs. The train rocked on the ancient rail bed as it gained speed and jungle foliage whipped against the cars like ocean swells. The smooth blue expanse of Gatun Lake, framed by the mangrove trees that clung to the clay banks, could be seen from the right-hand windows. When the team quieted, Chief walked up the aisle in the same easy amble as when he strolled to the mound to lift a pitcher who was being shelled, stepping over the bats that rolled between the seats with each lurch of the train, massaging the bulge in his hip pocket. He slipped behind the sliding door and out onto the platform between cars. Except for the elderly Zonian in a wrinkled white linen suit sitting in the front of the coach engrossed in the business section of the Miami Herald, the Iguanas were alone.

There was water on both sides of the train now as they rolled along the causeway that strung together hilltops above the forests drowned in the waters of Gatun Lake. The train whistled as it approached Juan Gallegos Island and the rail siding at Monte Lirio.

Joey leaned out the window and looked ahead, his hair streaming behind him. "Get ready! I can see the other engine."

"Everybody hock some snot up!" Elbert said.

Andre and Joey went to the rear of the coach and filled several cone-shaped paper cups with water from the dispenser next to the ammonia-scented rest rooms and returned to the open windows by their seats. They flashed by the Colón-bound train on the siding, the view from the windows looking like a speeded-up movie. Elbert spit while Joey and Andre threw cups of water at the blurs of color that were passengers.

"I think I got an old hoochie!" Andre shouted.

"Was the guy I spit on ever surprised!" Elbert gloated.

"I don't think I hit anyone," Joey said glumly.

"I hope your control is better this afternoon!" Andre laughed. Elbert threw his catcher's mitt at Joey and caught him in the face. Joey picked it up to return the insult but Chief came back into the coach, flush-faced and sweating. Elbert giggled nervously and kicked his shin guards against the footrests.

"What's up, you jaspers?"

"The opposite of down, Chief!" They laughed again. "Wise guy, huh, Andre?" Chief's crew cut bristled in the humidity. He spoke in short gasps with his jaw slack and his lower lip protruding, exhaling his strong, sweet breath towards the ceiling.

"No, sir," Andre said quietly.

"That's better! Now you guys settle down . . . how many times do I have to tell you? Save some of that energy for the game. Balboa's got a guy who throws aspirin tablets."

"That guy Peniche from Corozal?"

"That's right. That jasper is fast."

"He"s a spazz," Elbert said.

"Just because he's from Corozal doesn't mean he's retarded."

"But he's from Corozal, right, Chief?"

"And the funny farm is there."

"The mental hospital just happens to be there, you jaspers, although from what I've seen, it would do more good in Gatun."

The train rocked rhythmically, gaining speed as it bore incessantly through the jungle, leaving behind the swaying savannah grass that sprouted between the rotting rail ties at Monte Lirio. Huge philodendron fronds slapped against the sides of the coach, knocking loose insects that flew confusedly in the car's interior. The raucous cries of unseen macaws filled the air. The train broke from the jungle and into a small clearing. A dilapidated wooden shack with a rusted sheet metal roof nestled next to the tracks. A small black man with hair and eyebrows as white as cocoanut meat sat in an old rocking chair on the collapsing porch, waving as the train flashed by.

"Hey, Chief, who was that old guy?" Andre asked loudly.

"Some old jungle-crazed native, I guess. I've made this trip a hundred times before and never noticed him."

A voice as parched as the sun-bleached shell of a dead horseshoe crab spoke up. "His name's Spauldin. Nelson Spauldin." It was the old man in the linen suit. He put down his newspaper and coughed into a linen handkerchief.

"Who are you, mister?" Elbert asked.

"Pangolin. Vardaman Pangolin."

"How do you know?" said Joey, leaning over the seat in front of him to look at the ancient man.

"Been workin for Isthmian Fruit for fohty yeahs now," Pangolin said as if reciting a litany. "I reside in Brazo Heights but I work in Balboa, so I commute everday. See'm ever day, too, sittin there in front of that shack, rockin back an forth in that chair, watchin and wavin. Bet he even knows the timetable, too. Ain't that somethin? All the conductahs know him . . . fact is, one of 'em toll me that yeahs ago Spauldin even saved a train."

"How could he save a train?"

"He waved the engineer down with a kerosene lamp when the tracks washed out on the causeway durin a particuly unruly storm."

"Why does he just sit there now?" Elbert said.

"Maybe we bring him memries an he enjoze those memries. Maybe he picks himself out a particuly intrestin face on the train and dreams about that face's life. You gotta intrestin face, son."

Chief yawned. He was bored and wished he had a Sports Illustrated to read.

"But what does he do now for a living?" Joey asked.

"Retired now, son, like I'll be inna few yeahs. Old boy toll me Spauldin worked on the Cut yeahs ago. Helped build the rails, too. I know he played for a niggah group durin the war, the Jazz Sheiks. Ain't that somethin? Gave my girl horn lessons--lemme show y'all a picture of her--till he upped the price to three an hour. Old Nelson's got hisself all the time in world now. Time to sit. Time to fish. Here's her picture. She lives in Loosiana now, in Nawlins. Gahden District. Gotta boy bout your age, too. No ball playuh though."

"She's very pretty, sir," Joey said. He smiled and gave the wrinkled photograph to Andre.

"Yep, old Nelson's in niggah heaven now, I reckin." He wiped his forehead with the handkerchief and picked up the Herald again. Joey leaned out the window and looked back, but the clearing had disappeared. There was only jungle now, grudgingly giving way to the train. A branch whipped against the back of his head harder than any line drive had ever hit him and he fell back into his seat, gales of laughter burning his ears, red-faced and eyes brimming with tears.

* * *

"Steeeriiike twooo!" the umpire bellowed. The Balboa crowd roared its approval.

"That was at least half a foot inside, ump!" Chief shouted from the dugout. "Just let these jaspers play ball!" He spat in the dirt at his feet and put his hands in his hip pockets. Joey stepped out of the batter!s box and knocked out the moist dirt that clung to his spikes with his bat. Peniche loomed from the mound, halfsmiling, rubbing the smooth horsehide between his huge, callused hands. Behind him the scoreboard offered mute testimony to the Iguana's efforts:

Gatun	000	000	X	0	0	4
Balboa	041	032	X	10	12	0

Elbert stood on first and winced as he rubbed his left arm, still smarting from a Peniche fastball. Joey had thrown a beanball at Javier Sanchez, the Conquistador's hulking first baseman so mature that he already shaved, in the bottom of the sixth inning. Chief had put a finger to his head when Sanchez came to bat after crashing two towering shots over the American Legion sign in right field in the second and third innings and Joey had put him down. Now he stood outside the box and looked to the dugout for a signal but Chief was gone.

"Hey, pansy, play ball!" an adult voice shouted lustily from the stands. A Bronx cheer.

"Popcorn!"

"Let's go, lizards!"

"Get your popcorn here!"

"Peanuts!"

"Give him a ticket to get back in the game!"

Someone popped a paper bag filled with air.

"Hot and buttered!"

"Batter up!" the umpire shouted, his bullfrog throat puffing and glistening under his mask. "Come on, son. Step right in so's we can get this game over with. One out. The count's two and two."

Joey shrugged and dug his cleats into the box. He held up the white ash bat and turned it until the birthmark-colored Heilrich and Bradsby trademark stared him in the face. Peniche stepped off the mound muttering to himself as a brown pelican flew low over the diamond, its head retracted and its wings moving with slow and magestic grace. The bird circled the field and disappeared behind the stands. Peniche wiped his fingers on the bill of his cap, grinned at Joey, and again toed the rubber. Working from a stretch, he gathered all the strength he could muster, leaned back, kicking his right leg high in the air like Juan Marichal, and came for the plate. Elbert broke for second base.

To Joey, the baseball seemed to explode directly off of Peniche's spikes. Fastball. High and inside. Headhigh. Hit the dirt. Now. He fell back, left hand covering his face and clutching his helmet, right hand grasping the bat. The ball struck the end of the bat and popped up weakly

and the catcher jumped over him to catch it and fire it to Sanchez at first. On his back and feeling as helpless as an overturned turtle, Joey watched as Elbert dove vainly back to first, Sanchez swiping the big catcher in the face with his glove harder than needed. Double play. DP 2 - 3. The Conquistadors in the dugout swarmed onto the field and mobbed Peniche before he could cross the first-base line. Joey stood up, brushed the wet dirt clinging to his uniform, walked back to the silent Iguana dugout, and shoved his bat into the rack, where it rattled like a cough in a consumptive chest.

* * *

The late afternoon sun filtered through the canopy of trees in thin copper beams, the diffused light giving the train's interior an anemic hospital aura. Elbert slouched in his seat staring vacantly at a Detective comic, an unopened quart of mint chocolate chip ice cream slowly melting and spreading over the rattan seat next to him. Joey sat across the aisle, tossing a baseball and thinking up palindromes. A man, a plan, a canal, Panama. Chief was laid out across two seats with his feet dangling in the aisle, trying to sleep. The coach was almost empty; many of the players had ridden home with their parents, who had driven over from the Atlantic side for the game. The cries of the toucans and howler monkeys, the odor of orchids and mimosa, the sight of ships and sunset, all went unnoticed in the pallor of defeat hanging in the eternal tropic air.

"Sorry I didn't have it today, Elbert," Joey muttered.

"That's okay. The first ten pitches you threw in the second inning were all strikes. Right on the outside corner. No question. You were a barber the way you shaved that outside corner. The umpire just screwed us, that's all."

"Maybe. Maybe not." "No question."

"Why would he do that then?"

"He's gotta live in Balboa, not Gatun. He has to go to the VFW and the American Legion bars in Balboa, not the bars in Coco Solo, and sit and drink beside Balboa parents. So he shrunk the plate on us."

"We still would've lost. That Peniche should be pitching American Legion ball now, not Little League."

"Peniche's a spazz. You saw what he did to me."

"But I threw at Sanchez before that."

"That was different. We were losing bad." He pulled off a shin guard and kicked it up the aisle. "We'll take Balboa next week at the Elks swim meet when they can't use their hoochies. Let's see how they do then without Peniche and Sanchez."

"Why don't you jaspers relax now? We could have used that energy this afternoon." Chief's feet were kicking the aisle air. "Don't you know that the easiest way to take defeat is lying down?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't know we were so loud."

Chief stood and hitched up his pants. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go and get a nip of fresh air." He ambled up the aisle and disappeared behind the door. They rode on in silence. The sunlight forged the masts of ships passing through the Cut's Las Cascadas Reach into molten spears that burned their way through the web of jungle. The shafts of copper air grew larger and flooded the coach as the rain forest gave way to the flat jungle. A cracked two-lane highway hugged the right side of the rail bed, darting suddenly behind mangroves as it skirted the marshes. An ancient chiva, its molar-like surface, all crags and dents, loosed a layer of plaque and rust everytime the bus drove through another pothole. A

steady flurry of chicken feathers flowed from the wire coops lashed to the roof, fluttered in the bus's draught, then fell to the hot pavement. The bus passengers smiled into the wind and waved out the windows; the driver was obscured behind bouncing garlands of glass beads, bamboo, and cowrie shells. Elbert dropped the Detective comic.

"Andre, do you still have those balloons?" he asked.

"Yeah, I saved a few," Andre answered. "Why?"

"Look out the window, stupid."

"That chiva?"

"Why not?"

"Is Chief around?"

"He's still out getting a nip . . . of fresh air." Elbert rolled his eyes and hickupped.

"Okay. Let's get Joey, too."

"Hey, Joey."

He let the baseball fall to the seat next to him.

"We need you to throw a few more strikes."

"What?"

"Toss some ballons out the window, stupid. Haven't you ever done that before?"

Joey looked up the aisle.

"Don't worry," Andre said, "Everything's cool. Chief's taking a walk."

Joey saw the chiva veering down the road as the driver dodged pot-holes. The bus passengers smiled and waved at the train passengers. Joey waved back.

"I feel like I'm waving at a movie, Elbert."

"See if you can hit that movie with a water balloon. Let's go fill 'em up."

They walked back to the water dispenser. No other passengers had boarded the coach car; there were only a few of their teammates, dozing in the afternoon heat like content lizards. A ship bellowed like a lonely bovine through the cane grass burning in the twilight.

"We're almost to Gamboa now," Elbert said. "The railroad and car bridges cross the Chagres so close to each other that you can reach out and shake hands with someone on the other bridge. Or hit them." He chuckled in anticipation.

The train broke from the jungle and onto the bridge, whining against the rusting rails. In a marriage between steel and wood, the pilings sighed beneath the train's weight; the sleek black silhouette was etched upon the malleable metallic water. The chiva kept pace, so close that Elbert was tempted to reach out and pull at the strings of beads and shells whipping the sides of the bus but the chiva was behind a steel skeleton of struts and cables.

"Fire!" Elbert shouted. He threw a red balloon overhand and it burst against an old black woman's temple, spraying the chiva's interior with warm water. He laughed and ran back to his seat. Andre's soft underhand lob split two cables; the yellow balloon, as big as a melon, exploded squarely in the driver's lap after shreading the beads. The man turned and began cursing, his invective lost in the din.

Joey's slow sidearm delivery caught a strut and sprayed the side of the chiva. Elbert returned with the carton of melted ice cream. The passengers were shaking their fists and shouting, livid with a rage borne away by the wind, along with the steady trail of chicken down.

"Whoa, Elbert."

"They're just hoochies, Joey."

"There's a big difference between throwing water and throwing ice cream on someone."

"Sure there is. Ice cream sticks to skin and clothes better than water," Andre said. "Give me the box, Elbert." He looked up the aisle to see if Chief had returned, then took the ice cream carton. The high-pitched whining had stopped now; they were off the bridge. The road was still parallel to the tracks. The chiva was keeping pace, the passengers pointing and shouting in passionate pantomime. Andre took careful aim and led the bus several yards with an underhand lob. The driver downshifted and the bus shuddered, throwing the passengers from their seats. The coops on the roof were a squawking flurry of feathers. The ice cream splattered against the windshield like bird droppings.

They ran up the aisle and collapsed in their seats, howling like monkeys. Andre looked out the window at the chiva. It fell back and pulled onto the narrow, crushed-shell shoulder of the road, its windshield obscured by the green coat of ice cream. The train flashed by a railroad crossing all pulsating red and black.

"Don't worry, Joey, they'll never catch us. Gamboa's a quick stop and they've got at least one more traffic light to go through," Elbert said.

"Yeah, Joey, relax."

"The road ends in Gamboa anyway. Only the train goes all the way through."

Joey continued to look out the window until the train pulled up to the Gamboa platform. Chief returned, grabbing the top of each aisle seat as he walked down the corridor. His face was as ruddy as a new baseball glove

and his eyes were watering. Two middle-aged Zonians boarded, regarded Chief, and chose seats in the front of the coach.

"Joey, you jasper! Get your thick skull inside before someone separates you from it!"

"No headhunters around here, Chief." The train whistled and began to pull away. Joey saw the chiva turn a corner and race up to the station, too late, as the train passed the spoil ground, racing beneath the huge black iron arm of the dredging crane Hercules raised in benediction to the jungle.

"Glad you're so sure there, Andre."

"Huh?"

"I'm glad you don't think there are any maniacs out there."

"Are there?"

"Sure. Years ago there used to be a tin shack near the Gaillard Cut owned by a crazy old Chinaman. The chink's brother died in a mud slide in the Cut and he just fell apart. He lived in that old shack next to the graveyard where they buried his brother, watching the slides erode his front yard and the jungle eat away his back yard. He had a blind, half-tamed jaguar that he fed stray dogs and bird heads. He lived there for years and the day he disappeared the slides finally took down his shack."

"What happened to him, Chief?"

"Nobody really knows. The natives say he walks the jungle at night looking for his brother and steals dogs from backyards to feed the tiger he keeps."

They rode on in silence. Chief pulled a copy of the official scorer's card from a black, laminated notebook and studied it inning by painful inning. Andre slouched across two seats and read the crumpled Detective

comic. Batman and Robin were closing in on the Joker. Insects were buzzing throughout the coach. The green-eyed flies were the worst, carried by the swirling drafts from one sweating body to another to cling to sticky necks and shoulders. Elbert nudged Joey in the ribs.

"Come on back with me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Back of the coach, stupid. C'mon. We'll fill these up at the dispenser." He produced two shriveled balloons from his hip pocket.

"Are we gonna throw them at trees, Elbert?" Joey asked as they filled the balloons. "The rail siding can't be for at least another five miles."

"That crazy old hoochie lives round about here."

The train whistled curtly and broke through the trees. Elbert and Joey walked onto the rear platform.

"Get ready," Elbert said.

They crouched, arms cocked, watching the silver rails shoot out from underneath their feet to be swallowed by the sprawling, brooding landscape. The savannah flattened in the train's draft. Elbert kneaded his balloon with wet fingers.

"The house

should be

right

about

NOW!"

The old man shot into view, smiling and waving from his rocking chair, a six-sided metal star, his ancient Canal Commission ID number, dangling on a chain from his pocket and dazzling in the sun's dying light. They tossed the balloons in soft change-up arcs. Elbert's balloon landed on the rust-

ochre roof while Joey's balloon broke on the porch steps, darkening the dust caked on the ancient rocker's legs and wetting the cuffs of the old man's pants. By the time the thin streams of water dripped from the roof to mix with the dust and form brown globules on the smooth floorboards, the train had again disappeared into the jungle.

* * *

The train was five minutes out of Gatun, rolling past the powerboats at the Gatun Yacht Club that rocked in the steady swells of distant ships bound for Balboa and Cristobal or beyond. The Atlantic Remoras were already excited about swimming in the Elks Club Fourth of July Swim Meet. Elbert ran down the aisle after Daphne Laker, waving a lighted sparkler like the high school majorettes who had twirled batons in the Gatun July Fourth parade that morning. Elbert and Joey and Andre and Emily and other swimmers from their team rode in the back of Chief's pickup and waved through the wilted crepe streamers to the neighbors and the palm trees that dotted the route.

"It's too bad we had to leave right in the middle of the parade, Joe," Flora Southerland said. "I mean, making a U-turn and driving off to the station, just like that. It'll give that old Jeannette Echidna something to talk about for weeks."

"The meet starts at noon, Squaw. Those damn Balboa Elks know we have our parade every year a ten a.m. The jaspers on the other side just like to remind us who runs things down here."

"They could be a little subtler, though. What's wrong with one in the afternoon?"

"We'd all be at the meet and still have our parade. There wouldn't be any petty inconvenience."

"That seems small enough to ask for. They should let the natives swim, too, or at least the colored kids like Carl Christian. After all, his father is a sergeant. How is Joey's medley relay going to win without Carl swimming breaststroke?"

"The Remoras have other swimmers besides Carl Christian, believe me." Chief slouched in his seat and swung an open fist at a mosquito hovering in front of his face. "And the Balboa Elks put on this meet and I guess we'll just have to go along with what they want to do if we want to be a part of it. Now can I see the paper?"

"Be my guest. Just bury your head in the paper and not enjoy the ride."

"I like to read the paper, Squaw. It passes the time." He watched as the mosquito settled on his left forearm and tapped into the rich veins. "This trip is always the same and always as boring as a three-hit shutout. Besides, there's an article on the sports page about today's meet. I bet the Star will have a reporter there. Maybe the Army paper, too."

His wife sighed and looked out the window. She could see the engine as the train took a sharp bend to the right and then Gatun Lake was on both sides of the train, cobalt blue and white heat fulgurant on its surface. Through the nacreous film of night lingering on the surface lay the limbless forest of the Chagres River valley. Brilliant as polished gems, the faceted waves of the sparkling lake muffled the inland voices as amber forever locked away primeval insects. Only the hazy memories of los viejos in Colón could echo the sights and sounds of river towns like Charges and Las Cruces, drowned in the rising waters of the man-made lake.

Flora fumbled in her bag for a magazine but could find only melting Hershey bars and sticky grape Kool Aid packets to give to Joey for quick

energy at the meet. The magazines arrived by boat a fortnight late, but Mrs. Southerland always considered every article and essay in Time and Life, since any event that had transpired stateside in the last three months was regarded as new gossip on the dinner circuit, which Mrs. Echidna dominated.

"Joe," she said, "Who's Joey sitting with? She gestured at the girl with platinum hair so sun-bleached and chlorine-stained that the ends of her tresses had an iridescent green sheen like the scales or fletching of exotic birds or fish. Chief put down the paper and smacked the bloated mosquito and wiped blood and insect wings on his slacks. "Desirée Lamoreaux. Bob Lamoreaux the canal pilot's daughter."

"She's a very pretty girl."

"Joey seems to think so."

"I hope he doesn't make a fool of himself trying to impress her."

"He knows I'll keep him in line."

"I hope so. Two boys just threw Elbert's towel out the window, showing off for that Daphne Laker." She watched as the towel spread out as it landed on the water and then sank into the sapphire depths. Chief didn't respond. He was reading the paper again, an article on the swim meet. The Balboa Sharks were the predicted winners. Mrs. Southerland looked back again for the spot where the towel had been thrown, but there were no ripples. She began reading an article on the back page of the Star that Chief held up, about the dog show in Curundu the next weekend.

Joey held out a sugar cube in his open palm and Desirée took it and popped it into her mouth. "Are you swimming free and back against Gabrielle McCall today?" he asked, searching.

"Sure. Haven't you seen today's paper? They have a big article on the meet, plus all the results from the meets last week."

"I must have missed it."

"Well, it was better than that baseball game you guys lost. I won and my times were faster than McCall's."

"That's great. I think I'm doing all right, too, but I still need to get in better shape now that baseball's over. Since Roberto Mayers can't be at this meet I just might bring back some gold, too."

"You hungry?" Desirée asked.

"I've only had these sugar cubes."

"Split a mango?"

"Sure."

Elbert walked back to their seats and placed a hand on Joey's shoulder. "C'mon back with me." His face was red and he was still gasping from the struggle for his towel.

"What for this time?"

"C'mon back, stupid, and I'll show you."

Joey turned to watch Desirée take a big bite of the mango. The juice trickled from the corners of her mouth. "I'll be back in a minute, okay?"

"Okay."

"Sure?"

"Sure. But don't be late. I might get lonely."

"Where's Andre?" Joey said.

"He was sitting with Emily Rizzo and wouldn't leave her. What a fairy." Elbert shook his head and pulled two cherry bombs from the lining of his swim trunks. "My uncle in Charleston sent them. They're waterproof."

"What are we gonna frighten? Caiman?"

"Well, that old man's house is coming up real soon. We passed the siding a little while ago. Didn't you notice?"

"I was talking to Desi."

"You're as bad as Andre."

"The old man again, Elbert?"

"We're just gonna scare him, Joey boy. C'mon, it's the Fourth of July. '. . . the bombs bursting in air,'" he sang.

"I don't know."

"'. . . that our flag was still there . . .' Oh, c'mon. What are you afraid of? Desirée? Chief? Some old hoochie voodoo?"

"Well . . . I guess it won't hurt."

"That's the American spirit."

"All right . . . give me a cherry bomb."

"All right! Don't you worry 'bout a thing. Chief will never know."

"It's Desi I'm worried about."

"She'll never find out. Snap out of it. The house is coming up in just a minute, I know it." He leaned out over the platform. "The jungle seems to be breaking up ahead, but I can't tell for sure. You can never tell around here."

"How long are the fuses?"

"Five seconds." Elbert pulled a damp matchbook from his trunks. He smeared the sulphur tips of the first two matches he tried to light on the wet flint but the third match lit and he cupped it between his hands as the train shot into the clearing. "Here we go. The . . . house . . ." He lit Joey's firecracker, then his. "Should be rightaboutNOW!"

They threw the cherry bombs at the old man sitting motionless in the rocking chair. The shriek of the train whistle muted the sound of the

explosions but the clouds of grey gunpowder smoke hung in the air as they stood on the platform and watched the house recede in the distance.

"I'll see you in a little while, Elbert," Joey finally said. "I'm gonna see what Desi's up to."

He went inside the coach and stopped at the dispenser to drink two cups of water. The ammonia smell of the bathrooms burned his nose and he returned to his seat. Desirée was gone and curled shards of mango skin were scattered on the seats and on the floor.

* * *

Joey took one last powerful stroke and punched at the green tiled wall, looking all the time at the foam and kicking legs to his left. He grabbed for a rung on the slick wall and gazed through his matted hair at the official who stood on top of the starting wall peering down at him.

"Good swim, son, but not good enough for first. Tied up too bad on your butterfly leg." His glases were steamed up from the humidity and when he stared over the wall Joey could see dark crescents of perspiration that cut into the armpits of his blazer. "Still, a mighty fine medley." He crouched so that the misty lenses burned with the light off the water. "To tell you the truth, son, I thought you were going to take him when you went into that last turn. Then all of a sudden it was as if you were swimming in a tidal bore." The judge tried to suppress a grin.

Joey stared at him for a moment, then loosened his grip and sank to the bottom of the pool, blowing bubbles which rose to become part of the scalloped blue light. He let the dancing palette of sunlight hues soothe him and thought, I wish I never had to come up for air. He watched the thin, amphibian legs kick to the side of the pool and disappear into the light. To be a frog wouldn't be so bad. The legs were good and the legs

were lucky. The legs belonged to Vasco del Río, who grew up lucky enough to have a colonel in the Guardia Nacional for an uncle.

He felt his diaphragm tighten and gathered himself and pushed towards the dancing surface. The fogged glasses were in his face as he pulled himself from the water. "You had me worried there for a minute, son, and I thought you'd like to know your time."

"Was it faster than Roberto Mayers'?"

"Looks like Mayers isn't the one to beat anymore."

Elbert, Andre, and Steve Amaya, the spiderythin breaststroker, met Joey in the pen area behind the starting blocks. The smell of chlorine and urine wafted through the louvres of the locker rooms. The Remoras massaged their calves and kneaded their biceps to keep the muscles loose, wearing bored expressions while they silently sized up the competition. The Gamboa Flying Fish were a solid threat; their swimmers had placed in freestyle and backstroke. The Amador Sting Rays looked tough with a big kid who had won the breaststroke, the only individual event del Río didn't enter. But del Río was entered in the relay and slouched on the other side of the pen from the Remoras, surrounded by the other Balboa Sharks.

Even after Andre had opened up water on the backstroke leg del Rio remained unmoved, and it was only after Elbert maintained the lead that he took off his Junior Olympics t-shirt and dropped it into the puddle that gathered on the glazed tiles. Amaya hit the water with a five-yard lead on Balboa and Gamboa and a seven-yard lead over Amador. He pulled in long smooth scoops, unlike the quick bobbing style of the Balboa swimmer, but came out of the turn just three yards ahead. The Amador swimmer had passed Gamboa for third place. Señora del Río leaned over the side pool gutters, shaking her bouffant hairdo and shouting in Spanish. Joey stepped onto the

blocks as Amaya passed under the warning pennants ten yards from the wall in a dead heat with Balboa and Amador and a five-yard lead on Gamboa. Joey crouched, hands touching his toes, and fixed his gaze on the place in the water Amaya would cross as he made his final stretch for the wall. He would begin his dive then.

There were only the shrill gull cries of the crowd and the sunlight flashing upon the pool surface. And the slick heads, reaching arms, bowed legs. White foam. Blue water. Now. Joey leaped into the void. Slapslap. He hit the water pulling in quick, efficient strokes, staring down at the black-tile sightlines inlaid on the pool bottom. Pullkickkick pullkickkick. He didn't roll his head to the side to take a breath of air until he tucked into his turn, with the turbulence still even in the next lane. He pushed off the wall hard and shallow and began kicking and pulling as soon as he neared the surface. Don't breathe, don't even look. Pullkickpullkick. He could feel the throb of the crowd as he neared the pennants and pulled at the water with hands that clutched and no longer cupped. His burning lungs cried for air. Pullkickkick pullkickkick. The black-tile line swelled until it enveloped his vision. Pull kick pull kick four pull more kick strokes pull and kick he reached pull kick out pull and kickkickpull punched blindly at the wall, smacking kick the tile with a clenched fist.

He dropped a shoulder over the lane floats for support and gasped for air. Andre and Elbert and Steve were waving wet towels and slapping each others' backs. The crowd was in an uproar.

"We won!" Elbert shouted. "We beat del Río and Balboa!" He grabbed Amaya and pushed him into the pool. Joey smiled wanly and leaned his head back in the water to get the hair out of his face. His right hand throbbed

and thin red streaks of blood from his cracked knuckles swirled in the water.

". . . Joey . . . attaboy . . . Joey . . ."

Joey closed his eyes and basked in the water until he heard the cracked-leather voice of the official. The fogged lenses loomed above and beads of sweat rolled off the thin, aquiline nose and into the water. The old man smiled like a fisherman about to eat an underlimit tarpon.

"Sorry, boys, but we had to DQ you all."

"Disqualified. What the hell for?" Elbert screamed. "Steve's head never went under."

"No, it didn't. It was your anchor man. He left too early, son."

Joey punched the wall with his bleeding fist. "How can you say that? I didn't even begin to wind up when Amaya was--"

"There was no damn infraction!" Andre blurted.

"--judge's consultation we have decided to disqualify you all for an obvious infraction of the rules and award first place to the runner-up team, the Balboa Sharks. Gamboa moves up to second place and Amador to third place. That's it. Mighty fine anchor leg anyway, son, but illegal." The official scuttled off to the scorer's table. Elbert and Andre pulled Joey from the water. Vasco and his relay mates were being swept away by Señora del Río.

". . . good race . . . jasper . . . and you . . . Elbert . . ." Chief's voice floated down from the grandstand. Joey looked for his father but could not see him through the afternoon sun burning behind the bleachers. The announcer would tell the crowd about the disqualification in a minute. Steve Amaya gave Joey his towel, warm and wet and smelling of sugar and

ammonia, with heliotropic Kool Aid stains; the Iguanas pushed their way through the pen area to their seats.

* * *

Joey sat alone in the back of the coach on the ride to Gatun. Desirée sat three rows up in the aisle seat on the other side of the train. He watched her incandescent hair dance like filaments as she talked with Billy Bong, a freestyler in the 13 & 14 age group who had won three golds, including the medley relay, where he overhauled the Balboa and Amador swimmers on the anchor freestyle leg and broke a seven-year old meet record. It hadn't been enough to overtake Balboa for the team championship, though, as the disqualification of Joey's relay had cost the Remoras ten crucial points. Joey sighed into the weak electric haze. Bong was new, just arrived a month ago from Melbourne. It was only a matter of time until his swimming got his father transferred to the Pacific side.

The night had already thrown down its felt cloak; twilight had lasted less than the fifteen minutes the train had traveled from Balboa. Joey hadn't noticed the panchromatic sunset, but now he stared out the window at the silent jungle and the green lights lining the canal and the cruise ships burning like candelabras. Able was I ere I saw Elba. He could hear the pops and cracks of fireworks being set off for the ship passengers' amusement along the lee shore of Miraflores Lake. He walked back to the water dispenser as the train slid into the Fort Clayton tunnel. The interior lights dimmed and then failed, and in the darkness he stopped, clutching a seat top and swaying as the train rocked along. On the journey over, all of the Remoras had screamed and laughed in the tunnel, but now the coach was as silent as a cenotaph. Just as suddenly as it had entered, the train left the cool of the tunnel for the stagnant jungle air. The

interior lights blinked on in time for Joey to spot Elbert fumbling under Daphne's damp t-shirt.

"It's cool," Elbert grinned as she turned towards the window, pulling her shirt down. "What else would anyone sitting with a girl want to do in a dark tunnel, anyway?"

"I was just going to get a dr--"

"It's okay, Joey boy. How're you doing with Desi? All right?" He winked. "You shouldn't leave her in the dark, asshole. You only get so many chances."

"She's sitting with that new guy."

"Bong? Since when?"

"Since we left Balboa."

"Tough break. The older guys are always taking our girls down under. Pretty soon they'll chase down Daphne. Right, Daphne?" She stared out the window at the water and would not answer.

The train veered off from its parallel course with the canal and into the dark foliage, skirting Gold Hill and the mud slides in the Cut. Joey swayed in rhythm with the shifting coach, listening to the sighs of lush plants parting in the wake of the train, straining to hear the cry of a carnivore or the scream of a butterfly. Several minutes passed with only the swish of plants to break the silence before Elbert spoke.

"We should be nearing Gamboa soon. Wanna take target practice again for chivas on the bridge?"

"No thanks. I really feel too sore to throw anything. Tossing cherry bombs at the old man was enough excitment for me."

"He sure was surprised, wasn't he?" Elbert laughed. "Bet he needs some fresh underwear."

Joey smiled and looked over his shoulder. The red warning lights of the Summit Hill radio towers burned through the jungle to wink and dance on the rusted, muddied train.

"Elbert, I'm getting seasick. I'm gonna go sit down."

"Sure thing, Joey boy. And find Desi, too. When we get to Gatun I know a party we can crash out at the Yacht Club. We can watch them shoot the fireworks off at the spillway across the lake."

Joey nodded halfheartedly and returned to his seat. It wasn't until he looked out the window down at the swift Chagres that he realized he never got the cup of water he wanted, but he remained in his seat, staring silently into the night beyond the jungle and across the canal and its ceaseless ships to the yellow lights of the scientist's bungalows on the cliffs of Barro Colorado glowing through the heat like luminous chrysalises. Up ahead, the train whistled.

Joey looked down the aisle again for Desirée, but she had still not returned. Neither had Billy. His tongue as dry as a desert lizard, Joey mumbled apologies past Elbert and Daphne to the dispenser and then to the rear platform. He liked the taste of fresh wet paper and let the cup rest on his tongue while he swallowed the water. He belched and crushed the cone and dropped it between the gleaming steel ribbons that sprouted from beneath the train and shot off to the end of the jungle night.

The train broke into the small clearing, which Joey recognized even in the darkness. The cane and savannah clawed at the train's steel skin. The engineer gave three curt, guttural blasts on the whistle. Joey felt hot. The air smelled of smoke more pungent than the locomotive's diesel fumes. The train rushed past the shack, which was as dark and crumbling as the ruins of a Spanish fort. An old lantern hung unlit on the dim porch; the

empty rocking chair creaked in the train's draught, which stirred the ovenhot air.

Joey walked back to his seat without stopping to tell Elbert about the old man's disappearance. He had to find Desirée, to ask her about going to the Yacht Club to watch the fireworks and about his relay start. He eased by Chief, who snored hoarsely, sprawled across over two seats, and his mother, engrossed in the new issue of Time she had bought in Balboa.

He went through three cars without finding Desirée and Billy. On the shifting platform before the final car he paused and looked into the starless night. The couplings kissed and scraped beneath his feet. Suddenly, the Balboa-bound train, a wall of light idling on the Monte Lirio siding, exploded beside him and his ears were stung in the roar. Feeling a crawling insect, he slapped his cheeks, but his fingers found only warm, oozing phlegm and saliva. He heard the Ladyfingers exploding in the coaches and the shouts and screams of startled passengers. Above it all and fading like the bell of a distant ship was the sound of laughter, at once ancient and metallic.

The Water Cure

Walter Gloaming fled. He gunned blue smoke from his Impala and the steel-finned behemoth lurched forward. There had been the screech and the burned rubber smell of braking tires clawing the pavement and the soft fruit thud of warm flesh and blood against sunburned steel. He had only seen a flash of red shoot out from between two cars and a swirl of pink, blonde, and white. It had been too late to stop and when he realized what had happened he knew that he would never stop, not with the wailing sirens and the crying parents and the gaping crowd that a traffic accident brought out and the police on the phone to dear Penny and his explanation for being in Coco Solo during his lunch hour. He avoided looking in the rear-view mirror at the broken marionette body in grotesque pirouette against the warm October asphalt.

He fumbled for a Camel in the pockets of his pleated guevara shirt. The police would never believe he couldn't stop in time and when they tested him for the alcohol they would slap him with a manslaughter charge, at least. Hauled down to the station and getting treated like the Jamaicans, booked, fingerprinted, photographed, and locked up with the halfbreeds and the perverts. Then the Panama <u>American</u> would get wind of it and run a story with a grainy, unfocused, drunken picture from last month's Elks charity barbeque (proceeds to the Balboa Elks Little League team) on the front page with forty-eight-point headlines. The Agency would be sure to act in a self-righteous fashion; the Conquistador Collection Agency was not in the habit of employing people who couldn't keep their private lives off the front page. Guiding the steering wheel with his knees, Gloaming lit a cigarette and threw the match out the open window, which he immediately regretted. Fingerprints.

"People just don't ignore something like this."

Cool pastel bungalows were aligned in the neighborhood's manicured soyzia grass. One home gardener had plastic pink flamingoes stuck in his hedges like toothpicks in a club sandwich; his green-thumbed neighbor had a grinning, lantern-toting jockey with Orphan Annie eyes. There was even a yard like his own, with a circular wrought-iron bench around the trunk of a mango tree. He wiped his brow. Cigarette ashes dappled his khaki pants.

"Somebody's called the cops by now. All they have to do is run a trace on my license and pass it on to the Guardia at the checkpoint. Their computer can do that much. Can't chance it on driving back to the Agency. Cops'll be crawling there."

Back to forty hours a week, he thought, fifty weeks a year, at a buckling, battleship-grey surplus Canal Company desk surrounded by a grand and invincible armada of other desks and other collection agents. Headset in place, dialing, disconnecting, dialing, disconnecting, trying to get through on the overloaded telephone system and listen to excuses. My Eeengleesh is not good, the Rainbow City housewife with a new, and unpaid, refrigerator said. I have trouble with my bowels.

She had meant her vowels, although she probably had problems in the other area as well. Then there was the Balboa Heights matron who had passed out on the floor until his call. Beau Beau, her toy poodle, had just been trimmed and washed. So he wouldn't catch a chill because of the air conditioning she put him inside her new microwave oven. It was only for a minute. The dog didn't have time to suffocate; he exploded when the gases in his stomach expanded. For the hot heap of sinew, blood, and fur oozing onto the linoleum kitchen tiles Gloaming could only recommend that she write the company demanding that they warn users of the dangers of

drying pets in these ovens. His smooth voice, gently carressing yet continually probing, awaited her relapse into panic. Then he could tighten the verbal coils.

The work was nerve-wracking, especially foreclosing on widows. The pills he gulped kept him on an even keel and helped him maintain a hurt tone while he convinced, cajoled, and threatened clients to pay their overdue bills to Conquistador. Talking to people over the phone was better than talking to them in person, although customers on the Atlantic coast often needed a personal visit, always agonizing, to get the check in the mail. He would rather remain faceless, relieved in the detachment of the telephone.

"Maybe I could go back . . . no, her kids'll be home from school for lunch soon."

He glanced at his watch. He was with her just twenty minutes ago. He lit another Camel from the smoldering butt. Twenty minutes ago he had been at her house while her husband was in Panama City on business. He smiled and remembered lying next to her in bed, the warm flesh of his hands cupping her heaving breasts, in the fecund darkness of the room. Her name did not matter. He called her Honey or Babe or Sugartits, fearing that he might call her another woman's name. He regarded her as an average, innominate housewife: on restriction, spending the prime of her life confined by the Zone, feeling vaguely cheated by life. Except for him she had discarded emotion, content to involve herself in the American television shows comprising almost all of the eight-hour daily broadcast on the only English-speaking station. After "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Meditation" and the test pattern there were always Spanish-dubbed "Bonanza" and "Gilligan's Island" reruns. She was much like his wife,

except that Penny enjoyed watching taped bullfights on television unless they were from Portugal, where the bull was not killed, which, in her view, subverted the sacrament.

His visits were always short. The only things he left her were memories that fled like flocks of frightened birds and the stains on her selected seconds bedsheets. The stains always seemed to last longer than the feelings that spawned their creation. No permanence, just the kind of anonymity that appealed to his arrogance, particularly in shades-drawn, kids-at-school, husband-out-of-town suburban bedrooms. And now Walter Gloaming could not even fall back on that tattered security.

"What's wrong Wally? she'd bleat if I came back. Sounds like I'm some kid on 'Leave it to Beaver.' Does she think she's Barbara Billingsley? If I go back she'll know something's wrong . . . Dammit! Shaking like a goddam rookie on his first solo!"

He swung the Impala to curbside and tore through the glove compartment, scattering maps and manuals, looking for his Librium. When he found the vial he desperately ripped the child-proof top off and downed several pills. The safety tops were supposed to frustrate children, not adults. Someone at the Agency had told him, as they stood at the urinals one Friday afternoon, that regular tap water had a salubrious and calming effect that did the body more good than all the alcohol and barbiturates in the world. But Gloaming wanted a Tom Collins or a gimlet and to hell with H_2O. More blue smoke and the Impala accelerated on the flowing asphalt river. He could already feel the numbing reassurance of the pills that dissolved in his stomach.

It was the same way he had reassured himself during World War II when he flew reconnaissance in an unstable Navy blimp. A few shooters and then

a prayer for finding the wolf pack's mother ship, for at night a deadly borealis flickered on the eastern horizon: the U-boats had struck again.

He thought he would feel more when he finally spotted the long dark shape beneath the surface off of Portobelo. But he calmly called in support and lined up the unsuspecting submarine in his sights. His depth charges straddled the hull perfectly. When the dive bombers and the PT boats finally arrived there was only the mother of pearl sheen of a spreading oil slick. While he celebrated by whoring the night away at La Grulla Azul in Colón with his navigator, Roland Dice, the U-boats sent down a tramp steamer.

"No patrol now. This is not a drill!" He mashed the Camel in the ashtray and headed the car for Colón. He sped down the highway corridor, close enough to the city to enjoy the outdoor plumbing of the campesinos and their stilted shacks teetering over the glistening mud flats of the Folk River. White-eyed, gaping fish lay where the tide had left them. A few years ago, he remembered, the river, actually a brackish backwater of Manzanilla Bay, was an open cesspool of raw sewage, chemicals, and oil that ignited and burned out of control for hours. His attention was drawn to the piñatas of apocalyptic animals hanging in opened shack windows and he had to swerve back into his lane to avoid an oncoming taxi.

The streets reached out like tentacles that pulled him to Colón's squalid core. The Impala glided past a Shell station's yellow bivalve sign and the customs buildings of the Free Zone. Farting chivas were everywhere; all of Panama seemed to run on the gaily decorated, dilapidated buses. The shining, symmetrical warehouses and piers gave way to weather-beaten frame houses and boarded-up storefront churches. The smell of rotting garbage and furtive lust intensified as Gloaming neared Bamboo

Lane. At least every grunt who had spent a three-day pass in Panama knew it as Bamboo Lane, although it probably had a solemn, regal name on a roadmap. Gloaming rolled up his window.

"I'm out of my goddam mind to go down here. They got Rollie Dice down here in '64. Some schoolkids pull down a Panamanian flag and the hoochies kill the first cop they see trying to keep them from walking away with the Canal. Won't get me though."

He opened the glove compartment and pulled out the Luger pistol he had taken from a sailor snoring away his shore leave in a Colón back alley. He had never fired the gun but he always kept it loaded and within reach.

"Cold lead will win out every time. They can't outrun or outclimb bullets."

He smiled and put the Luger under his seat. He twisted the radio knobs but could only get Sinatra crooning "She's Funny That Way" on the one American station. He had never liked Old Blue Eyes. During the war, while swatting mosquitoes in open-air jungle theaters, he sat through too many newsreels of Sinatra surrounded by bevies of swooning bobbysoxers. He waited through the song for the news. There was no APB out yet for a balding (combs hair over), middle-aged white male of undetermined height driving a white, '61 Impala.

Loud pink and black letters shouted

El Dorado
Bailando
Cerveza y Licor

and Gloaming wheeled the car into the nearest alley. He would hide in the rainy-season smells and voices of El Dorado's patrons. A grinning, wide-eyed face met him as he stepped from the Impala, offering to watch the car for a dollar while he was inside the bar. He paid. It was cheaper than

not paying and then coming out drunk to find the tires slashed or the headlights smashed and some kid saying, Is too bad about your car, mon.

The odors in the autumnal air were even more distinct inside El Dorado. Stale smoke from cheap cigarettes hung like rain clouds over each booth and the desperate stench of sweat and Jade East and Schlitz and urine rose like gas from the scuffed linoleum floor, soothing and savaging his nostrils.

"Double gin and tonic. Bombay gin," he told the old man behind the bar.

He sat in an empty booth near the end of the crowded bar. It was empty because it was next to the overflowing bathrooms but the bargirl came back with his drink before he could get up, placing it in front of him with the gentleness of a nurse. He rubbed against the torn, imitation cordovan leather upholstery like an apprehensive patient. The smells of the El Dorado were like anesthesia. He grinned idiotically at the cardsharks and pool hustlers who eyed him, waiting for another drink to dull his senses before closing in for the kill. He looked around the bar trying to make out the nebulous forms. Everyone left a vaporous yellow wake that floated wraithlike as they trailed away. It's like a goddam gas in here, he told himself, their conversations like water being sucked down a drain or propellers droning through the clouds.

He could only laugh at the pimp who sat down across the table from him dressed as he thought a New York City pimp might dress.

"The name is Blake." Gloaming shook the thin, jewelry-festooned arm. "Listen, mon, you look like the sportin' type." His gold and silver teeth danced in Gloaming's eyes. He motioned towards an alluring ebony nymph clad in pink fur jacket, snakeskin pants, and Lucite platform shoes. The heels were hollow and filled with water and live goldfish.

"Her name's Clytemnestra but I call her Clit for short. She yours for tirty."

"Sorry. I get my action for free." He couldn't stop staring at her breasts, barely contained by her jacket.

"Twenty-five."

"I didn't come to get laid. I came for the cure and to forget." He drank the gin and tonic in one loud draught.

"Okay, mon, I understand. Some cards maybe? Check out de pictures on dis deck. They all different. Fifty-two position. You name de game." He flashed his 24-carat grin.

Gloaming laughed and ordered another gin and tonic and a rum and punch for Blake. He felt himself floating above the pimp and his whore. Someone was scouring the convolutions of his brain with a Brillo pad as he drifted in and out of conversations in the blue tobacco haze . . .

"One fine trollop

this giant rat in a ditch

with Pele they cannot lose

twenty

a real tart wha' happin' for you?

dirt mon

big as a goddam iguana

un hombre malo

de white mon over dere

look at her

my last offer

one slick dude, monnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn"

Goddam trash, he thought, goddam flotsam goddam jetsam goddam sound goddam buzz goddam hummmmmmmmmm . . . An orchestra and choir approached. Tubas. Trumpets. Cellos. A fanfare for the common man heralded the parade. Outside the El Dorado people stopped and waited. Crack high school drill teams, smart-stepping majorettes, and pneumatic baton twirlers. Wave after wave of goose-stepping housewives juggling Tupperware and cooking utensils escorted by policemen astride Harley 74's, wearing silver jackets and pants and mirrored hob-nail boots. Zombies bore an empty gilded litter upon their shoulders. Everyone was stamped "Human Bacon" on their forehead except for a tourist from Toronto stamped "Canadian Bacon." The procession stopped at the threshold of the El Dorado and waited.

Tap.

They waited patiently for Gloaming to come out of the bar and take the seat of honor. They waited in a snowfall. The thick wet flakes landed on their bare shoulders and instantly melted to liquid silver and burned tiny holes through their skin to the marrow.

Tap.

Gloaming dashed from the bar, bowling over the whore, and scrambled into the litter. The snow fell upon his shoulders but would not melt. It clung to his guevara shirt when he tried to brush it away. He couldn't feel the pain of the others but the snow would not leave his shoulders.

Tap.

"Get offa me! Melt, dammit! Get the hell offa me!"

"Easy, mon, easy. You all right now. Too much booze. You just pass out, dot's all. John Barleycorn put you to wool gathrin' ever' time, mon. Ain't no exscape. Best just go home and sleep it off. Drink some water

befo' bed. T'ree or four glasses. Best cure in de world for de butterfly stomach. Yes, mon, de booze it let you know de next day."

Gloaming blinked in the raw light that burned through the haze, warning of uncharted schoals. The air tasted as greasy in his mouth as the fried egg sandwiches coming off the cast-iron El Dorado grill. A middle-aged mestizo lay on the floor by his booth in the evening's vomit, cigarette butts, and spilled drinks. Gloaming rose hesitantly and lurched to a window. Outside fell a hard steady rain. He wheeled and addressed the old, toothless black man mopping down the floor behind the bar.

"Give my butterflies some water. And give me a fifth of Bombay. I gotta ride ahead of me."

The old man looked at Gloaming but said nothing, just shook his head and gave him a bottle. Crazy Americans. It slipped through Gloaming's fingers to the floor, shattering and splattering liquor on the floor and his Hush Puppies.

"Sorry, boy. One more thing to clean up."

"You drunk mon."

"First drink I spilled tonight. Give me another. I'll hold on."

"You ask for it."

Gloaming slapped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar.

"Keep the change." Clutching the bottle to his breast, he turned and staggered from the El Dorado.

"Worse ting possible that mon can do," he heard behind. The pimp's voice.

"Goddam pimp don't know nothin' but pimpin'. Talkin' to me in that King James Bible voice like we're old friends," he coughed. "I know what democracy in the Panama is though, admirals and seamen both screwing the

same whores. I'll be a sonofabitch . . . damn car's still here. Damn nigger's gone though."

Standing in the rain, his patina of dull contentment was soon washed away. Bamboo Alley's musky odors dissolved, leaving only the raw smell of oily streets and unmasked decay and doomed or denied love. Raucous laughter burst from La Grulla Azul across the street. Maybe he would have thirty dollars next week. He tried to hold his breath and cling to his bottle and unlock the car door but he dropped the keys and bumped his forehead on the side mirror as he knelt to pick them up and by the time he found the right key he was completely soaked and when he finally splashed down inside the car the humid interior was almost as bad as the downpour which sounded like depth charges on the roof.

boomboomboom

Two hundred yards and closing. He took a shot of gin and winced. The Impala coughed and bolted forward, grazing the rear fender of a parked Dodge Polara as Gloaming cornered too tightly coming out of the alley. Two heads appeared in the back seat of the stricken car but he did not hear their shouts. He was heeding a call much older and more urgent.

BOOMBOOMBOOM

One hundred yards and closing. He headed for Terminal Street and the piers, crossing Bolívar Avenue and entering Cristobal, and the Zone. Reaching into the open glove compartment for the vial, his wrist was cut by the compartment door latch as he bounced over the railroad crossing. Accompanied by a mouthful of gin, the remaining pills slid like silent medieval funeral barges to his stomach. He could feel the throb of the engines overhead and he closed his eyes and waited for the end but the noise died away.

He left the Impala on the quay and boarded the launch to Portobelo. It was an old landing craft outfitted with running lights. A spectral old man with gaunt eyes wiped his rheumy pug nose on his striped gondolier's shirt and fidgeted with a broad-brimmed hat while Gloaming dug through his pockets for the fare. He finally handed the pilot a wet five-dollar bill.

"Round trip is ten dollars, señor."

I'll pay my return when I decide to come back and not one damn minute before. Comprende?"

The old man sniffed and waved aboard more passengers. Just another cruise-ship drunk. The floral and checkered crowd smelled like mixed drinks and laughed and threw glasses overboard as the flat-bottomed boat shuddered away from the pier. Gloaming overheard something about a festival in Portobelo for the town's patron saint. The patron saint for the hunted would help him disappear for a time, but he knew not the name to pray.

The still, black water of Limón Bay gave way to the soft, rolling swells of the Caribbean as the launch passed the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater. He could make out the red aircraft warning lights atop the Dinosaur Corral, the Navy's huge circular radio antenna at land's end of Galeta Point. The methane gas of a coastal petroleum refinery drifted across the sea's mirrored surface. It was like the smell of a dead submarine, Gloaming thought. It was a week after the U-boat sinking that the Captain had called him and Dice to his office. Off the record, gentlemen. Key West reports one of our subs three days overdue, the Dorado. Last made radio contact off Cartagena. Your sub could be a friendly kill, but there won't be an inquiry--that's the last thing we need. The intelligence boys just slipped. We're only human.

We're only human. He and Dice had whored away the rest of the war. They saw many dark shadows in the water after that but they never dropped another depth charge. One helluva team, though, and Gloaming pulled the pint from his hip pocket and drank a toast. Better team than John Wayne and Robert Montgomery in They Were Expendable.

Even after the war they were inseparable. Dice went to Canal Zone College on the GI Bill. He was going to be a doctor until he took organic chemistry three times. He ended up a cop. Gloaming volunteered for a jet seaplane program at Coco Solo and tested engines until the project was scrapped, declared obsolete, after the Korean War. He married a Red Cross volunteer he met at a USO show who had allowed him to fondle her breasts in the cloakroom during intermission. Almost immediately there were diaper changes and 2 a.m. feedings. Then he saw Dice only once a week, at the Bowlarama or the Elks Club.

That was all water under the bridge. The riots had changed every thing. Buddy shipped out as soon as he graduated from high school and sent terse, two-sentence postcards from Bombay and Jakarta and Lagos. But good old Rollie. Couldn't ask for a better man beside him in a dark alley. Drinkinbowlinwomanizin. Looked more like William Bendix than Wayne or Montgomery. With this gut I look more like Alan Hale than Alan Ladd.

Gloaming lit a Camel in the warm drizzle and gulped more gin. It felt like lava going down his throat.

boomboomboom

Skyrockets arced over the harbor of Portobelo and then fizzled in the ash-colored water. The tourists oohed and ahhed and clicked their cameras. A few even used flash attachments to try and light up the sky. The launch passed under the turrets of the ancient Spanish fortifications; Rollie used

to drive out to Portobelo after the road was cut through the jungle and wedge himself in a battlement crenel and look out to the harbor mouth where Sir Francis Drake was buried and the sea beyond where the submarine went down.

"The monkeys have no tails in Semarang,
Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Semarang,
Oh, the monkeys have no tails,
They were bitten off by whales;
Oh, the monkeys have no tails in Semarang."

The song had been good enough for Wayne and Montgomery. It was good enough for Dice and Gloaming.

"That's the spirit!" a woman with rain-smeared mascara shouted as the launch eased up to the sagging dock. "We'll show em a real party!"

"Now dear . . ."

"Shut up, Leo, and have some fun, for God's sake!"

More whoops and laughter as the passengers disembarked. Gloaming caught the pilot's eye as he walked up the gangplank.

"Remember, five dollars to return. Not a penny less."

"Guess I'll have to swim back."

Gloaming followed the tourists to Portobelo's main street, where the entire town was out in force, chanting and wailing to the rhythm of drums and percussion. He elbowed his way through the crowd lining the street to watch the strange procession. At least ten abreast from curb to curb, the revelers lurched up the street, taking three steps forward, then two steps backward. Three steps forward, two back. The saturnalian conga line swarmed around a litter supporting a larger-than-life figure of the Messiah. Gloaming squinted through the downpour. The crown of thorns, the wounds, the beatific smile: it was the Son of God. Except that the statue was black. Three forward, two back.

"You got it all wrong!" he shouted.

One of the marchers, resplendent as a peacock in feathers and sequins, saw Gloaming screaming through the din. Thinking Gloaming to be another rum-befuddled tourist trying to "go native" for the amusement of his Instamatic-toting companions, he yanked him into the swirling frenzy. Knee-walking drunk, Gloaming was supported by the crush of wet, joyous humanity. The woman from the launch with the coatimundi eyes grabbed at him but the pressing flesh pushed him along like a spent seed toward the effigy gleaming in the rain. For a terrifying moment the darkness under the platform swallowed him and then he emerged behind the Black Christ and was squeezed over to the crowd at curbside. The parade snaked around a corner and he pushed through the onlookers until he had enough room to catch his breath. Stone arches surrounded him and the rain renewed its intensity; he was in the ruins of the old Customs House used centuries ago to store the gold brought by mule train from Panama City for the galleons of the Spanish Main. He waded through the water collected in the building's foundation to the ramparts of the crumbling sea wall. The launch was moored below but the old pilot was nowhere in sight. The moonlit water exploded in a thousand electrified concentric rings. He tired before he reached the turrets and leaned against a corroded cannon. Drake lost his touch . . . died . . . for gold, he thought. And Balboa, down the coast in the lost settlement of Acla, garrotted in the square of the town he founded, victim of a power struggle. And the naive Scotch colony, New Caledonia, ready to trade wigs, kilts, and bonnets to the naked Indians, never had a chance. The call had been the same but no one had listened when the jungle answered.

The almost-empty gin bottle slipped from his fingers and landed, unbroken, on the moss-covered stones. He grabbed clumsily, losing his balance, and his right arm shattered the glass as he sprawled. The steady stream of blood ran from the gash on his wrist to the stones and was absorbed by the puddles. He searched his pockets with his uncut hand.

"Woulda brought a drink Rollie, but I can't find my bottle. You shoulda seen the doll I had today. Great set of lungs. You'd think she had a Mae West on 'neath her blouse. Now I know you're thinkin', 'Gloaming, you stupid bastard, what're you gonna do when Penny finds out?' Well, relax, 'cause me an' . . . an' . . . hell, me and her we keep it quiet. An' Penny'd never ask. Never."

He sat back and rested his head against the breech of the cannon. The parade grew distant. The rain continued to pound against his head but the only thing he could feel was the dull throbbing in his right arm. His sleeve was soaked in blood. Penny would hit the roof when she saw the cleaning bill for his shirt and she would have to notice the stains on his pants.

Just as he was sure that someone had seen him run over the girl and taken down his license number and now there was an all-out man hunt for him. He thought someone would take notice of him, but no one ever did. He was too dull, too ordinary. He wasn't capable of attracting attention. Not by sending one hundred of his compatriots to a watery death. Not as a hit-and-run driver. Not in a blood-stained guevara. He had been bored and boring, been anonymous and enjoyed his anonymity, for too long.

It occurred to him that no one cared what he did. Had she been faking it lately? Only place I can find sympathy, he thought, is in the dictionary, between shit and syphilis. Penny would never question the

stains. The police would not have an alert out for a white Impala. Even Blake, the pimp, would be hard-pressed to identify him. Tomorrow at Conquistador no one would ask why he didn't return after lunch. The payroll secretary might stop to tell him that she had punched him out early and then he would sit down at his desk and begin dialing, disconnecting, dialing, disconnecting, as if nothing had ever happened. He pulled the crushed, soaked pack of cigarettes from his pocket and threw them over the parapet.

"Only difference 'tween me an' you, Rollie, is depth."

Tears ran down his cheeks and mixed with the rain striking his colorless face. Thunder crashed in the distance.

boomboomboom

The patron saint's pagan music pulsated over the moaning crowd. Gloaming lay down by the cannon and closed his eyes and imagined himself make love many times to a faceless woman with huge breasts.

"Jesus . . . I'm crawlin' . . . I'm dead in bed . . . " he lapsed into laughter. The rain soaked his clothes but he felt only peaceful radiance. In the closing jungle he could hear the clopping hoofbeats and clinking ingots of the gold train coming down El Camino Real. Must rest . . . sleep . . .

BOOMBOOMBOOM

Raindrops pelted his face, formed tiny pools in each eye socket, dribbled down his nostrils, dripped down his mouth. The silhouette of the blimp was directly overhead now. He could feel it coming. The music stopped first and then the sex faded away. The rain continued. His lungs were filling up with water but he made no effort to change his position along the watchtower. The shadow moved on and he lay there like a landed

fish, eyes closed, mind vacant, mouth gaping, as the rain continued to flow into his nostrils and into his mouth. He was going down with the ship this time. Soon he would have to breathe water. Only then would he be cured.

Mrs. Alabaster's Party

> Extemplo Libyae magnas it Fama per urbes.
> Fama, amlum qua non aliud velocius ullum.
> Mobilitate viget virisque adquirit eundo;
> parva metu primo, mox sese attollit in auras,
> ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit.

Stifling a yawn, Eveline Alabaster closed the yellowed pages and languidly placed The Aeneid upon her mahogany reading table, the wood suffocated beneath layers of clouded wax. She smelled the odor of mildewed muslin, which, mixed with the humid, stagnant air that seemed to congeal upon the rusted screens, emanated from the continually drawn curtains. They were frayed and worn, and the afternoon sunlight that filtered through them bathed the room in the hue of stewed apricots. Eveline added lukewarm water from the samovar to her rosehip tea and felt very, very tired. She settled into the threadbare horsehair sofa; the ancient antimacassars crinkled like autumn leaves. It had been long, too long, since her husband's patchouli-scented hair cream had stained the doilies.

The aged sentiment pervaded even the garden that occupied the ill-defined backyard, where brazilwood, myrtle, espavé, and jacaranda encroached the lawn on both sides of the house. The rose bushes had become a maze of thorns. The mango tree's boughs were gnarled and unruly, its branches brittle and barren. Where plantain trees and frangipani once grew, layers of fallen fronds and pandurate leaves now buried the ground. Past the rose bushes and the mango tree the French Canal sprawled out, dark and calm, to the canopy of mangroves and vines enshrouding a bucket dredge and half-submerged railroad gondolas on the far shore of Telefer's Island. Near the path overgrown with jungle scrub, which led from the house down

between the bushes and the tree to the canal bank, the carbuncular cross marking her husband's grave corroded in the hot salt air.

Close by, the garden furniture rusted, subjected to too many sudden and sultry tropical storms. The leaves of a yellow-flowered pea vine obscured the leaves wrought in iron. In the sandy soil, perched on half-sunken, lichen-encrusted pedestals, features indistinct and covered with guano, the marble statues were admired only by the birds. Eveline had been forced to let Jamaica Edwards, her gardener, go with a promise to soon pay him his back wages, though she knew there was little chance of her receiving further recording royalties from Victrola in the States. Her records had long been out of print.

Slowly surveying the scene around her, she could not help but remember when the room had indeed been a living room. That was years ago, she thought, picking up one of the cracked, leather-bound scrapbooks that occupied a prominent position on the reading table, years ago, that the crystal chandelier burned like a diamond pyre at one of my parties. Leafing through the dog-eared pages, she came upon a review of one of her concert recitals. Her fingers carressed the page as she read.

> "After viewing Miss Eveline yesterday evening at the Avalon Theatre, one can only conclude that it was she who instructed the nightingale in the divine art of singing. One might daresay call her the empress of tongues. Miss Eveline possesses a voice of startling dexterity and vibrant warmth . . ."

There were dozens of tickets and handbills. Scores of newspaper reviews were mixed in with her recital programs. And, more important, there were the breathless illustrated magazine accounts of the parties she had attended or hosted for her society friends. Her latest clippings had assumed a jaundiced color years ago.

Why had it been so long, she wondered, husbands and lovers, Albert and D'Annunzio . . . so far removed. Her 78s were under the reading table, warped and buckled, stacked in forgotten disarray like worn and punctured tires. The placards, the posters, the pictures of celebrities that hung grinning and faded from her brown walls reminded her of triumphant curtain calls, of standing ovations, of sold-out performances, of adulation and attention, of a distant and glorious past. Now only the walls bore her company, her at-home days resigned to entertaining memories.

She had never wanted anyone as badly as the first time she had seen D'Annunzio, nor had lived to regret anybody so much. The fatal night long ago when she had sung with Caruso at La Scala. The tenor, stricken with influenza, had gone onstage against the advice of his physicians; his voice gave out in the second act. The flustered orchestra replayed the aria's opening bars but Caruso sat down heavily on the papier mâché scenery, which collapsed and sent him sprawling through the curtains. Eveline had found herself screaming in her clear contralto in the ensuing pandemonium when, over the bedlam, had floated the words of the aria in a strong, rich voice. It was D'Annunzio, standing in a loge at the rear of the theatre. The orchestra struck in, con brio, and he sang the entire piece, finishing with his arms upraised in a dramatic flourish and the audience in hysteria. On stage center, watching with awe at the sheer panache of the act and listening with jealousy to an audience moved as she would never be able to touch them, she had wanted him completely.

Sucked in by the current and almost drowned by the undertow. When she left Milan with D'Annunzio, Albert had never recovered, exiling himself to the tropical limbo of his family's failed rubber plantation in Panama. When the recitals and the money and the banquets ran out, so did

D'Annunzio, forever. She came up for air and left for Panama to live with her dying husband in the green mansion that blazed through the night with the novelty of electricity.

She sighed, rose slowly from her chair, and walked to a window. Parting the decrepit drapes, she gazed out upon her neglected garden and the still black water beyond. A thin smile pursed her pastel lips. She had a plan that would restore the complexion of her faded past, that would part the discolored curtains, that would return the spectral house to the champagne breakfast days rivaled only by the DeLesseps Palace.

She would have a party. Not a small, intimate gathering, but a huge social event, attended by the same philanthropists, dilettantes and social climbers who had embraced her when she first came to Panama, before stories of D'Annunzio were spread. She would hire maids and servants to return her home to its former grandeur. It would be a catered affair: tuxedoed waiters, corseted by gold cummerbunds into gauntness, would slide unctuously through the crowds balancing trays of spiced meats, ceviche, chicken Kiev, sauteed mushrooms, and sweet and sour sauces; bartenders would offer Lafite Rothschild, Chateau Margaux, Pinot Blanc, chartreuse, curacao, scotch, whiskey, rum, and gin, as well as five bottled waters; a huge swan, carved from a single block of ice, would grace her ornate sterling silver punch bowl; an orchestra would serenade the guests, and, after a seven-course dinner, followed with baked Alaska and accompanied by more liqueurs, the ensemble would back Eveline in her finest hour, her triumphant return to the clutches and good graces of high society.

But all of this would require money and careful planning, and while the afternoon sun burned through the curtains she wrote letters to her bankers and creditors, composed a guest list of more than four score of

Panamanian society's lions, and designed a party invitation. She made sure to include Nello Rosetti, capitán of the Colón bomberos, a heroic tenor who perfected his art in an Austrian prison camp following the Italian defeat at Caporetto. Her party invitation was to be of the finest ivory-colored laid paper, deckle-edged, with lettering in the florid, engraved silver script popular for wedding or birth announcements, bordered in filigrees and elaborate, embossed French curves. The invitations would contain no r.s.v.p.: she was confident that no one who was anyone would miss the opportunity to congregate and congratulate.

* * *

The gala was still a week away, yet the gaunt, consumptive mansion basked in an inner glow of anticipated success. The cabriole-legged, ormolu-inlaid mahogany reading table had reassumed its rich, tortoise-shell lustre and the crystal chandelier had been dusted and furnished with new candles, while the air was redolent of the sweet smell of new varnish in the humidity mingling with the exotic odors wafting in from the jungle and the revitalized garden. The punch bowl, its tarnish removed, gleamed in the sunlight that poured through the parted curtains in bright orange trumpet blasts. Porcelain vases, containing sprays of garden flowers, jungle orchids, and water lilies in a wild riot of color and scent, were placed throughout the house.

Upstairs, seated at her writing desk, Eveline Alabaster fondled the party invitations as if they were a baby boy, the sole scion shouldered with the heavy responsibility of carrying on the family name. She placed the cards down gingerly upon the emerald felt covering the table, picked up her fountain pen, and continued to write her weekly entry into her diary:

"At seven o'clock next Friday evening I shall be reborn. I shall rise from the ashes and soar towards the stars. I shall drink the milk of Paradise and pools of deep blue thought as I gaze into the eyes of intelligent, appreciative guests. It shall be the social event of the year. It shall be my finest hour since I left the Continent."

She closed the slender, leather-bound volume, a frail house for all of her hopes and dreams, and placed it lovingly in the writing table's top drawer, along with the packet of party invitations.

* * *

Eveline Alabaster paced nervously about the worn Persian carpet of her bedroom. She glanced at her watch: the guests should be arriving shortly. The soft strains of flutes and violins, coupled with the delicious odors of beef Wellington, Yorkshire pudding, and a myriad of vegetables and hors d'oeuvres, rose through the waxed floorboards. The party had cost her many pieces of jewelry, but what a party to be remembered.

She picked up a Dresden figurine, a souvenir from one of her European tours, fondled it, then placed it back upon the chiffonier. I sang there once, she thought, Mahler's Kindertotenlieder. Then, in a quavering whisper:

"Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn
Als sei kein Ungluck die Nacht geschehn . . . "

She trailed off, sensing an intruder, and turned slowly, as not to muss her hair. In the doorway a girl watched silently, her sombre maid's outfit masking her Cuna Indian origins but for her glinting, gold nose ring and the mola trim of her native blouse blossoming from under the starched sleeves of her black cotton dress. Eveline forced a smile.

"How are you?" Eveline said.

No answer. The girl stared at her feet, unaccustomed to the tight red leather shoes, then at the porcelain figurine.

"You . . . you are from the San Blas Islands? San Blas?"

The girl nodded shyly and shifted her feet. "Aligandí," she said quietly.

"Aligandí, yes. Very pretty . . . so I have heard," Eveline replied. "I haven't had a chance to get out and travel as of late and there are so many excursions one simply must take in. I would sincerely love to take the launch to Portobelo . . . it's near the San Blas so I am told . . ." She checked her exhuberance as the maid stared quizically at her. Eveline blushed and turned the figurine slowly on the dresser. "You may go now," she said curtly. "Go." She waved the girl out of the room.

After the maid had withdrawn, Eveline sat in front of her dressing mirror, brushing non-existent hairs out of her face, applying liberal doses of lilies-of-the-valley perfume to her neck and wrists. But looking in the mirror she saw that layers of cornsilk powder, rouge, mascara, and lipstick could not mask the ancient anxieties of her heart. She heard a train, distant and mournful, approaching Gatun.

Will I look all right? she wondered, gazing at the figurine. Will I look too . . . too gauche? She smoothed her lipstick. It's been so long . . .

She rose and walked over to a window. Parting the curtains, she looked down into her garden, and beamed as her gaze fell upon the scraped and repainted lawn furniture, the gleaming Parian marble of statues recently uncovered, the orderly hedgerows and beds of hydrangeas and sunflowers, and the sullen murmur of red-wing grasshoppers and cocoanut beetles in the freshly trimmed grass. Near her husband's grave, a grizzled iguana basking in the final tropic sunlight looked indolently at Eveline and slid into the dark warm obscurity of the French Canal.

Eveline returned to her dressing mirror, picked up her lacquered paper fan, smoothed her lipstick, checked her hair. In the heat, the lipstick was like Titian wax. She patted her beaded forehead with a silken Venetian handkerchief spotted with embroidered strawberries. Satisfied finally with her preparations, she made her way down the carved oak staircase which led to her living room. There she would await the arrival of her guests in long forgotten luxury.

And there she would continue to wait. A vermiculate hour doddered by like a malarial invalid and still no one had arrived. Only the doleful aria of a Caribbean-bound liner, from across the far bank of the French Canal and Telefer's Island, beckoned. Eveline sipped her cold, blood-colored tea. The members of the orchestra whispered among themselves, frequently eyeing the anxious Eveline, while the young maids tittered and giggled in the kitchen.

Can't they forgive me? she thought. It's been years since D'Annunzio and I were found out. Haven't I suffered enough? Haven't I left the immortal parts of myself behind? Haven't I lost my career, my reputation, even my husband, as a result? Must I endure more? Must people have such long memories, to see in others that which they fear in themselves?

At nine o'clock she dismissed the hired help. In the tiered epergne, the cold hors d'oeuvres congealed in their aspic-and-butter sauces like glazed clay. The punch-bowl swan drifted listlessly, its neck drooping, while the dinner stood forgotten in the kitchen. Eveline picked a petit four from a snack tray, sat down in a sculpted, high-back chair near her reading table, and began to leaf feverishly through her scrapbooks. She stopped only to request that the orchestra play dirge music.

* * *

The orchestra had just concluded a Ravel pavane when Eveline closed the tooled-leather covers of her last scrapbook. She thanked the musicians for coming, regretting the fact that she did not have an opportunity to accompany them, and asked the ensemble to leave. In the distance she could hear the last train to Balboa groan as it pulled out of Mount Hope. It was almost midnight. The shrill and angry cry of a jaguar, sharp and short, from across the water was her only accompaniment, as she sang in a voice like dirty water poured over greasy silver spoons:

> "Was dir nur Augen sind in diesen Tagen,
> In kunftgen Nachten sind es dir nur Sterne."

What had once been a magnificent swan was now a smooth cake of ice wallowing in diluted fruit punch. The candles had burned down and coated the chandelier in layers of hardened wax. The smell of candlesmoke, wax, and fresh flowers pervaded the room like a church service. Although the orchestra had left, Eveline remained in her chair, unmoving.

Albert's death hasn't been forgotten after all, she thought. D'Annunzio hasn't been forgotten either. Why can't other people forget? I've forgotten. Memories are like coral reefs . . . beautiful at the surface yet sharp as scythes beneath the water.

Brushing away a single tear that eroded the cornsilk and rouge on her burning cheeks, Eveline Alabaster rose from her chair and trudged towards the oaken staircase. That trip to Portobelo . . . in a launch venturing outside the breakwater . . . I must take it soon, she thought. Every step seemed to echo in the silence of the darkened room, to remind her of her foolish vanity, as she made her way up the staircase--to her room, to her writing table, to her diary--one feeble step at a time, her withered right arm, muscles long ago atrophied, unsteadily grasping the balustrade.

Across the black water, another shrill cry, coupled with the chiming of crepuscular crickets and mosquitoes, all around the house, and the frogs that crept from the shadows, croaking.

It was her gardener, returning to collect his back wages, who found her dead. Eveline Alabaster was slumped over her writing desk, one hand on her diary, the other outstretched and clutching at the unmailed party invitations scattered on the worn carpet, wild surmise etched upon her face.