

Is American empire good or bad...or just an opportunity?

By James Brusseau

Decadence of the French Nietzsche
(academic philosophy)

*Isolated Experiences: Gilles Deleuze
and the Solitudes of Reversed Platonism*
(academic philosophy)

Empire of Humiliation

James Brusseau

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For family, near and scattered

All descriptions of places are accurate. All citations from historical documents and news media are accurate, though in summary form. Sources are provided at the book's end, along with internet addresses where available. Links, audio and visuals at www.empireofhumiliation.com.

Empire of Humiliation

Hernán Cortés set out for the Americas to conquer entire civilizations, thousands of villages and cities, millions of people, none of them pacifists. No one expected he'd return. Boarded on ten leaking ships, he went with four-hundred trudging swordmen and seventeen mounted (on donkey) nobles. The nobles were armed with spears.

Leaving aside the obvious pitfalls—unknown terrain, unpredictable heat, rain and snow, diseases, attacking serpents and beasts, no safe refuge—leaving all that out and simply *counting* the reality, the imperialists were outnumbered about 15,000 to 1.

It didn't matter. They enslaved everybody. That's 418 plunderers bringing whole civilizations to their knees.

How?

And it wasn't just people, Cortés took control of an idea too: global imperialism. "The sun never sets," Europeans began saying, "on the Spanish Empire."

They were right about that and later they were wrong, but the original question—how?—stayed and hasn't changed. It holds on because the answer's so alluring: it's *hard* to turn away from conspiracies, from acts and audacity that are enough to take the world.

Probably, you already know that.

If you don't, you might be reading the wrong book. If you do sense the attraction, then you're not at all alone. In the af-

termath of Cortés the capitals of Europe were consumed by his story. No one could understand it, though, no one saw how he reached the dominating conclusion he did. His documents, notes and letters were studied, his route and crude maps examined. When they revealed little, scholars were consulted, priests too, everyone.

No good explanation came. The conquest seemed not just impossible but incomprehensible, it was maddeningly untouchable.

Passing centuries offered no alleviation and by the time the Spanish empire blinked out, the question about the original strategies and tools of its rise was almost completely buried under heavy layers of discouragement.



Today, few study the first global imperialism in America. But the tired papers, pamphlets and disorganized books that were written about it back then, they still exist. In dusty sections of obsolete libraries in Valladolid and Seville you can trace the history of how the now forgotten empire struggled to understand its own origin.

Reading an old Spanish that only vaguely resembles today's version is of course necessary. And just getting access to the remote library wings where the most delicate and antique volumes are stored poses a problem. (Chocolates for distractible, elderly librarians will get you started.) What's important, though, is that the pages are there.

Their intellectual quality is sometimes...surprising. You might uncover a particularly deferential sixteenth-century essay, it objects to the Spanish Emperor's repeated announcement that the sun never sets on his domain. The objection's reasoning? The Emperor *must* be wrong because the earth is flat.

Other pages aren't so obviously dated.

They are largely unified. By a suspicion. It seems benign at first: the number 417—the count of those in Hernán Cortés'

company—doesn't matter. Had he led an entire disciplined army, or a crowd of brutes still smaller than those who actually followed, the end would've been the same. It would have because the conclusion was written *entirely* by his guile, his vehemence, his brilliance.

If that's right, then the lesson taught by the past is that empire's labors are not only accomplished by vibrant nations, they're also done by individuals. One towering figure alone may command the world's obedience.

That's obviously insane, though.

Who in their right mind would imagine a *single* conqueror taking the Americas? What forces could've been used, what shocking weapons? There're no apparent answers, which isn't surprising given that just asking the question calls down uncertainty about your mental condition.

There is however—and this is the important part—an implication. If possessing the New World fell on nothing more than a single commander, then anyone who understands *how* he did it has definitely passed the limits of sober thought. (The less delicate version: if the solution to the problem of how the New World got conquered is crazy, only crazy people are going to get the solution.)

Whichever, it's possible that no one knows how the imperialism happened for a good reason. You *don't want* to know. If the explanation's so tenuous, so unreasonable that just taking it seriously is deranged, then you're better off leaving it alone.

All orthodox thought about why the first worldwide empire never understood its own beginning reverses here. The standard idea is that probing eyes sought, but failed to see. Now it's the opposite, the reason no one recorded how the imperialism happened isn't that they didn't see, but that they *did*. They saw too clearly: the explanation would punish their reality, brutalize their thinking. The cost of understanding would be the coherence of their minds.

Whatever was originally seen, it's lost to the past now. But the suspicion remains. It comes with a statement and ends with a warning.

Suspicion. Empire may be accomplished by solitary individuals.

Statement. The work of the singular imperialist happens in a realm of thought and rules so contorted that witnessing them—just *seeing* them—overwhelms. Anyone in their right mind collapses before the vision.

Warning. Don't look.

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Doing the work of imperialism in Juárez, Mexico

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Men and prostitutes who drive off together don't look at each other. Easier for him: check the speedometer, the rearview mirror, a small adjustment to the steering wheel. It's not hard pretending that attention's somewhere else. But this driver wasn't faking. Twisting at his bow-tie, he really was absorbed, entirely devoted to preparing for a harrowing memory.

Next to him, her eyes darted. What she saw was good, very good because long experience constantly reminded her that a man's gentleness normally increases with his neatness.

From the start she'd liked it, from the moment the clean BMW came down a little too slowly to be just passing through. A nice car, promising money and (even better) a break from the scurvy regulars.

Then there's the way he'd talked, *that* was the real turn-on. Not the words' meaning, the language. English. She'd been hoping for one like him that night—all the girls and women hoped for one every night—a gringo. Probably from El Paso. That's where the license plates came from, anyway.

He *could've* just stayed on his side with the sloppy illegals. It costs more over there, true, but better to pay an extra ten than wait and wait in the car lines to cross the national border. Then wait again—much longer—to get back. It's suffocating, the trucks and cars packed in the eleven narrow lanes, you can't open your door wide enough to squeeze out if you have to. And just in front there's always some dented relic coughing its exhaust. By the time you finally cram through, your face is grease. You can scrape the slime off with your fingernails.

He'd accepted all the waiting, though. Revealing. Obviously it wasn't to save money so it must've been for the other reason: to avoid any embarrassing police entanglements. *God, if he was willing to pass through that stinking border mess to reach the Mexican side where cops don't bother with hookers, he must be somewhere near terrified of getting caught.*

So he was afraid. Which was even better news than the neat car because fearful men, she and her friends constantly reminded themselves, are vulnerable men. Men as opportunities.

He was a good one. Stolen glances caught shiny teeth, a nose never broken. Sideburns perfectly squared. Clean hands. Crisp shirt cuffs. If she was going to have to suck his feet she already knew he washed between all the toes every morning. Nothing grimy down there, nothing smelly. No leaking blisters, maybe no warts.

His height, weight, calendar years? Hard to be sure, but she saw right where he was in life: just far enough along to realize he wouldn't be getting it for free anymore from young things impressed by his stately—or was it fragile?—demeanor.

Traffic diminished, their ride together went on.

She *loved* telling men she was great with her hands. This is what she secretly meant, while one set of fingers provided a serious distraction, the other probed for a wallet and pinched out a few bills. She'd never been caught.

A couple extra tens wasn't what she wanted from *this* rich gringo, though. Much more.

Getting it started with his driver's license. Stiff plastic would be harder to steal than bills, obviously, but worth the stretch. If she could get away with it, she'd have a nice proof of their meeting. And also his real name and address. From those she'd get his telephone number. (Probably she'd dial it a few times to hear the wife's bubbly greeting, then hang up.)

Later—maybe a week, maybe a month—she'd get *him* on the

line. A short conversation, but long enough to remember each other, and then to aim the penetrating threat: *a visit*. Yes, she'd be coming across to meet the other woman in his life.

Given her particular connections and skills, she'd tell him, illegally crossing into America wouldn't be a problem. She'd start early one morning, jump the border and make it to his house, probably before lunch. A Tuesday, she'd warn, would be about right. He'd be at work, the kids in school. A good time to find the prissy mom alone. A perfect time to face her, appall her, shatter her.

The meeting was *so* easy to imagine:

The Mexican home-wrecker arrives on the doorstep. An awkward introduction, then she begins recounting the adulterous story. Her command of English is only sporadic, but the essentials get through. She names the street in Juárez where she was standing when the husband found her. She describes the car he drove. Looking straight at the cheated woman she calmly remembers his smooth clothes, his clean shoes. She confides how impressed she was by his fresh white underwear and adds something snide and personal about what she found inside.

The wife *tries* to tear her watering blue eyes away from the grimy, scabbed mouth. There'd be a mandatory denial, "My husband couldn't *possibly*..." But she knows it's true, she knows just like she unconsciously stretches her hand down between the legs of her Burberry pants and blocks her crotch.

Then the triumphant prostitute leans close to the horrified mother, almost touching before accusing, "It's *your* fault, you know..."

The wife shivers without understanding. Then, finally, she's grasped by the disgraceful meaning.

That's the way to treat an American bitch!

The glorious scene would never play out, though.

Only the threat of it would because the man who'd just

crossed the border was going to pay over and over and over for her silence about the quick twenty minutes of work she was about to do.

In Juárez, women who live that way—comfortably retired on the wages of shame—are called *Reinas Estafadoras*. Extortion Queens. She lolled the words in her mouth and fantasized about her new life. True, she'd probably need contributions from a few more good family-men, but this one provided a very respectable start.

The car stopped. A remote place.

"I am," the husband earnestly stated, turning to face her, his eyes finally meeting hers, "ready to compensate your services. As you now see." A short stack of fifties came out.

The money made them both feel better, more relaxed: they were doing business, nothing personal. She gave a jagged smile, "The *Señor* pay good."

"Well."

She stared, vacuous but attentive.

He slapped himself mentally: if there was *ever* a moment to forgive another's grammatical imperfections...

"¿Como?" she eventually managed.

"It is unimportant," he stuttered, then concentrated on fanning the money across his thigh.

Resisting the instinct to grope for the cash, she haltingly produced the short lines of English words she'd rehearsed so often, not so much as a way of preparing for this night but as a prayer for it to happen. "The place much the robbers. You put the money safe now. Pay after."

He folded the bills into his wallet and slid it into the left, rear pants pocket. She watched viperously.

Suddenly she was on him, a kind of rough, grasping attack.

He couldn't find *that* to be very exciting. But rather than explain how his personal taste ran toward creamy-skinned boys on the verge of adolescence, he squeezed away and pleaded

embarrassment, "I've never done this before..." A nice addition to the effect: he twisted and fussed with the slim wedding band he'd purchased at a pawnshop the week before.

"Me you make feel good," she insisted, lunging again, her hands straying and tugging.

He fended her off, forcefully this time.

"*Raro*," she hissed, fingering at the tear he'd opened across the shoulder of her pink blouse.

"What?"

"You let me."

"Yes," he sighed, "naturally."

What came next wasn't agreeable.

Later the important part, the application of an ornate wood and metal clenching device. Crafted by a zealot from Spain in the early sixteenth century, it worked perfectly today on the ends of her dirty, limp fingers. One after the other.

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How to hire corrupt police officers in Mexico

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A few more desolate women would need to be encountered, their defenseless fingers used to receive the imprint of his metal device. It got no easier. Actually he found the work harder each time because he wasn't a cruel man. Determined, yes, but not callous. So he was relieved when it was all done. His project could move on.

The next stage began with a question. How do you corrupt a small group of Mexican police officers? What do you *say*? While he was blessed with a unique dinner-table wit and boundless vocabulary, when it came to asking policemen to swing the other way, it was, "Ummm..."

Even the minor details confounded. What *clothes* do you wear to a corruption event? He pulled absently at his bow-tie.

Probably there should be money, but how much? Or, maybe some other sweetener? Immigration papers for the U.S? He *could* arrange for them. No, a quick decision there: offering too much.

Time for a break. An emery board was applied to his nails. The fit of a suit just back from the hotel's tailor got tested. Mixed approval, one cuff had been sewn *slightly* irregularly and would need to be redone. He called for the concierge.

Then time for his weekly hair trim and tinting. Normally the woman came up, but to get out of his room for a while he descended to the lobby salon.

Of course he brought his own reading material. What kind of person wouldn't?

For this afternoon he selected a homemade accumulation of Mexican newspaper articles. Each was snipped to preserve straight lines and correct right angles. Then the columns were pasted into a leather-bound journal. Slowly, his editing and assembling work had become a geometric art form, finely exhibiting rectitude and dedication.

"*Admirable*," he whispered, fingering it. Then he opened, very pleased that Guadalupe—an aged widow who'd dedicated her life to one of the nobler pursuits, perfecting hair—couldn't receive him immediately.

Some clippings were short, like a note about the influential politician Carlos Hank González who continually proclaims, *Un político pobre es un pobre político* (A politician who's poor is a poor politician). Given that sentence as a governing principle, it's no surprise that Transparency International consistently ranks Mexico as nearly the world's most corrupt nation.

But rankings are empty abstractions, energy comes from real events. One of the *most* invigorating had been scissored from the nation's largest circulation daily, the appropriately titled *El Universal*. He re-read it constantly.

The article's hero: a young and exuberantly idealistic, if that's the right word, Mayor.

Villains: dirty traffic cops continually extorting pesos from motorists who commit even the smallest infraction.

The story: instead of acting like any other elected official and demanding his cut, the Mayor fights the scourge. But since he knows that firing the crooked police would just lead to their replacement by different crooked police, he goes for the deepest roots. What fundamentally *allows* the corruption is the existence of laws. So...the Mayor got rid of them.

Since there were no more traffic rules to break, he reasoned, the threat of an expensive ticket would halt, leaving the cops without leverage and so cure their extortion habit. The Mayor was right.

"Astonishing maneuver!" the reading man exclaimed, grasping at his bow-tie and reveling in the triumph of pure logic over all common sense. He never tired of studying it.

Every line of the newspaper story excites, but the choicest ones describe the results of the Mayor's unique strategy:

Drivers stomp their accelerators while cheerfully cursing shift officer Gutiérrez. He laments, "You see, everyone laughs at us."

This absence of respect for the uniform explains a scene:

A teenager at the wheel of a dented van revs his mufflerless engine. His heated, acne-scarred face jerks to his radio's blaring. Yelping, he slams his horn, flips his middle finger at a policeman and blows the red light. "It just felt cool," he later related.

Finally, for pedestrians forced to cross through the screeching-vehicle zone, they get maimed and killed. One hundred and eighty-seven were hit during the first two months of Zero Tolerance, Mexican style.

"Those are just the reported accidents, there're actually many more," according to the dejected Chief Heras.

On that note the article ended.

The man closed his journal and his eyes, allowing thought to flow. Soon this slipped into his mind: "Reality *is* stranger than fiction."

The infection of his brain by a cliché would normally have caused hyperventilating, but he was saved by a realization. There's *no need* to figure out how to corrupt the local police. It couldn't be any clearer, they're all already soiled. The *right* question is slightly different. Where do you go to hire the dirtiest?

Anyone who's spent a night in Juárez knows the answer.

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Laura's Bar and the adjacent brothel, *Departamentos Blancos*, infamously centers the four rings of vice dominating Ciudad Juárez: drugs, illegal border crossing, hetero sex, homo sex.

As for the vices' costs, he had no idea about the drugs, and no interest. He considered them detestable.

Border crossing? Free for him.

He gleaned that about forty dollars got a girl and a room. Sixty for two girls. Women were cheaper. Transvestites cheaper still.

Men could be had for a drink. Young men for a drink and a twenty. There wasn't much interest in gawky teenagers. Boys were expensive. They cost 125 dollars for oral, 175 for a rub between the thighs. *Brief entry with* protection—as supervised by a third party—cost 600. A long evening without supervision? 2,250 U.S. dollars.

Prices can be negotiated down a bit on most weeknights.

Touring the oily place in his pressed suit, suspenders, bow-tie (no one would dare rob a man so obviously asking to be robbed), he zeroed in on a particular character, both unwashed and unbalanced. Unbalanced physically, his right leg was short. He limped around matching people up, shepherding first-timers, transferring boxes of empty beer bottles to the backroom and constantly bellowing about how much he hated "Whorez."

Harsh with the other workers, friendly with customers, the unbalanced guy showed deference only once.

As that weighty man seemed to defer to no one, he was selected.

People in the bar watched as the odd fellow in the suit calmly approached and engaged the boss. No attempt was made to hide the handing over of four, fifty-dollar bills. A phone number scribbled onto a cloth handkerchief followed, and then words requesting police officers "willing to work *privately*."

"Who wants 'em," said (not asked) the pudgy boss.

Thinking quickly, one answer that seemed *perfectly* appropriate to the stiff attire he'd donned that morning and nearly every morning since his early twenties was "Archer." A classic.

But wait, did he really want people seeing him and thinking... bows and arrows?

The fat guy waiting for his answer began nibbling on the corner of one of the filthy bills. Disgusting sight. God knows where the paper had been, who'd touched it, with what.

If not "Archer," then?

Horribly, the ugly boss started using the bills to pick *gunk* from the space between his front teeth. In the face of such repugnancy, no one could *possibly* invent a creative name, or even an acceptable one. Well, at least there hadn't been any belching yet.

Probably that and worse was on the way, though, so a response was needed. Only an embarrassing stuttering came.

Now the crude boss frowned. He was accustomed to foreigners inventing names for themselves, but usually it didn't take so long. After coughing and spitting a gob on the floor he prompted, "Smith, Roberts, *Rodriguez*?"

Befuddlement.

"Your *name*."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes, Name," came the stammering. "My name *is* Name."

"You wanna be called Name."

"That is...my name."

"Clever." The repellent man pocketed the money and left.

The newly christened Name stood bewildered. It seemed impossible, but it was undeniable. It was *true*. He'd just been humiliated by a pimp. That crude entrepreneur of bestial vices actually imagined himself to be *superior*.

Deep inside, Name allowed himself the pleasure of the irony.

That went on for a while. Until he noticed people in the bar staring. They were probably just wondering where he purchased his suits, though.

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The expected telephone call came hours later. Short conversation, the man now called Name ordered a meeting.

The place was a junky basement apartment. Rented for cash and without questions, it came with a ratty bed, a long bench, several chairs and a lot of noise from the industrial zone just behind. A perfect spot to receive the eight uniformed men who arrived.

No doubt they *could've* been ringers, friends or maybe cousins of the guy who'd received the seed money. But Name observed they all shuffled in wearing identically cheap black shoes, recently shined. Their blue shirts were tired, but spotless and ironed. They had scrawny mustaches and left breast pockets stuffed with papers and a worthless pen. Conclusion, they belonged to a single pack resembling Mexican cops too perfectly to be anything else.

The American held two levers of influence: money and, as he judged from the way they narrowed eyes at his dapper presence, envy. Maybe, he thought, it was envy for all his money. Probably something else, though. But either way, since envy is a form of obedience, he already had them under significant control.

Significant only needed transforming to complete.

The cops were directed to the bench and chairs circling the bed he'd dragged to the main room's center. Ponderously slowly, Name—*Mister* Name—marched around the group formally setting a fifty-dollar bill in front of each man. Then he spoke. It was severely accented Spanish, but his educated words and grammatical perfection combined into an unusual eloquence. *Me gustaría...* "I would like to employ each of you for activities over the course of the following week. Perhaps longer."

Expressionless faces.

"You will be paid separately for each task. If you prefer not to participate you may take the money before you and leave."

No one did.

Methodically, he set another fifty in front of each cop. "You may leave if you like." One or two glances between them.

Repetition with the money.

After displaying a small, wood and iron device, he said, "You will be asked to employ this."

They showed no sign of understanding what it was.

Money repeat.

By the time he got around to explaining that he'd need kidnapping and worse from them, he'd picked up two patterns. First, the only policeman who'd speak was the oldest and, judging from his sleeve insignias, the highest ranking. He had a peaceful countenance somewhat contaminated by yellowed teeth.

Name also caught that the speaker never opened his mouth without first meeting the eyes of the man seated directly across.

That officer, the one granting permission with silence, kept cool as Name circled the group and stopped beside him. "You will be *able*," Name looked down and asked, "to use your pistols?" Slowly placing a hand on the quiet man's shoulder, Name reached down and gently unholstered his weapon. When the now disarmed policeman didn't blink or look around for guidance from anyone else, Name knew he'd chosen correctly.

Just to be sure, he dramatically held the gun out, pointing it around the table. He repeated his question. Nervousness circulated, but contained by their leader's stoical presence everyone held their ground.

Satisfied, the pistol was respectfully replaced. Another circle of money distribution.

Arriving again beside the leader, Name formally reached for the man's gun, deferentially withdrew it from the holster and, as though offering a cup of tea, aimed and pulled the trigger.

Light and instant blackout.

Name regained his senses, but only enough to realize he was dazed and flat on the floor.

He couldn't have been out for more than an instant, though. Above, the chief policeman he'd targeted was still in his chair, slumping. Then in an injured, dying rage he slapped at his neck, at the pouring spot, Name saw, where the bullet had torn through.

Beside them a convulsive, younger cop struggled to his feet. A cleft palate rendered his face expressionless, but total confusion radiated from arms and hands as he fumbled with his revolver.

Eventually he pointed the shaking thing.

He was threatening Name. Or, maybe just waiting for his hands to steady before firing.

"I have more," Name gasped from the floor, gesturing at the fifty-dollar bills scattered around. "Not here, but *much* more."

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Later, when Name wrote the episode into his journal he almost left out the part about his inexperienced use of the firearm. His devotion to truth, though—the idea that truth (in the right hands) was good no matter what—forced him to recount what happened.

He'd held the pistol gracefully, almost daintily, but way too limply. So when he pulled the trigger, the violent flash and piercing noise joined the recoil and altogether shot the gun up and smack into his weak chin.

He went down.

He recovered quickly.

And the reminder he spoke—that *he* was the man with the money—that had worked perfectly. No one stopped him as he grabbed at the pistol on the floor, propped it toward the bleeding man and fired, better this time.

The report concluded with a critical detail. When they filed

out, the remaining police all referred to him as *Patrón*. “Patron” is the more or less correct English translation. It doesn’t fully capture the subservience, though.

•

Not long after, Name was struck by what he heralded as...*an insight*.

It’s wrong to label these police immoral because they’re corrupt. It’s just that for them right and wrong isn’t about morality. It’s economics: the law, an infraction, enforcement and verdicts, all that may be bought and sold no differently and no more scandalously than beauty (plastic surgery), or the desire for a certain tequila (advertising). Justice south of the Rio Grande, in other words, isn’t a virtue, it’s a product.

“Interesting!” spurted Name as a way of congratulating himself for his perceptiveness. Then he set about recording his idea with lavish and very long sentences.

●
Marina, Anderson
●

Since everyone on the avenue was trapped and wedged by the same halting traffic, it wasn't clear that the police actually meant to stop the long car they'd veered to cut off. Two officers slamming out, guns waving, made it clear.

No one watching doubted their purpose. Nearly all kidnappings in Mexico are executed by policemen, especially on Fridays when their piddling salaries feel tight. The cover of darkness is unnecessary. (If you're a witness, who're you going to call?) It's also true that there's usually little advance planning as was graphically illustrated in March 1995 when a pair of officers in the capital spotted a luxury car and soon found themselves unwittingly abducting the *President's* eldest son. (Unwisely, the President trumpeted the episode during the following election cycle as proof that he could relate to his citizens' problems.)

This time the intervention had been meticulously planned.

Not that it mattered to the chauffeur who'd spent a generous sum of his employer's money on an evasive driving class. At the first sight of a pistol he got his hands up and mouth screaming. *Llévala! Llévala!* Take her, take her.

The young woman in back cursed.

The policeman's first command surprised. "You first." He meant the driver.

Too late for regrets, and with a gun pressed against his cowardly ribs he got trundled into a white van.

Next came a stark dilemma for the woman alone in the car's

back seat. The decision's not at all uncommon in a country where kidnapping is just another career choice: *Risk everything making a break now, or surrender and pay the costs of getting out later.*

The costs of getting out later, they go beyond ransom. There's also the crude down-payment. To show they're serious, kidnappers usually cut a knuckle of finger or a chunk of ear from their victim and have it delivered along with the demand for money.

That's one of the unsettling aspects of living in Mexico, at least inside wealthy circles. At cocktail parties and dinners you're tempted to accumulate your own abduction statistics: count the women missing a slice of earlobe, the men going without half a pinkie. The disfigurement has even become a badge of honor, an announcement that *I'm* worth taking.

One, two, three seconds flashed past the woman sitting alone in the car while her assailants dealt with the pathetic chauffeur.

What would you do?

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In its June 17, 2004 issue, *The Economist* reported there were 3000 kidnappings in Mexico during the preceding twelve months. Subsequent years haven't diminished the risk.

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Before consciously making any decision her body was acting; she dove for the front seat, struggling to swing a foot onto the gas pedal. She got it there then nearly stomped through the floorboard. The engine roared.

The car was in park.

A hand jerked at the shift and she was squealing—both the tires and her—backward. How far she got or what got hit along the way, she couldn't say, but when the thudding stopped she was out and staggering through traffic. Since she'd always considered intense physical activity barbaric, her

stumbling running didn't reflect the obstacles she avoided so much as simple inexperience.

Behind, her pursuers beat a quick retreat seeing how she'd managed to back into a bus and its foreign tourists—hungry for the authentic Mexico they'd been warned about so severely—were already flashing pictures. None of the officers gave a second thought to leaving one of their own wreathing on the pavement. More money for those who remained.

The downed cop had a cleft palate and two very distinct last visions: silver rings on a toe belonging to the frantic woman fleeing in one direction, and his partners packing into the van and squad car to go the other way.

•

Without looking back the woman pushed her jagged run another few blocks down the sidewalk, sidestepping people and tripping here and there over thick cracks in the pavement.

She never actually fell, though, and even seemed to be finding a rhythm for her rangy, swinging limbs when she caught sight of her unlikely sanctuary. One stop past the clutter of an informal (meaning stolen) auto-parts dealer, there came an essential Juárez spot. Blinking lights surrounding gaudy metallic doors, it was the standard hourly rate—with a discount for the whole night—hotel.

Slamming into the lobby she stopped hard, straightened. Instinctively she let her blouse and skirt find their natural set across her body. They did, nicely, very well cut. Sufficiently gathered, she looked the place over.

The half-dozen men lounging returned the effort, until she stared them down.

The reception desk had protective metal bars and an attendant on the other side. She went there, made a demand.

The attendant's infirm response suited his natural suspicion: the shaking woman was a wife in the process of getting cuckolded, and she was about to go up there and put a noisy and

uncomfortable (or worse) end to it. He repeated, with slightly more insistence, "I'm *not allowed* to give out our guests' room numbers."

"Where—is—his—room." Her words hit. The attempted kidnapping and jerky escape had taken her breath and tranquility, but not everything. She still projected authority. Unalterably she radiated it, as did anyone in Mexico with her sleek length (face, legs, every part), olive white skin, blue-green eyes. Her blood and genes appeared very Spanish, which means naturally powerful, even royal.

Not occasionally royal, not like some princess living in Europe who's no different from her subjects until adorned with symbolic jewelry and surrounded by solicitous attendants, this woman was authentic. You could *see* it. Done up one way or another or not at all, she remained above the squat, dark locals surrounding her. Small and brown as they are, it's easy to see in them today what the first Europeans saw five centuries ago when they first came to the new and barbaric world.

Because the descendants of those Europeans held true to their heritage by coupling (almost) exclusively among themselves, the colors and shapes of the natives' bodies haven't changed, not at all. And their social station, that hasn't moved either. How could it? It's nearly impossible as long as these others remain among them, the ones with a history so obviously distinct, so indisputably tracing to a more cultivated, civilized society.

The woman standing rattled and alone in the entrance of the grimy hotel didn't *believe* in the superiority, of course. The men eyeing her didn't either. Almost no one in Mexico believes power, capability, nobility and importance are distributed in accordance with the body's length, the skin's tone, the colors of the eyes and hair. The certainty goes deeper than any belief. It's been that way for so many centuries that the hierarchy is a kind of logic, a way of understanding the world as opposed to an understanding of the world.

So the peon behind the desk averted his face slightly—just like his distant forebears learned they must do in the presence of a European—and humbly checked his book. Then she was up there, rapping on the door of a protector.



Anderson wasn't a cautious protector; in the middle of a severely dangerous city he opened the door without asking who was knocking. Not a cautious observer, either: the woman's disheveled hair and frantic eyes went right past him. It'd be wrong to call him rash and insensitive, though. More like trusting and oblivious.

Definitely he was surprised to see her. She'd just dropped him off, only a few minutes before, in front of the cheap hotel. Then she'd briskly gone on toward her own more...dignified lodgings.

Her stern face when she'd left him on the curb bluntly stated what she thought about his place. That, and the way she'd refused to look out the car window and see the hotel a second time. And also the crisp tone in her "You're welcome" after he'd said "Thanks for the lift." All of it formed a clear message: she had absolutely *no* interest in getting any closer to the crappy building where he was passing his nights.

Anderson couldn't blame her, he didn't want to be there either.

Still, as he'd stepped onto the sidewalk it *had* occurred to him to invite her into the lobby café, no denying that. A quick coffee, nothing more. That'd be a warmer way of showing gratitude for the trip which had been enjoyable though brief. It was the first time he'd been driven by a chauffeur.

Unfortunately the hotel wasn't just repugnant, but so aggressively despicable that inviting her in seemed to defeat the purpose. A place like that—a prominent condom machine, the contrived screams of women echoing along with men's grunts—asking someone to come inside could easily be taken

as an insult. It probably should be. So he'd just repeated the thanks as sincerely as possible and that was it.

Now she was back. And as he began perceiving from her eyes and posture, somewhat distressed about the fact. Who could blame her? Behind, a guy hurried past, pants barely on.

Possibly, it struck Anderson, she'd returned to invite him for coffee at *her* hotel. Pleasant thought. Yes, that had to be it; she'd taken pity on him. He smiled warmly, both at her and the prospect of going elsewhere for a while.

She burst past huffing a chaotic mix of Spanish and English, then locked herself in the bathroom.

Now what? No idea. Anderson remained standing at the door. Then he stuck his head out to check up and down the hallway. Nobody there. He pulled back in, closed the door and took a few turns around the compact room before...sitting on his bed.

After a moment he firmed up his posture and began crossing legs one way and the other.

There was a yellow sheet on the bedstand: the schedule for the conference that had brought him and the woman in his bathroom to Juárez. He'd been invited to make a short presentation. She'd taken the trip from her home in Mexico City just because she was interested in hearing what got said, and because she had the time and the money to more or less pursue her interests.

Though the event was finished except for tomorrow morning's concluding address, Anderson took the sheet and studied it.

From the bathroom the sound of heaving began, then flushing.

Intensely, he *scrutinized* lines of the conference schedule.

Her cell phone beeped futilely.

Maybe, Anderson thought, it'd be polite to turn on the television and raise the volume, give her some privacy of sound

and not just sight. Then again, when she finally came out it might appear as though he wasn't taking her predicament—whatever it was—seriously.

He supposed it was food poisoning. Happens regularly in Mexico, you feel fine for about five hours after eating, then it comes like a tidal wave. From the stomach's first clutching you've got about two minutes until your body totally empties. That's one of the reasons strolls in the more urban parts of the country are seldom enjoyable; sooner or later you always come across someone down on the sidewalk, discharging in every direction.

While Anderson fiddled with the TV remote and finally decided just to leave it off, noises indicated her move from the toilet to the sink.

Back to the toilet.

The sink.

Silence. That continued for a merciful while.

Her cell phone sounded again and she exited abruptly, appearing only moderately haggard. It was almost stunning, actually. "Can you answer this for me?" she said, "I'm not sure I'm up to it."

Difficult to say no.

The voice on the other end asked, "Marina? I know where you are."

He passed the words on.

They staggered. "*Hang up*," she ordered. Then a deep breath and firm, no longer wild speech, "Hang up. They tried to kidnap me. Police."

Anderson had been living in Mexico only a few months, but long enough to take that last piece of information almost unfazed. He wasn't sure how to react, though.

Time inched forward as Marina struggled, attempting to comprehend reality so she could maneuver within it instead of madly trying to escape it. Gradually, her breathing retreated,

which Anderson could hear because they were standing there, not saying anything.

A couple strolled down the hall outside, bickering about money.

Marina went to check that the door was locked, then returned unsteadily toward the bed. She sat.

After an awkward moment, he did too. Should he extend a comforting hand? Where? Her knee? Her back? The deciding went on through a long and stretching silence that comforted, that became almost peaceful.

Blaring mechanical ringing from the ancient room telephone. Startlingly loud, they convulsed together on the bed and both nearly fell off.

Marina recovered first; she glared at the ugly machine.

The persecuting noise *refused* to stop.

Marina held in her place. Her back arched, though.

The rings multiplied, came louder and she stiffened. Then her wavering began. Next, shaking. That didn't last: the composure she'd recovered so patiently blew up in an outburst, "*They're still after me!*"

Anderson watched her shoot around the tiny room apparently searching for intruders; finding none she squeezed fiercely at the bed covers, then rose up. Arms dropped straight down to her side. Eyes froze ahead. Her posture was perfect.

The telephone insisted.

A guttural screech cracked everything and she flung herself through the door, somewhat chaotically as it was locked and resisted her attempts to open.

By the time Anderson determined the call was innocent, the sound of her panicked feet no longer reached his ears. He considered pursuit but thought: a man chasing her down probably isn't exactly what she needs right now.

On the other hand, she'd come to him for support, and given that they hardly knew each other she probably had nowhere

else to go. So, even though he might reawaken the experience of threatening abductors, he *should*, he finally and sturdily concluded, pursue her.

It was way too late by then, though.

•

The telephone call that sent Marina flying came from a room down the hall. Far from being a ruthless kidnapper, it turned out the guy had traveled to Ciudad Juárez for the same conference as Anderson and Marina. And, since his financial wellbeing matched Anderson's, it wasn't surprising that he too was staying at the cheapest spot you could find within (long) walking distance of the dilapidated Juárez conference center.

By chance he'd caught sight of Marina's disheveled arrival. No one could blame him for phoning, especially since, as he put it, "You could call me...*her friend*."

Anderson wasn't sure that that meant, but he suggested they meet in the lobby where they could talk, then take some action.

They met. There wasn't much to talk about, though. Less to do.

Going to the police was out.

None of the men in the lobby saw anything but this tall woman coming in quickly, and leaving the same way.

Anderson hit on the idea of calling around to local hotels. No need to check any but the high-end places. No report of her presence.

Meanwhile Marina's friend lent vague attention, then drifted off entirely. He did maintain a steady interest in tequila. A strong interest.

"You don't appear," Anderson eventually observed, "I'm not sure exactly how, umm, how to put this, but you don't seem quite as *concerned* as you might be. Given what we know. And given that you are...*her friend*."

The scruffy man waved awkwardly for another drink (for

him, not for Anderson). The waitress pretended not to see. After she finally gave in, the guy told Anderson, "Marina, well, *she'll* take care of herself, count on it. You know, somehow or another she always gets what's going on, and she *always* lands on her feet. You can trust me, count...on...it. She's a fast one. I'm figuring she'll be alright."

Anderson beat down the bad impulse to say, "I'll definitely count on it," and just nodded.

When the drink for Marina's friend arrived he spilled it, along with some of what he knew about her. Since he was a furry guy, Anderson was reminded of a dog marking territory.

Marina had no brothers or sisters.

Her father: American by birth and education. A striking man, apparently, in a way that might be considered handsome. Something of a scoundrel too, though details weren't forthcoming. "Marina was 17 when he died," the story went. "I knew her back then, you know. We were just young...." The memories continued in predictable directions.

Mother. Significantly wealthy and Spanish. Her political views gyrated wildly, but always remained extreme. "Pure," Anderson was told, was the word she normally used to describe her beliefs. She lost her restraint for peyote several years after her husband's death, then her sanity. "Not at all rare, not...at...all. The dose, you know, it's *really* hard to control in the dry-season, at least if it's a really dry dry-season. Some of the older bulbs, they shrivel, they get almost tiny. You stick three or four of those nasties in your mouth and *wham!*" Marina's friend slam-clapped his hands. Then he nearly slipped off his chair. Balance recovered, he offered, "Ahh, maybe you'd like to try it sometime, yeah? It just happens, actually, that I got a bag-a-bulbs right here. Up in my room, I mean. I'm not selling or anything, you know, but the fields, they're right near here and a guy I know, he just asked me to bring some back. So...that's why they're up there."

Eager to steer away from that unexpected invitation, Anderson said, “Well, right now what I’m *mainly* concerned about are these police Marina says were after her. And where she’s at, and if she’s alright...”

Truly, he was concerned, which says something about Anderson but more about Marina. Without seeming frail or weak—without seeming helpless—she made you want to protect her. At least if you were a man, some women had a different reaction.

On the other hand, Marina’s old friend, he didn’t seem too moved.

No doubt about Anderson, though: he was intense, earnestly focused on exactly what he should do, what he *could* do.

Nothing came.

After twenty minutes of contagious silence (and seeing tequilas being delivered with eye-opening frequency), it didn’t seem totally inappropriate to return to the room. “Maybe,” Anderson explained, “she’s trying to call there.”

The friend grabbed him—not forcefully—by the shirtsleeve, “I was wonnering, uhh, if I can put your room on bill.”

“I’m sorry?” Anderson didn’t understand.

“Your name, I’m saying. On the bill.” He was slurring. “I mean you *did* invibe me here, down here to come be with you. That’s why I’m here.”

“That’s...not false,” Anderson managed to answer.

•
The burning
•

Name's work with the women of Juárez had been done. Next, the kidnapping in the street had occurred. Execution so far had been *very* imperfect, but still good enough to get the project's next phase underway.

It was an irritating phase.

One of the bad parts: since he couldn't wear his normal clothes and bow-tie, Name had *nothing* to twist between his fingers, no way to occupy his hands. What was he supposed to *do* with them?

The truth is, he'd never felt comfortable with the fingered things, they interfered with his preferred self-conception as a pure strategist. During lighter moments Name even enjoyed musing that in a sense he existed as only a brain in a vat, squeezing the world with unadulterated intelligence.

"El Meester (the Spanish pronunciation of Mister) say go to-day?"

Name looked down at the humble, dirty man asking the question and sincerely hoped so, hoped they'd be able to go, go and get the whole infernal thing over with. Name simply *couldn't* take much more of the silly outfit he was being forced to wear. In fact, simply pulling on a pair of jeans for the first time since adolescence had nearly finished him. He'd persisted though, adding a three-day beard, a checkered shirt and baseball hat. It goes without saying that twisting the cap backwards on his head, like donning cowboy boots, was out of the question.

Even without those last details, though, any observer would have to admit that he'd more or less managed to adopt the customs and look of a *pollero*.

Literally, the word means "chicken shepherd," but just south of the border everyone knows it's someone selling frontier-crossing services. For a fee—surprisingly large, around two thousand dollars—*polleros* promise to get their clients into the U.S. and then onward to an interior city.

The reason it's so expensive isn't that slipping past U.S. border patrol agents requires some great expertise; they're too few to cause much trouble. The real money goes to paying off roving gangs of drug smugglers who supplement their narcotics income by charging illegals for crossing through the territory they control.

Obviously the price tag is way too high for most aspiring migrants, so they typically agree to pay off their debt with labor. *Polleros*, who are usually Mexican but occasionally American, make the necessary arrangements with companies on the U.S. side: normally they're meatpacking plants, construction outfits, mines, that sort of manual-laboring operation. The workers get shepherded across, and after two or three (or more) months in a U.S. sweatshop, they're freed to pursue their American dream.

There wouldn't be *too much* sweat, though, Name had promised from ear to ear along the dusty streets of Reynosa, just across the river from McAllen, Texas. For only *seven short weeks* of work in a clothing warehouse near Houston, he'd get a small group *al otro lado*. And after the sewing job was done? They'd get a little cash and a one-way Greyhound ticket going anywhere.

No trouble finding takers. Flimsy, dorm-style hotels dominate most frontier towns; they overflow with bedbugs and workers praying for an offer like the one Name was making.

So Name had his herd of hopeful illegals assembled.

Now he was waiting for the right moment to start them north. They were, he'd learned, a patient group, waiting without complaining. And careful too. They didn't want to get left behind. So every morning, and then every afternoon, one of them tracked him down and asked, "El Meester say go today?"

On a Thursday the weather report, along with the sun threatening his pale skin, told Name the moment had come to say yes.

•

Back home in Mexico City, Anderson used the telephone number he'd gotten from Marina's freeloading friend to call her house, see if everything was alright, ask if there was anything he could do. The placid, deferential voice answering told him she was "in residence" but "couldn't be disturbed."

Two days later Anderson tried again. Same response, but he left his own number this time.

Since it was always possible that she hadn't gotten the message, a week later he gave it another try. The man on the telephone's other end recognized Anderson's voice and, without being asked, assured him that Marina had *received* his messages. He repeated the word "received."

So that was that.

Alright, he made *one* more try. Expected result.

Which made it surprising when, about two weeks later, the deferential guy called back. The *Señor*— Anderson was told— could "pay a visit."

When should he come?

No answer provided.

Anderson managed to hold out all that day, through the night, and halfway into the next morning before going.

He arrived figuring Marina would bring up the apparently foiled kidnapping, and describe everything that happened. She wanted to talk about her house first, though. "The yield," she said, catching his reaction to the high-walled residence, "of

predator economics.” She seemed to like the sound of that word. “Low money cost,” she explained, “as long as you’ve got high experience.”

The experience—the years Marina’s family had lived in Mexico—produced a valuable lesson. It was, Anderson realized, a legitimate get-rich-easy scheme.

Anyone can do it.

Start with Mexico’s seasonal boom and bust economy. After barely emerging from yet another dreadful depression, the Mexican president who happens to be in office declares that the past’s lessons of economic responsibility have finally been learned, and full membership in the league of developed nations is only a *sexenio* (six years) away.

A few basic, technical modernizations are implemented. National accounting standards, for example, are adjusted to slightly increase transparency and better reveal the nation’s financial health.

The changes *modestly* increase confidence in the government’s maturity and the nation’s economic future. Reflecting that, the Volkswagen company sends some money to enlarge a manufacturing plant just outside the city of Puebla.

Seeing the barely perceptible inflow on their arbitrage screens in Chicago and London, some institutional financiers in charge of speculative accounts decide to buy a slice of risk: small blocks of pesos get purchased and banked, maybe some Mexican blue-chip stock.

The International Monetary Fund—after several members report hearing rumors of “investor confidence”—issues a statement that’s ambiguous but not entirely discouraging. That sparks some more cautious investing.

Down in Mexico the arriving money is spent, a few people get hired, new wages dribble back into the economy.

Financial specialists start paying closer attention.

Next, some young, usually unmarried executives from the

U.S. are sent across the Rio Grande. Their task: oversee an expansion opportunity in this nation that people are now calling “perky.” Each is assigned to open a small office. Just walking down the main streets you notice a new FedEx reception center, a fresh sign announcing a software consultancy, a shiny McDonalds.

These snappy execs don’t know much Spanish or anyone else in their new country, so they spend a lot of time telephoning friends back home. Not wanting to feel like losers because they couldn’t land a job in L.A. or some other happening American city, they invariably send excited word back that Mexico is *up and coming!*

The friends back in the States whisper the news to *their* friends because it feels good to be the first to know, to be an insider. And also to be cosmopolitan (without actually having to go anywhere).

So now a few common investors in the U.S. are asking their stockbrokers about Latin American mutual funds and similar things. According to the specialists who make the determinations, these investments are no longer “extremely speculative,” they’re “high risk.”

Europeans stationed in the U.S. hang around water coolers, and they too have phones and friends back home.

The Mexican peso gains some value because every time an American or a European wants to invest down there, they’ve got to first sell their dollars and euros to buy pesos. Result: investors are seeing profits from their acquisitions in Mexico rise a bit and, *at the same time*, the peso’s value is increasing, heightening profits still further.

Articles begin appearing in *Business Week* magazine and the *New York Times*. The population of those “in the know” increases exponentially, and many hurry to send their money south of the border where companies pop up to receive it.

This isn’t high risk anymore, it’s medium, acceptable risk.

But it's still producing great, high risk returns because of the international multiplier effect: while the value of investments increases, the currency is going up too. So there's a nice gain on the gains.

Before long, *everyone* knows someone who knows someone who's heard about the forklift operator making a killing with international trades during his lunch breaks. Which attracts still more money. And why not? Investing in Mexico is a Sure Thing.

Until someone notices that the government has been drastically overestimating revenue from the state petroleum company. Or, a populist yahoo starts getting traction in presidential opinion polls (the recent version was a sap named López Obrador). Or something else.

It's impossible to say beforehand exactly what the signal will be, but for people *really* in the know, for people who live in Mexico and understand something about the country, they'll sure recognize it when they see it.

And they'll know what it means: *buy dollars now, as fast and furious as you can.*

On the foreign currency exchange market in Chicago, the wheel that had been spinning so virtuously (the elevating peso drawing more investment which elevates the peso still further) wavers and threatens to flip viciously.

It's true that the weekend investors are still buying into "Developing Nation" funds and similar boondoggles, but led by wealthy locals the more serious international traders are putting their Mexican holdings up for sale.

It's not so easy to find takers.

They drop their asking price.

Which draws more sellers into the market.

Those who *do* manage to unload their liabilities whip their money out of the country which undercuts the peso and now the selling gets frantic.

Pretty soon the government tries to intervene, but that just makes matters worse because even the forklift operator begins figuring out that *something* must be really wrong.

You see where all this is going.

In 1994 in Mexico it took about two months for the retreat to run to exhaustion. A nation on the cusp of joining the First World saw its currency—in a certain economic sense the net worth of the entire country—lose *two-thirds* of its value.

And before that the same reversal in 1982 and before that in 1976....

Now, what's important about all this is that if you've seen it happening a few times, then you know what to do.

During the cycle's ascent, buy pesos. Keep buying—even on margin—until the critical moment. The critical moment defined: it seems absolutely undeniably certain that *this time* it's *for real*. Mexico WILL become a wealthy nation.

How will you recognize this moment? Just review the unvarying chronology. Stories about "The Mexican Miracle" and similar absurdities begin appearing in American newspapers and on CNN investment television shows (which is the real kiss of death).

When *those* people start talking up the situation south of the border, *get out*. Don't hesitate. It's better too early than too late. Buy dollars. And wait.

The bonanza, *your* little bonanza, is inevitable.

"And when everything goes to the *chingada*," Marina said, "you swoop in, change your dollars for wildly undervalued pesos and buy a house for a fraction of its real worth. And less than a fraction of a fraction of what it *will* be worth when everything explodes up again." She circled her finger in the air. It was bony and long. Her nails were short, clean and perfect.

"It *is* nice to be rich," Anderson conceded.

"And not at all difficult," she came back, "if you have a little money and a lot of time. Just like my father did."

"By that reasoning, now's the moment to sell the house. Lock in your profits, as they say."

"I'm considering."

Anderson was grateful that she didn't pin his relative poverty with some question like, "Are *you* interested?"

It did seem to him, though, that her little speech had a purpose, as if she was testing him in some way. Maybe checking how he'd respond to her particular style of economic exploitation.

He definitely should've thought more about that.

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El Meester Name had turned his small herd of illegals over to his purchased cops. They'd done the difficult work: leading the group's midnight charge across the border and a few miles up the barren farm roads paralleling Texas State Highway 281.

Flashing his blue passport, Name had zipped through the official station and gotten ahead of them.

Now he was on the U.S. side, parked in a clunky truck on a 281 access road. Waiting, with the motor running and the air conditioning throttled all the way up, his water bottle was already half-empty. It was barely daybreak.

•

"Something to drink?" Marina asked, taking a seat on her back patio (as distinct from the residence's side and front patios). Around the circular table there were three empty chairs: two next to her, obviously, one opposite. Anderson stood deciding.

An obsessive social observer, he attributed monumental significance to even the most prosaic formalities. When someone—particularly a woman—handed him a glass he took careful note of just how long their bodies remained joined by the object. When someone extended a hand for shaking, he gauged the force of the grip to the smallest increment (incidentally creating a feeble impression of himself since his precise measuring required that his own hand be offered as little more

than a limp stub). And if *he* did these things, he judged, then others might too. They probably did.

So the chair choice held some weight. Sit beside her, set a tone of comfortable familiarity but also risk appearing overbearing? Or, sit across, maintaining a dignified distance but also risking callous aloofness.

Time went by.

Finally a *muchacha* (a maid) scurried out and set glasses of ice water with a lime slice before the *Señora* and at the empty place facing her.

He sat.

Marina said, "I've been wanting to ask you... Well, let me just go straight to it: how much do you *really know* about why you're here? In Mexico, I mean."

Crisply, Anderson summarized the invitation he'd received from the U.S. Embassy. It had come from a talkative man who'd suggested he apply for a Haynes grant. Then Anderson explained, "My task here is to promote American perspectives and practices abroad while sharing learning experiences and policy initiatives. I will make presentations in various fora, that's the plural form of foru—"

"Yes," sternly.

"Umm, at various fora, including Professional Associations, Governmental Meetings, and Educational Institutions."

"You sound like a brochure."

"I'm supposed to. That's the way you win these things. Read the information they send you, then repeat it on the application in the section where they ask why you're applying for the grant."

"Sounds like you've got that under control."

"I'm here."

"You are."

"I've got to admit, the competition isn't *extremely* fierce to win an assignment to this place, I mean, to a city where just

breathing the air equals...what? Isn't it like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day?"

"It definitely helps having space like this." She leaned back in her chair, waving a hand toward the green, expansive yard and then glanced down at her breasts.

Anderson agreed it was nice and their conversation meandered around what was going on: a Labrador being trained to prance, the gardener hoeing, some touch-up painting.

He kept wondering when she'd bring up the Juárez kidnapping episode, but it refused to surface.

Other things did, and some made Anderson suspect that she already knew a bit—more than a bit?—about him, about his recent past at least. Maybe he was being paranoid. Anyway, it's not like she'd need some profound investigating: his CV and all that were on the internet. In three minutes anyone could put together a decent biography.

"Tell Carlos," she said absently, "that I won't be taking lunch today."

Anderson blinked.

Marina wasn't looking directly at him, but not away either. She only sipped at her water and displayed no sign of retracting the sentence. So after a few doubting moments, Anderson very slowly began rising to look for this Carlos.

Just then, though, he caught sight of the maid ambling off, doubtless to inform the cook. She must've been stationed perfectly: out of sight and within earshot.

Rising and obeying the glib orders of others, that wasn't one of Anderson's normal routines. He'd *almost* done it this time, but really it wasn't his fault. It was Marina's words, they seemed irresistible. Anderson couldn't know why at the time, but he would later. When most people address a waiter or valet or someone presumably serving them, there's at least the *hint* of a request, a tone of *asking*, even if it's just a courtesy. Not with Marina. It'd even be too weak to say that she "com-

manded" since that leaves open the possibility of disobedience. As perfectly accustomed to the rules of wealth, she simply produced words. And since she'd never known a reality where they *weren't* obeyed, there wasn't the least trace of concern in her tone that they wouldn't be.

So they weren't.

The servants understood perfectly. And as they too had known only one reality their entire lives, they depended on the same rules. If Marina had used a less firm tone—if she'd asked instead of just deciding out loud—they *wouldn't* have felt gratified or more respected. They'd be lost. Or maybe they'd suspect she was mocking them.

There was something of pure domination in her, which Anderson probably would've seen were he not distracted by the her that was in her.

"And by the way," she came down sharply, "what *is* a Haynes fellowship? I've never heard of it."

"I have to admit that...I hadn't either." Anderson thought for a moment then, "Possibly, it's *so* prestigious that word of its existence circulates only among the *most deserving* individuals."

She had no trouble repelling irony so she answered quickly and cleverly.

Then she led him back into the house and to a room he couldn't have expected to visit.

•

"¡Qué suerte tienen, cabrones!" welcomed Name as his trekking illegals came into view. Their assignment in the Houston sewing factory, he explained, would be even lighter and faster than he'd promised. "Four weeks, maybe three and you'll all be out of there."

They were too exhausted to respond, but their worn faces lit up. It was better than the best they could've hoped for: already in the U.S. without any problem, and now—after dispatching with a few quick laboring days—they'd be free to connect with

brothers, sisters, cousins. It was only the smallest stroke of good luck, true, but still a break in the life-long monotony of the opposite.

Name pulled open the container doors of the small truck he'd use to ferry them further north. Twenty, he counted, as they filed past and into the metal box. They were all little people, the result of rampant malnutrition in rural Mexico. Their mouths' held few teeth. Ratty hair. About half wore boots or shoes that weren't in pairs.



An abbreviated version of the editorial page statement "Migracion: Ni Un Muerto Mas" (Migration: No More Deaths) translated from *La Jornada* newspaper in Mexico City.

The twenty undocumented immigrants found in a truck in Texas dead from heat asphyxiation are victims of America. More, the Mexicans are not criminals but workers and the lethally dangerous conditions in which they enter the U.S. represent massive violations of their Human Rights. We must demand an end to the criminal brutality with which the Americans pursue our co-nationals who cross the border.

"Apparently a band of illegals," Marina said, then stopped, changed words, "*undocumented* workers were being transported up in some kind of container truck, a small one I guess. And the driver just pulled into some parking lot and disappeared. Poof. Maybe he thought the *Migra* (officers from Immigration Enforcement) were onto him or something, I don't know. The Mexicans, they didn't last long in that heat anyway."

Anderson scanned the editorial.

"It's a clever turn, isn't it?" Marina asked. "I mean, according to this the immigration police are the brutal criminals because they're...enforcing the law."

Not sure how ironic or just plain analytic she could be, Anderson sought a non-committal reply, something like "Clever-

ness is always to be appreciated.” That didn’t sound right, though, so he just said nothing.

Finally Marina filled the gap. “That’s only *part* of what I wanted to show you.” She folded the newspaper, set it aside. “The other part you can’t see.”

Taking that as a challenge, Anderson studied the weird room she’d led him down into.

It was a large cellar. In the center, a heavy wooden table supported an obviously very sophisticated scanner, an industrial FAX, two computers, some external hard-drives. Cables and wires everywhere, clipped articles scattered about. There were stacks of newspapers and many, many art magazines, mostly concerning antique artifacts and their restoration. They had captivating titles like *Eighteenth Century Restorer*.

A section of the table and a set of shelves had been reserved for small tools, brushes, tweezers, chisels. The clean adjacent workbench supported a number of vises—from heavy to intricate—and also small, lidded cans apparently containing specialized liquids.

She seemed to be serious about this restoration hobby. A nice pastime if you’re rich.

The abundant racks of wine lining the walls and filling half the open space were strangely congruent with everything.

“No,” Marina snapped his attention back to her, “it’s over here.” She was leaning over a computer, the black tights stretching around her thighs verging on transparency. Anderson got caught with his eyes skipping down there. Maybe, possibly, Marina thought, he *wanted* to get caught. Regardless, she didn’t change her posture as he maneuvered to watch over her shoulder and see what she wanted him to see. She flashed a screen from the *Dallas Morning News*, then one from the *Washington Post*, and on to a few others. Always the international sections. They checked through with some care and found only two mentions of the Texas deaths. Both were very brief.

Neither of the U.S. articles described an odd particularity that made it into the Mexican press and fixed Marina's attention: the fingertips of the victims, many had been strangely shredded and mauled. Maybe the result of scratching at the metal container's walls, the desperation of trying to get out.

"*Every single* newspaper in Mexico City," Marina patiently listed them, "*led* with the Texas story. *Big* headlines. And lots about their fingers, how ugly it must've gotten for them." She stopped for a moment. "But in the U.S...nothing. Nothing. Those stories I showed you in the American papers, they're so little they're *less* than nothing. And I think that's important. Or, at least it *says* something."

"Well," offered Anderson, relieved that a fairly neutral sentence occurred to him, "the basic story line *is* going to be a hard sell in the U.S. How'd you put it? Because they enforce immigration laws Americans are..." he reached out to grab the first newspaper she'd shown him, opened it and scanned for the words.

Marina, "brutal criminals."

"Yeah, like you said, that won't seem so *entirely* obvious north of the border."

"It could be, though. I mean, not that, but something *like* that might be true. In a certain sense." To show what she meant, they went on a trip.

•
Cathedral
•

Indirectly, Anderson kept trying to raise the subject of the kidnapping episode in Juárez. No response until he circled it for about the fifth time, and Marina began emitting signs of finding him boring. So he let it go.

She was driving, he beside her on a very choppy trip through Mexico City traffic. She could barely control her long car which was probably a symptom of her customarily chauffeured existence. Her not hiring a new driver, Anderson concluded, fit with at least one strategy for managing the kidnapping: pretend it never occurred.

A man followed behind. For a moment his chugging car got so close he could see Marina's lips moving. If he could've heard, he would've listened to her saying a couple things he knew and one he didn't.

First, a pattern had been emerging over the last several months, one so far noticed by only a handful of people paying close attention to Juárez and the rest of the outposts dotting the U.S./Mexican line. Bodies had been turning up, bodies with medically minor but still hideous wounds.

Taken individually a reasonable explanation could usually be found for the ruined fingertips: the victim had been trapped in some kind of container and struggled to escape. The corpse had been gnawed by animals. Something else. It didn't make much difference. Almost none because people who wind up in dead-ends like Juárez are usually trying to escape their own lives and pasts, so when they meet a bad end

there's no one around who's going to know them enough and care enough to press for details.

Still, word will manage to circulate if something grotesque repeats persistently. Word was beginning to circulate.

The man trailing Marina and Anderson also knew—like most Mexicans—that the great Cathedral in Mexico City's center was a project of the most tangible imperialism. It was once the grand *Templo Mayor*, the Main Temple that spiritually anchored Aztec religion and geographically fixed their civilization. It also centered, according to their belief, the universe.

It no longer exists.

The Spanish expedition led by Cortés understood that castrating a people requires bringing down powerfully symbolic monuments, so enslaved natives were forced to dismantle their *Templo* block by block; then they were commanded to rearrange the stones to form a new temple—a firm, soaring Catholic Cathedral—on the same spot.

Finally, what's *not* so commonly known—though no overt attempt is made to preserve the near secret—is what goes on inside a massive old stone building adjoining the Cathedral. Called the *Sagrario Metropolitano*, it houses not only the Archbishop's opulent vestuary and historical archives, but also a severe nunnery: it shuts in a few *monjas de clausura*, that is, nuns avowed to never lay eye on the outside world.

Decades have passed since the insertion of any new devotees, but the original group, they've stayed on and true to their ideal.

"I'll leave the *reason*," Marina said, after they'd parked and begun walking toward the gaping Cathedral, "for these once young women being enclosed in the bishop's extremely private quarters to your imagination."

She waited for Anderson to say something there, but he didn't so she squeezed the plastic bag tucked under her arm and added, "For us, they're an *excellent* opportunity."

The opportunity: since the withered nuns can have no contact with outsiders beyond a very short list of approved and highly religious persons, the Sagrario is permanently virtually deserted. "Which means," Marina said, "that we can more or less do what we want in there. Assuming we can just stay out of the way of a few old virgins. Near-sighted virgins. Supposed virgins."

They entered the Cathedral, Anderson unsure whether he'd correctly heard and understood what Marina said and meant.

He had. Her plan for getting inside the adjacent Sagrario—which she explained as though they'd already agreed to do it—was the product of her deceased father's passion for colonial architecture. He'd just wanted, she told Anderson, to learn about the building's layout and design, so he'd investigated and discovered a way in. "He found a *surreptitious portal*," she said, rolling the 'r's long and cheerfully.

Then, "It is true that there're paintings on the walls in there, I suppose old Dad *may* have had an interest in those too. Maybe not entirely intellectual. Anyway, he found the private library by accident."

Anderson could've asked about how exactly it'd been decided that they'd be going into this nunnery or whatever it was, but really, what were the chances she was serious about all this?

Plus, it was good *doing* something with someone, nice to be moving and talking face-to-face instead of the usual: sitting alone writing research papers, reports on narrow questions and exchanging clever word-play emails with friends back in the States. So he followed along. "And now I'm going in there with you to *see*?" (Solid stress on the "see" to show that he hadn't missed Marina's implication. For Anderson, art theft probably wouldn't be on the agenda.)

"I think you should *see* something in the library."

"So if I understand correctly, I'm taking your father's place in this...mission. And *why* is it again that I want to go in there?"

She evaded the Freudian question and also the more practical one by leading him to one of the Cathedral's confessionals. Wordlessly, she ducked into the priest's side.

Anderson stopped. Was...he supposed to occupy the repentant sinner's position?

"Look," she spoke. He bent down, stuck a head in her side and watched. After leaning a shoulder against a wood panel, the slap of her hand popped it. It hinged open, revealing a niche carved into the stone, just large enough to receive a small person. A besieged man of the cloth, for example, assuming he wasn't too muscular. "This place is *full* of secret hiding places."

Then she was out and beside him again. "Secrets," she confided, "from the *Cristeros*." She meant the Cristero Rebellion.



Cristero Rebellion. Mexico, 1920s. Devoted Christians enraged by the secular government's closing of numerous monasteries and religious schools banded together in furtive resistance.

Their efforts culminated at a banquet hosted by the intensely anti-clerical president Alvaro Obregón. A young artist strolled among the guests, rendering quickly drawn caricatures. When the drawer—a covert seminarian—reached Obregón, the President remarked, "Be sure to make me look good." The seminarian, "I surely will." He drew a gun and shot the President dead in the face.

A wave of bone cracking repression followed. Some was organized by the government, most by (usually drunken) mobs. So priests devised ways of hiding in their churches. And ways of escaping them.

Anderson knew all that, at least in broad terms. What Marina added is that in the Cathedral in Mexico City, one of the escapes is a tunnel through the thick stone wall of the church and into the Sagrario building right beside it.



"We're going," Marina said as she sat Anderson down in a pew, behind a man mumbling insincere apologies to God for a drinking binge, "to slip right through that old escape passage. Actually...*you're* going down it."

"*Alone?*" Afternoon shattered. For Anderson, no more care-free gliding along with the conspiracy. No more partnering with her, it seemed more like he was being manipulated. Or maybe just led on for some reason.

"Someone," she said with a wrinkled smile, "*has* to stay behind clearing the way."

Then she was smart to keep going, to keep explaining and talking and not give Anderson a chance to stop her. Next she described exactly how he'd get into the tunnel. Around the Cathedral—she pointed with glancing eyes—a dozen or so quiet novices covered by long robes with high collars moved about observing the worshippers and tourists. Several wielded hand-sized mops; they wiped up children's fallen ice cream cones and bodily drippings from the elderly. "The others," Marina said, "they're assigned to a station, and when the Cathedral bells ring, they rotate around to the next one. Maybe, um, we should wait and watch a rotation, I mean, just so you can see how it works?" Her tone seemed condescending.

"*Probably*, I can imagine," came back Anderson, checking around and seeing a few that seemed fixed in their spots. "But wha—"

"Ok, good, now I'm going to put on this costume," she tapped her bag, "and take the place of that one there." Following her gesture, Anderson scanned but saw no one, only the carving of a splayed holy woman mounted on a wooden pedestal.

"You can't seem him," she said, "but he's there, tucked behind that...rapturous female. Anyway, just make sure that as soon as I take his place, I mean *as soon as* you see him walk off, you come in. I'll be standing right in front of a panel, alright?"

No pause there, “It’s a big, well, a *rectangle* of wood, it actually looks kinda like it’s hanging off the wall. It’s not, though, it’s *in* the wall. Get behind me and push, you’ll see. It’s a door. It’ll swing. Now you’ve got to *shove*, it’s heavy.” She examined his upper body and showed no sign of approval. “It’s really heavy.”

Then she came to a full stop, finally giving Anderson an open space to talk, and expecting or at least hoping for something like, “Don’t worry, I’ll get it done.”

She got silence. That went on for a while.

Anderson normally reacted to awkward situations—or ones he just didn’t understand—by not saying anything and then, if absolutely necessary, by trying to say something funny. So eventually he went for, “I’m tough, the sort of man who sneers at his injuries.”

She *almost* smiled, but didn’t. Instead, “Like I said, it’s heavy, so you better use your shoulder. And then once you’re in, just go straight down the hall. Oh, and *remember*, you can’t leave the door open, ok? You’ve got to push it back closed, *all the way* closed.”

“Right,” said Anderson.

It would have to happen quickly; they’d have only a few strokes of Cathedral bells between when she’d appear at the post to free the current novice to move on, and when the young man actually scheduled to take the place arrived. Then, obviously, she too would move on as though proceeding to the next station.

This is what Anderson finally decided to think. Even though all Marina’s outward appearances—her words, her voice’s tone, a vague anxiety lining her smile—indicated the opposite, there was *no way* she was serious. None.

So he started calling her on it. “When you show up to take that guy’s (the novices were all male) place over there, isn’t he going to probably recognize that something’s *really* wrong.

Your...*sex*, for example?" He could've said "gender" or "that you're female," but he'd chosen the word he wanted.

Marina heard him perfectly. She didn't respond on that level, though. "Let *me* worry about it," she said.

"And anyway," Anderson kept on, "aren't the guys guarding these places going to notice that they've *never* even *seen* you around here before?"

"They're *constantly* changing people doing shifts. It's all day from before the sun comes up to late, late at night. *Every* day. All year, alright?"

"Yeah, maybe, but they *never* change from male...to *female*."

Marina got irritated, "Look, you just worry about not letting those old women *see* you in there."

Anderson had more, but Marina hit him with an expression, a "Please stop being so annoying" face. Or maybe it was just a "Stop" face.

Either way, powerful.

Anderson blinked and retreated, "Ok, umm, and *if* I'm inside, no one's going to...run into me?"

"Like *I just told you*, not if you stay away from those old women."

"And *why* is it, again, that I'm going in?"

"So you can see something that's there and something that might not be," she chirped. Then came a description of the library that Anderson was supposed to reach. There'd be dusty books and brittle papers everywhere of course, but Marina talked about a little exhibit gathered with some others on a set of shelves across from the door. If he went in and walked straight across the room, she promised, he'd find a small metal stand bearing the label *Turcas, Siglo Dieciséis*. "That's what I want you to check." Marina glanced at her watch, "check and see if the turcas is there, where it's supposed to be. And if it's *not*, scour the place. I mean, I *really* need to be sure."

Anderson knew what a turcas was, so there was no reason

for that question, which freed him to go directly to, "That's the reason *you* want me to go in there, but not the reason *I'd* actually do it."

The library, she nonchalantly came back, also held a folio containing the five separate reports Cortés sent from Mexico to the Spanish royal family.

"You don't mean the originals."

"The originals."

"Direct, as written *by Cortés*?"

"Yes."

"Obviously you don't mean the first."

"The first is there."

"The *carta-relacion*, as written *by Cortés*. The one *he* wrote is there?"

"Yes."

"Not a copy. Not the *Justiciary* letter."

"I've just explained—"

He interrupted, "It's there, in the library."

"In the library."

"The *first* letter, in the handwriting of Cor—"

"I *think*," she cut him off, "that I've been about as clear as I can be."

Extremely hard to believe. She'd found a weak spot, though. He'd have to check.



Between 1519 and 1526 Hernán Cortés wrote five *cartas-relaciones*—reports in the form of very long letters—describing his unlikely conquering of what he called New Spain, today the Americas.

The second through fifth caused minor sensations across Europe when copied and sold to the dinner party set. As conversation starters, they performed admirably (though only after meals).

They tell of warring tribes of Tlascalans lunching on the stewed bodies of their fallen comrades. As for their fallen *ene-*

mies, their muscle was cut into strips, dried into beef jerky and happily gnawed.

Then there were the Olmecs with their wedged heads. Europeans marveled at how pallets strapped to a forehead from birth could gradually reduce it to extending only slightly above the brow before flattening and retreating almost straight back. The malformation's result? When combined with crude dental work and extreme makeup, the adults resembled jaguars, the fiercest of the many Gods occupying the Olmec pantheon.

Many more outrages and freak-realities complete the letters, but they weren't read only for their weirdness. There was also vanity. Europe, every sentence and page assured, is *elevated* civilization, sophisticated doctrines, and freedom from crude superstition. It's better. So Europeans deeply enjoyed reading the rudimentary but descriptive words Cortés sent back from the other side of the Atlantic.

Really, who can blame them? It *is* nice, reading about how superior you are.

Then there's the first letter. Addressed to the Spanish Emperor (and, according to centuries of odd rumor, also to his mother), it was never copied, never passed around. Today, we only know one thing for sure. The Emperor frequently stated that the pages had been "hidden in a place where they'd never be lost, and could never be found." Whatever that means.

We're also fairly certain that the first letter is heavy, serious. Maybe not as entertaining as bizarre tribal customs, but it's *important*. It's there that Cortés detailed his strategy for taking the New World. He informed the Emperor not of the weirdness he was conquering, but *how* he was doing it. So while the four widely read letters relate odd stuff that happened along empire's way, the one revealing exactly *what the way is*, that's gone.

Which isn't surprising. Given that Cortés was describing

how he, nearly alone, was prostrating entire civilizations beneath his imperializing ambition, those few who possessed knowledge of his method took extraordinary steps to ensure that it wouldn't escape their grasp.

It's also true that a kind of pseudo first letter exists. Written by the "Justiciary and Council of Vera Cruz," it reads like the four others and coheres with them both in style and also by claiming to restate most of the contents of the letter Cortés himself wrote. It's a boring sheaf, though.

What's not boring is the speculation and debate provoked by the authentic and missing pages. The speculation: what unspeakable techniques of imperialism could have filled the letter? The debate: should we regret the loss, or be grateful for it?



"I *guess*," Anderson acknowledged skeptically but also excitedly, "hiding it here in Mexico *might* somehow be considered a place where it can't be lost and can't be found..."

"You'll see for yourself," she assured. "I've seen it, I've read it, I know it's there."

"Why don't you just *tell* me what it says?"

"Because," she resisted, "that'll leave *my* question unanswered. By the way, you should be interested in my question too. It's going to affect you."

Anderson should've followed up on that, but Marina was checking her watch again, anxiously now, and describing exactly where the folio sat in the library. "We really *should* go," she insisted, "or wait another hour... Or, I suppose if you don't really feel like you're ready for this, we *could* wait until tomorrow..."

"No, no, we—"

"And the *truth* is, really, I never even asked if you *wanted* to be part of this. I mean, I could probably find someone else pretty easily."

"We've *got* to go forward." Eyes darting, Anderson was pen-

etrated by the Cortés letter, starting to realize what it could mean for him.

At the same time he didn't dare let himself believe it. The odds against pages of that inestimable historical and political value just sitting there virtually unguarded seemed astronomical. "If it's *really* the letter," he told her, "I'll take it of course."

"No you won't."

"Not for me, not for the prestige of discovering it. I mean, I'll *have* to take it. It...it's really a kind of a, well an *obligation*. What I'm saying here is that this has *got* to be made available, for *everyone*...and in a museum! *That's* the responsibility part, you see, to get it copied right away so that everyone can know it, know all about it!"

"Shhh, you're not going to take it, that's too serious, you'll end up in jail. In jail here in Mexico." She halted, squared, caught his eye straight on.

Anderson stopped, completely held.

Marina came with a voice he hadn't heard: deep, trudging. "You don't want that. You do not want to be involved with the police here in any way." Anderson managed to keep his jaw firm and his eyes locked onto hers.

Then, like the moment hadn't existed, she shifted back to her usual self, "Now I'm going. When you move, move fast. But don't seem hurried."

About the police, Anderson *knew* Marina was right. Stealing a historically priceless treasure from the Cathedral, if he got caught there'd be no way to bribe out of that. And a gringo in a Mexican jail cell, bad combination. Still, he couldn't resist one final spasm, "Something like this belongs to *all humanity*. Irresponsible! That'd be the right word if I just *left* it there..."

The man in the pew in front of them—unwashed, vaguely insane—looked back curiously at one of his own. Anderson pulled himself together.

●

In a remote corner of the Cathedral a not at all devout man—the one who'd been following Anderson and Marina—lit a votive candle and watched Marina stride toward a confessional.

A moment before the sounding of the hour's bells, she was back out.

He was stunned. She'd donned a bland religious robe, it swept the floor as she walked and reached up to a stiff collar surrounding her neck. Her hair, pulled back into a tight ponytail, tucked behind the collar. As she wore little makeup she suddenly took on the appearance of a perfectly clean and fine teenage boy.

He watched Anderson follow (stumble behind) her as she steered around a corner. Then he couldn't see them. And he was too far away to hear her hiss, "Push *harder*."



The passageway was damp, rock solemn and only two long steps across, equaling the width of the two adjacent buildings' stone walls.

Inside the Sagrario, dreary light traced up to slits of colored windows in the high ceiling. On the floor, various shapes and sizes of hand-painted tiles fit together: surely a satisfyingly holy design if you could see it from above.

Following Marina's directions led quickly to the library.

Inside, volumes were shelved in rows but Anderson hurried to a corner and a large, antique box. Resting on a granite pedestal, it was covered by an ornate wooden top and carved all the way around with swirls and the occasional horrid beast.

Through a glass frontpiece—yellowed, cracked by age—Anderson saw and felt the temptation: three short book stacks.

It wasn't, as he knew, until the seventeenth century that books were constructed to be held side to side; before, their relatively weak spines required that they be piled one on top of another. So stacked books were old books, very old.

He bent down, squinted. Some were dusty and leather-

bound. Others were pages sewn between splintered wooden covers. And there were grouped papers, dangling loose and faded.

Heart strangely quiet, Anderson ran a finger underneath the old wooden lid. A latch, he thought, or a hook or keyhole waited, something allowing him to open and touch inside.

No discovery, though, so he kept on, running his hand carefully around the back of the case, feeling it, slipping fingers tentatively down the curving ridges decorating the box.

Since the library's darkness was relieved only by a heavy stained-glass window, the shadows spilled melancholy invisibility through the room. Anderson trusted his hands as much as his eyes. They told him the case was supple, beautiful and—so far at least—impenetrable.

The search went on, his probing fingers browned with dust.

His eyes adjusted as far as they could to the murky room and he stepped back to look. Were there scratch marks? Anything that might tell where keys or some other opening technique had been applied?

No, so he got on his knees to see the container from below. He was almost begging, but still no sign of vulnerability.

Maybe there was a kind of seal no one knew about, one passed secretly from bishop to bishop over centuries. Probably invented by some remarkably clever and devoutly religious librarian, it now kept these documents entirely protected from improper eyes. He studied intensely.

Most people would've thought of simply trying to *lift* the top lid which hinged upward.

Anderson didn't.

He did, however, eventually conclude that the glass front pane was replaceable. So, with ample time still in reserve—before he had to push back out through the door Marina would again briefly occupy—he acquired a deep cut across a finger, and that one run of pages he sought.

First task: check authenticity. No lab tests or high technology required, just a few pokes and pulls at the aged paper. Then a twist and a more aggressive attempt to rip. No effect. Confirmed genuine.

Explanation. Most important documents in the early sixteenth century were written on parchment since nothing else was considered worthy of being possessed by educated people. But, Cortés wasn't that kind of guy. Refinement, the tastes of the elegant classes, they simply didn't connect with his swaggering and limping existence. (He got the bad leg falling out a bedroom window as a husband came up the stairs. Typical.) He was a bawdy, lean, hairy and syphilitic man: a *raw* commander. He wasn't parchment.

The paper *he* would've used was the stoutest, the most resistant and incidentally the easiest to get. It was a kind of sheet that existed only during the brief historical moment corresponding with Cortés' life, and only because of thankfully temporary circumstances.

As medieval plagues raged through Europe an odd problem arose. Rags. With so many people dying, and so many of them clothed in little more than rags, the survivors confronted mounting piles of pestilent fabric.

In Italy, a resourceful solution was discovered. The clothes were doused in water and thrown in a large tub to ferment. Then the disintegrating scraps were drained, beaten, watered and again left to fester. Eventually, only gray pulp remained. A wire screen got tipped into the mess, and a slurry sheet emerged. It was set in a mold to dry. Layers were added. Finally a common glue was pressed through and after several more days of drying, a reasonably smooth and *extremely* durable sheet emerged.

(Note: Each producer used their own wire screens which left distinctive marks embedded in their product. Today we call that a watermark.)

Scorned at the time as a poor-man's substitute for parchment, the crude sheets did hold the virtue of consuming many over-abundant rags.

Tracing further down the historical consequences, the perfectly predictable subsequent problem—an over-abundance of writing material—allowed a man named Gutenberg to ask whether something could be done to get rid of it all.

Leaving the printing press aside, what's important about "rag paper" is that it's nearly immune to time. Even today it's almost impossible to rip.

Which led to Anderson's indelicate test of authenticity.

●

"Any problems?" Marina asked as they made their way out of the Cathedral.

"You mean *besides* Cortés' first report?"

"You're holding up fairly well, I thought suicide might be a possibility."

"Why didn't you just *tell* me?"

"Would you have believed it?"

A glum response, "Possibly."

"Anyway, I needed you to have a reason to check for the turcas."

"It wasn't there."

"I *knew* it." Severe consternation on Marina's face. But mixed, there was a glimmer of hope too, or thought. Hard to be sure, even Marina didn't know exactly what she sensed.

●

The severe consternation aspect of Marina's mood resembled Anderson's feeling as he'd sat in the Sagrario library facing Cortés' long-missing first letter.

After cautiously studying every word of the first paragraph, and then thoroughly reading the second, speed picked up on the third. Faster on the fourth.

Minutes later he was flipping through pages haphazardly.

Then not reading at all, only considering how the letter had been rendered to convey the one message that it couldn't, and how, for that reason, it had worked *so* well, how it had guarded Cortés' secrets so dutifully.

The problem Cortés had faced wasn't simply concealing his conquering plan. While hiding his thoughts was necessary—he didn't want some freebooter sailing in and out-imperializing him with his own strategy—safeguarding is easy. It's as easy as not writing anything at all. But, he *wanted* to write; vanity is a powerful motivator. And not just vanity, reward too: Cortés needed his Emperor and the masters of the Spanish court to know that success wasn't a fluke. It resulted from superiority and deserved serious recognition.

So the problem Cortés faced wasn't about concealment so much as combining: it was secrecy *and* revelation. How do you keep ideas from most people while circulating them among a very select few?

And then with respect to that select few, for someone endowed with a passion for domination reaching *historical* proportions, one generation of witnesses couldn't possibly be enough. Cortés needed to be regarded—to be seen in his glory—beyond any mortal limit; the record of his shining strategy would have to be maintained for all time.

How?

The solution was ingenious. First, Cortés somewhat obliquely wrote his strategy and thinking into a letter. Then he slapped a different name on it in the space reserved for the author's signature. Then he let it be known publicly that this report written by someone else was only an approximation of the real one; it was a loose copy that had been mostly cleansed of the original's insights and genius.

The false authorship Cortés concocted was "The Justiciary and Council of Vera Cruz." The letter signed that way circulates widely today. If you go to your local bookstore and buy a

copy of Cortés' letters—usually packaged under the title *Letters by Cortés to the Emperor* or something similar—you'll find inside the four widely circulated Cortés letters, and also the other which, the book's introduction will tell you, substitutes and approximates the first letter that Cortés wrote but that was subsequently lost.

It was never lost, though.

It couldn't have been since there never was a first letter signed by Cortés.

Which means the letter always existed in that *one* place no one would search for it: *as* the misleading clue pointing toward pages remaining safely hidden for eternity since they hadn't ever been written.

The result is that the real pages—the actual container of Cortés' thought and strategy for imperialism—was safeguarded at two locations. First, in a place where it couldn't be found (nowhere, since it was unwritten). And, second, in a place where it wouldn't ever be lost since the intrigue the non-existent first report aroused effectively guaranteed that people would want to look at and want to preserve the copy presumably written by the Justiciary and Council.

All this leaves behind a single certainty. The key to understanding how one man virtually alone brought empire to the New World waits in plain sight; it's there in the written lines of a letter we've always had.

It's not certain which lines, though.

●

How to escape someone following you in Mexico City

●

"It was depressing at first," Anderson was saying. "I mean, who *wouldn't* have been depressed, discovering this priceless, long-lost letter and then discovering...it was never lost."

Marina seemed consumed by the task of driving. Understandable given her inexperience and the chaos of Mexico City roadways.

"But it's also intriguing, *this* is what we have to see. It's there *somewhere*, it must be. Some kind of strategy, some kind of map of what really *has* to be history's single massive episode of...*domination*. Right *there*, in this letter we've had all this time. All these *centuries*. But where? *Por Dios* (My God), this is..." He paused, waiting for an equally breathless assent from Marina.

She didn't seem to find the occasion so momentous.

"You're distracted," he accused. "This gets significant, it's *not* just history. I mean, there'll be major changes in political science, in every policy institute, Europe, Mexico, Washington DC... I could go on."

"I'm worried."

"What?"

"I'm worried. There's a *vocho* behind us. Don't look."

"We're in Mexico City, there's *always* a *vocho* behind us."

"Not a '93." She meant the 1993 version of Mexico's most popular car, the *vocho*, the old VW bug. The chassis had been changed during that one model year, along with some of the innards. An attempt to update the old standard.

Total fiasco.

Old-style production quickly resumed and continued until the last car rolled off the line in 2004.

"There *is* more than one '93 in the city."

"Not many, the transmission was a *mierda*." She took a pointless left and watched, then a right and decided. "Definitely following us."

"A kidnapping?" Anderson asked, suddenly worried.

"There's only the driver, you usually want more people." She'd said that as a true resident of Mexico City: no panic, no surprise, just a calm and permanent calculating of the odds.

"We could try to get away," proposed Anderson. "Or maybe go to a restaurant or some place like that where there's lots of people."

"Let's find out who it is." She drove purposely for a while, then spun the wheel, twisting down a narrow, one-way drive. "The only way into the Four Seasons," she said. They slowed, then abruptly accelerated, zipping past the impressive hotel's entrance. "And also the only way out. Now, let's lose this guy."

Anderson wasn't sure what had just happened.

They merged back onto the main street just as the light in front turned yellow. "*Slow down*," Anderson urged. "If you can time it *just* right..." After a second he added, "On the other hand, since when has a red light stopped a car in this city?"

"We'll find something."

Soon they were very close to where Anderson lived, so he knew the area. "Why don't we try," he pointed an unsteady finger, "going down *there*." Marina gripped the wheel, glanced in the rear-view mirror.

"No, no," Anderson stopped her, "wait, we should keep going..." Marina followed the instruction.

Then Anderson, "Actually, if you can *still* make it, hit that turn."

Too late by then, though.

As they approached the next intersection it started up again,
“I think... wait...”

Marina: “*Decide.*”

“Turn!” Anderson jabbed his finger the wrong way down a one-way street.

No hesitation from Marina.

It was a commonly used shortcut, and the police staked it out once or twice a week. No more, though, since that’d risk reducing the illegal traffic and therefore the productivity of the spot.

The cops were there this time, a pair down at the end of the short street collecting their *mordidas*. They’d gotten sloppy, though, or maybe a little drunk. They were joshing with each other, barely acknowledging the cars wheeling through. Almost without slowing, experienced drivers hung their arms out the window, offering a few coins.

Between pushing at one another and grinning, the policemen grabbed the clinking money and dropped it into bulging pockets. Since everyone knows the correct amounts, they didn’t bother counting the tolls.

They also failed to notice the supervisor’s car looming behind.

Marina saw it, though; that’s why she blew right past the group, shoving her most impolite finger at them all.

The supervisor’s car exploded lights and siren. The two street cops petrified.

In the car trailing Marina and Anderson, the driver watched them swerve away. He started to press the gas, to accelerate and keep up, but the supervisor’s car veered in front, blocking all traffic, not letting anyone through.

Stuck, the trailing guy bowed his head in respectful defeat.

To fully understand the defeat, you need to know that police work in Mexico is really a pyramid scheme. Posts are bought and sold openly and with full understanding of their privileg-

es and responsibilities. The main privilege is lordship over those below, the responsibility is to feed money up.

Sometime in the past, the supervisor who arrived to receive Marina's flagrant insult made a cash payment for his job. It came with a banged up squad car, a colored area on a map and a unit of sixteen foot patrols. The officers he distributed in pairs as he saw fit, and profit. One-way streets are mediocre but consistent profit centers.

As for the walking police, they're the bread and butter producers, they collect small sums—fifty cents, a dollar, maybe two—for every petty illegal act they cross. They pocket a fraction of the cash, the rest goes up. The officer above extracts his cut and keeps the money moving.

Weak links aren't tolerated, quotas have to be made.

Which explains why the two lowly officers standing at attention in front of their supervisor were frozen by shame. (Actually that's not entirely right since their bodies still shook from the blast of the siren they'd received.) It also explains why the supervisor hadn't even considered going after Marina and her flashing finger. He had more urgent business: discipline.

After prodding the incompetent cops to the middle of the street for maximum exposure, he delivered a spectacular berating, "You don't have their *respect*. ¡Pendejos! They're giving you the *pinche* finger." More sputtering.

The underlings absorbed it miserably.

Drivers in the line of cars growing behind the display could only watch and wait.

•

While the disciplining went on, Marina and Anderson returned to the Four Seasons.

"It'll just take a bit," Marina said, "to collect a picture of whoever it was tagging along behind us."

Anderson didn't see how. He couldn't because he didn't know that the Four Seasons in Mexico City monitors its visi-

tors scrupulously. From the moment a car enters the virtually private drive an array of cameras with lenses fitted to penetrate even severely darkened windows allows quick preparations.

When luminaries arrive, security officers screen the lobby for people toting cameras. When dignitaries are spotted, a small welcoming committee trots out. When an approaching car contains numerous male passengers without suits and ties, well, then pistols get fingered.

Marina went in wanting to know about the '93 *vocho* that passed through half an hour earlier.

She came out soon after, under the wing of an older fellow, medium patriarchal, medium lecherous. She bid him goodbye with a peck, a whispered message.

"He's such a dear," Marina said to Anderson, before reporting that the old guy had volunteered—she didn't mention his name—to go back through the tapes and deliver the desired image himself, to deliver it to her home after work that evening.

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How to pay a *mordida* in Mexico

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Typically foreign drivers who hit Mexican police traps get a bye since they can't be expected to know the local rules. But when quotas aren't being made the pressure intensifies, and if one of the cops happens to know English, or if you make the mistake of letting on that you speak some Spanish, you'll have to pay.

Here's how.

One officer will maneuver around and stand in front of your car to block it while the other begins a formal discussion. He informs you—with melodramatic signs of regret—that you've committed an infraction.

As a courtesy, make the first move. Acknowledge that the policeman must be correct by asking, "What's the fine?"

The response will be polite and only slightly evasive, maybe: "It depends..." Or, sometimes the more explicit, "It depends on how much you want to save." (Meaning: "It depends on how much you want to save off the official fine.") The officer will then produce a ragged book of traffic laws and open to the specific violation. He'll insist on formally reading the sentences, and also prefacing them with a complete and surprisingly lengthy elaboration of category: *Section seven of code III, enacted 1998. Chapter addendum C6, paragraph....*

It's all very official.

When the reading ends, ask to see the infraction book. You'll receive it. Pretend to confirm what was just recited. Take your time, don't seem hurried or uncertain. After sternly consider-

ing, take out and fold peso bills worth about ten dollars. (Since you're a foreigner you must be rich, so you'll have to pay more than the locals.) Slide the money between the infraction book's pages. Close the book firmly.

Hand it back formally.

"Correcto!" the officer snaps.

Off you go.

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The smallest instrument of imperialism

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“Where do you live?” Marina asked, driving the car away from the hotel, eyes glancing in the rearview mirror. At the turn onto the main road the car lingered for a stubborn moment. It took Anderson just that long to realize Marina was checking around, right, left, behind.

Later, Anderson came to see: she was *always* checking, darting eyes, taking account. In the car, walking to a store, sitting on a barstool, wherever. The surveillance only relented when she was completely, absolutely safe behind her residence walls. That’s what it’s like, being wealthy in Mexico City. (Imagine what it’s like being wealthy and having young children to keep track of too.)

“My house, it’s in the Condesa,” said Anderson.

“Surprise!” Marina reacted, which was more or less predictable. Everyone in Mexico City knows the expatriates invariably live in the urban neighborhood called *La Condesa*.

And *the* bistro for Condesa locals is named “La Gloria,” which loosely translates as “orgasmic bliss.” The place, that means, lends itself to a particular and clever dating invitation, “I’ll pick you up at eight and we can go to La Gloria.” For the sentence to work, naturally, it has to be said with just the right ironic tone and an arrogant chuckle: I’d *never* say such a vulgar thing, I’m just making fun of someone who *would* (and nonetheless finding a way to say it myself).

Neither Anderson nor Marina tried to make the line work.

Instead, after being led to a table a little removed from the

street and its coughing exhaust pollution, Marina recounted how some of her *chilanga* friends (*chilanga* is slang for a woman from Mexico City) were beginning to talk more and more about the “Women of Juárez.” That’s what the newspapers and advocacy organizations were calling them anyway, the unusually high number of women turning up dead on the border town’s outskirts.

Like most everyone else, Marina had assumed they were some mix of prostitutes, dealers in the rampantly violent drug trade, and unremarkable single women with the worst possible luck in love.

“Until,” she said, “I read—it was just a little note in one of the papers—that some of them have been turning up, not many, but some anyway, with their fingertips *twisted*. Really torn open, apparently. Weird.”

She had Anderson’s full attention.

A waiter passed by, delivering a basket of bread and two small plates. The plates couldn’t actually arrive on the table until diners sat because if you do leave them out, only fifteen or twenty minutes pass before they’re covered with a slick, greasy sheen from the dirty air. The oily layer gets so thick while you’re eating that at the end you can actually *write* on your plate with your finger. It’s not uncommon for people to calculate the tip amount that way.

“But it just seemed,” Marina said, “like a bad rumor or, well, at least something you didn’t have to confront straight-on, you know? An urban legend maybe, something like that. And that’s how it stayed for a while, for me at least. Until a picture of one of these hands, it got printed in the *Jornada*. Not on the front page or anything like that, there wasn’t some big headline, it was just a little shot on the inside. I barely saw it; it’s just chance that it even registered. But *that’s* what got me to make the connection. Not at first, it wasn’t, like, immediate, but a few days later it came to me: I remembered I’d seen a

turcas—it's a *long* time ago now—in the Sagrario. I *knew* it right then, though, and I'm even surer now. It *has* to be that. There's just *no* other way to explain that kind of ripping, at least not that I can think of. And I've tried."

They were speaking Spanish and Anderson wasn't quite sure that he'd heard correctly (this was becoming a regular problem for him with Marina). But, what he *had* understood seemed... speculative. He started to ask, she kept going, though, "Maybe it really doesn't mean anything, it's just a small detail. *Obviously* it is compared with dying. But I'm beginning to think—well, more than beginning, actually—that maybe it's *not* a detail. Maybe it's the other way."

"?"

"Don't misunderstand me, but I think it's the fact that they're dead that could be the detail. It's the *fingers* that're important. You see, it's *that* the turcas is being used that's causing everything; it's using that thing, *displaying* that it's being used, *that's* what it's all about. It just happens that some women are dying in the process."



"The Useful Instrument" is how Cortés cataloged the turcas in his log of personal items.

It's not a complicated instrument. Two short rectangles of wood—maybe nine inches long and an inch thick—are hinged at one end. At the other, the upper plank is teathed with two or three very short, thick spikes. Those spikes are closed down on the victim's fingernail. There's a screw set in the instrument's middle, it pierces the two planks and turns to clench the turcas, locking it onto the fingertip. Then comes the screw's slow tightening, the turning and squeezing until the spikes penetrate the nail.

Up to this point the torture is mainly psychological. Painful certainly, but the impact is slight compared with the message: what's coming when the *pulling* begins will be ruinous.

It is, even though the process generally fails; only part of the fingernail is torn away and the instrument must be applied again.

If the torturer is merciful, then it's applied quickly and the extraction is completed while the victim remains dazed or unconscious. If not, then not. Either way the entire fingernail is eventually pried off and then comes a decision. The spikes may be squeezed directly into the exposed and ruined fingertip, or, another nail may be removed.

One of Cortés' *Aplicadores* (a man charged with the torture's administration) writes extensively in a letter home to his eldest son about the advantages and drawbacks of both strategies. His main point, though, is that either way the victim gets reduced to driveling.

Soon after comes the maddening certainty that gangrene will take hold and extend along what remains of the fingers, into the joints of the hand, up through the forearm, to the shoulder and then lethally into the chest.

Which doesn't mean it comes to a sad ending. What's most astonishing, most audacious about the whole process is that it was considered *curative*. It cured the deepest flaw.

Spaniards believed the natives they discovered in the New World lacked souls. They also believed the application of the turcas contained a power crossing into the miraculous: if it had been properly blessed—if it had passed through an elaborate ceremony similar to the baptism—it was equipped to “humbly elicit the Divine Gift.” The prying, in other words, of the sanctified turcas had the benefit of granting the recipient a *soul*, an unblemished, sinless soul.

And since death inevitably followed soon after this particular generosity, the gift was eternal and heavenly.

Which begins explaining why Cortés considered his deeds not only right, but *beneficent*.



"You don't seem particularly affected," Marina went on, "I mean, I'd expected you to get visibly sick." She hadn't intended that as an insult, still, it was hard to deny a judgment on her part. She hurried more words, "That's good though because what's coming is worse.

Anderson waited.

"What if I'm *right*? I mean, I'm not saying I *definitely* am, just asking what it means if there's really a connection between this turcas that's missing and these injuries? What if *that's* the point, the reason these women are getting killed?"

She stopped, leaving space for something from Anderson.

Nothing.

"And then," she went on, "what about those illegals left in that truck? I mean *all* of them ripped that way. It just *has* to be intentional. And yeah, it sure *seems* like a complete break in the pattern, I mean from solitary women to a truck full... But what I'm saying is *that's* the point. It's not a break, it doesn't really matter who or how many, you see, it's people getting that old torture treatment. Do you see?"

Silence from Anderson.

Now Marina refused to go on. She wanted an answer. Without taking her eyes off him she raised a water glass, sipped, returned it to the table, then...just sat.

"But," Anderson finally stuttered, "*why*? Why would anyone *do* that?"

"Aren't *you*," Marina's voice sharpened toward accusation, "the person to ask?"

In a sense, he was.

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A part of the truth about a part of Marina

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Marina had a good reason for asking what the torture treatment could mean. Though she had no way of understanding exactly how or why, she couldn't avoid knowing that she was connected to the spate of turcas maulings.

The link: her missing chauffeur was also a victim.

The morning after he'd been pulled from her car on the street in Juárez, he'd turned up lifeless just outside her hotel. Apparently an overdose was the cause of death—a painless way to go—but it had come with the nightmare injuries of the turcas.

Possibly it was some kind of message. A memorable one. And totally unexpected, the day before she hadn't even considered the possibility that when the kidnappers hauled the worthless driver off they'd gotten all they'd come for. It seemed like maybe they had, though.

Then they'd returned him.

His unorthodox injuries were the real reason she'd first gotten interested in the Women of Juárez, at least in the ones that had come to the same disfigured end as her driver. Then she'd read about the deaths in Texas, and that confirmed something was going on.

What?

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Marina could have told Anderson what happened to the kidnapped driver right there from the start. She could've told him everything, just spilled it out. But...why alarm him? Maybe in the end it wouldn't add up to anything, anyway. Just a weird Mexican experience. She'd collected hundreds.

For her, here's the bottom line: she could use Anderson's help, and she didn't want to scare him off. So it made sense, just leaving him in the dark about that that one small part.

She'd told the truth about all the rest.

And she hadn't told anyone else anything. Which wasn't difficult since no one was asking. The shuttle-bus driver who happened to spot the chauffeur's dead body early in the morning didn't think too much about it. Neither did the tired cops eventually assigned to go over and take a look, or the city health workers who finally chunked the corpse into their pickup and drove it away.

On their handwritten reports they all took the trouble to note the ruined fingers. There was some banter about how that kind of thing had been happening to women too. No one really cared, though. Just another anonymous death among the hundreds. No reason to ask who the guy was or why he'd suffered in this particular way or whether any provocative connections shot out from his sad end.

The immediate problem Marina faced was simple: all that could change at any time.

If it *did* change, if someone managed to see the line leading from the imperialist instrument—one of history's bitterest tools of empire—to all the disfigured victims, and particularly to that one who served as Marina's chauffeur, and from there on to her, then it'd take a nearly blind eye to *not* see one more extension. Marina's nationality. She'd inherited it from her father and lived it so inescapably in that tall, white body of hers.

True, she hadn't spent much time actually residing in the U.S, and she spoke perfect Spanish and all the rest, but that doesn't change the explosiveness of the combination in today's world, the words imperialism and America.

●
Suspecting an imperialism
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Why did Marina go to Anderson, why was she involving him in all this...whatever it was?

It hadn't been an easy decision. Definitely she needed *someone* to help her get a grip on everything, but there were multiple possibilities and she'd gravitated around one, then another and back again.

In the end, she wrote all the names on sheets of paper, and in parallel columns listed arguments for and against. It's the way she faced uncertainty: get it all out in front of her where it could be seen.

Actually, she'd devoted more than a day to the project, scratching out words and sentences, pluses and minuses. Phrases were crossed out and re-written, arrows and circles drawn. When a page's messiness dipped it into the incomprehensible, she pulled out a new sheet and wrote everything back in, straight and neat.

The work was done exclusively with a pencil and thick, white paper: the act of careful hand-writing helped her consider.

Finally, when there was nothing left to add or take away, she spread the sheets across her cellar table, then stood back and forced herself to look until the decision emerged. It was closer to a revelation than a choice.

Anderson's sheet was the only one listing no argument against, which probably made a difference. There were also, she found, three decent reasons in his favor.

First, he was *already* involved. Hadn't he been the guy with her on that day up in Juárez when her driver got taken? Bad luck for Anderson, but that's the way it had gone, just a coincidence. She'd been one of the five or six listeners at his conference presentation. She caught him afterwards, introduced herself, and then offered a lift to his hotel. He'd been perfectly free to say no. He might have.

(It was an incurable habit of Marina's, offering men rides. She *relished* that expression on their faces when they saw her long sedan pull up, the driver jump out and scurry around to open the back door. Then after recovering from that intimidating shock of wealth, there was another challenge for the poor guy. Decorum: should he go in first? Wait for her? Extend an arm to help her in? Something else? Marina was merciless. Offering no indication or help, she crossed her arms and posed as impatience, her body screaming, "*I'm waiting...*")

The kind of man Marina was interested in inevitably found a way to *gently* twist the test back. Like Anderson: after stumbling around the sidewalk for a bit, he ducked his head and got in. Marina stayed firm on the curb. Arms crossed, she glared. Moment of truth. For a second, Anderson started to get back out. But then he settled—you could almost see him take a steadying breath—and said, "Are you getting in, or should I send the car back for you?" Very nice, Marina approved.)

The second reason she'd decided on Anderson was stronger. From what she'd been able to find out about him, he *should* know something about the turcas and its historical uses. More than something, actually. Unless the CV she'd found of him on the internet was *completely* fabricated, he was actually well-schooled in just that part and that kind of history.

Then there was the last reason (at least it counted as that for Marina): what Anderson had said in his Juárez conference presentation. Marina liked it. She wasn't, though, the kind of person who'd go all the way and admit she was impressed.

She preferred less committed words, ones like “provocative,” “different,” and “not completely vacuous.”



Anderson’s conference paper, summarized.

A new strategy for imperialism was circulating in the United States. Exactly when did it start? Not clear, though there’re indications. Back on April 29, 2005 the online version (and obtrusively not the printed version) of an establishment political review published an essay, “On Being Disliked: The new, not-so-unwelcome anti-Americanism.”

Obvious question: how can an American *welcome* anti-Americanism?

The answer begins with a sequence of ideas about humiliation, about how it works on normal people in everyday circumstances. It begins with what humiliation *does* to people.

Humiliation incites envy

We’re humiliated when someone mocks us for something—beauty, poise, intelligence, money, power—that they have and we don’t. The humiliation energizes, it lights up our wanting and our envy.

Envy makes obedience

When we envy someone we’re soured by them. But, we’re also drawn in their direction. Maybe we copy the way they dress, or how they talk. We eat at a restaurant where they’ve been seen, try to get our kids on the same soccer team, check what books they’re reading, what movies they see, what they drink. We dream of stealing their husband, sleeping with their wife. The worse it gets, the more our time, our acts, our desires, ourselves, all of it gets ordered and commanded by the one who mocks us.

Conclusion

Humiliating others chains them, despite themselves, to their own desire to *resemble* the humiliator.

Operative conclusion

Humiliation is a plot for obedience.

Back to the discretely circulated foreign policy article. It just lifts the logic of humiliation from typical people in everyday life to the world and its civilizations.

Which is why the puzzling title actually makes perfect sense. If the U.S. now reaches for imperial ascendancy and global obedience by humiliating other nations, then obviously people out there in the world are going to feel anti-American.

That just means the strategy's working.

And when it's *really* working, they're going to abhor America. They're going to loathe the condescension, detest the haughty superiority, resent everything about the country while burning its flag in the streets.

Who can blame them? For all of us it's normal to feel not just envy toward those who humiliate us, and not just detestable obedience. There's also *hatred*.

God we hate them. It's nearly unbearable.

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Unbearable hatred in the newspaper
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The unbearable hatred explains an outburst you hear all the time down the halls of the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*. “*Pinche [PEEN-chay] gringos!*” it goes. *Pinche* translates as “damned.” “Gringo,” traces back to armed skirmishes in the nineteenth century when troops in Texas—clad with green uniforms—leapt into lines of Mexican soldiers screaming “Green Go!”

In this particular case, the wailing erupted from a bearded reporter at the paper, one who doubled as a photographer, and who occasionally received a few column-inches for an opinion article. (Like all employees, he was also assigned to the noisy production warehouse where he manually fed paper into one of the printing machines).

“*Pinche, PINCHE gringos!*” He reviled the United States, always had. But this, *this* was the greatest outrage yet. Something needed to be done—something needed to be *written*—against the crimes of the American state.

The facts that so infuriated were straightforward and had been reported over and again for several days. With increasing intensity. A group of his compatriots had been herded into a stultifying container truck, driven through the oppressive summer heat of Texas to a place called Victoria. There, they were cruelly left to bake and die on the roadside.

He made a fist with his left hand; with his right he wrote out a torrent even more bitter than the main editorial his newspaper had produced several days back. It began:

The government of the United States has an immigration policy of silent murder. It's *migracide*, a whole new crime....

•

"*Pinche Gringos!*" Name announced to the open air, drawing curious glances. He wouldn't let their craven eyes suppress his excitement, though.

Yes he would. Jerking at his bow-tie, he concentrated on tranquility. Then a unique relaxation technique, one he'd begun practicing decades ago during those years when nothing could drag him from somber libraries. He pooled mineral water in his mouth, leaned his head back, pursed his lips and shot a curl upward. Remarkable control, hardly a drop escaped the human fountain. A very brief display, but anyone watching had to be impressed.

And slightly uneasy. It was that second feeling that drove the couple sharing a coffee at the next table to stifle their conversation.

Name pretended not to notice. He did decide, though, that he shouldn't return to that unique personal ritual. He'd relied on it for peace through his long intellectual period, but he was too old for that kind of thing now. And also too involved in the real and public world.

Then it was back to what he'd been doing for the past hour in *La Selva Café*: reading the *Jornada*, re-reading the *Jornada*, nearly memorizing the sentences. After so much planning invested and effort exerted and risk taken, at last he was getting somewhere.

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Why is Anderson in Mexico?

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“Is he going to be alright?” asked Marina, jabbing her elbow at a pallid, older fellow dressed with a peculiar formality. His head dropped back, he was apparently balancing something on his lips. Then water spouted out.

Anderson shrugged.

They were winding through the Condesa’s sidewalk cafés, on the way to confront their pursuer from the day before.

Marina had recognized him immediately from the photos automatically snapped by the hotel security cameras: a harmless newspaperman who’d been following her for one ostensible reason or another—but always romantically—for years.

“He *can* be cute,” Marina reported, without showing Anderson the photo, “and I actually mean that as a compliment. In some sense. I mean, he tries hard to be the person he wants to be, which is kind of an old-fashioned virtue. You know?”

Anderson wasn’t sure.

What made the guy curious, according to Marina, was how his passion for her wound through his other heated devotion: *loathing* the U.S.

Probably, the feeling was stoked by his employment at that hotbed of resentment, the *La Jornada* newspaper. There’s poverty in Mexico? Well—according to the *Jornada*—that’s because the U.S. tricked Mexico into signing unfair trade agreements. There’s crime? That’s because of the poverty. Choking air pollution? American-owned industrial plants. Why doesn’t the Mexican government *do* anything about it all? They can’t since

they're under the thumb of the (U.S. controlled) International Monetary Fund. What about the rampant corruption poisoning nearly every aspect of daily life? Well, Mexicans do have themselves to blame for that, *but*, the *Jornada* informs, it's worse in America: just think of the payoffs necessary to cover-up the CIA's planning and execution of 9/11.

A seductive storyline, definitely. Because the United States causes all problems, everyone else is released from any responsibility for putting an end to their misery.

Of course, it's worth noting that the *owners* of the brisk-selling and quite profitable *Jornada* have found a way of ending *their* misery.

Lesson: there's a lot of money to be made in the business of hating America, it may even prove this century's major growth industry. Newspapers fly off the stands in capitals south of the Rio Grande when their headlines blare about how U.S. savage capitalism causes local unemployment. In Europe, they line up around the block for movies depicting American soldiers committing unspeakable atrocities. Posters of burning New York City towers are hot sellers in gift shops everywhere (outside the fifty states).

T-shirts of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, Osama and the rest. *Excellent* profits.

You could market red, white and blue toilet paper.

And anti-American bars will be all the rage one day, their urinals decorated with faces of American presidents, mouths open.

U.S. flags could be manufactured with fabric chemically treated to burn slowly thereby guaranteeing maximum spectator enjoyment.

Products may be sold in Canada, Germany and similar places by advertising not the quality of the particular item but that some portion of the earnings will be donated to organize boycotts of fiendish American goods and services.

Coffee table books picturing life in the least appealing city or town in each one of the fifty states could be produced. A sure international bestseller. (Title: *The Ugly America*.)

Endless possibilities.

Marina wasn't interested in any of them. What she wanted from this reporter *did* depend, though, on his fervid anti-Americanism. It seemed a long shot, but she supposed that the guy might be able to sniff out something on the theory she'd proposed to Anderson: the old instrument of empire, the turcas, was being used again in Mexico.

True, she considered her reporter friend to hold only dubious investigative competence, but his sincere *desire* to ferret out any signs of imperialism operating within his beloved country, that couldn't be doubted.

So, with Anderson beside her, she was off to see him. And she knew where to find him.

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Though it's a completely open and very high-buzz event, the Expatriate Club's *Cocktail Wednesdays* pulls in a self-selecting and notoriously consistent crowd.

Mainly they're unattached Americans. Most accepted their south-of-the-border assignment in exchange for a solemn promise: after three quick years they'll receive a transfer to the New York or Chicago or Los Angeles office. (Urgent Warning: the Mexico City expat scene overflows with middle-agers *still* waiting.)

Then there're the enthusiastic Mexicans, a few trying to make business deals, most more interested in amorous negotiations.

Some Japanese, Swedes and various other nationalities clump here and there. They assumed "Expatriate Club" meant Expatriate Club instead of Clubbing Americans Who Happen to Live in Mexico City.

Finally, there're the brooders, the sullen locals who despise

any gringo presence but can't pull themselves away from witnessing, from wringing their hands and *wallowing*.

The *Jornada* reporter who'd written so furiously about the heated deaths of his countrymen in an abandoned truck belonged to this bitter group. On the first and third Wednesday of every month he was there at the stylish Hotel Condesa, squeezed into the same back corner nursing a beer and smiling wickedly at people he recognized who didn't recognize him.

Always one of the first to arrive and last to leave, his visits with the foreigners were as long as they were glum and inconsequential.

So you can imagine his delight when someone—and not only someone but *the* someone—strode through knots of despicable *extranjeros* and addressed him directly with the weighty tones of an important conversation.

From a safe distance Anderson watched the other man's round face nodding intensely, almost rapturously. Suddenly, Anderson *recognized* him, it was the guy who'd been in Ciudad Juárez and stiffed him with a nice bar bill. What was it he called himself...? Marina's *friend*.

Anderson considered going over, maybe to greet him, maybe to try and get his money back. He didn't reach any decision.

The noise was overwhelming. When an American (at least a man) speaks English to a foreigner and receives a look of bewilderment, you can be certain of this: he won't restate the idea with different and maybe simpler words, and he probably won't try speaking Spanish. He'll simply repeat the same sentence IN A LOUDER VOICE.

Which obviously does no good. It does, however, garble the conversations of those in the immediate area, leading them to BEGIN REPEATING WHAT THEY JUST SAID.

Returning to the first amplifier, he goes for an unrestrained scream but too many auditory shock waves have already circled out and once the process gets started there's no way to

avoid a conclusion. Everyone yelling frustrated sentences as loudly as they can while waiters scurry around delivering drinks more or less at random.

At one moment or another Anderson lost sight of the *Jornada* reporter. Then he couldn't locate Marina either.

•

Next day, mid-morning, she summoned him. A short, almost chilly telephone call. No allowing for the possibility that Anderson had something else to do, somewhere else to be.

It bothered him. But what? He'd mope until she asked nicely? Actually, he did sit sullenly for a little while.

At Marina's, the maid Lupita met him. (Anderson had learned the servants' names, and their pecking order). She led into the towering house, then invited him to find his own way to the familiar cellar.

Anderson ducked down the wood stairs. "My favorite room," came the greeting, far too loud and from the *Jornada* reporter. Marina wasn't visible.

The reporter stood—maybe posed—next to a wine rack, fingering one of the bottles. He emitted a comment about Mount Xanic (shan-EEK) wine and the importance of climate for grape growth. It seemed trite to Anderson. Or maybe he wanted it to seem trite.

"Mexico *definitely* makes the best wine in the world," the reporter claimed, while admiring the bottle. "The label's pretty cool too." He went on, but Anderson was entirely absorbed by a not unimportant question. Were the clothes dressing Marina's friend *the same* as those he'd worn last night? Unclear. The shirt did look wrinkled. Then again, the guy didn't seem like the kind who'd spend a lot of time ironing. Probably, Anderson decided, he was always wrinkled. Probably.

The man did manage to radiate a kind of Che Guevara mystique with his longish hair, stringy goatee, the hammer and sickle pin. He couldn't make it fit with the wine-bottle-in-hand

look, though. Could anybody? The guy probably deserved credit for trying.

Marina emerged. "He," she said directly to Anderson, "has been paying very close attention to *us*." Striking a not entirely innocent stance between the two men, she repeated, "Luis has been *observing*."

"It's my *professional* job," Luis answered, "I'm *supposed* to be checking on Americans." Eyeing Anderson distastefully, "I'm *paid*, actually, to find out about people like you. But even if I wasn't, I'd probably do it. I don't trust gringos." He glanced over at Marina. "*Not* including you. You just happen to have an American passport, it's not *your* fault your dad was born there."

"Certainly not," Marina confirmed.

Anderson's earlier question about clothes was more or less answered by the reporter's petulance. So he (felt relieved and) softened up. "I *never* meant to convey any kind of..."

"No need," Marina interrupted, signaling and then leading the men to the narrow staircase. As they went up she felt embarrassed about not feeling particularly embarrassed about shuffling her hips in their faces.

On the rear patio, a brilliant morning. The *muchacha* deferentially emerged. Anderson requested juice. Marina got juice with a splash—just a *few drops*, she instructed—of Riesling. The reporter asked for "another *Don Julio* (tequila, expensive) with coffee."

After a pause that could've been taken as disapproval aimed at the group's hard morning drinker, Marina pushed on, "Our newspaper comrade has been quite inquisitive this morning. He's been wondering—*very* interested I'd say—about just why it is *you're* here in our hopeless little part of the third-world. I mean, there must be something you're hoping to accomplish."

Luis the reporter nodded aggressively. Then he held up, not feeling entirely right about Mexico described as "third-world."

Eyes turned to Anderson. Which made him feel uncomfortable...but also gratified. He actually thought the story of his recent life was somewhat cool. Fairly original, at least, if not overwhelmingly successful. Anyway, nice to have someone (besides mom) willing to hear about it.

The very basic facts about why and how he'd gotten to Mexico, those recounted easily. Four years earlier he'd terminated his M.A. in history, specialized in politics and colonialism. It had taken more than ten years of studies to get there. Anderson's problem wasn't scholastic incompetence, it was indecisiveness: he'd changed departments four times before finally sticking with one program all the way through to a degree.

Then, with help from a family friend, that piece of university paper got parleyed into a short term appointment at a respectable think tank dedicated to world affairs. He'd lived poorly and happily the first two years in Virginia, and more nervously the third, at least until he wheedled a one-year extension.

The fourth year: not so good. There are only so many places in the world where you get paid even miserly amounts to draw up obscure papers on foreign policy. Rand Institute, Council on Foreign Relations, Carnegie, New America Foundation, a few others. Anderson had offered his services generously, and indiscriminately. The responses were unanimous: everyone believed he needed a bit more experience actually being somewhere foreign.

Then the invitation arrived in the mail. He *was* wanted after all, wanted in Mexico to work for the U.S. government studying (and hopefully promoting) the American image abroad. Anderson mailed the formal application for the job—which was actually a privately funded “International Service Post,” whatever that meant—on the same day he did the paperwork to file for unemployment.

One of the two would probably come through.

Both did, and figuring that he better save his unemployment

checks for when they might be absolutely necessary, he tracked south.

Arriving in Mexico City he feared the worst but didn't find it. Instead, good accommodations in a cozy house in a desirable neighborhood, walking distance to the U.S. Embassy.

On the roof there were servant's quarters inhabited by old Victoria. She kept the place in order and smoothed out the life of the resident below. True, there *was* an adjustment period for Anderson, a stretch when it annoyed him having someone he didn't know lurking around all the time.

But life with Victoria also meant: toilets eternally clean, beds always made, breakfast plates, glasses of wine, dirty shirts and the rest magically disappeared then reappeared washed and dried. Usually not too far from the proper place.

No more orange juice? Send Victoria to the grocery store.

The faucet leaks? Mention it, and Victoria finds a plumber.

"I left several papers on the kitchen table, could you get them photocopied?"

It didn't take long for all that to become perfectly natural. It seemed weird at first, just asking Victoria for one thing or another, but she wanted the role. It's what she knew. And she'd seen a train of Americans come through so she also knew how to reach Anderson, how to break his resistance. "Mexicanize" him, as they say.

Later, when Anderson left that home, it was the simple luxury, the freedom from mundane, crude chores that he most regretted losing.

In a certain sense what he missed was civilization in its purest form, a society organized so that at least a few of its members may be freed to live entirely *human* lives, ones unscathed by bestiality, by the need to clean, to answer your own door, dedicate hours and effort to pushing carts down supermarket aisles, sweat in the kitchen before dinner, respond like a trained dog to the telephone.

Probably, none of that was in the minds of those responsible for the place, the American Embassy's division of Cultural Extension. They kept the house—a couple of them, actually—for short term visitors. Most people stayed a month or two before transitioning to their own spot.

Since the Embassy house was free, Anderson spent a lot of time scheming to avoid the transition.

How long could he hold on? Not clear, but really, were they going to kick him out? Kick one of their own out onto the cold streets? Anderson didn't think so.

Marina wasn't so sure. In fact, she was skeptical of the whole thing. "Too easy," that was her verdict.

"What?"

"In the *real* world," Marina said (which was one of her favorite lines for think-tankers, academics, that crowd), "people who're fighting off unemployment *don't* just fill in fast applications and suddenly get saved by international grants."

Anderson could've pointed out that it wasn't like he'd been offered London or Sydney or something. Probably no one else wanted the thing. But the truth is, vanity blinds. When it actually happens to you, when you're offered a grant virtually out of the blue it seems natural: it's easy to believe that others believe you're worthy of recognition and prizes. Which explains why Anderson ignored Marina's suggestion that something somewhere wasn't stacking up.

Marina insisted: no one had ever even *heard* of this grant that Anderson had won.

A shake of the head from Anderson.

A more vigorous nod from Marina. The *Jornada* reporter—who seemed to be maneuvering his chair closer to her with little nudges—didn't quite get what was happening but wagged in agreement with whatever Marina said.

Anderson saw absolutely no reason for the discussion they were suddenly having. But feeling outnumbered he conceded

the minimum, "*Possibly* it's not *entirely*...conventional." That sounded, Anderson quickly realized, very defensive.

Marina scalded the wound, "Common sense triumphs!"

"Fine," relented Anderson, broken more by Marina's aggressiveness than her reasoning. "If I *can't* get you to stop any other way, we can just go ahead and call over there and *ask* how it was that I got selected for my job. My *post*, actually."

Marina's blue-green eyes turned up in her head. Then, "You can't get me to stop any other way."

Anderson was startled, surprised that she'd gone through with it. "What?" he said, still figuring she'd pull back.

"I'll get you the phonebook."

"Oh." said Anderson.

Lupita delivered the phonebook, Marina signaled her to leave it on the table. Then she gestured for Anderson to pick it up and get on with his telephoning.

Anderson refused to move. He did ask, "*Which* number?"

That's one of those (many) questions that only makes sense in Mexico. The monopoly telephone company, Telmex, still doesn't have multi-line technology. Because they don't, if you want two (or more) lines into your office or home, you need to have two physically distinct cables, each with its own dialing sequence.

Obviously the idea of having two separate home phone numbers isn't troubling.

Things *do* get troubling, though, when the place being called is the U.S. Embassy's Ben (not Benjamin) Franklin Library where the Cultural Extension offices are located. That building—which actually sits a few blocks away from the main Embassy—needs to manage fifty simultaneous telephone calls, internet connections and the rest. For that they need fifty lines and corresponding numbers. The result in the phonebook is numbers like: 5525-3221-33, which means you dial the 5525-32 part, and then any number between 21 and 33. Because they're

in order, you know those thirteen lines were installed simultaneously.

The rest of the forty or so numbers reaching the place were added piecemeal, you could tell because they weren't sequential and so had to be listed individually in the (*thick*) phonebook.

So, if Anderson wanted to call the Franklin Library he'd have to choose one of the numbers and dial it; if it was busy select another and keep going until getting through.

This situation which is not extremely time consuming and somewhat amusing with respect to little places like a library, reaches monstrous proportions with institutions like the state-run electric company. In the phonebook their listing runs for *pages*, through thousands of telephone numbers that are nearly all busy almost all the time. If your power goes out, if you have a billing problem, whatever, you're faced with a dialing lottery, sore fingers, hours of busy signals. People have spent days trying to get a call into the electric company.

On Mexico City's major boulevards there are palm-readers, soothsayers, crystal ball gazers who—for a small fee—promise to find a telephone number that won't be busy.

If you lack confidence in the mystical, there're also endless rules of thumb. Always call the first/last number on the list since no one uses those since everyone thinks everyone else will use those. Call numbers ending in 13: they're good luck. Or don't. Call... In any case, a lot of phoning goes on, and a lot of busy-signaling.

Anderson eventually got through to Cultural Affairs. Everyone important was travelling, though, so he settled for an appointment with the Director the next week.

This *very* weird skepticism from Marina and her reporter friend, he assumed, would all blow away before then. When it did, he'd just call back and cancel.

●
Cutting hands
●

Twisting his bow-tie, Name contemplated the next stage. In his journal, the few descriptive lines he'd already penned sat under the title Act Two.

Really, though, *this* was the beginning, today. Everything he'd done so far was only preparation. His labors with the turcas had gone well, but what did they mean?

Nothing.

At least not on their own. What comes next, though, that will give form to it all: good or bad, success or failure. "Now," Name said (to no one since he was alone in his lush hotel suite) "for the *significant* act."

To start, questions needed answering.

How do you cut off the hands of fifty people in broad daylight in the middle of the world's largest city without causing so much of a fuss that someone—a courageous bystander, a legitimate police officer—intervenes? Certainly neither is likely in Mexico City, but the contingency must be accounted for.

At the same time, how do you create *enough* of a commotion for the incident to receive significant attention on TV, radio and in the local newspapers? (True, the nature of the act seemed to resolve this difficulty.)

Where should it happen?

Who should get severed?

How should the victims be lured to their appointment?

How will the operation be performed, with what in-

struments? More mechanically: how can the chosen ones be *restrained* during the process? Obviously not handcuffs!

After underlining that last sentence, Name set about simplifying—Occam's razoring, he called it.

As for the victims, their number didn't seem so important; it was the *how*, not how many that mattered. They could be reduced to one. One to represent and *re-create*—he liked that word's Godly overtones—the act first done five hundred years earlier by Cortés in the city of Tlascala.

With respect to location, the *street* named Tlascala in Mexico City would serve admirably. *Quick decisions are such a joy!*

What remained: who and how.

•

Anderson's phone rang *again*. It had to be Marina's butler. He'd been calling almost daily, reminding of the appointment in the Cultural Extension office where presumably Anderson was going to investigate the origin of his grant.

Today was the scheduled day, and the man had called twice already.

So there was no choice, Anderson was off to see EC, the snorting desk officer who administered the American Embassy's division of Cultural Extension. (Yes, EC was in charge of C.E.)

Though not unintelligent, no one would think of describing EC with the word *cultured*. As Marina—who knew him, apparently—had put it, "You'd *assume* that just insisting others call you by your *initials* would automatically disqualify you for that job." It's hard to know.

When Anderson arrived, the first thing EC asked about was the housing situation. "I think," Anderson said, "I mean I really *hope* that I'm...*just about* on the verge of finding my own place. It's close, I can feel it."

EC grunted, then said, "Well, I've got a *muuy* important meet-

ing I've gotta be gotten ready for. I do have something here for you to look at, though. I mean, so your visit won't be a *total* waste of time." Anderson wasn't sure how to take that.

EC's office had a television and VCR contraption. He swung it around, inserted a tape, hit the play button.

Then EC rumbled over to his desk, a deplorable piece of furniture covered by papers and little twin flag sets, American and Mexican, obviously.

The screen flickered and lit.

EC began reading through a stack of papers as though Anderson were no longer there. Which was alright because EC appeared again on TV, surrounded by a group of teenagers in a school gym. The place looked American. On the lectern supporting EC, something was written, words *almost* legible. Anderson squinted and nudged forward, trying to make them out.

While EC on TV regaled the youngsters, Anderson stayed fixed on the bothersomely inscrutable words. He could make out the first, a captivating beginning: "Seethe." Was it followed by...*world*?

EC's speech glorified the Foreign Service, saying you got to live in interesting places while personally showing foreigners the true nature of America. He also recited some anecdotes, some nice international friendships made. Anderson kept up his study. Were the next two words, "give it?" Yes, definitely. "Seethe world, give it...?" One word remained. Give the world *what*? Anderson prepared for an awesome message.

The video-taped EC kept talking. Anderson peered, cocked his head, concentrated, squinted harder. Wait. A change to the first part of the motto written on the lectern. It wasn't "Seethe world, give it..." but, "See the world, give it..."

Give it what?

The video went black.

"*That,*" EC startlingly announced from behind his desk,

“was a real short-n-fine diplomatic presentation. You appreciate it, don’t you?”

“It certainly was...something that could be appreciated,” offered Anderson, pulling himself together. After a moment it occurred to him: he’d just been insulted. EC showing him that video, didn’t it imply that he, Anderson, existed at about the same level as a typical high-schooler? Then again, maybe he was overanalyzing.

“That’s the way to work!” ejaculated EC.

Anderson sought words, found none.

“So that’s where we’re at.” With a pencil in one hand and a pen in the other, EC tapped a little rhythm on his desk then upped and left.

•

For the symbolic severing of hands, an excellent victim had been found. “How shall I *describe* you?” implored Name, as he gazed at the unfortunate man. “So beautiful, so clean and lithe. What *is* the word, will it even be found in the paltry English vocabulary? Could it be...lad? Precisely that! You are an innocent, comely, *musical* lad! Do you find the description agreeable?”

The Mexican pianist standing in front of him—whose English language mastery and musical ability incidentally proved that there’s no connection between either linguistic or musical skill, and general intelligence—pretended to be fully absorbed admiring his hands.

“Well,” conceded Name, “one could hardly hope for your resplendent musical gifts to be matched by poetic intuition. That’s *perfectly* understandable. More, it’s *natural*! Genius for so many reflects only their monstrously *focused* natures. All but a few, really, are idiot-savants of one kind or another.”

“I’m not getting you exactly...”

“Of course not. And why, why *should* you! In any case, and as I’ve explained,” Name pulled contentedly on his bow-tie,

“we’ll be taking three series of photographs, each capturing in a unique way the *power* of your accomplished hands, their value, *their worth!*”

The pianist nodded eagerly, this part he understood. And anticipated. The prospect of an American fashion magazine circulating the essential parts of his body across the entire United States was, finally, confirmation of the success he so richly deserved.

From the beginning he knew he’d get it. While his peers—ruttled in their subservience to the “Western Canon”—had labored for years perfecting boring renditions of the so-called masters, *he* had pioneered a lonely but superior path. Completely ignoring Mozart, Mendelssohn, Rachmaninov and the rest, he’d dedicated himself to the performance of uniquely *Mexican* composers. I am the “Nation’s Musician” he often proclaimed.

And wrote. From his very first application for a government subsidy he’d sensed that devotion to homegrown music could be converted into hard cash. So, while other aspiring pianists insisted on prostituting themselves for old Europeans, he profited from conspicuously disdaining them.

Over and again he penned twin-barbed (though not very elegant) proposals. On one side he cut with guilt: *denying me this money I need so much for my “artistic development” would be like denying our great nation of all “artistic development.”* Then on the other side he alleviated the tone of extortion with a rousing proclamation of his battle for Mexican independence. *Though I’ve been advised lots of times by all kinds of people to change my musical choices to those composers everyone else thinks are the great ones, I can’t. I just can’t—no matter what’s the price—abandon my principled devotion to the national musicians whose excellence I hope to reflect...and also become!*

What Mexican government committee could *possibly* deny support to such a solicitation?

Maybe one that had received a better kickback offer from another of the applicants. So just in case someone finally did outbid him, he'd implemented a backup plan, a completely distinct though equally creative strategy for advancing his career, spreading his name, drawing the *attention* he craved.

The idea had struck him in front of a subway entrance. In Mexico City it's not just magazines and snacks that get hocked there, also real photos of local luminaries: TV personalities, rock idols, movie stars, sometimes politicians. Professional photographers snap shots of them in the street, print up hundreds of 3 x 5 copies and post them for sale at five pesos each. (There *is* something captivating about the shiny pictures, something strangely personal.)

Despite being an artist, the pianist wasn't the kind of guy who'd lose much time contemplating the existential powers of images. He did, however, hit on a clever reverse strategy.

He had a friend snap some bare-chested shots of him reclining on a grand piano, got copies made and then simply presented them—along with a small monetary complement—as gifts at stalls outside the busiest and most important subway stations. The reasoning: if being famous means your photo gets posted, then shouldn't your photo getting posted...make you famous?

The managers pocketed the money, pinned a copy up on their board and inevitably asked, "Who should I tell people you are?"

"A fiercely independent man, a warrior for our people's musical virtues, the true...."

The only notable sales occurred at a subway stop just outside a famously strict Catholic girls' school.

It did happen, though, that at a different location a 3 x 5 was spotted and quickly purchased by a bow-tied man, one who thoroughly enjoyed classical music and was not immune to the charms of the young male body.

Now very different photos were being taken. The Nation's Musician was on the verge of going international.

The first series of shots for the magazine (it's actually a *Review*, the pianist had been told) were appropriately respectful. His hands were snapped from various angles while suspended above a white board. "We want," Name explained, "so much to bring out the beauty of your skin's *tone*."

"Yeah," he replied, stretching and curling his fingers slowly, captivatively. An undeniable invitation.

Name watched avidly, raised and lowered his expensive black camera several times then exploded, "Allow me to *know* the texture!"

After a somewhat prolonged caressing, the next series of pictures were contemplative poses. "Intellectual as well as artistic depth," the accompanying text would read. And to visually capture the message, the shots, they'd all be composed with the head and hands somehow united.

"Cradle your manly chin," begged Name.

The pianist did. Pictures snapped.

"Now, run your hands through your dark locks."

"What?"

"Your *hair* boy, run your hands through it." He obeyed. Name squealed in delight.

Finally, culmination.

While it's true that windows everywhere in Mexico City are shielded from intruders by ornate lattices of wrought iron, the artisan works produced in the 1940s—the period of the Condesa-area's construction—are widely considered the purest examples. They're certainly some of the largest. And also the most visible, pressed as they are right up to the sidewalk.

"Now, for our final series we want to exhibit your finger *power*."

Understanding immediately, the pianist wrapped his hands through the iron bars of a window.

"These are *wonderful* shots. They'll be remembered in New York, *in Los Angeles!*"

The camera's insistent clicking, the knowing words, all of it was joyous, even better than the pianist could have imagined. Overflowing with gratitude, he fixed Name with his dark eyes and announced, "My next concert, it will be dedicated *to you!*" Then he clumsily reproduced a line he'd obviously heard elsewhere, "A rambunctious and devilish performance!"

Name clasped his heart in knotted admiration for the enthusiasm. "*Oh delicate tinkler!*" he proclaimed. "Inspired, innovative, grand!"

"Great, incredible, really really *great!*" stuttered and cried the pianist. More words gushed as he rapturously twisted hands, arms and then his entire self through the iron bars.



"You're *still* here," blurted EC as he stormed back into his office. He'd been gone for almost fifteen minutes after having shown Anderson the video and then abruptly leaving.

"I wasn't sure," answered Anderson, "if I was supposed to leave or not."

"You were."

"Oh. Well, I was still hoping I could ask you about a few things. Actually, there's some *specific* information that I..." Not exactly sure how to approach the question of how *he'd* been chosen for the grant he'd received without appearing to suspect that he might not be worthy, Anderson at the last moment peeled away. Delay, he decided, was the strategy: if he could just keep the conversation going long enough, the subject he wanted might come up on its own. Something needed to be said *now*, though, so he decided to admit that he'd grown more than a little concerned by Mexico's rampant and violent crime.

The threat had nearly caught him twice. Marina almost kidnapped on the trip to Ciudad Juárez, and now there was the

bizarre episode just days before, right outside his own front door.

"If you're mixed up with this Marina character," snapped EC, "then it's not gonna surprise me at all that you've got some problems. She's been a big pain in the upper thigh for a long time you know, for us members of the Dip Staff."

"Dip staff?"

"Diplomatic staff."

"Of course."

"I can tell you right now that the knots this *Miss* Marina Rhodell causes have been mostly...romantic. You probably shouldn't forget that. And then there're her psychological problems. Colorful, huh?"

Not sure what he meant, but eager to change the subject, Anderson tried, "After that scene in front of my house—"

"You mean the chopped piano player, no?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

It took Anderson a second to figure out where the conversation was. "After that, that butchering...I'm, well..."

"Speechless."

Almost inevitably Anderson again said, "Yes." Then, "And it happened right outside my door. Right there. I mean, I had to step through a *puddle* of it. No one even cleaned up. Gruesome."

The pianist—dressed entirely and stylishly in black—had been left almost unconscious and leaking profusely from stumps that should've led to hands. While his clothes soaked up his blood, he'd produced no screams, no moaning, no sound at all. He *had* managed to spit weakly at a few of those passersby who paused to stare. Disturbing.

It took nearly an hour for an ambulance to arrive. In Mexico City when there's no payment in advance, medical care is hard to come by.

Robbery was the apparent motive. The light tan line circling one wrist probably marked a missing watch. And the fingers of the left hand displayed no rings. Hard to know, though, whether they'd disappeared in the original crime or been picked off by a police officer later. Or maybe he hadn't worn any.

As for the other hand, a witness stated that he'd seen a dog run off with it.

"Surely that piano man tried to resist," EC said. "That, or he was just plain too co-operating. Either way I gotta be goin' again."

Anderson took the hint.

●
Survival tip for Mexico City
●

It might seem strange, EC explaining the brutal slaying of the piano player by speculating that either he tried to resist a robbery, or, he was *too cooperative*.

It's not strange, though. It's counter-intuitive but in Mexico City if a thief corners you and demands your wallet, hand it over fast, and nothing more. Even if it happens that you have some extra cash in a shirt pocket, don't offer. You won't placate the grimy attacker. Not at all because what pains gutter criminals most—even more than poverty—is the sneers they get, the constant disdain. So when a wretched thief comes, he's coming for money *and* respect. And offering something not demanded is disrespectful; it's showing him up, slapping him with the too-familiar reminder of who's *really* in charge.

Mexico City survival tip: when you're being robbed—and if you go there you will be—don't do anything but *exactly* what you're told. No less, no more.

•
Simple fraud
•

"He showed you a *video*!" Marina, furiously.

Not sure how to respond, Anderson repeated his telling of what had happened.

"You should've been more *persistent*." Then Marina decided, "Regardless, you went there to find out exactly *how* you got your strange grant, and that's why *we're* going back."

Anderson could've said, "No, that's why *you're* going back if you're so interested." But the truth was he found her correct usage of the word "regardless" endearing. He didn't mind the bastardized version, "irregardless," but people who used the word well, that always got through to him. So he agreed to accompany her.

Ok, that's not true. This is: Anderson had just hit forty, an age carrying the sadness and optimism of a particular weakness, younger women.

Marina knew all about that.

•
Some U.S. international action is genuinely shadowy and Hollywoodesque, and almost all that dark drama happens outside the official Embassy building. CIA infiltrations, attempts to influence—usually with funds of murky origin—local election outcomes, secret interrogations, unavowable diplomatic negotiations and the rest, all that traces back to unmarked, unwelcoming places. (Yes, they're really called "black sites.")

The Ben Franklin Library is the opposite of all that. Set up as an open invitation, its entire mission is to welcome Mexicans

into admiring contact with America. Security is virtually nonexistent, there's a constant provisioning of coffee and finger-cookies, signs indicating bathrooms and exits are in Spanish, there's free internet on two-dozen terminals.

The Ben Franklin Library is, in all its gloriously ordinary existence, a projection of what political theorists call "soft power." It's a place where, presumably, locals are subtly drawn into the U.S. sphere of influence every time they flip through a pamphlet describing the Bill of Rights, take an English class, hear a lecture on import/export law, or check out the latest Rolling Stone magazine. They begin, goes the strategy, to feel like they're *participating* in America; they're with the country, not against it.

Just as important, those who make all this happen—the administrative staff and workers—are local Mexicans, they're living models of the desired international convergence of interests. And the few staff members who do come from the U.S, they're sure to always speak flawless Spanish, and fit in with the local customs and courtesies. Up above, of course, there're State Department professionals who make it a point of honor to *not* learn foreign languages, but they keep themselves out of sight.

As for how well the outreach works, it's hard to measure, but it's a palpably different strategy for showing America's face to the world than the one you find at, say, the German cultural center (Goethe Institute) or the French equivalent. Navigating those places requires already knowing the respective languages' basic words, at least if you want avoid going in the wrong bathroom. And God help you if you *dare* ask a staff member—inevitably a German or a Frenchy—something in either Spanish or far, *far* worse, English.

These European cultural services people, they express something less than high admiration for the Franklin Library. They normally call it "Drool House" because the internet terminals

are typically opened to one porn page or another, and whole gangs of young (and older) men congregate to unabashedly watch, some stroking themselves through their pockets.

Once in a while the Library's sole security guard—a toothless old Mexican—limps around and shoos the most obvious perverts.

Not surprisingly, the men's room at the Library should be avoided.

The women's bathroom is upstairs. Since the building was converted from an old colonial mansion, the iron showerhead sticking out from the wall above one of the stalls isn't as threatening as you'd otherwise suspect. There're also two doors: one opens onto the stairway descending to the Library below, the other—which bears the note (in Spanish) *Use Other Door*—opens to a hallway. Several offices, including EC's, occupy what were once bedrooms.

Marina and Anderson wanted to get into EC's room.

They sat downstairs for a while, reading newspapers and keeping an eye on the internet action. The wait wasn't long before an older and quite distinguished American gentleman—he looked almost familiar to Anderson—disappeared into the bathroom, two Mexican boys tagging close behind. Quickly, Marina and Anderson scurried upstairs.

Marina checked to make sure there was no one else in the women's room, then waved Anderson in. They whispered together for a moment—calming each other's nerves, enjoying the sensation of conspiring—then she slipped out the other side and politely reported the scandalous goings-on in the downstairs bathroom to the upstairs security guy.

He ambled down the front stairway.

Anderson and Marina hurried to the door marked as EC's. The knob was an exquisite piece of antique cut glass. Nice to look at, but no locking mechanism so they were inside fast.

They pawed over his desk. Nothing of interest.

They moved to the file cabinets. The folder tagged with Anderson's name contained two copies of the application he'd submitted, and nothing more. The pages weren't marked, not even in the part designated "For Committee Use Only." They moved on to other folders, prying open and peering inside as many as they could as fast as they could.

All meaningless.

"Wait," exclaimed Marina, "I think *this* might tell us something." She held up a piece of paper, incidentally knocking a short stack of magazines onto the floor.

A rustle just outside the door.

The two froze, their eyes locked, then they were frantically scanning the office for a hiding place. Under the desk? There was room for one person there, but which? Marina was closer and Anderson pointed her into the spot. She squatted, but then thought better of taking that undignified pose and pointed for Anderson to occupy the space. He pointed back to her, and then they both started looking elsewhere.

Simultaneously they noticed a slot between two bookshelves and raced each other in that direction.

Too late. The door cracked and spread open.

Cleaning lady.

Cleverly, Marina bought time by pretending not to speak Spanish. Anderson caught the strategy and followed, so they all stood there, glancing back and forth between the other two and feeling uncertain. Then the tone of Marina's voice and a dismissive hand abruptly made the contrived language barrier irrelevant. The cleaning lady bowed her head and slumped away.

Shortly after the piece of paper Marina thought might be important turned out to be nothing.

So too everything else.

Before leaving, Anderson noticed Marina pulling several crinkled papers from deep underneath her clothes and ex-

changing them for sheets extracted from one of the thicker, more aged files. "Simple fraud," she smiled.



Later she explained. In the decades surrounding World War II, the Cultural Extension branch of the Embassy acquired—piece by piece, more or less by accident and without any long term plan—a sizable collection of pre-colonial artifacts.

They were useful. Carved Aztec stones decorated the Embassy vestibule. Intricate jewelry got displayed when local dignitaries came around; it sparked easy conversations and showed that Americans knew and even cared about Mexico's past. A few chunks of mosaic work got loaned to senior diplomats to fill the empty spaces of their very large, official residences. Things like that.

No one thought too much about it.

Until the 1980s when rumors began circulating of new and more "possessive" attitudes on the part of the local government.

The entire collection was gathered and shipped north of the border.

Immediate firestorm. Accusations of theft, imperialism and unforgivable disrespect. Outrage. Public pronouncements, newspaper editorials, protest gatherings. Everything.

Soon after, all the noteworthy pieces were formally restored. A gesture of international goodwill and permanent friendship they called it.

Not many people know that a large number of objects actually remained in the U.S. Not, though, because someone resisted their repatriation. It was just that their value was judged too little to warrant the bother of crating and returning them. These were minor artifacts: small and crude statues, stones used for pounding grain, tiny fragments of painted murals, arrowheads, feathers. They all sat virtually forgotten in a government repository.

What Marina did was simple.

She *fabricated* a moderately interesting artifact, one sufficiently developed to intrigue a private collector, but not so refined as to warrant very serious cataloging. A small section of a mural, for example. One just large enough to be framed and hung as an exclusive conversation starter.

Then she advertised the object by word of mouth to friends who in turn spread the message. (It *is* sexy, having something to do with an underground black market...)

"This piece was originally stolen," Marina would report to any collector who came forward, "well, let's say *pilfered*, by my father. It just happens that he was involved with the original Embassy shipment. I mean the one back in the '80s, the one where the Americans were sending all these artifacts they collected up from Mexico. Dad, he...extracted a few of the minor ones from a crate. He did it right after it'd been packed up, but just before it got sealed. Bless his soul."

The story was pretty good, which didn't make much difference, and the story was confirmable, which did.

It was a somewhat tedious but ultimately straightforward process. An application could be made to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico for a photocopy of the sheets listing *all* the pieces that had originally been packed up for transportation north. This list—which Marina had replaced with her own nearly identical but slightly longer version—could be compared with the catalog of current holdings in the American repository, and the list of items returned to Mexico.

The proof was in the discrepancy.

As for the items Marina fabricated, they were not only somewhat profitable, but also quite pleasing to make, and to look at and appreciate. "It's my *beautiful* hobby," she said coyly.

Later, she led Anderson through the rooms of her home pointing to this cracked jade mask, to those carved vessels.

There were pieces of friezes and some decorative renderings of copper. "Some *are* authentic," she assured.

Anderson was impressed. ●

So impressed, Anderson was so taken that it wasn't until much later that he realized how useful he'd been to Marina that afternoon, sneaking into the Franklin Library with her. If it *had* happened that she'd been caught (by someone not so easily dismissed as a cleaning lady), then wasn't *he* the perfect excuse for being there?

Probably, it wasn't good prying through EC's office, hunting information about Anderson and just how he came into the grant he'd received. But, it's a lot better than prying through EC's office to falsify official government documents with the purpose of selling fake pieces of Aztec history. That's serious, real criminal charges on *both* sides of the border. (And, hadn't Marina warned Anderson about avoiding Mexican jail...at all costs? He did remember her saying something along those lines.)

"She's very good at faking," were the exact words Anderson spoke when it all hit him. Then a question: how far back did it go? Was she truly interested in his grant, and *then* saw the opportunity to make the document insertion? Or, did she see the opportunity to make the insertion by getting interested in his grant?

This is certain. By the time Anderson figured out he should ask, the answer didn't matter.

●
Humiliation in Tlascala
●

Humiliation as an imperial weapon was originally unveiled by Hernán Cortés at the city of Tlascala.

Cortés relates that on the fields rolling out around the city he was surrounded by a hundred thousand screaming attackers. (Among his great talents, simple counting shouldn't be listed; once things got into triple digits Cortés had a hard time.) His response to the onslaught? Cortés stood in the midst of the frenzy proclaiming the *Requerimiento*.

Requerimiento: pages of condescension. An excerpt:

Our Lord created the sky and earth, man and woman [the list continues until ending with "fungus and stone"]. Of all this God donated the Americas to Spain. Therefore I require you to recognize the Spanish King as Lord of these lands. If you do, I will receive you with love and care. If you don't, I'll take your women and children and enslave them, and the deaths and damage I wreak will be *your* fault, not mine.

So you can see how Cortés didn't just vanquish the natives, he first degraded them; so little respect did they merit that he stood in the midst of their fevered attacks *reading*.

And reading a message blaming *them* for their own imminent deaths.

The deaths came. Spaniards wantonly decapitated, they cleaved shoulders with battle-axes, drove brutally spiked clubs into rib cages, they administered countless indignities until their conquering arms weighed so heavy they could no longer lift their bloody instruments.

After that long day of brutal exercise, Cortés wrote this into one of his letters home:

Messengers were sent from Tlascala begging forgiveness and pleading to become vassals. They brought gifts of feathered ornaments which they believed held high value. I laughed at their trinkets and ordered the hands of all fifty men cut off. Then I sent them back crying to their masters.

•

As it happened, this frequently quoted passage from Cortés had been cited and read aloud by Anderson in his conference presentation in Juárez. Memorably so, because of a question raised by a provocative listener in the room's back.

"When," Marina had asked, "the Tlascalans were sent back crying to their masters, did they take their *hands* with them?"

"Umm," Anderson had stumbled, "I'd *suppose* so." Quickly his voice strengthened, "There's no *record* of Cortés having any use for the hands. Of course we all know the Spanish didn't commonly *eat* human flesh as the Tlascalans are reputed to have done."

From there Anderson energetically launched a five minute discourse on the natives' habit of cooking and eating fallen warriors. When he finished, he felt he'd done *quite* well. A not inconsiderable expertise on the subject had been brightly displayed. His confident smile, his comfortable pose beside the lectern, they were entirely appropriate.

"I just asked about the hands," Marina had responded, "because I was wondering how they could've been carried back. I mean, since they no longer *had* hands."

"Well, I... I concede that I hadn't thought of that...very *technical* aspect of your question. Umm, a good point you...seem to be making. Or, question, I guess, that you're raising. Well, let's move on."

•

Back to Cortés in Tlascala. When the final end came women

and children ran naked through the streets while native fighters fled to the shelter of the cornfields.

They were defeated but, more importantly, disgraced. As the warriors cowered and shook between swaying corn rows, and as the others exposed themselves to the uses and pleasures of their conquerors, not one could have failed to understand: more than beaten they were inferior, unworthy of respect.

Cortés certainly understood. Their bodies were taken and broken but what he really needed—and got—was their spirits.

Which explains how he reacted to a despondent Tlascalcan proposal for a broad ceremony of intermarriage. The daughters of Tlascala's six principal chiefs were offered to members of Cortés' expedition. The response? Spaniards, Cortés explained, couldn't be expected to *debase* themselves by taking heathen wives. So arrangements were quickly made for the maidens to be purged of their stain with baptismal waters. They needed cleaning.

Then new, good Spanish names were exchanged for (these are Cortés' words) "the barbarous labels of their own language." Yet another disgrace.

Cortés also demanded the pulverization of all the locals' religious idols and monuments. So he demonstrated that even the *Gods* of Tlascala were defenseless before the victors' requirements.

Conclusion. As Cortés moved toward total empire he demonstrated that he wouldn't only overpower his adversaries and therefore humiliate them, *he would humiliate them and so reduce them to powerlessness.*

Centuries of time haven't managed to entirely obliterate the lesson.

•
Humiliation today?
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Sharply but not very comfortably dressed, Name meandered through the rooms of his Mexico City hotel suite. Reaching the luxury recliner he'd purchased himself and had installed in the sitting chamber, he distastefully recalled the squishy piece of furniture that had first occupied the place. "Rush this graceless beast *out* of here, please," he'd ordered the concierge, pointing to the bumpy thing. It was gone in less than a minute.

Hours later his own selection had arrived.

Since then—since he'd had that warm but firm comfort so reliably close—he'd never felt overwhelmed by his project.

True, the entire plan sometimes seemed too tremendous to execute. "My God!" he'd once exclaimed. "Simply *understanding* my endeavor is no doubt beyond most of humanity." It was during those weak moments when the recliner proved most valuable, even a saving grace.

Would he have come as far as he had without the soft respite it offered? Hard to say.

So now, as he felt heavy, bleak, almost like a failure, he *wanted* to take refuge there in the comforting spot. But no, he couldn't allow it. He *had* to stay with his work and understand exactly what was going wrong.

Almost mournfully he opened his journal. Such a magnificent book filled with his plans and thoughts, is it possible that it will finally record...a bad ending? "*Unlikely*," Name answered, stirring and aloud. Then he rubbed his eyes. They were as red as his bow-tie.

He'd been watching TV for days, flipping channels.

There was some good news to report: the event he'd orchestrated on Tlascala Street had been noticed, yes. But, *what* got noticed, that was all wrong.

First problem, the trite theme. "We'll never know," a bright-eyed television reporter typically spurted, "the musical *greatness* that has been extinguished before its time."

"The *truth*," Name had snapped at the dumb screen, "is that you'd never even have known of his ridiculous *existence* were it not for *my* contribution."

Then there were the tears of the pianist's oversized family, the shock of his neighbors, the regrets of his friends and colleagues. It was all insufferable.

But—and here's the real problem—there was almost nothing about the *act*, few details about what actually happened to the poor man.

That explains why there couldn't be any leaps to discovering the main point: how it all just might *resemble* something that happened in the past.

Five-hundred years in the past.

Really though, Name had to admit, the gaping absence couldn't be called *terribly* surprising. In a city where murder occurs with the frequency of car accidents, the details of the pianist's case simply weren't very compelling. *A man found in the street with his hands cut off?* So what? That's nothing compared with the two drug dealers slaughtered by a bomb in a downtown revolving door. Or the congressman found lifeless with cigarette burns in unmentionable places. Or....

Result: the daily mayhem simply overwhelmed the isolated story of what a radio reporter called "the disadvantaged pianist." People knew about it, but their conversations weren't *dominated* by it.

And the so-called Afternoon Newspapers, they hadn't helped at all. Sold on street corners every weekday as people

head home from work, they aren't news so much as scandal sheets with a Page 3 topless photo. Naturally, they're the country's most influential publications.

All these papers did feature the piano man butchering somewhere on their pages. But to Name's dismay, the most memorable aspect of the crime was...the punch lines. One headline: *Victim to Thief: Unhand Me You Scoundrel!* Other publications probed still sicker depths of cleverness while traditional questions about who, what, where, when and why, they floated away.

Name moved to his suite's vast table, sat, unsheathed one of his finest pens and wrote: "This was to be an intelligent operation. And by that I do mean *nous*." (*Nous* is an ancient Greek word designating purified intelligence.) "It *does* seem," he continued writing, "that the Tlascala episode...fails. There are *no* indications that pertinent connections will be drawn to the historical precedent."

After re-reading the conclusion, Name spoke aloud, his voice tired, irritated, "It's *not* that the connections aren't being made, it's that *I* haven't made them *obvious* enough. I'm being far too...intricate."

What were the overlooked connections? Name listed:

1. Hands were ritually and humiliatingly severed by Cortés, and by me.
2. My recreation occurred on the street named for the city Cortés decimated.
3. The severing occurred in front of a house intimately associated with today's empire.
4. The victim, he'd been a strapping young man who approximated the virile ideal of the warriors massacred by Cortés' and his horde.

"Even so, even given *all* these coincidences, *no one* seems to have noticed," Name lamented.

●

The moment Anderson and Marina begin to understand

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"You *live* on *Tlascala* Street?" Marina erupted.

It was stunning, Anderson had to admit, that he hadn't made the connection until now, until Marina visited his house for the first time and saw fast: a man with his hands severed on Tlascala links to the infamous severing of hands Cortés imposed on the city of the same name.

Then again, Anderson was intelligent but notoriously oblivious; overlooking the obvious was a constant in his life (and the reason people who knew him well never risked riding in a car he was driving).

But with reality suddenly pushing so hard, even he was forced to see, to acknowledge...well, he wasn't sure what.

"Are you alright?" asked Marina.

"I think so."

Gradually, some focus. What did he have? First, the application of the torturous instrument most graphically accompanying Cortés through the conquering of the Americas. And now the...what should he call it? The *staging* of the conquering's first major step, the humiliation of Tlascala.

From there a flat question even Anderson couldn't miss. Were these just freak-occurrences freakishly overlapping, or, freak-occurrences with a reason?

Marina was pretty sure she knew the answer.

•
The next step
•

After conquering Tlascala, the next step on Cortés' march to the center of the Americas and world empire was Cholula. There are three notable aspects of that city and its taking.

The Cholulans were a notoriously decorative people. Cortés' most devastating pronouncement of disdain for indigenous civilizations was uttered just outside the city's colorful gates.

The slaughter. Guileful. Merciless.

For Name, *these* were the elements he needed to align spectacularly. Also undeniably. He had to lead anyone with *minimal* sense to conclude that right now repeats what happened five hundred years ago in Cholula.

Uncharacteristically, he undid his bow-tie and muttered words like "conundrum."

It was, Name eventually mused—then he inscribed the realization gracefully in his journal—an *aesthetic* project more than a criminal one: it was about composition and symbolism more than legal disobedience. And, it concerned reception. As opposed to adolescent definitions of art which conceive it as insipid self-expression, Name knew that true art is *force*, coercing others to see what the artist *demand*s they see.

He gasped at the thought.

Then he sourly observed that his mineral water was drained; it was a very hot day to be working at a sidewalk café. Raising his pale, manicured fingers, he signaled his waitress and requested another bottle.

Gratefully, her return was hasty.

He poured a small bit and drank. Then—after glancing to *ensure* that no one was watching—he raised the small bottle and...chugged the rest down.

That passed for an indulgence.

Now back to his project. Name needed energy, though. Just as a middle-aged couple pours wine to begin a romantic evening, or an accountant drags deep on a cigarette before sitting down to confront rows of numbers, Name needed something inciting.

Of course he couldn't fall back on coffee. He *despised* the black liquid (though he did occasionally sip at it). What about other artificial stimulants? Even more contemptible. Eventually, there was this: Name thought on the *pettiest* level, of little people he found *so* revolting.

Yes, rage can impel; it was the perfect natural amphetamine.

He brought to mind a college roommate who insisted on blaring the most undisciplined jazz music. Next came those *poorly dressed* people who inevitably ruined his afternoon strolls. He thought of female interior decorators. Foreign policy advocates of multilateralism. Graffiti "artists." Wearers of cologne, notably Paco Rabanne. Left-wing political activists who live in mansions. Restaurant patrons requesting "a good Zin." The General Assembly of the United Nations....

●
Cholula, past and present
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The Cholula of the Aztecs was, according to Name, an *exquisite* city. EC would've called it "artsy-fartsy." Whichever, we don't get a hint of it from Cortés. Since the letters he wrote back to Spain were composed to accent his hearty bravery, he wisely slimmed down his descriptions of the Cholulan people.

He doesn't tell us how they excelled in neatness and delighted in the arts. Nothing about their delicate taste for flowers, or how they adorned themselves with the most colorful varieties and tossed garlands among the soldiers. In Cholula, light-hearted priests mingled through the streets swinging aromatic censers while music from singular instruments completed the enchanting and frolicsome scene.

Instead of any of that, Cortés—that swaggering and ruddy guy—related how he spoke from his horse while staring down at the puny locals.

I told Cholula's Chiefs that it wasn't fitting for me to deliver a message to persons of such minor rank as themselves. Even their masters in the capital of Tenochtitlan hardly merited hearing it. Nonetheless I commanded their obedience.

It's hard to imagine imperialism getting any purer. So unworthy were the natives of respect, so shameful and despicable was their existence that they didn't even deserve to hear the command: *Obey*.

Obviously they were crushed by the indignity (along with a few quick, one-sided skirmishes). Years, decades, *centuries* lat-

er the brooding continues over the most debilitating question: how did I come to be so insignificant?

No matter how they got to be that way, the subsequent surrender was abject. Faces buried in the dirt, the Cholulans could only hear Cortés and his metal imperialists marching past and into the center of their normally festive city.

After rising from their knees, the disgraced locals were commanded to prepare and serve their betters a lavish banquet.

The next order was to go away. "But keep checking back," Cortés demanded, "to make sure we don't want anything."

Days passed. The Spaniards saw that in a remote corner of the city obscure rites and ceremonies were being practiced, altars billowed and smoked. What were the Cholulans doing? Ritually disemboweling and burning children, they were *pleading* for an explanation from their Gods.

None came.

A more earthly message soon arrived, though. It was an emissary from Cortés, he declared that a formal ceremony memorializing the obedience of Cholula's citizens would be mounted. The messenger made sure to add an important point: the locals weren't being *thanked* for their subservience; their condition was too contemptible to deserve any gratitude. Still, an opulent *celebration* of loyalty and docility, that could be done without affecting their submissiveness.

More, gifts would be presented by the Spaniards. There was also notification that the Spanish would *receive* no gifts. How could they? That would imply some comparability between the two civilizations.

Finally, last details. Since the Spaniards would participate almost to a man in the commemorative ceremony, the full spectrum of native leaders would be there too: the chiefs, the priests, the wealthy....

Also, due to the Spaniard's imminent departure—obviously

there was more conquering to be done—the Cholulan youth was convened. They'd be charged with carrying the Spaniards' heavy supplies to the next city, the next siege.

That was very bad news for the next city.

But it was great for the locals because it meant Cortés was leaving. The dignitaries quickly assembled, the young men too. There was relief, even some colorful though muted displays of celebration.



Outlines of a dramatic, a fabulous re-creation of the end of Cholula formed in Name's mind. It was...an evening party.

The size and tone? A small event, private, but florid and exuberant.

Invitees? Abundant hair stylists, naturally. Everyday-object designers (but no painters). Players in the theater (no directors). Clothing artists. Masters of the alchemy of perfumes. Avant-garde florists.

How could Name ensure that they'd all attend? A creative solution here, starting with the unique invitation. The material could *only* be amate (ah-MAH-tay), a thick, texterous paper fabricated laboriously by the wretches who inhabit Cholula today.

The handwriting on the invitation, it goes without saying, couldn't be tacky calligraphy (which means it couldn't be calligraphy) but *must* be scrupulously formal, impressively graceful.

Here's what it will say:

An evening *reunion* will be held for our friend Carlos Montsivais Monte. Together we will celebrate that flamboyant author, that adjudicator of taste, that cultural icon and lewd pervert. Not only will you and the gathered *salute* our guest of honor, there will be a celebratory launching of his long awaited chronicle and hierarchizing of the tones and shades of the color blue.

Then comes the uniquely personal touch, a message in pleasantly flowing handwriting casually added to a lower corner. (Written to appear as though it was added to only that one invitation, it actually appends to them all.) The words: *Javi if you'd like to share this with Ricardo, please do. I must warn you that Emilio will also be with us.*

Any Mexican will immediately decode the message.

"Javi" must be Javier Alatoro, the mightily handsome but perfectly refined—even fussy—evening news anchorman for the Azteca TV network. "Ricardo" Saliñas is the network's major shareholder and fashion plate. Currently under investigation in the United States for massive fraud and theft from his own multinational corporation, he's as dashing and charismatic as he is untrustworthy.

"Emilio" is Emilio Azcága, inheritor of the media empire Televisa. His father—a slightly less debauched man—was granted and maintained a monopoly on Mexican television that lasted until the 1990s.

How were others kept out? By Televisa's diligent service to the nation's important politicians. The President was *perfect*, and that fact was newsworthy *every* day. And for those who most energetically supported the nation's leader, only slightly less lavish praise. "Governor Emilia Martinez's heroic efforts to empower the poor...." "Senator Santiago Fernandez single-handedly rescued the drowning grandmother...."

Televisa protected the politicians, and the politicians protected Televisa.

Until the stylish and suave Ricardo Saliñas—financed by drug barons and malcontents—amassed enough hundreds of millions of pesos to organize a lightening war of corruption. Tremendous, unheard of sums were paid directly to politicians and their immediate families and extended families and friends. Newspaper editors suddenly started arriving at work in chauffeured cars and just as quickly began writing op-ed

columns bemoaning the limited channel selection on TV. Radio talkers wearing imported suits and Rolexes joined in. Petition drives got underway. Protesters marched. Telephones rang.

It was the single largest event in the world history of money laundering. Incidentally, it also brought into existence Mexico's second television station.

So now there are two networks in Mexico, with no love to lose between them. And that explains why an invitation addressed to people on one side should carry fair warning that representatives of the other will also be there.

It also tells the recipient that the invitation is to an event of the *highest* caliber. Only an affair of maximum glamour and resplendence could hope to lead the two sides to forgo their differences and together attend.

In a single sentence, the invitation could *only* be among the year's most intriguing and desirable.

And what a tremendous stroke of luck for the recipient!

Extreme luck because the recipient *wasn't* Javi Alatoro. None of the twenty-three delicate and colorful recipients were Javi. All of them were very thankful, though, for an address fluke that brought the invitation to their door.

Taking just one case as an example: the carved wooden box carrying the card was addressed to Javier Alatoro at 37 Riviera Street, *but* it got mistakenly delivered by private messenger service to 37 Rivera.

The effeminate man who received the box *thought* about forwarding it to the intended destination.

Wait. No.

How could he *possibly* let it pass, a once in a lifetime chance to mingle in the most prodigal and thrilling social air. He sat fingering the expensive box for a while, got up, telephoned an intimate friend to be his guest for the evening, and marked the night on his calendar.

There was a problem, though. Since everyone there would be SOMEONE, wouldn't people notice the very incongruent presence of this person no one had ever seen before?

Name solved that difficulty easily: a *masked* affair. Actually, he thought, that would be a perfect name for his entire event. The Masked Affair.

"A sliver of disguise," the invitation read. And the box included two masks, both the color of red wine, stiff, luxurious, and sized to cover the eyes and brows, most of the upper face. Obviously it wouldn't be held in place by a tacky elastic band; instead, each mask came firmly attached to a fine Monte Blanc pen. You held the writing instrument in your hand to keep the disguise fixed in front of the face.

The pen was a social masterstroke. Easy to uncap at any moment during the evening, it could be used to jot down a telephone number, an address, a naughty thought. Name squealed at the inventiveness.

Then he daydreamed of Javier Alatoro, so *marvelous* a creature. Everyone in Mexico knew how he breezed through social events smoothing the lapels of men's suits, pulling at the hems of women's dresses. He'd take a knee before a young gentleman and carefully measure the distance from pant-cuff to floor; a curdling judgment normally followed. He'd strip the pearl necklace from a young woman because the white balls blocked the view to her long, supple neck. While cooing over a dowager's understated lipstick he'd reach down her dress and slightly adjust her bosom. Nothing escaped his critical eye.

He wept when the petals fell from the flower arrangement.

He was infuriated by wine drinkers who didn't hold their glass by the stem.

His sizable retinue was exuberant but not loud, their clothing bold but never gaudy, their discrimination nearly as flawless as their master's. They were students of superficial emotion, collectors of obscure musical scores, public masturbators,

sternly respectful of the history of absinthe, daring advocates of causes like dressing for dinner.

Obviously this shining mass of rare cultivation, style and joy could be found divine by only a very few.

But for every one of those carefully selected to receive Name's apparently misdelivered invitation, the spectacle of their beautiful presence wasn't appealing, it was irresistible.

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As was, in a distinct sense, the humiliation.

The invitations had been delivered to people who did not merit them. Indisputably, that was the message sent between every line: you, the accidental recipient of this card would *never* be considered for *our* company. And were it not a masked affair, even an invitation-in-hand would be insufficient to gain entry to be among us.

It was a brutal slap of indignity. The recipients were forced to confront a reality where the insignificance of their existences was so deep that if it weren't for a wild stroke of fortune they wouldn't even have *known* the dullness and pettiness of their normal social evenings. In fact, they *still* didn't know. They could only plumb the full depths of their misery by going to the party and finding out just how intoxicating life was among the aristocracy of the dandies and the aesthetes.

Conclusion. They'd hurry to the event. And with masks pressed tight against their faces, they'd do their best to fit in.

Conclusion written differently. Shame and humiliation induce perfect obedience.

●
The party, the massacre
●

“Cholula Street,” Marina said, “it’s right here you know.” She pointed. “Two blocks, I’m thinking.”

That caught Anderson by surprise, but only because he hadn’t noticed something about streets in Mexico City. They’re clustered thematically. Example, the U.S. Embassy is located in a zone called “The Rivers” because the streets are named Nile, Amazon, Mississippi and so on.

There’re clusters for military leaders, world philosophers, inventors, nearly everything. It’s a big city. And, in the Condesa—as the Condesa—streets are named for Mexican cities and towns. Veracruz, Tlascala, Cholula, Cuernavaca....

Incidentally, this strategy is a real breakthrough for urban organization. Anyone who’s lived in the city for more than a few years can instantly locate the neighborhood of an office or residence just from its street name. It’s not as precise as the street/avenue alignment of New York City, but far superior in all other respects. It’s even a helpful learning tool for school-children.

In the Condesa, Cholula Street runs five short blocks. It’s purely residential, placid, almost noiseless, so it held no promise of any revelation. Still, Anderson and Marina wandered down to check it out after she’d provoked, “Tlascala Street makes you *think*?”

Not in the mood to play sarcastic, Anderson refused to say the name of the city Cortés crushed after Tlascala; he just set off in the direction she’d pointed. “Always nice,” he finally said to break the silence, “to walk in the Condesa in any case.”

Marina liked that about him, he was the only person she'd ever met who could say "in any case" perfectly naturally, as though he was saying "anyway" or "whatever."

They went.

In the Condesa nearly every building's made from brick and mortar with an art-deco twist. Discovered about twenty years ago by the expatriate crowd, they all live in the neighborhood now. And as opposed to the developed world where the word "immigrant" implies filth and poor taste, in Mexico it's the new and alternative, the different and exciting, the future.

Local artists, actors, intellectuals and bohemians, they all followed the international scent, and pretty soon sidewalk cafés sprouted and, more recently, organic food stores.

Then a third wave of move-ins: idle children of rich parents. They want to buy the lifestyle, but don't have patience for refurbishing old homes. So here and there a stately but tired brick house comes down and up goes the glass and steel of modern lofts.

Marina and Anderson paused to look at one in early construction. Thick metal beams reached up from a deep foundation lined with poured concrete.

A policeman reclined listlessly against his squad car, watching a few workers drag heavy velvet tapestries from a van down the ramp and into the cement foundation. Below, two of the lavish drapes had already been hung across the gray walls.

In the skeleton of girders above, a few mini-floodlights were being positioned.

"They're probably getting ready for a *Pre-venta* (Pre-sale)," Marina said. "Since the economy collapses about every ten years or so here, no bank can possibly give mortgages, so the builders, they really have to arrange all the financing themselves. It works, more or less. They build a little bit at first, like this one, and then throw some parties in the place to get some interest going. Hopefully they make some sales. Then—I mean

assuming everything goes alright—they take that money and pay the workers and all until it's finished. At the end you move in and live there, but you *keep* paying for it. It's kinda like renting for a while. That second part of the money's the profit, that's the way it's supposed to be. And probably the builders, they'll give you the *escritura* (formal ownership papers) eventually. Probably."

"So, the buyers actually loan money interest-free to the contractors who use it to make a profit off those very buyers."

"Like I said, it works."

"Nice scam."

"Especially when they skip town instead of finishing the building."

•

Like any event meriting the adjective *exquisite* (Name's favorite word at the moment, replacing his long preference for "interesting"), the evening glittered with startling particularities, with *chispa* as the Mexicans call it, sparks.

As their cars were spirited away by flirtatious valets, the arriving guests could be heard tittering at the setting. Earlier in the day it had been the hulking frame of an unfinished building. Now, a seductive, bold statement.

From the steel beams above, tremendous white sheets hung for soft night breezes to fill with undulating curves. Carefully spotted floodlights provided mystical and billowing illumination.

Men sighed, women hummed as they were ushered down the entrance ramp into the building's solid base. As was perfectly obvious to Name, scattering the improvised walkway with candles or rose petals to greet his arrivals would've been trite—just anyone could do that. But small stones, *those* could be interesting.

They were, and so much more. Name treasured that otherworldly crushing sound as his guests carefully descended through the pebbles.

"Bow your heads in devout thanks...*for ears!*" he commanded a pair of young men who seemed more captivated by each other than Name's creation. They hushed.

Another arriving couple—*so* delightful, the boy could've been the man's grandson!—had somehow left their concealment elsewhere. Still their faces were covered: silk handkerchiefs performed the clandestine service. Could it be, Name asked himself as he admired their appearances and envied their pleasures, that they'd actually *improved* his effort?

No.

Every single person who received an invitation arrived, and slowly the event reached toward maturity.

Guests mingled cautiously, no one wanting to give too much away, to be seen as who he or she was. *Interloper*. Personal facts, they were scrupulously avoided.

Drifting through the clusters, Name found a giddy pleasure in the prying and elusive words. It was a brilliant trap, really, everyone imagining that everyone else *must* be tremendously powerful or intriguing, and digging to find out exactly how. But, at the same time, laboring heroically to say nothing at all about themselves and their sadly ordinary lives.

"Oh piquant night!" Name wrote grandly on a five-hundred peso note before passing it to one of his guests. Steadily, the message was read and sent on from hand to hand around the room. Name watched the slow progress avidly.

Five-hundred pesos is a respectable sum, and the receivers *must've* been tempted to pocket the note. More than a few wavered, checked to see if anyone was watching... None took it. Name knew: they were all too intimidated by the shame of being seen as the kind of person who'd do something like that.

It was a curious truth Name had discovered. He ran the money experiment regularly, and found that the note disappeared only from the most exclusive gatherings, only when the guests didn't even need the money. Of course those were

also the people who weren't ashamed of themselves, they're the ones accustomed to making others feel that way. So if they *were* caught pocketing the bill, their response wasn't red-faced stuttering about how it was all some kind of mistake. It was more like, "*Why* were you *watching me*, you baboon."

Tonight, the women attending Name's event may have been imperfectly trained in the etiquette of wealth, but they couldn't be criticized for their sultriness. Too bad almost no one was interested.

As for the more numerous and effeminate men surrounding him, Name found their presence not in the least arousing; he was a pederast—a lover of boys—not a homosexual. In fact, he considered gay intimacy nearly as boorish and crude as the heterosexual version. Still, he enjoyed the sense that everyone else was aroused, flirty, hopeful. He played along. Very well.

People *responded* to Name, his glow. It wasn't the straight lines his suit cut, or the fine woman's boots tying well above his ankle. Those elements contributed, but what made him visibly shine was his pose, the impression he radiated that *you* the person I'm talking to now are a step beneath me and my continued presence *requires* the demonstration of some social virtue on your part. Nonetheless I sense that you *could* be one of those I select for more intimate association. So I'm listening. For the moment.

Tantalizing.

This quality, this posture, the tilt of the head and flicker of the hands, none of it was consciously controlled. Name hadn't even realized he possessed it until halfway through his university years. A jealous and not particularly clever—but with clever intentions—classmate had *accused* him of having it. "You're a social ladder," he'd huffed. "You make the rest of us want to climb."

A clumsy metaphor, but not lacking in truth.

So as the evening intensified, the admirers arrived before

Name. Inevitably, they opened with a banality. Soon after they'd thrust details of their cloddish lives at him.

For his part, Name maintained solid dignity by addressing them in third person, something he could make seem perfectly natural. "And what *else* does Roberto do?" "Where does Eduardo shop?" "Who is Enrique normally seen with?"

On a night when everyone was hiding, they revealed everything to him.



The nobles and high priests of Cholula gathered outside the Spanish quarters and waited patiently. Eventually, the compound's mighty wooden doors swung open. The Cholulans entered, were ushered through the main courtyard and into a great room where Cortés and his highest lieutenants sat.

Ceremony: documents read, speeches made.

Some imbibing. Nervousness dissipated, glances skipped across the bare tables.

Finally the formal recognition of subjugation was presented. The Cholulans were reminded that it couldn't be called an "agreement" since that word implies the autonomy of both parties.

Next, the natives were told that *all* the Spaniards would sign. Cortés' entire infantry filed into the great room. The Cholulans noticed—how could they not?—that their entering masters were adorned with long swords.

Heavy, silencing doors were pulled closed.

According to Cortés, the slaughter required less time than the cleanup.

The blood pooled so deeply and rapidly afterward that it threatened to flow from one room to the next and down into the street. That was a problem because the unsuspecting Cholulan youth waited out there.

Quickly, the groaning bodies were piled into the lowest of the killing-chamber's four corners. Then men were detailed to

dig grooves into the clay floor to channel the flowing blood down a water well. (Historical note: in his letter to Europe, Cortés finishes recounting this part of the episode with an immodest suggestion about the now reddened well and the divine capacity to turn water into wine.)

(Second historical note: Cortés' writings became more "exuberant" as his march pushed forward.)

While the overflowing blood was being managed, Cortés oversaw preparations for the massacre's next phase. Improvised crossbows were stretched, the expedition's sole musket loaded. Hidden positions were taken along the parapet extending above the main courtyard.

The young Cholulan men waiting outside—gabbing, sparsely attired, decorated with flowers, some fingering themselves with rich body paint—were finally shepherded into the open patio.

None dared raise a voice to ask about their elders.

They stood obediently for prayers. They were told to kneel for the reading. Sun blazing, scripture was recited. Half an hour, three-quarters of an hour. On it went. Falling sweat darkened the dust at their feet.

A signal.

From above the Spanish loosed arrows. (The musket fizzled, as usual.) Defenseless and crying for help from their Gods, the brown youths fell together. For those lucky enough to find themselves near the middle of the pack, the dying bodies of companions provided cover from the opening barrages.

There was no relenting of the onslaught, though, no stopping the arrows zinging straight into their mass.

Eventually some struggled away from the pile, screaming abject surrender. "A theater of futility," is how Cortés remembered the moments.

The attack kept up, and finally those few Cholulans who still could ran for the courtyard walls. They attempted to climb,

but were met from above by long spears mingled with pity and contempt.

The initial massacre ended.

More than an hour of wading through limbs and torsos—hacking, impaling, clubbing—was required to finish the work.

Outside, the emasculated remains of the city waited. Cortés leapt to his horse and flew to them for several more hours of passion. When it was over, another three thousand lay dead. These last victims—composed of the aged, women and children—had, according to the letter Cortés wrote home, no defense but the weariness the imperialists.



Down in the basement a decision needed to be made. *Which* guest would be designated to receive the crushing disgrace of today's version of the old domination?

Meandering through his event, Name's concentration fixed on one and another possibility. Some held the advantage of size: smaller equals less resistance. Others presented a pending and helpful disorientation; they were alleviating their anxiety with too much of a drink that was unusual and not mild.

Then there was a guest who seemed to *invite* humiliation with her bent posture, tweaky voice, banal conversation. And her shoes! Almost invisible under her floor-length (and admittedly tasteful) gown, she'd probably convinced herself that no one would notice. Name had, though. Horrid sight. Just a flash, but enough to recognize...artificial leather! *Where* could she have gotten them? Recently, he'd heard of a place called Wal-Mart where such things were apparently storehoused.

Unfortunately, Name's critical eye could not avoid falling on an obese and aggressively obnoxious fellow who'd somehow found his way into the splendid event. Both the evening and the world would be improved by *his* absence.

And, as always, some people seemed too frivolously cheerful to deserve anything but dreadful and curative torturing.

"Perdóname!" came an exclamation.

Immediately Name felt a chilling wetness trickling down his thigh. A spilled drink. Sensing that it wasn't severe, he pardoned, "It's fine, fine." Then, catching sight of a delicate, almost childish hand gripping the now empty earthenware cup, Name added, "I *obviously* shouldn't have *jostled* you."

The spiller's eyes locked with Name's. "Can I get you another?" the young man asked, somewhat senselessly since he was the one who now stood without a drink.

"No, I couldn't be so *rude*. It would..." Name searched his mind, but his Spanish still occasionally resisted. There was a phrase, he knew, that would be exactly right here. Something along the lines of, "I couldn't *presume*..." It didn't come, though. So he settled for, "Perhaps I could get *you* another?"

"I can't ask for that, but...well, sorry about your pants. It's not a lot, luckily." Peering down, the youth was angling his mask on his face, revealing a sharp cheekbone that contrasted wonderfully with his succulent mouth.

It was a kind of game, Name had noticed, almost a striptease. As guests picked up vibrations of sex and opportunity they flirted with their face-coverings. Finding ways to reveal a bit here, a little there, they sent out their fleshy signals like women communicate with their cleavage.

Another man—the crass, boisterous one who'd been tentatively marked as too repugnant to share the earth with Name—obtrusively lingered in the area, then butted in. "Part of the magic of tequila," came the blurting, "is that it hardly stains." Engorged by his silly knowledge he lowered his mask, revealing a homely face.

Feeling their disdain, or maybe just sensing that they wouldn't be lowering *their* masks for him, he disappointedly raised his back into position.

Quickly Name moved to extricate himself, but he maneuvered too bluntly and the ignoramus correctly took offense. "It's *rude* to show your back to a new arrival."

"You *are* right, of course. *Do* excuse me."

"As punishment you better flip us some skin, you oldie but goody!"

"I *do* need to check on my partner," Name tried again, taking a step away from the other two, "I'll be back, *momentarily*."

Almost from behind the annoying man guffawed and reached for Name's mask, gripping it playfully then tugging bullishly enough to reveal the face beneath to the attractive lad.

"*Odious creature*," shrieked Name, knowing that he couldn't allow anyone who'd seen him carefully—anyone who could later identify him—to walk away from the event. The next moments were excruciating, but Name stiffened, composed himself and went forward. "I *am* sorry," he said.

"What for, old man? Showing us those *wrinkles*!"

"Petulant oaf."

"Where's the face cream!"

"Witless bovine! Lout!"

A neat though whiny intervention came from the youth, "I'm covering my ears!" He did.

Silence.

"Again, I *am* sorry," Name relented, this time slipping away quickly. Flustered now, and with the evening's intrigue irreparably damaged, and the unfairness of it all depressingly burdening, he again circled the room. He moved very slowly, it would be the last chance to observe and enjoy.

Impossible to miss the guests' excitement. No doubt the drink—tequila with heavy lingering overtones—had taken generous effect. Had the guests been less urbane they may have recognized the source of the tingeing, leaden taste: a liquid common in the Mexican countryside since centuries before Cortés' arrival. Called *pulque*, there's nothing demonic in the drink, it's not highly disorienting or overtly hallucinatory. Still, it's different. It *soils*.

Pulque is fermented, which means its natural qualities and penetrating effects reach pestilent extremes as the liquid essentially rots until it's drinkable. So while distilled liquors like tequila insert a hearty message of cleanliness and intensity into the mouth, from the first vile swallow of pulque you feel corrupted, infected.

Maybe it's the festering nature of the inebriation that explains why Aztec priests sometimes used pulque as a substitute for blood in their ceremonies.

Without doubt it's the ulcerous putrefaction that explains why there're no pulque *connoisseurs*, there're no levels of pulque expertise, no learning, no more or less sophisticated pallets and descriptions. There are only those who've accepted it into their body, and those who (prudently) have not.

Of course it's nearly impossible to drink on its own, which is why Name blended it with a rare tequila. Then he poured the fusion into an urn atop a *choc-mal*, a kind of ceremonial table.

On the wall behind, a unique, exquisitely painted reproduction of "*Bebedores de Pulque*" had been suspended. The original mural dates from about 1000 BC. Unearthed in Cholula in the late 1960s, it depicts a romping celebration of nude boys and drunk Gods.

Guests admired the intoxicating, handcrafted reproduction. *Superior to the real artifact!* proclaimed one expert. The effect was only enhanced by the fine boys Name had contracted to mimic the dance, to exhibit themselves leaping and spinning throughout the room.

The atmosphere resonated toward perfection. At once exciting, hopeful, mysterious and forbidding, the way opened to conclusion.

As if to confirm the thought, the young man misfortune had designated as the evening's crucial guest drifted to Name's side.

Together they observed the antiquated indigenous woman

seated next to the pulque blend. Nearly toothless, she lifted several fibrous strands of the maguey plant from the pile between her feet and gummed at them. A few determined chomps, then she spit the mess into a wooden vat. In the remote countryside, Name explained, older women make themselves (and their corroded, sore-infested jaws) useful by mixing their spittle with shreds from the plant. "It's the infections from their mouths, you see, that *initiate* the fermentation."

The young man's cherubic face—the qualities radiated through his mask—wavered between curiosity and revulsion.

"A repugnant origin," acknowledged Name, "undeniably. But the *results*, exalting."

"Horrible but exalting," agreed the young friend. For a time they remained silent together, united in their happy loathing.

Eventually the youth asked, "I've been wondering about, well, about what it can be that's *behind* all this, I mean, what it's about. It's so...much. It just seems like it *has* to be more than a one-night party."

Name appreciated the insight and the question. "Almost certainly the intention is that the event be *understood*. I mean, how everything staged here this evening beckons to...well, if you'll allow me to share it?"

"Ok, good."

Since arrogance was his natural reaction to anxiety, Name pompously contorted his pronunciation, he twisted the accent shaping each word from slurry Mexican to the sharper, more dignified Spanish of Europe. "Everything you see *here*," he intoned, "beckons to Cholula, more exactly to the day the imperialist Hernán Cortés made the city his own."

"Wow, what a...different idea. Original, that's for sure."

"I hope so," Name agreed, silently overjoyed at having made such a perceptive acquaintance.

"But are you *really* sure that's what's going on? I mean, it seems like there're so many different ways everything could

be taken. I *love* that old woman—she’s great, so patient just working away there... And everything seems so *earthen*, you know? Like, look at her skin.” He admired the old woman’s brown folds. “And then there’re these great cups. And this basement, it’s so damp, so wet.” Deeply, he inhaled through his nose. “You can *smell* it. It, it almost feels like a theme of, or, well, like a *celebration* of...nature’s order.”

“Ewww,” squirted Name unpleasantly. “*Nature’s* order... Could *any* thought be more *repugnant*?”

Not sure what was so painfully wrong with what he’d just said, the youth bowed slightly and began pulling away.

Name arrested the retreat. “*Wait*,” he almost pleaded, “tell me what you know about the massacre at Cholula. I mean, umm, I mean the events there as perpetrated by the grand Cortés.”

“Well..., I have to admit that it’s not very much.”

Name nodded as a father would. “If you’d like, you’ll be able to learn *quite* a bit this evening. I even happen to know that there’s a brilliantly surprising piece of that history very near here. It’s no more than steps away, there, behind that curtain.”

“Hmm,” came the neutral reply.

Name led the way.

In the narrow space behind the curtain’s limp fabric a crate was dimly observable: long, thin, made of wood. Name pointed at a hammer and iron wedge. “You’ll be able to pry it open with those.” The young man hesitated. “You will be impressed by what’s inside, I *want* you to see.” Underlining the sincere desire, Name lowered his mask.

The youth did too, eliciting an aching pant from Name. If *only* he could’ve encountered this tantalizing creature five or six years earlier! “I *must* know what your friends and what your lovers call you. Tell me *that* at least.”

“Miguel.”

“Ohh.”

While Name observed, Miguel cautiously and respectfully set to work. Though obviously not accustomed to manual labor he eventually got the lid partially raised. Then off. Inside, he saw an object wrapped in embroidered cloth.

"Unfold," Name politely commanded.

"Wow," came the report after Miguel pulled away the sumptuous covering. It was a long sword. Then, slowly taking up the weapon he examined the blade's straight line and the symbolic indentations covering the metal.

"A nearly *perfect* sword," said Name.

Miguel dared wave it slightly. "And so *light*," he marveled.

"A common misconception. It's *balanced*, it feels and swings light because of its precise craftsmanship. In our vulgar age, of course, we commonly conflate the quantitative with the qualitative. You, my boy, certainly may *not* be blamed for the state of the world into which you were born."

"What? I mean...too bad about the missing top."

Name laughed feebly. "Yes, one also can't be blamed for a poverty of historical knowledge. I can only pray that I have not overestimated my public once again."

"What?"

"Most of those gathered here, I imagine, *would* suppose that the tip was partially snapped off in some kind of bad accident. In fact, however, it's quite intentional. Certainly the sword as originally fired was more refined, more pleasing to the eye, but it's far *deadlier* this way. The wounds it cuts are rougher, more difficult for the body to heal."

"Grisly, I mean the injury."

"Precisely," Name agreed, "which, you see, tells us why the Spaniards who came to the Americas did that to their swords. Imagine, the finely pointed tip so useful in Europe served no purpose here. The natives *obviously* didn't wear chainmail."

"Ahh, no."

"It is, of course, *absurd* that the natives presented themselves

for battle without any bodily protection. Only adornments, *paint* and *feathers*."

Miguel nodded, without conviction.

"At the same time," Name's mood shifted, "this too should be stated: we must at least recognize the possibility—the *glorious* possibility, really—that they were setting *aesthetic* considerations above biological ones."

Uncertainty tinted young Miguel's face.

Name enjoyed the teaching, helping another understand. "I mean, they surely *could* have wrapped their bodies in thick leather. That would've afforded at least *some* protection... But perhaps they found it preferable to expose themselves to death in battle rather than enter such a momentous thing appearing only *plain*. Protective leather and such, could anything be *more* ordinary, more unremarkable and...*boring*?"

Miguel's uncertainty edged toward bewilderment.

"My God, man, I mean they'd rather risk death than not be *fabulous*!"

Message conveyed.

The two remained together. Name made no sign to separate his young friend from the sword; instead, he stood casually watching, establishing trust and comfort. *If I don't object to your swinging that near me, you won't object to the same...*

The weapon had been hewn in Toledo in the sixteenth century. Two qualities made it—like all blades from that singular place and time—nearly perfect. First, content. Fabricated with two types of steel (technically one type with vastly different levels of carbon) the Toledo sword combined the strength of Europe's hardest blades with the flexibility of the softest. The other crucial element was timing. Forging the two steels together required joining them in an oven for an exact period no briefer or longer than the one required to chant a specific round of biblical psalms. Exactly *which* psalms—and therefore the exact timing—remains a secret to this day.

"So," Miguel understood, "these blades were really *holy* or *Godly* from... well, from the moment they were born."

"Exactly. That *does* give you a perspective, doesn't it, of the power you now touch?"

Not exactly sure, Miguel held the sword up in silence, then asked, "Where'd you get it?"

Reinforcing the social order he'd been imposing, Name off-handedly ignored the question by instructing his companion to turn around. A directional floor lamp—industrial intensity—waited behind. It was oriented to shine right at the two. If lit, the beam would hit them then pass on to illuminate the curtain separating them from everyone else. "Turn it on, please."

Miguel went to the task.

Name withdrew a folded sheet from his pocket.

Brightness exploded all around, grasping attention. As expected, all fell into reverential silence.

Every one of the basement's masked guests was captivated by the images projecting onto the curtain. They saw two silhouettes, one standing, apparently preparing to read from a paper or a book. The other figure seemed mildly confused, disoriented. He held something long, narrow and suggestive.

What could this be? And how could these two make the evening *still more* perfect?

Also observable: sentences were written darkly—and in English—onto the hanging fabric separating the quieted group from the shadowy actors. Several spectators mouthed the words, they whispered and struggled to capture the meaning. The message seemed very familiar, but no one could quite describe the significance or place where it came from.

Name had translated the sentences from Cortés.

He'd also copied the well-known (in Latin America) lines onto the paper he held. The plan was to read, or better, *announce* the words with penetrating clarity. The light's glare was overwhelming, though, leaving him unable to read his own

writing. He could barely make out the form of the paper in his hand. No matter, Name recited from memory:

Awe crept over the Cholulans as they gazed on the mysterious strangers. There was no use in denial before such judges!

The brief but awesome sentences completed, Name carefully folded the paper and pocketed it.

Then he gently reached—his eyes still adjusting to the brilliant illumination—for the sword his companion held.

The lethal tool was relinquished.

"I command you, *indulge* in this Toledo steel!"

The victim received his thrust in silence and collapsed. Overwhelmed by the white beaming, he hadn't seen it coming, hadn't seen anything all.

Name slipped from behind the curtain and strode away from the event.

Behind, he heard attempts at clapping, but only scattered and tentative. The hesitation didn't reveal his guests' uncertainty over whether they *should* clap for the rousing theater, instead, everyone wanted to join in applause but most didn't dare. Bringing their hands together would require lowering their masks, and that meant revealing themselves as who they really were.

Forced to remain silent, their humiliation was complete.

•
Trapped
•

"Wake up," insisted Marina, picking his pants off her floor two fingered and holding them out like the plague.

Sharp answers were possible, but Anderson's habitual indecisiveness won the moment.

Accustomed to occasionally maintaining their conversation's two sides, Marina said, "You'll just have to wear them. We need to go now."

Anderson hated the morning, his face swollen and ugly, everything unclean. There was only one way to make it worse: skip the shower and dress in the previous day's clothes. Especially the socks. "Ahhhghg."

"Good," she said. "Now *please* move."

He considered begging for at least a rinse. He'd put it casually, "A quick shower?"

She cut him off, "So, there it is." She dropped the morning paper on the bed. "I need to make arrangements." He heard the door close bitchily.

For *his* part, he hadn't regretted the night before, just the opposite. Flipping through the newspaper without actually looking at it, he tried to imagine why she suddenly found him so revolting.

Nothing came.

Maybe *that* was the problem, the nothing. Maybe she thought there wasn't anything unique or memorable about last night; he hadn't done anything to stand out, to be different from all those other men out there in the world.

So he wasn't bad or repulsive, but worse, boring.

He had to admit that leaving a dull man alone with a newspaper was a *deviously* effective way of kicking him out in the morning. At once thoughtful and impersonal, it perfectly messaged, "You're a nice person, so you get to look at the sports section, but..."

On the other hand, maybe it *wasn't* that. Definitely, the tequila had led him to produce a few sentences last night that came off raw—verging on insulting—in the sober light of morning. "Not exactly poetic, that's for sure..." Anderson said aloud. She might be mad. Still, he hadn't been *totally* obnoxious.

And what had *she* said as she touched his belt? That he was "lucky" to catch her at a "hormonal moment." Not exactly pink and fluttery romance on her side.

Maybe later she'd soured on the way he'd pried her up by the ankles to get a stronger angle, or how he'd watched her like she was in a movie. Hard to turn away, though, or close the eyes during those seconds as she slammed her fist up and down against the mattress while gagging herself with her other hand. It was dramatic, just like her. And anyway, she'd watched him too at the end, smiling with this almost twisted satisfaction, like a mother proud of her son's performance in the school play.

Hard to know what to make of it all, but somewhere along the line something obviously went wrong.

The door burst open. "Well," she demanded, her eyes jumping down the bed to the abandoned newspaper, or maybe to his thigh. Not sure which, Anderson covered himself and tried to scowl. He really couldn't do it, though.

Her face contorted. "The first thing I did, obviously, was call Luis. He'll be here any second now. You *may* want to get dressed. It'd be nice if you could do that."

"Luis?"

"Luis."

"That reporter for the *Jornada!*" Suddenly Anderson got it. He'd intruded on another man's territory and Marina had, it seemed, reported him to the proper authority. "I didn't realize..." he stuttered.

"What?"

"I, I *hope* your Luis isn't planning on, what, challenging me...to a duel?"

"What?"

From below a ringing bell. Then the slow climb of footsteps up the stairs. The maid was coming to announce the arrival of "Señor Luis."



Later, Anderson cataloged that morning as the third truly complete misunderstanding he experienced in Mexico.

The first occurred because he hadn't learned a small but critical distinction. In Spanish, *Soy aburrido* means "I'm a boring person," and the very similar *Estoy aburrido* means "I'm a bored person."

During his first weeks in Mexico City, Anderson was invited to any number of social events and he always took pains to speak Spanish as well as he could. The effort was tiring, though, and now and again in the midst of conversations—especially in groups—he found it necessary to withdraw slightly, rest his mind and more or less pretend he was following what was being said.

Occasionally someone caught him fading and addressed a pleasantry, "Are you feeling tired this evening?" Anderson had a stock response, something he thought modestly clever. "No, I'm just a boring person." Then he'd smile ironically around the cluster of people, expecting the radiant warmth his gracious, self-effacing humor merited.

Since he'd said "*Estoy*" instead of "*Soy*," he got something nearer the opposite. Which he attributed to his poor Spanish in the sense that he wasn't pronouncing the words well and his

listeners couldn't understand them. So, inevitably, he repeated the sentence, slowly, and in the *clearest* and *sharpest* tones he could muster.

Very rarely has a man accumulated a reputation so dreadful so rapidly.

It was curious, though, the unwitting condescension resulted in no decline in the number or quality of invitations received.

•

While Marina went down to receive the *Jornada* reporter, Anderson contemplated a tense, joyless and possibly threatening meeting.

From the upstairs bedroom—now nearly dressed—he could hear raised voices. More of Marina's, and not only because she was louder.

He listened, trying to discern the words and determine a moment when his arrival—the interloper, the man who'd not only spent the night but *obviously* spent the night—would cause minimal disruption.

Why had she reported him? Maybe Luis did something bad and Marina had decided the right punishment was sleeping with a vile American. What could Luis have done? Forgotten her birthday? Probably worse than that.

Anyway, the sleep-with-another-man-as-revenge strategy fit with one thing Anderson clearly saw in Marina. She was *manipulative*. Hadn't she *used* him to find out about the turcas being missing from the Cathedral? And then when she wanted to plant those false papers in EC's office, who'd she take advantage of?

So it couldn't be called surprising. She wanted to get back at Luis, and she'd called the tall American to her service. Manipulator. Probably, Anderson had to admit, he actually *liked* that about her. It was captivating. He wished he would've seen it earlier, though. "Little thief," he muttered as he picked at short streaks of dried blood he found on his shoulder.

Then he buzzed for the maid. (A button next to the bed called downstairs.) Pretty soon the heavy and deferential woman arrived in the dressing area outside the bedroom. "I'd like a coffee, please," he announced through the door.

How natural *that* had become. Anderson could barely remember what reality was like before, back when he found it irritating having people he didn't really know traipsing around his intimate places. Now he couldn't imagine living any other way.

The newspaper Marina had left for him remained curled into the messy covers. He frowned, already dreading that part of his inevitable return to the States: having to make his own bed.

While fiddling with his trouser zipper and waiting for his coffee, he plucked the paper out. He'd page through it again. Anything was better than going downstairs.

For the first time he actually *looked* at it.

Everything twisted, all reality blurred.

The voices downstairs surged and he rushed to them.



Surrounded by newspapers, radios and two televisions, Name was singing and prancing in his luxurious suite.

The locals were beginning *to understand!*

They still didn't see many of the pieces, and very little of how it all fit together. They definitely weren't yet shuddering at what it all *meant*. But they were...attentive.

There was a lot to see and hear. Film of the scene came over the televisions. Descriptions poured out of radios. Abundant pictures in the morning newspapers.



"I," a strong stress on that egotistical word, "got a call about a *new* job at a *different* paper. It was real early this morning," Luis the *Jornada* reporter was saying.

"Let me guess," Marina answered, "they'd *welcome* your application. And it's more money."

"The *only* thing they want," he soothed, "is for me to start with a really big bang. This *is* my chance. Especially because it was...*Reforma* that called!"

Reforma is Mexico's influential, solid, respected and wealthy newspaper, the best employment a print journalist or photographer can get in the country. At the other extreme, *La Jornada* is poor. And not only that, in accordance with their quasi-socialist philosophy, everyone from the print and ink boys to the general editor are paid on the same scale. This shouldn't be taken to mean the ink boys are well paid.

The marginal poverty was worth it, though, all the *Jornada* employees heartily agreed, because they were serving a noble purpose: revealing the horrors of unbridled capitalism. And even *more* satisfying, they were doing everything in their power to display the evils of capitalism's fervid source, the United States.

Clearly there's a cause and effect uncertainty here. Is the *Jornada* against America because it represents capitalism, or, is it against capitalism because it's so American? Whichever, secretly and nervously everyone who works at the *Jornada*—down to the ink boys—fantasizes about landing a post at *Reforma*. And periodically they all send in a hopelessly solicitous query letter.

The *Reforma*, of course, pays no attention to these Hail Marys. They hire only graduates from elite private universities in Mexico (or any school in the U.S.). They're interested exclusively in those people *unless* some good reason intervenes.

That morning's *Jornada* front page—two photos together dominating the headline above—provided one.

The images: Marina and Anderson the previous afternoon, in front of the building on Cholula Street. Taken from an angle behind, the first peers over Anderson's shoulder. It shows the back of his head and his extended arm pointing inside the frame-building, to where the crime would happen. Marina

stands firmly beside him. Off to the side a man lugs a heavy roll of fabric. As he carried it on his shoulder, his face—like those of Marina and Anderson—was invisible.

The caption, “Assassins direct the mounting of their bloody horror.”

The other photo again showed Marina and Anderson from behind, now departing the area. Caption, “After overseeing final arrangements, the assassins depart.”

Both images were credited to Luis.



Luis’ proposal was straightforward and, Anderson had to admit, reasonable.

The reporter would destroy the remaining photos he had, photos, he claimed, that clearly revealed their two faces. He’d do that in exchange for *their* doing *his* job: getting to the bottom of what occurred at the place only hours after they left.

“Like I told it to Marina,” he said, with a disturbing calm, “the two of you were there, I *know* that wasn’t just some kind of coincidence. No way. And if you guys got so close right before it happened, then you’re gonna be able to find out one way or another whoever’s *really* behind it. Or, maybe you already know, eh?”

“No,” Marina, firmly.

“Whatever, you’ll find a way.” Looking at Marina, “*You* always do. And then that’ll be it. I mean I won’t have any reason to have anyone publish,” his eyes hopped back and forth between the two, “*either* of your names.”

Marina, her legs and arms crossed on the sofa, clenched her entire body.

At nearly a complete loss, but sensing it was his turn to talk, Anderson wrestled with possibilities, eventually settling on, “But of course you *won’t* destroy the pictures. Just hold onto them and then come back for something else later.”

As it turned out, though, Luis had actually thought through

the situation, he had a good answer. "You see," he said, "we're *not* talking about trust, here. You *don't have* to believe me, just think about *my* interests. Obviously I'm not going to wreck my own story. If I can just get some good shots of someone *else* carrying on with this," he looked at Marina skeptically, "how did you say it again?"

"*Cortés repetition*. It has to be some kind of copycat thing. Someone's *repeating* what Cortés did. For some reason."

"Right. If I can just get shots of whoever's *really* behind this *repetition* of yours, no way I'm going to wreck *my own* story by saying it was you two guys at Cholula."

Anderson stared at him.

"Like I said to Marina, look, there's no reason to get uptight here. I *chose* those shots. No one's going to finger you because of 'em." Gesturing toward Anderson he insisted, "Just look again."

Anderson started, then halted, not willing to follow directions so easily. Luis picked up on the hesitation, but simply went on, "No one's gonna to recognize *either* of you two from the pictures, no way."

"*How* did you stumble on us *there*?" demanded Anderson.

"He was following us again," Marina said.

"*But*," Luis gloated, "I don't have to follow you anymore because *now* you're both working for *me*."

After contemplating for a minute—possibly a little more—Anderson decided against restraint. "And *I*," he challenged, doing his best to relish the moment, "don't have *any way* out of this." He pointed at the newspaper, "I mean, *obviously* I don't have any good alibi, I can't *prove* I was somewhere else last night. It's impossible since I was *here*, the whole time." Pregnant pause. "In *bed*," pause, "with *Marina*." Long pause. "All night."

That'd shut him up.

The reporter's face did sink, but not to a satisfactory depth.

"I mean" Anderson went on, "*we were...*"

Marina sensibly cut him off. "Yes, yes, we're not in a strong position here."

•

The obvious route out was money. "I suppose," Anderson said after Luis' gloating departure, "that we could just *buy* his pictures. We'd probably have to offer some outlandish amount, but that's what it's all really about. Cash."

Anderson hadn't stated the strategy *entirely* accurately. He really meant, "Buy the pictures with an outlandish amount of *Marina's* money." He'd contribute what he had, but...

There was a problem though, completely unforeseen. Marina didn't have outlandish money. Little by little she'd been spending down what her parents' left. About all that remained was her (opulent) home. And if it weren't for Mexico City's ridiculously low property taxes, even that would've been jeopardized.

As Marina eventually admitted, it wouldn't be long before she'd have to consider letting one of the maids go. Then another. That'd leave only two.

The money reality: very bad news.

Really though, how surprising could it have been? Marina didn't have any obvious source of steady income. Her shadowy artifact "work," well, maybe that yielded some good cash occasionally. But there wasn't any doubt about her expenses. Constant and big. Most anyone would've suspected that the imbalance had to be catching up.

Anderson didn't, which struck yet another black mark against his worldliness, his practical intelligence. (Things seemed to be improving though, at least he realized that he *should've* realized.)

On the positive side, Marina's revelation opened a sliver of intimacy between them. Now that the secret was out, Marina could freely vent complaints about her relative poverty. She

said things like, "It's tedious driving your own car, but what I *really miss* about not sitting in back is the tray of glasses and tequila bottles. It's *so* charming, hearing them clink-clinking as you go along...it's almost like chimes. For me, that'll always be the true music of the street. It just doesn't sound the same from up here in front."

Anderson consistently resisted the temptation to say things like, "Yes, it must be hard getting by without some pleasant accompaniment like that."

●
Imperialism
●

Stabbing at the keys of his mechanical typewriter, his lips moved with the lyrics. How Luis *enjoyed* the National University's radio station! And how happy he was that his workstation comrade kept his little radio tuned in to it!

Playing now, a popular song by the local group Molotov. Titled "Frijolero" (Beaner) it concludes with a rousing stab in the ears of Mexico's northern neighbors, especially those occupying the stretch from Arizona to California. "If not for Santa Ana, just to let you know/that where your feed are planted, would be Mexico/*Correcto!*"

"*Correcto!*" celebrated Luis. Like all his friends and workmates at the *Jornada*, he subscribed to the belief that the southwestern United States legitimately belongs to Mexico. More, were it not for a few militaristic accidents in the 19th century, Mexico would be the hemisphere's wealthy power and the U.S. a banana republic.

A 2002 Zogby International poll found that 58 percent of Mexicans agree with the statement, "The territory of the United States' southwest rightfully belongs to Mexico." Luis' reaction? *Shocked* that the number was so low.

"*Racista y culero/pinche gringo puñetero,*" came the chanting tune. (Racist assholes/damned gringo jerk-offs.) That line is addressed to U.S. border patrol agents. How *thoroughly* Luis enjoyed the couplet which deservedly ranked among his eternal favorites. Reveling in the pure poetry, he abandoned his work altogether. The chorus repeated. "*How true, how true!*" Luis exclaimed, slapping his thigh in excitement.

The others scattered around scowled.

They knew: he'd gotten hold of the moment's big story and since that meant nothing at the *Jornada*—the egalitarian ideals of the place obviously forbade rewarding success—he could only have been so enthusiastic for a single reason. Some *other* newspaper was offering something.

It wasn't that people were angry with him personally, it's just that he was *ruining* their ambiance.

When the mood was right, smoke, black coffee and resentment permeated the newsroom in a perfect alchemy for contemplative brooding. Grim employees spewed complaints about capitalism, the International Monetary Fund and multinational corporations. Ears were receptive, the response always another slur, usually supported by statistics published in *Le Monde diplomatique*. They were content that way. Bitter too, but all in it together, they wouldn't trade their little world for any other.

So they told themselves. And since most of them could earn significantly more money working for one of the hated multinationals, they had a reason for believing they were telling themselves the truth.

Their confidence was being shaken, though, by Luis and his exuberance at the prospect of leaving the crabby newsroom. Worse, some whispered that he'd be escaping to that most heinous refuge for pro-gringo pigs, the *Reforma*.

●

In an article titled "How Latins View the U.S." from December 2005, the commentator on Latin American affairs and columnist for the *Reforma* newspaper, Alvaro Vargas Llosa, wrote:

The poll's important finding concerns attitudes toward the United States. Around 60 percent of Latin Americans have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S, a much higher figure than 10 years ago. Oddly, the figure is higher despite the fact that more Latin Americans than ever want to migrate to the U.S.

It *does* seem odd that as Latins decreasingly like America they increasingly want to go there. It's perfectly comprehensible, though, inside the rules of humiliation.

We've all felt the need to be near the ones who disrespect us; there's an urge to pander, to imitate, to be like them.

At the same time we hate them. How could we not? It's *enraging* when they chuckle at our boring existences, belittle our earnest accomplishments, ignore our words, forget our names.

The rage doesn't send us away, though, it just makes us work even harder to be something in their eyes, to be respected, to be beside them instead of underneath their condescending glares.



Name rocked in his plump but dignified recliner, twittering and marveling. All had congealed *far* better than he could've hoped. It had taken no more than two days for the truth to be seen, for connections to be recognized between the glamorous evening he'd staged and what Cortés had done five centuries earlier.

"Extraordinary!" he ejaculated.

Later, his excitement matured. The result, a more sophisticated emotion of power. A lone man manipulating an entire nation, it was...humbling.

One key to it all had been the *smallest* detail, the ceremonial words he'd spoken behind the curtain and just before the swordplay. They'd been spoken in *English*, and worse, with an *American* accent. The witnesses all agreed on that. Which meant: it wasn't that a very old episode of imperialism had been reprised by some deranged local historian. Instead, the *Americans*, the *new* colonialists, they'd come and perpetrated the infamy. That got the excitement going, it made everything now and happening.

Then the infamy got a catchy name. *The New Cortés Killing*.

That's what someone came up with, and anyone could use it. On the radio and TV, in the newspapers and magazines, it was easy to say, dramatic too.

The name was crucial because it provided such a convenient handle. The scene wasn't just an odd piece of complicated gruesomeness like the piano man and his amputations. It was a package that no longer needed explaining or describing. Without even fully knowing what it was, people could pass the event back and forth, talk about it fast, get agitated, mad, get outraged.

Before long the politicians most sensitive to groundswells were reaching for microphones, and then falling over themselves lunging for them. It was easy to be on the right side of this one, to denounce what had occurred. Newscasters followed, eventually throwing all pretension to serene reporting out the nearest window. Editorialists cranked up their richest words: heinous, unacceptable, accursed.

"Grandiloquent act!" Name announced to the walls of his hotel suite before withdrawing into his favorite reverie: reflecting on whether his task was technical or aesthetic. "*But,*" he warbled, "am I a social engineer, or a social *artist*? Either way, *exquisite!*"

●

What was most amazing to Name was the acceleration. After years of thought, months of preparation, and long weeks of horrible work, it had seemed like nothing would turn out. It was all a waste of time. Then, overnight—that's what it felt like—everything.

●

Through ensuing days there appeared only one small distortion in the loud story. The rare sword he'd acquired for the task and that he'd thrust so majestically into the beautiful lad, it had disappeared. Not hard to imagine what happened. Someone got to a police officer at the scene, or maybe to an evidence room guard. A few pesos and the weapon was gone.

Name couldn't be very upset about the corruption. He *was* concerned, though, about unexpected consequences. Anyone turning up with the sword would immediately become a suspect in the Cortés Killing. And with respect to suspects, it was vitally important that those two Americans already selected be vulnerable. When the moment came, *they* had to absorb the guilt.

●
The weirdness and death of Montezuma
●

The next major step on the Spanish march to domination in the Americas was the death of the Emperor Montezuma.

Puckering, Name sipped at his coffee. The liquid disgusted him, but everyone else seemed to drink it and he felt a need to fit in with at least *some* of the trends of the day; no one has the energy to be unique *always*. Creative forces must be husbanded for concentrated release, that's the way to being truly great: follow everyone else until those rare moments when you diverge tremendously. "Conformism," Name quietly announced, "is the loyal hand-maiden of all strong originality." A moment passed, then a gasp. "That rarest of creatures, an original statement *about* originality!"

Quickly he penned the sentence into his journal.

Then he slowly flipped through some of what he'd inscribed on earlier pages. He wasn't reading the words but luxuriating in the colors. Since he'd recorded events and thoughts in the colored ink that seemed most appropriate to each one, his pages were an exciting rainbow to behold.

"Resplendent!"

Name got the idea for his journal from the Mexican artist and suffering invalid Frida Kahlo. Her diary—oversized and stuffed with drippy watercolors, lamenting words and revolting anatomical drawings—has yet to be internationally recognized as the perfect experiment in limp self-absorption that it is. For those who equate art with expression, there can be no doubt: Kahlo's private journal is the world's great masterpiece.

Seemingly effortlessly, each of her large, bold pages reduces Monet, Van Gogh, Munch and all those to the category of bumbling amateurs.

Despite the merit of Kahlo's work, Name loathed recognizing that his own erupting tome had been inspired by her since she incarnated two intense poisons. She was a woman and a communist.

He emitted a gurgle of reprobation.

Then attention refocused. The darkest of his inks—not quite black, which he considered vulgar—was chosen. The description of a death was written.

•

When Cortés reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan he was met by the once proud but now crushed Montezuma. It wasn't the imperialists' swords and havoc that had sapped the Emperor's energy for resistance, it was the demeanor, the unyielding condescension. Montezuma simply couldn't imagine resisting visitors as *haughty* as those who came.

So he invited them into his city.

What the Spaniards found there was breathtaking. But none of it—not the grand pyramids or the expert astrology or the advanced economy or voluptuous art—struck them so hard as the customs of the freakish man who ruled over it all.

•

The vast public plaza at the center of today's Mexico City marks the exact spot where Montezuma stood to receive Cortés. Called the Zócalo, it's obviously very old.

It doesn't feel antiquated, though; it can't with all the tourists hurrying. They cross from stately government buildings to the grand Cathedral to museums and partially excavated ruins. On their trips back and forth they're entertained by locals who dress in traditional clothes and perform ancient dances. Souvenir peddlers greet the foreigners in cheerful English. There are water vendors and the rest. So the place seems buzzing and happening now, even though it's about the past.

Since there's a lot of money to be extracted from these visiting lookers, the local government does all it can to keep them coming. Clean streets are flagged with signs pointing toward nearby monuments and all the hotels. It's hard to miss anything important, it's impossible to get lost. You'd expect hordes of pickpockets and purse-snatchers, but they've learned the (very) hard way to practice their crafts elsewhere. So if you visit and take no precautions at all, you'll enjoy the afternoon and come out just fine.

The sweeping effort made to safeguard the main tourist area is balanced, though, by a near total disregard for the nether regions just off the beaten path.

The Sonora Market is one of them. It's not so much that the forces of order are afraid to go there, into the clusters of stalls and odd people hawking bizarre items from doorways and windows. The reason cops won't go in is that things are so far out of control, there's really no point.

Nobody should be there anyway. The buildings dating from the eighteenth century have been cracked and tilted by centuries and countless earthquakes. Every year a few simply resign and collapse. Neighbors can only use shovels and their hands to drag out the bodies because heavy equipment is too large to navigate the narrow streets. Little by little the fallen bricks are removed and re-used: jammed into cracks and stacked up to meet sagging ceilings, they essentially hold up the buildings that remain.

Occasionally the local government mounts a cursory effort to clear the zone. All the buildings are red-tagged, those living within told to leave.

They never do.

Who are these resisters? The penniless, too poor, ragged and diseased to go anywhere else. The thieves, they're attracted to the place's intrinsic lawlessness. Finally, the proud dominant class remains, the ritual wastrels. Their decadent beliefs ex-

clude them from any community except one belonging to an era long past. They're witches, shamans, and serpent priests. They mumble and deal exotic wares for ancient rites. Everything they do is as impenetrable, primeval and dramatic as it is laughable.

In a place like that, so mixed, dangerous and other-worldly, even the locals usually aren't sure what to make of things.

And they had no idea what to make of Name. Clearly, he wasn't one of them. But could he fit in *anywhere*? White shoes, dark-green socks, screaming blue pants, olive belt and tight, coal sweater all set off a face blushed and marked by thick mascara (like ancient Egyptian royalty). It was stunning. Not just the individual pieces, but how it all somehow...*worked*.

This was even more baffling: his obliviousness, his calm presence in the distinctly not-for-foreigners place.

Everyone watched him, supposing he'd soon be splattered with rattlesnake blood, or maybe a chanted incantation would render him defenseless.

The bizarre man stopped in front of one and another stall, then moved on. As he went, there was one thing no one really saw, the foreigner *beneath* the outfit. Eyes skipped across the painted face but the clothes were so distracting that the watchers remained powerless to describe the man's weight, age, the length of his nose, the shape of his mouth. Name knew it, and his new confidence and exuberance momentarily got the better of him. "Precisely because everyone sees me," he spoke aloud, and in Spanish, "no one knows what I look like!"

The people who heard him understood the words, but didn't get what he was saying.

Death, Name observed as he strolled, was everywhere. No surprise. Since the symbolic and holy rituals of Mexico's past almost inevitably involved blood, and since the market belonged to that past and its unique customs, the liquid flowed.

The rattlesnake variety was, of course, the mainstay. But flu-

ids from other reptiles and species were often required and nearly every indigenous animal—endangered or not—could be found in one dark stall or another.

So too innards, especially those strung out of birds. From fetid cages the hissed and chirped complaints sounded as organs were extracted.

Infectious rot puddled everywhere. Creatures died faster than their parts could be sold so while some carcasses were carefully skinned and dissected, others got tossed into the narrow streets' drainage corridor. The current slowly rolled the abandoned bodies away in a blend of urine, watery excrement and blood.

The stench resists all description.

It was, Name noted, nearly perfect.

After some further investigating the “nearly” got scratched. Not only are animals sold in Sonora, humans too; young boys and girls are imported from Mexico's most remote parts where the oldest, truest customs remain intact.

Head and face shaping ranks first among the sincere rituals. Pallets are tied to newborns' heads so that as they grow their foreheads incline back at a wedged angle. Later, the teeth of these specimens are sharpened into pointed weapons. The idea is to make the humans into replicas of the Jaguar God. Called “*Nahuales*” by their creators, it's hoped that they'll be able to shuttle back and forth between the worlds of the mortals and the divine.

They're also highly prized as decorations. Bought and then confined to the weekend estates of the wealthiest Mexicans, they're stationed in the vast residences to lend an air of ancient and mystic opulence to proceedings.

Name was quite interested in that opulence, interested in its staging and horror.

●

Cortés reports that he engaged Montezuma in a series of reli-

gious discussions, attempting to reform the Emperor's singular beliefs and habits. There was some success. After one of the talks, Montezuma was moved to summon his cooks and order that roasted children be removed from his diet.

Surprised, but hardly daring to object or even ask why, the kitchen staff shuffled out despondently.

Then, almost immediately, a number of priests arrived, begged entrance and were received.

While they, like all Aztecs, refused to look straight into Montezuma's face or directly address words to him, they made their objections known. Their powers to foretell the future would be severely hindered, they complained, as the young, human entrails they received each day just before Montezuma's lunch were among the *most* telling. They simply couldn't do without those.

And wouldn't Montezuma's mood suffer? Weren't his evenings lit up, wasn't a bright smile guaranteed by the fresh and dripping childish heads that servants dangled from windows and doorframes for their master?

Still more important, the priests insisted, Montezuma would feel *his own* divinity wither without the continued nourishment of blessed, young flesh.

To that Montezuma replied curtly: his divinity was inviolate and could hardly be affected by rituals.

For their part, the Spaniards were rendered mute by the vision of these ruddy theologians, their hair clotted with human blood and dead flies, their robes soiled and torn by panicked victims. They were rendered mute, but not uncomprehending. They could understand the scene, given the Aztecs' extraordinary religious beliefs. What *wasn't* understandable, though, what tripped them into the incomprehensible were some of Montezuma's other customs.

What could be made of the albinos he stored in his rooms? Occasionally they were allowed to bathe him. More frequently

they were instructed to circle and prance naked. Montezuma enjoyed these parades immensely; sometimes he joined in!

Another group of human oddities, humpbacks, were also maintained. Their bent spines received Montezuma's personal items and they lurched around behind him, careful to let nothing fall.

Then there were the birds. How Montezuma loved slipping into their vast cages and adding to the fluttering with his own richly painted arms. His attendants waiting outside were always sure to comment loudly about how well their master was flying.

Montezuma was also devoted to the reptiles. Though he'd never stoop to accompany their slithering movements, he *reveled* in the sensations of their tongues and scaly caresses.

As for his meals, Montezuma called on justices, counselors, priests and chieftains to stand near him as he ate, and from time to time he offered them niblets from one or another of his numerous plates. Since they were allowed no other nourishment, they chewed the offerings greedily.

After meals, there inevitably followed a breathless session with a wretched weed. The plant was burned, the smoke fully inhaled. Called *tobacco*, the Spaniards who tried it nearly lost their lungs to spasmodic coughing.

Finally, the leather garments Montezuma wore, they carried the most undeniable signs of...his particularity. He believed that pelts could be converted into leather of divine suppleness only by a laborious process of tanning with human excrement. This unique copraphilia—along with Montezuma's constant presenting of his once-worn and smelly garments to the chiefs of vassal towns—led him to order the storehousing of all bowel-movements in Tenochtitlan.

Fortunately, no plumbing modifications were necessary. Since his subjects were in the habit of relieving themselves by jutting their rears over the city's bridges and letting loose into

the channels below, Montezuma's command was satisfied by tasking experienced boatmen to navigate in their canoes and catch the ploppings.

•

People, Name sensed, were distancing themselves, contorting their bodies slightly as they passed to avoid touching him. That had been his hope, of course, and it justified his wearing the same outlandish outfit and carefully applied makeup to-day that he'd appeared in previously.

This visit was dedicated to more than looking, he'd be acquiring. And given that he was buying in the Sonora Market, the items on his handwritten list weren't unusual.

The request he repeated before each purchase, however, *that* was irregular. The odd visitor explained that he'd been dispatched by a demanding benefactor. His current duty could not extend beyond moving from stall to stall and designating just which objects were needed. Actual possession would be taken only after his patron had performed a careful review.

This mysterious and absent patron, the explanation went, would appear only when all the items had been gathered. Then he'd arrive, inspect the goods and perform the final monetary accounting.

With a luxury of detail, Name described the appearance of this surprisingly wealthy man. Tall, full lips, heavy brows, "not even the hint of a swell around the waist." He was an American. A description of the man's inseparable lover and occasional translator was also provided. That and a name, Marina.

For the vendors' part, they'd receive half of a tentatively agreed on price now, and the rest to follow upon the taking of the items. Were the product ultimately rejected, the vendor could keep the down-payment.

Though neither side thought the agreement fair, both readily accepted. The vendors because they'd negotiated a fifty per-

cent down-payment which was actually almost the full price normally charged. The extravagantly dressed man accepted because he didn't care about price.

Name did care about this: the vendors' greedy anticipation of receiving nearly double money led them to extend a courtesy. A small area of the market was cleared and designated to hold the purchases for which down-payment had been received. The vendors would also continue caring for their products—feeding them, watering and so on—until they were transported away.

The day progressed, a ghoulish menagerie accumulated.

Feathered creatures both living and dried were caged next to snakes and sundry reptiles. There was a swampish mess containing exotic shelled animals. Rare plants, herbs, and fungi grew in small and large pots next to bags of intestines and hearts.

The severed heads of several children were being sought. Probably they'd be acquired from mortuaries or maybe just dug out of graves somewhere. Maybe something more dreadful. In any case, silk thread would be strung through the ears so the body parts would dangle properly.

Nearly extinct monkeys were on the way.

Though a few other living organisms were judged too valuable to storehouse in the market, assurances of prompt delivery were abundant.

Most urgently, a request had been sent to the country's southern reaches, to the impoverished zone where descendants of the Olmecs still believe in *Nahuales*, the body-modified youth fitted to commune with the Jaguar God. A child would be acquired and brought to Mexico City.

The cost should not be underestimated. Just one *Nahual*, twenty-eight thousand dollars. For that sum, you get a nicely receding forehead, numerous sharpened teeth, elongated neck and extensively treated fingernails.

●

"It's true in a certain sense," Anderson said, "that Montezuma's...*quirks* were the most important part of Cortés' conquering."

"Because?" asked Marina.

"*Because*," he lectured, "the reason the whole story wasn't just washed away by time is that back then so many copies of Cortés' letters got printed up and sold across Europe. Really, the place was flooded with them. And the main reason—or at least one of them—that so many got sold is people wanted to know about this, well, the *weirdness* of this Montezuma character."

Marina found his tone irritating. Not because she disliked being lectured, but because she despised the fact that she was such a sucker for intellectual guys. Especially the ones who didn't hesitate to talk with other people as though they were teaching.

Sensing the advantage, Anderson waved his arm dramatically and pronounced, "Never underestimate the power of money over historical events."

"Among my many sins," Marina assured, "*that's* not one to include." Smiles mirrored between them.

In more self-reflective moments, Anderson sincerely believed that he'd be happier in life if he smiled more and thought less. He may have been right. Probably he was. Definitely not then, though.

●

Ensnared in his hotel room, comfortably appointed in an understated suit and between tugs on his bow-tie, Name scrupulously copied the items listed on every bill-of-sale into his flowery journal.

Two facing pages were covered.

As always when adding to his book, he wielded no less than twelve fountain pens, each loaded with a rare ink. There was

the red inspired by a precious Rioja wine, the blue taken from the flag of Castillo y Leon, a glorious orange sold by a randy Madrid shopkeeper.

As that particular orange ink continually flooded his writing utensil, it was employed only rarely. This afternoon, however, it had flawlessly inscribed his sensation as he totaled the acquisitions. *Magnificent*. Nearly everything found in Montezuma's extraordinary court had been promised or actually delivered.

On to the next task: his wardrobe. Since yet another trip to the Sonora Market was inevitable, his inherent good taste demanded a change. It was *unacceptable*, the prospect of returning a *third* time identically dressed.

Fondly, Name recalled a paragraph from F. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel. The main and admirable character found himself in a late-night taxicab short of cash. What should he do? Not wait until reaching his destination before offering the driver what he had, and then slink away. He also didn't ask the driver to watch the meter, and then stop the car when his total was reached. Instead, he summed his money, subtracted a generous portion as a tip, and then instructed the driver to pull over when the meter hit the remainder. When it did, the fare and the tip were handed over. The man—the *hero*—got out into the cold and walked.

There are compromises and acts, Fitzgerald taught, that are unthinkable. Wearing the same outfit on three consecutive visits was one of them.

So Name moved to his closet and tried several outfits. As nothing felt right, there was no choice, he'd need to visit the boutiques of Polanco (a shopping district where his perfect taste, like his significant wealth, always found satisfying appreciation).

When he returned to his hotel, two problems remained.

With a penetratingly sick green shade, the first was penned

as a single word. Timing. The corpse was required at the right moment, just when the staging was complete. More, he needed it to *become* a corpse at a moment when neither Marina nor Anderson could have a convenient alibi. It was imperative that they not be able to prove their innocence.

The difficulty yielded to a helpful timeline. If a cadaver is warm and not stiff, death occurred less than three hours ago. Warm and stiff means dead between three and eight hours. Cold and stiff opens the large, desirable window: eight to forty eight hours. After that, the putrefaction countdown begins. As bacteria work away at the inner organs the carcass temperature rises, along with a sickening odor.

So, a body just crossing the line into cold and stiff could be inserted into the Sonora Market and the subsequent discovery would leave authorities with a time of death they couldn't easily narrow further than two days. And since almost no alibi could last that long, there'd be no way of eliminating much of anyone as a suspect.

That resolution left the second problem. With the reddest of red inks, he wrote: a way to get the corpse into the market must be determined.

It was.

As for the *who*, that name had been written into the journal months before. So too the vivid, purple description of exactly how he'd soon perish.



Fittingly, Montezuma came to an unusual end.

One night a slight misunderstanding between several drunken Spaniards and a bunch of local adolescents led to the locals' getting impaled. Concerned citizens gathered and threatened to rise against their occupiers. Attempting to quell the anger, Montezuma mounted the rampart of the Spanish position to laud the virtues, wisdom and power of his captors. With a wave of his hand he excused the soldiers' drunken im-

pulsiveness. Resistance, he finally declared, was inadmissible; only rank docility could be countenanced. He bowed his head and sank to a knee.

Faced with their leader's demeaning call, silence fell across the Aztecs. How *could* they respond?

A single old woman—according to legend—thought she knew. She kicked dirt, cursed and complained bitterly before lifting a weighty stone, one of the round ones typically used to grind corn. She heaved it.

The grindstone looped upwards and then dropped, mortally cracking Montezuma's skull.

●
Montezuma's death re-created
●

Many months before, when Name broad-stroked his project of international humiliation he'd sketched the string of acts without paying attention to names. The specific people who'd be involved, they were blanks to fill in later.

Except one.

He knew from the beginning whose death would reproduce Montezuma's end: a specific museum curator. He was, Name wrote, "the symbolically fecund choice."

As it happened, that curator met occasionally with his god-daughter. Which is how Marina first received Name's attention. And from Marina, Anderson came into view.

●

The curator's last day wasn't unusual in the beginning.

Marina visited. She hadn't come by in a while, and though he was still quite alert intellectually, his memory did clog occasionally. "At my age," he liked to explain, "there's a lot to remember." So their conversation rambled over territory Marina was more than familiar with.

That was alright.

"Of course," the bent man reminded Marina at one point, "your father was also a thief. But things were very *very* different back in those days, you can imagine. We were *all* thieves really." The admission lit him up. "Did you *know*, we had a small battalion of archeology students in Guatemala? We lasted two years there before they got onto us. We dug out room-fulls!"

Marina did know. The curator had told her on more than several occasions, but she always let him go on; she enjoyed his happiness in the recounting.

"You see the Mayan displays? You see how much is labeled as coming from Chiapas (a southern Mexican frontier state)? You won't *ever* know how much came from *across* the border." He pointed at an exquisite jade mask, a modest collection of copper ornaments. "Of course they were digging on *our* side too. And in the middle of it all your father robbing and selling everything he could..."

Marina nodded.

"Selling mainly *out* of country." Squarely, the old man fixed on Marina, "I never forgave him for that, you know. For what he smuggled out. Most of those things we will never retrieve. Ours is, sadly, a weak nation."

Nothing from Marina.

"But please don't misunderstand me," he said, reading her face, "you *are* my best friend's *pequeña*. And my goddaughter. Always will be. Just as your father will always be my one great companion."

He led her through the museum at a good pace, given his years and encumbrances.

"I *know*," he eventually said, "about recent events. They, well, they've certainly been difficult to miss."

"Yes."

"People like me, we read all there is about the past, and when we run out of books, well, we just keep going, but reading about the present. Sometimes...it seems like it's not coming on fast enough to occupy a man."

Marina let that last part go, knowing where it was leading. Instead, she redirected him this way, "So, you know about Cholula Street?"

"And before that the scene on Tlascala with that poor musician. But you're not here because of the past, you're interested..." a tiny note of wistfulness, "in the future?"

"I have a very personal interest."

"You do. I subscribe to the *Jornada*. Actually, to *all* the papers these days. And I recognized you, *pequeña*, perfectly, from the backside. You know I've been watching it for you, since before you could walk." He smiled the way old people do when remembering. Then, catching her worried eyes, he reassured, "But don't be overly afraid, really, don't. I'm *certain* no one else will make the connection. I myself wasn't *sure* until confirming it just now."

The redness coloring Marina's face had leaked away entirely by the time they made it to the curator's office.

She took a seat in front of his desk.

"You won't mind if I stand," he said, explaining that once he'd endured the discomfort of getting to his feet, he preferred to avoid repeating the experience for as long as possible.

Marina was surprised to learn of this new affliction, but comfortable enough in his presence to stay in her chair. She was also, though, respectful enough to soon find a reason for consulting one of his reference books. After returning the volume to its place, she remained on her feet next to the shelves.

"Would you like coffee?" he offered, when his ancient machine finally finished gurgling and spitting. He reached for a mug from his disparate collection. All were handmade, big and wildly decorated.

Marina accepted by not refusing.

The office was cramped, hardly adequate to his post as Senior Curator of the *Museo Nacional de Antropología*. He'd been employed there at the center of Mexico's truly world-class museum since the beginning, since construction began in the 1960s.

In a sense, the place was *his*. He'd never make that claim himself, but he'd been the one charged with acquiring—more or less by any means available—the exhibits now on display.

The budget he'd received was never a matter of public re-

view; the uses he made of it, his own. Only results mattered. (Possibly, he remained in his compact office instead of moving to one of the larger spaces to maintain his reputation as a man immune to personal comforts. That reputation served well to suffocate questions about his private residence. Located in a nearby neighborhood, it was more luxurious than his official salary would have permitted.)

"I have been made to understand," the curator said, as provocatively as a wrinkled man could, "that a younger woman fitting *your* description has managed to make off with the Toledo sword used at Cholula."

Marina heard the quiet admission: *he too* had been interested in acquiring the precious weapon. How else could he have discovered that she was the one who'd already gotten it? He'd probably tried to bribe the very same nightshift cop. Too late, though. All he got for his trouble was a description of the earlier bidder.

"Yes," conceded Marina, "someone matching my description now possesses it."

"I'll assume you haven't come to me to ask for help in a resale."

"No, if you don't object it'll be sent to a client in Spain, I believe."

"I can't bring myself to care very much about these foreign things. You know I acquire them when I can, at least if they'll fit into my own exhibitions. But if they get away, well, then off they go."

Marina understood. The curator was an archeological schizophrenic. On one side he considered non-Mexican artifacts as little more than complicated forms of money. They were anonymous, without intrinsic owner and freely available for use or spending by whomever happened to be their possessor. But for native Mexican works—from the Aztecs, the Olmecs and so on—the opposite. Those belonged to *his* people, they *are* his

people and their spirit. Any attachment of vulgar monetary value could only be heresy.

Which was, finally, the irreconcilable distance between the old man and Marina. He was a Mexican, she wasn't. He inherited Aztec nobility, she was an offshoot of intruding colonialists.

Certainly the curator loved his goddaughter, just as he'd loved, perhaps unnaturally, her father. But he pitied them both their incapacity to see in history something *larger* than they were. He'd never been able to describe it exactly, but he knew this: whatever it was, he *participated*. He was a living expression of eternal Aztec culture.

As a young man he wrote extensively on that sensation of belonging. But feeling clumsy and inarticulate, he'd supplemented his literary ambitions with collecting. His writings persisted, though, and now, as an aged man—"a relic himself," he liked to say—they'd come to define him nearly as much as his museum work.

Everyone in Mexico knew his essays. And a surprising number actually read them. He'd become, in the eyes of his country, the truest believer, the steadfast incarnation of the authentic *Mexican Identity*. He evoked a culture that existed purely and perfectly. Until Europeans arrived and contaminated everything.

"I shouldn't have to tell you," he addressed Marina, almost sternly, "that acquiring the sword wasn't the most sensible action. You *have* to see that it connects you with a murder. And you're already connected, really, no matter how blurry that *Jornada* photo might be."

"I know, I *know*," she answered, her tone suddenly juvenile. Marina couldn't help it, she always ended up talking like a little girl when she was with him. "But *you* know I can't resist. And it'll be out of my hands soon. Completely gone. Now, please, don't tell me I'm just like my father."

"There's obviously no need to. I do worry though. "

She knew he did. It made her uncomfortable, she didn't think of herself as someone who wanted to be cared for in that unconditional way. Still, it did feel good, the sensation that out there in the world there was someone who stopped and worried about her.

Enough of that. "Well, the important thing is I've come because—"

"I can imagine. You'd like my help to figure out what's going to happen next. Yes? The only thing I'm *not* sure about is the why. Is it that you want to know so you can stay out of the way? Avoid more—how will I say it?—inconvenient pictures in newspapers? *Or*, is it because *maybe* you could maneuver for...another opportunity?" He meant to buy something like the sword she got last time.

Marina evaded by insisting, "You *said* you've been following these events..."

"Hmm. I *meant* that I've been following them in the newspapers and on TV. Just like everyone else."

"If you had to *predict* what was coming next?"

"I can't be sure. Of course you know that Tenochtitlan got overrun by Cortés and his *barbarians* on the thirteenth. I suppose that date will play some role. It doesn't leave much time."

Marina didn't need reminding that there wasn't much time.

"And our Cathedral, as you know, would be the logical spot for any kind of...conclusion." He almost spat out that last word.

Marina nodded.

"We should, I believe, *continue* this discussion. I'll tell you this now, though: I've come into some information that might be helpful for you."

"*What?*" she blurted.

His eyes caught hers.

"It *might* be helpful," he calmly repeated.

Oh.

She knew him. She understood. Ever the curator, he was offering a deal. Whatever he knew in exchange for a museum piece. "Anything in *particular* you'd like me to bring?" conceded Marina.

"Well, any trinket will do," he said. "I know your father had many; some he shared with me, others I'm sure he didn't."

"And among those he *did*?"

"You do seem to be in a position of considerable need, I mean, very vulnerable given the newspaper photo that has been published. I'm sure my help will be worth at least one of the smaller items your father gathered during his time here. Or, perhaps something *not* so small." His watery eyes sparkled. "Why don't you return this evening. Come to my home."

Marina understood and could only agree.

The curator took a magnifying glass from his shelf, turned it onto his wristwatch and their meeting concluded, "You'll have to excuse me as I have another *acquisition* to make."

On her way home, Marina appreciated the fact that he never directly asked exactly *how* she was wound into what had been happening.

For her part, she hadn't asked just why he was so versed in the details. She hadn't because she already knew. He hated it; he hated anything smacking of imperialism. And men that old, that experienced, that jaded, they find it very hard to hate. But when they do, they stir it up because they're *glad* of it. It makes them feel alive.

Twenty minutes later the curator hobbled out of an Anthropology Museum annex, lugging a box. It held a stone, unremarkable except that it'd been excavated from one of several digs near Mexico City and identified by certain scratchings as most likely a grinding stone, the kind typically unearthed along with fragments of kitchen pottery and small bones.

It held no value archeologically, and very little historically;

the annex was awash in similar pedestrian artifacts. There wasn't room to store them all.

What was being offered in exchange for the rock, conversely, held *inestimable* value. A necklace, an authentic example from the early sixteenth century of the kind given to pliant Aztec leaders as gifts from the Spaniards. Not one such piece could be found in any museum in the Americas. (These "necklaces" were actually buttons of crude metal taken from the Europeans' clothes and hung on a string.)

Even for an inveterate hater of imperialism, the opportunity to exchange almost nothing for very much something couldn't be passed by.

The curator wasn't senile, though. He *knew* the necklace was almost certainly fake. But even if it were, a competent reproduction would more likely find its way into an attractive public display than the dumb, redundant stone he clung to.

The other substantial likelihood: there was no necklace, he was being set up for a robbery. But so what? The rock's disappearance would free a crack of much needed space in the annex.

And against those two likely possibilities there stood a third, it was remote but not impossible. Near the end of a solitary life he'd add one more mysterious and brilliantly dramatic triumph to his career and to his Museum.

(There *were* those, he knew, who whispered that he'd grown too old for his work. Well, they might be in for a surprise...)

Finally, there was that one other, very little thing. A "*Carta Poder*," was supposed to accompany the stone. That's a formal letter on official stationary giving someone the power to do something. This *carta* was supposed to provide the right to act on behalf of the Anthropology Museum. So, the final, agreed-upon trade was the stone and the paper for the necklace.

Why'd they want the *carta*? The curator had no idea, but there was at least one plausible answer. They wanted it so no

one could accuse them of possessing the rock illegally. If they were found with the old stone, they could pull out the note and show they were empowered to have that kind of thing.

Maybe.

It wasn't a very good explanation, though, so the curator *did* think twice about handing the letter over as part of the deal. But, after all, it was just a piece of *paper*, and when he considered what he might be getting in exchange...



A private collector in Spain, Marina had learned, possessed a turcas very similar to the one no longer found in the Mexico City Cathedral. Though his price exceeded her means, the collector didn't seem unreasonable. So Marina proposed a trade. The Spanish collector knew Marina by reputation (as an extremely accomplished forger) and declined.

Soon after, however, the collector read about the Toledo sword used at the Cholula event. If, he proposed, *that* could be passed along....

Marina bribed her way to the sword with some pesos and her hands, and now it along with some cash had been shipped across the Atlantic.

Sending the money, that hurt since it was a good portion of her reserves. Still the turcas—which resembled the sword in that its rare metal and fine craftsmanship made passable imitation all but impossible—would soon be delivered.

Extortion would follow.

Already the compelling and threatening letter was written. Marina was quite proud of her biting literary work, actually. Too bad it'd be read by only one person and had to be signed, "Anonymous."

Addressed to the Archbishop in Mexico City, the letter noted several deaths on the U.S.-Mexican border and detailed the contribution made by a horrible instrument. She built the information solidly, then wrapped it all in the major news. The

instrument was the turcas. The one—in case no one had noticed—that could no longer be found in the Bishop's private library.

Next came an explanation of the link between the border deaths and the Cortés killings. She didn't only describe the hairdresser in the Cholula Street basement that everyone was so enraged about, but also the pianist on Tlascala Street. Some people, she hinted, were starting to see that there *might* be a connection.

She really got into it, rich descriptions to make the horror immediate and pressing.

A nicely concocted admission followed: the anonymous letter-writer conceded *knowing* the perpetrator. Some inventive details about his mental sickness and dangerous beliefs were provided, just enough to make him seem real, and to make the writer seem very familiar with his miserable life.

All of it led to this. "*If,*" the letter read:

I stole the turcas from the man committing these horrible crimes, I know he'd stop immediately. Don't you believe I should? Shouldn't I do it even though it's true that theft is a sin?

She couldn't resist adding that last line.

Then, back to business. To make sure the message was fully received:

It would be a permanent stain if it were revealed that a turcas from the Cathedral was employed in these crimes. Miserable unbelievers, they may even imply that you, the most revered Bishop had a hand in them. Bastards! That's why it's *so* important that you have the turcas returned. You'll be able to put an end to all these killings, and also destroy the terrible device. That way there won't be any evidence left that you or The Church were somehow involved. That does seem like the right thing to do, doesn't it, especially since an accusation against you could come at any time?

Would the Bishop catch the threat she was making, that *she* would arrange for the accusation to be made? Yes. So, the way to the real message was open. She wrote it, she thought, artfully:

About me, obviously God's true reward awaits all of us in the end. But the earthly benefits The Church may grant now, those too are unmistakable signs of God's grace.

As for the concrete question—*how much?*—she went for suggestive ambiguity. "Heaven," she wrote, "will bless you with sufficient resources."

It was a good plan. Dastardly maybe, but also necessary given Marina's tenuous financial situation.

It was also a plan about to be ruined.



An *inspiration*—Name shuddered at the triteness of the word—resolved a nettlesome problem. He'd acquired the necessary goods in the Sonora Market, everything needed to glamorously stage Montezuma's death was there and waiting at the putrid location. *Except* the most important, the dead body to occupy the spectacle's center. Getting the body wasn't a problem. But with all those people buzzing around, *how could it be secretly inserted into its place?*

Solution. Name returned to the grimy alleys and explained that his patron was a man whose expansive wealth was matched only by the compression of his daily schedule. It would, consequently, be *impossible* for him to personally visit the market. However, could it be arranged for the items to be removed for personal inspection at the patron's residence?

Of course not.

Bargaining followed, an agreement was struck. The *full* price for an item would be paid at its removal. If satisfaction was incomplete, the second half of the cost would be refunded on the item's return.

Immediately, a number of heavy men were called and one of the larger cages got carted away.

Several hours later it reappeared, still covered and wrapped by its tarp.

Not surprisingly the man who'd sold the item—at an exorbitantly inflated price—wasn't to be found. He'd "be back at any moment," that's what his friends promised. Pleading the inability to wait, Name made plans to return the following afternoon for his reimbursement. And if not then, the subsequent afternoon would do...

Neither Name nor the vendor were seen at the spot again.

Days later, when the smell finally grew intolerable, the cage's shroud was anonymously removed. Immediately the sheets covering everything else got pulled away.

A spectacle.

In the center, a wire prison holding the very deceased museum curator. The bloating and the skin's ghastly paleness were repulsive, but not nearly as hideous as the ripped fingernails, the shredded fingertips.

Comparatively, his bluntly crushed skull seemed benign. So too the lizards and serpents gorging themselves.

Around the centerpiece, innards were carefully arranged, and resplendent feathers. Two small heads dangled from a nicely carved stand, an earthenware jug was partially filled with scented liquid, some delicate flowers survived in small pots. Modest piles of excrement hardened here and there, wrapped in colorfully painted strips of leather.

So terrible and enthralling was the full vision—the riveting center, the bizarre clutter of boxes, infectious growths and carefully selected accouterments surrounding the staged death—that none of the market's normally intrepid thieves caught sight of the glimmering edge of an instrument tucked into the crux of the deceased man's arm.

As usual, the police were the last to arrive and, in a lightening storm of photographs, TV lights and billowing, fetid stench, they moved the body. The pronged, spiked instrument

which had been administered to the victim's fingers dropped into plain view.

As for the rounded, heavy and bloodied rock, it drew little attention.

Besides the corpse and the turcas, what proved most captivating and finally descriptive of the scene was a young boy trapped in a box hewn from twine and tree limbs. Maybe eleven years old, he was tied into a seated position, his hands knotted behind, his legs crossed and bound. His forehead angled sharply backward. His teeth—ground into dangerous points—chewed convulsively on a gag while his yellowed, watering eyes darted tirelessly and absently.

●
The powerful riddle
●

Between the curator's death and the previous Cortés events there were no screamingly obvious connections, nothing for fast telephoning to newspaper editors or filming for the evening news. At least nothing except the turcas. And since no one immediately knew what the clawing device was, it'd be a while before that part of the drama got twisted into what came before.

The reason for no connection? A photographer slightly more enterprising than most beat everyone to the scene.

Usually the first arriving members of *la prensa* (the press) are no different than the first bystanders or the first police: they poke a bit, check and see if anything's worth stealing. That's the real reason victims in Mexico are rarely found with identifying documents. Their papers and cash are lifted just after their souls; they usually don't even have shoes though they generally do manage to retain their socks.

So, given the only casual deference conferred on the deceased, the photographer didn't hesitate to execute a small modification.

After snapping a long string of pictures from every angle, she fished inside the largest cage and extracted a printed sign hung from around the dead curator's neck. It read:

This is a suicide.

This fact fails to implicate the guilty.

It also fails to reveal who killed this man.

What did it mean? No idea, the photographer hadn't slept the night before and she wasn't ready to start analyzing poetry. She *was* sure, though, as she bent and crumpled the heavy paper into a pocket, that her photo would be worth more than anyone else's. Irreversibly marked as the first, it was also the only complete record of the scene.

Such resourcefulness is well rewarded in Mexico.

Surprisingly well, the photographer discovered when she got the check the City Editor of *Reforma* scratched out.

The reason for the generosity? The editor grasped the importance of the lines. It wasn't what they said, but *how*. English.

Three implications.

There was a connection in language between the lunatic scene in the Sonora Market, and the bizarre murder at Cholula, which in its turn *might* connect to the obscene and weird hacking off of a piano-players' hands, according to some of the more fervid speculation.

Everyone was definitely talking about it, and now there was *much* more to say.

A gripping headline struck like lightening. *Cortés Killings Continue*. Excellent.

Wait, about that headline, wasn't there a dead word? Yes, "Cortés." Too old, too far removed from the concerns of *today's* world. Since *Reforma* prides itself on being Mexico's modern newspaper, a more actualized headline seemed recommendable, one like...*Imperialist Killings Continue*. Perfect.

Now, the editor wondered, should he play it safe and insert the word "*Apparently*"? Or, how about not playing it safe and setting an exclamation point at the end?

•

"I WILL GET THE JOB AT REFORMA!" howled Luis, the *Jornada* reporter. "And you two *will* get it for me!"

The maid who'd just stepped outside to deliver drinks to the

group on Marina's patio scuttled back in. "It's fine, fine," called Marina. The *muchacha* cautiously reappeared.

Tactfully oblivious to both the shouted demand and her servant's confusion, Marina continued on the first of two compact speeches she and Anderson had worked out to respond to the *Reforma's* exclusive photos. It didn't take long to reach the conclusion, "So, if we *didn't* have any way of knowing what was going to happen, *how* could we alert you beforehand?"

A moment of silence while Luis got himself under control.

Anderson chimed in, "It's *also* true that in a *theoretical* sense, since you're asking us to do the virtually impossible, you're *not* asking for anything at all."

Marina didn't like the sound of that.

Anderson, "I mean, something that's impossible is inconceivable. And what cannot be conceived cannot exist. It's nowhere, it's not even an idea. Therefore it is...*nothing*."

"We'll be," Marina cut in, "a *lot* better off if we can all work *together* to figure out where all this is going, what might come next."

"Possibly," conceded Anderson, "but what I'm saying is, there's an internal contradiction here. We shouldn't be in this predicament because—"

"*Que te chingas con tus teorías*," snarled the reporter. Fuck yourself with your theories.

That was, Marina judged, an excellent opening toward her second little speech. "Really, *why* do you want to work at *Reforma* anyway? That's not *you*, they're more pro-gringo than the PAN." (PAN is the acronym of a Mexican political party.)

"That's the *last* thing I need, *you*, a pinche half-gringo telling *me* who *I* am. All you—"

Marina, crossly and with admirable force: "I'm *not* telling you who you are. I'm saying that *if* you work at *Reforma* your entire project of social critique is *abandoned*. You know that."

The reporter wasn't sure. Partly because he didn't completely

understand all the fine points of what they called around the *Jornada* office “The Critical View of Social History.” Anyway, he remained unswayed. “I said I’m gonna get that job and I’m gonna. I don’t even *need* your help. If I want that job *right now* all I’ve gotta to do is just go and bring in the pictures I’ve *already* got. You know, the ones of *you two* on Cholula Street. The ones that show your *faces*. I don’t need any more than that.”

“We understand.”

“I’m being nice, you see, I’m giving you guys a chance to get me *better* shots. But if you don’t, you don’t. So you can *see*,” the reporter eyed Anderson hatefully, “what you can do with your *pinche* theories. Next time something happens, I *better* be there for it. Be there *before* anyone else.”

He stormed out (after gulping down his expensive tequila drink).



As a man dedicated to the abstract and intellectual, Anderson was naturally slow to sense pressure from brute reality. He felt this squeeze, though.

Marina too. And along with it there was the other heavy weight, the curator’s—her godfather’s—death. That sadness was too real to defile with sappy tears. She just left her face empty.

Then it passed.

The sorrow lifted because of the way Marina connects with the world. For her it’s not *deep*, not a place where you have roots and so belong somewhere, participate in something, hold responsibilities, maintain bonds. Her reality exists more like a kaleidoscope surface: she flits across connecting with one and another person and project, here and there. Turning through time is seeing patterns and getting into them while they last. Then when the arrangement shifts there’s no holding on, no preserving; she slides fast into the next configuration and finds a way to make it work.

So while Marina doesn't try to control the world, she's not helpless either.

That's probably the reason forging historical artifacts came so easily to her. Marina's reality is always about what's coming, not what has been. The question is, what can be done? Never: how are things? So if wearing a forged Aztec amulet to a dinner party got the same response as wearing the real thing, Marina saw no difference between the two. And if she sold a not-quite-genuine article to a collector, she didn't feel bad or guilty. There was nothing to be guilty about.

Unless she got caught. She's a fast one though, hard to catch.

Of course the fact that she skimmed over reality doesn't mean she *escaped* it. There was no cutting loose from her financial situation. That, like her plan to extort a bit of the Catholic Church's wealth, was neatly summarized by a single word. Ruined.

•

Another person was also feeling squeezed, but pleasantly and by a bow-tie along with a fitted jacket. "How *comforting*," Name celebrated, "a well disciplined suit can be!"

Not that he needed comfort, if anything a bit of sobering discomfort. Who could blame him, though, for a burst of euphoria? Hadn't his absurd riddle worked better than even the most preposterous hope?

This is a suicide.

This fact fails to implicate the guilty.

It also fails to reveal who killed this man.

He remembered when the embarrassing lines first occurred to him. And afterward, after jotting them on a napkin he'd spent a troubled hour asking whether he was an imperialist, or...a game show host?

In the end, he decided to go with them. And just as bad art inevitably sells better than the real thing, so too his "poetry" found a public. Deciphering his lines even became a local obsession.

Name cherished the radio personalities who theorized that it *really was* a suicide. Does, Name asked himself, imbecility know *no* limit? Imagine, using a rock to bang yourself dead. A *common* way of putting an end to it all. Alone in his hotel suite with three radios tuned to different stations, he luxuriated in the error and occasionally emitted celebratory comments like “nitwit,” and “simpleton.”

Then there were those who imagined that the reason no one could figure out a clear meaning was that the *author* had been confused. It was the writer’s fault, not the readers’! “Opacity and conceit,” Name announced, “must be fundamentally joined!” He did need to admit, though, that the poor clods had no way of knowing that someone of *his* literary stature penned the lines. Even so, he could hardly avoid concluding that they were imbeciles.

Then there were the *most* amusing decoders, the mistranslators. Since command of English is a hallmark of the Mexican elite, people are loathe to admit incompetence. As a result, any number of minds were stoically laboring on this and similarly impenetrable conundrums:

This is a suicide.

This work fails, and involves guilt.

This, which is also a failure, reveals who killed this man.

This much is certain: the riddle had everyone tied in knots. “So *they* are the twisted ones!” Name loudly concluded, which incidentally revealed that he occasionally admitted—at least to himself—that his majestic project brought him to the edge of reason. That wasn’t necessarily bad.



It was also a project dotted with critical decisions, and as the glow faded, Name faced another.

An offer needed to be made.

Radios were turned off, the television cabinet closed, papers

carefully stacked. "Neatness," Name whispered, "is the frame surrounding all clear thought." Then a lingering moment got passed gathering himself in the secure embrace of his recliner.

His cell phone was located. Name held it in his hand and sighed, though not because the destiny of everything he'd done so far balanced on the outcome of the call he was about to make. It did, but he *detested* the little buttons he could barely distinguish with his 50 year-old eyes. Did they *have* to make these handsets so small? Could nothing in this world be done correctly without *his* supervision?

Probably not, but focus needed to be maintained.

Before making the connection, a single question. The receptor: Anderson, or Marina?

●
Worrisome visit
●

"Who is it?" the *Jornada* photographer demanded into his telephone. No response. But he did perceive, barely, some suggestively heavy breathing. Unable to suppress a nervous tinge of hope that some hot babe had been pining over him and decided to make the first move, he repeated the question, less brusquely, almost invitingly.

"Damn," he heard whispered, in English, before the line went dead.

On the other end Anderson dropped his phone onto the bed (so crisply made-up by the maid). Again he concentrated on listening to what was going on downstairs in his house. It *had* to be a man down there; the footfalls were simply too brutish, too heavy to be female.

He'd suspected it might be that infernal *Jornada* reporter poking around. The annoying guy *did* have a history of following him, spying, taking pictures. God knows what else. So he'd called. But whoever was downstairs hadn't answered any telephone.

More listening.

"Damn," Anderson cursed again, remembering that his doorbell was disconnected. *That* was probably the cause of everything.

He'd been forced to disable it because of a terrible mistake made upon first arriving in Mexico. A day or two after occupying the house the bell sounded. Outside, a hobbled, malnourished man waited with his desperate wife and three dirty

children. (There was a lingering dog too, hard to know whether a stray or a pet.) The man would do *any* job for money. "*Pa' la familia,*" he'd begged. Anderson gave the guy a menial task and a few too many pesos.

For which he received a return visit the next day, and then another and another until Anderson decided he'd done all he should.

It was too late by then, though. Word had escaped.

Two days later it was a different guy at the door. The day after still another miserable work-seeker, this one accompanied by cousins. Anderson had no idea where all this was going.

He hadn't yet learned that Mexico is a word-of-mouth place. Almost no one except naive foreigners has contact with *desconocidos* (people they don't know). Everything is "I've got a friend, who's got a friend who's...selling his car." Or needs a job, or is looking for love, or whatever. And it works. In a culture adapted to oral communication, organization finds a way to happen.

What that meant for Anderson: on the second Friday after the first visit, the dam broke. They seemed to be arriving by the busload. Dirty clothes, shoeless feet, the hordes congregated outside his door ringing away at the doorbell.

The maid Victoria had tried in her anecdotal way to explain all this right from the beginning. Anderson hadn't quite gotten the message, though. But now, with her wisdom proved, he accepted her verdict that there was nothing to do but disconnect the bell and pretend no one was home.

How long would the pretense need to last? No way to know.

Slowly, the tide had turned. But months later they were still trickling in, mostly from the nearby villages according to Victoria who occasionally set an ear against the door and took account of their accents.

The doorbell had yet to be reconnected.

Which meant the following explanation was plausible, at

least for Anderson. *If* Victoria was out—and at this time she frequently shopped for the day's lunch and dinner—then *maybe* she'd accidentally left the door ajar. Whoever it was downstairs *might* have rung the inoperative bell, gotten no answer, seen the door open and decided to look in, just to make sure everything was alright. *Probably it was a Good Samaritan!*

Still, he'd feel better when Victoria returned and confirmed the benevolent intentions. "Where *is* she?" Anderson swore. Then he chided himself as hardly noble. What kind of man hopes his sixty year-old maid will limp home to rescue him from an intruder?

Who was down there?

The Good Samaritan explanation was certainly the most comforting. The plan would be to wait quietly until the fellow was satisfied that everything was in order and peaceably left. With luck, he'd close the door on the way out.

The footsteps, heavy, determined, came upstairs. Anderson hid behind the bed.

Whoever it was out there, he stomped hard past the bedroom door and seemed to enter the study across the hall. Confirmation: the sound of papers rustling and getting shuffled. (In other circumstances Anderson would've noticed how *quiet* it was inside his brick and concrete home smack in the middle of the world's largest city.)

There was one contingency that really worried. *Really* worried. The house came with a small wall-safe in the closet. The combination had always been taped to the dial. But some time in the last week or two it disappeared. A locksmith hadn't yet been called to open it, so there was nothing Anderson could do to prove that the box was, in fact, empty.

Imagine trying to sell that story to a robber.

Something slammed violently, frighteningly hard against the floor in the study.

Eyes flashed and Anderson's thought churned toward possi-

ble escape routes. None emerged. His home, like most every other in Mexico City, was a kind of highly decorated cage. Though the metalwork was exquisite, it was still iron bars covering all the windows. No doubt the house was well protected against outside threats, *but*, unfortunately no one getting in also means: no one gets out.

That's why house fires in the city—when the heat and smoke trap people upstairs—are so deadly. It's a terrible thing to watch, terrorized mothers and fathers cracking the bones of their own children so they can be forced through the bars and dropped into the arms of strangers on the street.

In the gathered crowd people fight viciously for the crying babies and children. The fact that they'll be anonymously sold on the adoption market isn't so horrific when you consider the fate awaiting the parents.

Usually police arrive, drawn along with the street criminals by the rising smoke. They fight for the adoption money just like everyone else and occasionally use their pistols so the deaths can multiply.

Of course there's always the chance that a fire truck will cut the horror short, but since the job is patronage—friends of politicians get hired and claim their checks while never actually going to work—holding out hope for a last-second rescue isn't realistic.

Realism was beginning to grip Anderson now.

Victoria hadn't left the door open.

There was no Good Samaritan in his house.

If someone was sufficiently cold to get through the three heavy locks on the front door in broad daylight, there couldn't be much doubt about intentions.

One comforting thought: if whoever it was had the skill to open those three locks, then maybe they could also pick the safe. And there wouldn't be any need to...*extract* the combination from Anderson.

Options? There seemed to be three. Defense, offense and of-

fensive defense. The first meant staying put and hiding. Probably under the bed.

The second, *attack*. The elements of suddenness and surprise, combined with Anderson's good size—or height at least—promised the intruder's quick subduing. (The main redeeming aspect of this choice was that its existence showed Anderson hadn't completely lost his sense of humor.)

The third option took the element of surprise, but exploited it to flee madly. Assuming there was only one guy, if Anderson *zipped* from the bedroom he might well make the stairs, get down them and race out the front door before the criminal or his bullet could catch up. This course of action, Anderson was alarmed to conclude, was probably more recommendable than waiting and hoping.

Suddenly it was too late.

The front door downstairs slammed.

The heavy footsteps raced back down.

Then came the scream, a quick shrill burst immediately plugged. Victoria had arrived.

With her came a simple moral dilemma for Anderson. Hide or help.

Instead of doing either, Anderson considered—"sought guidance from" would be a more charitable way of putting it—an episode Marina had recounted. She was staying in an old apartment building near Mexico City's center when an afternoon earthquake rolled through. It built slow as the big ones do, and since most significant movers take a few buildings with them, she rushed out. Through her door, down the stairs from the fourth to the third to the second floor where everything stopped. There was an old woman in front, being helped down one step at a time by her middle-aged son. Neighbors filed behind.

The building was moving by then, the nervous, undulating rhythm that usually dissipates into nothing but occasionally

makes it up to shaking and then building-wrecking convulsions.

Decide now: wait behind, or force your way past the neighbors, those people you'll have to face day after day and night after night if nothing happens.

Fear versus shame. It was most abrupt decision Marina had ever faced—

Victoria laughed.

Just like that Anderson heard it. Hard to believe, but there she went again, a flustered kind of sound, but not anxious, definitely no panic.

Then she was speaking, conversing. Hard to make out the words, but the placid tone communicated the important part, *danger over.*

He hurried downstairs.

"Are you alright?" were the first words spoken.

"Yes, of course I am. Fine," stumbled Anderson. "Are...are *you* alright?" he asked Victoria. Then, without actually waiting for a response, "How, umm, yeah, how did *you* get in here?"

EC's heavily lidded, reptilian eyes glinted. "I have the *key* obviously. I rang but no one answered. So I assumed no one was home. I gave our Victoria here quite a scare, huh?"

Victoria laughed cautiously.

"This *is*," EC went on, "United States Embassy property you know."

"Yes, it almost certainly is. No doubt, I mean. I was just upstairs napping when I heard... Well, you *know* I was upstairs since...that's where I just came from!" Anderson still felt shaken. "I feel a bit shaky."

EC eyed him sternly. Probably he wanted an apology for being forced to come in uninvited. After not getting that, he said, "I *am* glad it turns out that you're here, though. I've got some things I should be telling you."

"You could've phoned."

"I was in the area."

The information EC had come to share was about as compelling as his introduction, "We've *all* gotta be on-board, especially now that this crazy Imperialist Killer stuff is going around like a bad disease."

• Foreign policy •

Most American foreign policy is formed by “Marriott Internationalists.” Definition: Americans who visit a Marriott (or Hilton or Hyatt) in a foreign country and taste the local culture by checking out some tourist attractions then mixing with a few locals before packing up and returning home.

In Mexico, the tourist stops include the “Folclórico,” a song and dance show supposedly inspired by pre-colonial customs. (Most Americans leave making comparisons to the Rockettes.) And the contacted locals, they’re usually business leaders strongly linked to America. They went to school in Boston, or spent a few years working at an international law firm in Chicago. No matter what, they *have* to be at least halfway Americanized since the visiting Marriott Internationalists rarely know the local language.

Predictably, these Americans abroad end up in small world conversations. One of the locals took intensive English classes in Houston years before and, it turns out, one of the Americans has a sister who... lives there! Small world.

When this cadre of globetrotters touches down back in the homeland, it’s straight to work. They issue pronouncements in newspaper columns, in scholarly journals like *Foreign Policy*, in D.C. workshops, and in directives printed on U.S. State Department letterhead.

It all sounds the same.

It does because they all hold a view of international relations that, not surprisingly, reflects their particular kind of interna-

tional experience. Relating with foreigners is basically about holding up one end of a friendly conversation.

Desperately, EC wanted to be one of these important U.S.-based conversationalists. He wasn't though. He was a subaltern. He'd been sent to Mexico almost two decades earlier with instructions and a promise. The instructions: don't drink the water and treat the locals kindly. The promise: if he did a *very* good job, he'd be considered for a position Stateside one day.

Still waiting.

His problem wasn't an intelligence shortage, it was that he just didn't *seem* smart. True, his judgment occasionally failed. He'd made the mistake of learning Spanish in Mexico. Bad career move, like learning to be a fast typer it locks you among the underlings.

Still, he couldn't be faulted for trying. Way back at the beginning, when he'd first met Anderson, EC had dutifully produced a copy of the *International Herald Tribune* and invited him to, "take a looky at this with me." The top headline read: Poll Shows Americans Unpopular in Europe.

"Americans are unpopular in Europe," Anderson ventured, "because no one ever does a poll of whether French, Germans and the rest are popular or unpopular anywhere."

A smile. "That's sure true, it's better being something than nothing. But wouldn't it be *even better*, don't you think, to be good neighbors? I mean, we can learn from this how important it is, our behavior when we're visiting other places. Do you see?"

Was EC being serious or sarcastic? "Something *is* there," Anderson answered cautiously, assuming he was being tested somehow.

But he wasn't. EC was just being EC. And maybe that's the deepest reason he'd never get that promotion taking him north. He was intelligent, he was capable, his feelings about international relations were pleasingly orthodox, but he was annoyingly enthusiastic.

•

"Well, you've certainly got all that figured out," complemented Marina, after listening to Anderson's interpretation of American foreign policy in general, and EC in particular. Actually, it wasn't a complement.

"Ok, ok," conceded Anderson, meaning he'd try not to bring the subject up again. He found it interesting, though, hard to resist.

Not Marina. She just couldn't get excited about global politics. On the other hand, bold things—history, imperialism, power—*those* turned her on. But the workings of garden-variety diplomacy? Fashion magazines were more intriguing. And more sophisticated.

So they sat there, not saying anything for a while.

Then it was back to it, back to their own lives and the one place they couldn't avoid going eventually.

The conquering of Cortés reached culmination—and the first world empire began—at the exact spot where the Mexico City Cathedral stands today.

●
Building the Cathedral
●

The Mexico City Cathedral's central dome is beautiful though not—architecturally speaking—majestic. The reason for its deficient awesomeness was two lessons learned by builders well before they reached their project's crowning stage.

First, because Mexico's capital sits on an ancient lake, asymmetrical sinking everywhere is unavoidable. (It's a permanent outrage, the attention given to the *single* leaning tower of Pisa. In Mexico City everything leans precariously every which way. Rows of buildings resemble the mouths of teenagers badly needing braces.)

The other lesson was earthquakes. They're constant, with a real shaker every four years or so.

Together, the precarious foundation and the unsteady future set a requirement at the Cathedral's critical stress point, the central dome. To protect against collapse of the entire structure, the dome's weight required significant diminishing. And back then the only way to shed weight was by shrinking size.

So the glorious Cathedral got crowned with a puny top.

An attempt was then made to offset the dome's paltriness by in turn *topping it* with a cylinder of windows projecting still another dome. But the effect contradicts the intention: the main dome appears ludicrously retarded not only in comparison with the building below but also contrasted with the cupola above. "No other dome from any other church," according to the book *La Cathedral de Mexico*, "can be compared with that

found in Mexico. The genius lies in its disproportionate proportion.”

That’s one way of putting it.

What’s most frustrating, though, is that the aesthetic calamity didn’t solve the practical problem. In the late 17th century inspectors discovered that even the mini-dome was sufficiently heavy to begin forcing cracks through the Cathedral’s upper parts.

God, according to the faithful decision made at the time, could be trusted to protect his parishioners. No earthly action was taken.

Confidence was shaken, however, when similar cracks were discovered in St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, and the decision was made *there* to buttress God’s efforts with material forces. So it was that in Mexico (as in Italy), religious faith got replaced by trust in massive iron. A thick tension ring was fashioned and belted around the dome’s base to relieve outward stress and prevent widening of the cracks.

The iron circle worked. No further modifications have been necessary.

The same can’t be said for the rest of the Mexico City Cathedral. It tilts and bends incoherently. Walking through you’re engulfed by unsteadiness—some tourists report nausea—as the body’s balancing mechanisms struggle to account for a column twisting slightly to the right, next to a wall fading leftward. More unsettling, the conflicting angles verge on the imperceptible, so you feel like things aren’t quite lining up while you’re also fending off worries that you’ve lost the ability to see straight.

Unsurprisingly, scaffolding is constantly erected throughout the place, and workers never finish hammering at stone and wedging mortar into fissures and cracks.

It’s still a wonderful building. Solemn despite the constant hammering of workers. Refreshingly frigid in the morning,

and spiritually dark all the day through. It smells old, it's comfortably, humanly dirty. For almost everyone, the place hits the five senses just right: like massive, historical Cathedral. Difficult, though, to feel safe there.

It's that sense of impending danger that allowed Name's workers their free access. And they wore clean uniforms (though no gloves or work boots) while seeming confident about what they were doing. So no one bothered them as they positioned and repositioned scaffolding and ascended here and there, working up above. There was no skepticism at all. If anything, the congregation and priests were grateful for their efforts.

Of course a minor official did run a cursory check. He went over, offered to be of any service, sent an obedient boy to fetch water and crackers for everyone, and after abundant pleasantries got around to asking what was being done. The lead worker pulled out an authentic *Carta Poder* from the Anthropology Museum. "Restoration work," he said. It was enough.



The Cathedral isn't intriguing only for what it is, also for what it was. Where the Cathedral today crookedly stands, there originally rose the most imposing shrine in the Americas, a giant, sacred pyramid.

Pregnant girls were frequently sent to the top for butchering, their entrails dragged out, then examined for portents.

The priests also happily received up there men who could grow beards (uncommon among the relatively hairless natives). Why the need for face hair? It reminded of curly beast fur and so was immensely symbolic: it linked humans with the divine animals inhabiting Aztec religion. In city streets, rabid animal festivals climaxed in intoxicated orgies of bestiality, while above, the priests sanctified it all with their own ritual. The hairy skin was torn from victims' cheeks and suffused with a sticky natural glue. Worship leaders then adorned their

bodies with the furry clumps and stalked each other on all fours, howling like lunatics.

On the *most* revered occasions, there could be no substitute for quantity. Victims were squeezed into columns stretching for miles; in one four-day ceremony twenty-thousand human hearts were torn out in gratitude to the Gods. In the midst of the appalling pageant, priests and spectators alike collapsed in exhaustion and disgust.

According to Cortés, the number of skulls accumulated in the ossuary beside the temple pyramid reached 136,000. Later waves of the colonial effort included more capable counters, and while unable to confirm the number, they did find similar ossuaries in other locations that contained dozens of thousands of bone heads.

It all came to an end with Cortés, it ended with his civilization and his humiliation. He commanded the Aztecs to pull apart their holy monument block by block.

Then they were ordered to rearrange the giant, rectangular stones; they were told to begin erecting the Cathedral that remains on the spot to this day.

So it was perfectly demonstrated that even the local Gods—no matter how sated or insane—were powerless in the face of the conquerors.



Saturday is always a heavy tourist day in the Cathedral; there're religious services of course—they never really end—but consigned to the more remote of the two main sections they barely interrupt the noisier work of women in tank tops and men in shorts seeing, pointing, discussing and flashing pictures.

Laid out in the orthodox fashion as a giant cross, entering from the plaza in front sets you at the cross's base. Hypnotically long rows of pews stretch forward, leading to the open, main altar set directly below the (relatively) small dome. Then,

just behind the main altar comes a vast enclosure of ornate latticework holding the organ machinery along with the chorus.

That chorus structure also usefully separates the main nave from the second, much smaller area for worship extending through what would be the head of the cross.

The Cathedral, that means, essentially divides in two, which is what allows loud tourists to dominate the front without garbling the prayers of devout worshippers in back.

Except Sunday morning when the priests assume the main altar underneath the central dome, and the sheer number of reverential believers cows tourists into respectful silence.

It was Saturday, so the place was busy and noisy.

And there wasn't anything inconvenient about the work being done. The scaffolding planted on one side of the main altar and precariously stacked upward had finally reached to the dome's base. A worker ascended, surveyed, and returned. Energetically, the entire structure was disassembled, moved around to the other side, and rebuilt. Again the worker climbed. His subsequent descent was...hesitant.

He did eventually touch ground again. His hands waved helplessly and then he slumped off to one side while two others ascended (the older one obviously nervous about the skeletal structure's integrity). They dropped back down. Anger.

Once again the entire structure—hundreds of interlocking metal rods, nuts, bolts and so on—was disassembled and replaced about three steps away from where originally erected.

There was some urgency now, a day that had begun before sunrise was reaching toward noon.

There was a scare. Four workers had ascended and their combined weight proved too great, the scaffolding began swaying. Locals assumed the worst—the first waverings of a serious earthquake—and fled. While few of the tourists understood what was happening, most were sufficiently perceptive to figure out that leaving would probably be a good idea.

The mass exodus had drawn some unwanted attention.

Work pushed forward though—with only three men going up at a time—into the early evening. Some heavy wrenches went up and came back down. A box holding diverse tools ascended.

Finally, four loudspeakers were hoisted. Previously they'd been distributed about the cavernous nave. Used on Sunday mornings, they amplified the sermon.

•

"Where are they all going?" Marina asked. The locals were crowding toward the exits, the tourists somewhat confusedly falling in behind.

"No idea." A while later Anderson added, "I feel...*heretical* about all this." Understandable. Seated in the central nave of refined Mexican Christianity, they were flipping through Cortés' unvarnished writings.

"It seems more foreboding to me."

"Maybe." Anderson glanced toward the paneled door he'd pushed through at the beginning of it all, the one leading to the adjacent Sagrario. He remembered the shocking vision of Marina disguised as a religious boy, and how *hard* he'd had to push at the heavy door. It was so cold in there, and murky. Inside the stone library there was the empty turcas stand, the centuries-old letter... If *only* he would've said "No" way back then. He could have. He'd been so close. He almost had.

"Still," Marina snapped him back to now, "it's definitely relieving that it's the twelfth." Which meant it was one day *before* whatever was to happen would.

Tenochtitlan fell, and the imperialism of Cortés reached completion on the thirteenth day of the month. On that date the uneasy—sometimes openly conflictive—coexistence between the Spaniards and their Aztec hosts came to a violent end.

The natives were rounded up and forced to choose between

death and irredeemable slavery. Many died, and those choosing life were immediately compelled to begin tearing down their temple-pyramid. As the sun set, the cornerstone got laid for the new Cathedral.

In all the history books—and probably in reality too—that single day encompasses the taking of the New World: the conquering, the slavery, the end of everything the locals believed in, and the erection of a new culture and rule.

Which explains why on Saturday the twelfth Marina and Anderson felt confident that whatever was going to happen, at least it wouldn't be until tomorrow.

"On the other hand, I suppose it *could* be today," Marina worried. "I mean there *is* some confusion about the calendar."

Anderson had no idea, and Marina—despite her nervousness—found a spark of pleasure in a historical fact, just the kind of obscure thing Anderson normally knew and she didn't. The Julian calendar—promulgated by Julius Caesar—applied in Europe until sixty-one years *after* Tenochtitlan's fall. In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII instated his Gregorian Calendar, which remains in effect today. And though the adjustments were minor, it's true that a day *is* thrown off here and there.

They were a day off from the promised end.

Anxiously, they made for the exit.

(As a note, there exists an irresolvable mystery as to exactly when the Gregorian Calendar came into effect. The papal bull was signed February 24, 1582, but Pope Gregory neglected to indicate which calendar the date referred to.)



Name halted writing to watch Anderson and Marina hurry out of the Cathedral. He nodded contentedly: right where they were supposed to be. Since he'd set the trap leading them there, he wasn't surprised. Still, it's always pleasing, the sight of obedience.

Then back to marking and coloring his journal. He was writ-

ing very personally now, though briefly as he hadn't contemplated much space for such indulgences.

His confidence, he noted in aristocratically purple ink, was only growing as the project built to culmination. Earlier he'd been afraid that his dedication might falter. It probably would have had the television, the radio and the newspapers not reacted so energetically and perfectly.

Now, though, there was something else. Impending failure no longer dimmed enthusiasm, but from the other extreme came a darker menace. *Success*. Success because he'd slowly come to see the historical decisiveness of his project. The awe threatened to overwhelm, to leave him cowering before an accomplishment so mightily powered that the effects could no longer be completely foreseen.

He wrote all that down and liked what he saw.

•
Media empire
•

The day's *Reforma* front page got people's attention: a photograph of the Cathedral with a "?" superimposed. Inside, the picture linked to a history of Cortés' march to the Aztec capital, and a diagram of the engineering required to transform the blocks of a pyramid into an open cathedral building.

There was also a timeline—colorful and blaringly clear—which Name scissored and then glued across facing pages of his journal. Above the line, there were pictures of what *he'd* done. Below, the historical precedent. The first photo captured the piano player's unique demise. Beneath it, Cortés' triumph in the town of Tlascala was depicted. Next along the line came the glorious evening party Name had thrown, and below, a lively depiction of Cortés in Cholula. A resplendent picture of the bizarre objects in the Sonora Market filled the next place above the line. In the slot beneath, a drawing of Montezuma in his court. Finally, there was an empty frame on top, and below, Aztec slaves deconstructed their holy the pyramid.

Near the page's bottom, there was a small picture of a turcas, a description of its historical uses, and some vague gestures toward current events.

The normally verbose Name could not find a single word.

Across town, the *Jornada* had its own take. On the front page sidebar, the editors placed an old, well-known pencil drawing of Cortés, but with his face blotted out and an "x" superimposed. And the day's issue was especially thick with broadsides directed at globalization and similar outrages.

●
Going to church
●

Sunday morning, early. The sky was illuminated, but the sun hadn't broken the horizon.

The "homeless" prepared. Some spread chunks of stale bread and crumpled bible pages around themselves. Others hid shoes, water bottles and cell phones under bundles of soiled clothes.

The begging happens all over the place on Sunday mornings, but it's most intense and professionalized at the three main Cathedral doors. Beside one of them, the irritated boss man was resolving a disagreement between two tenants. An efficient guy, the disputed spot quickly went to the higher bidder. The expected complaint ("But you *promised...*") was cut off with a sharp "*Lárgate, vieja*" (Get out of here old hag).

The resigned woman packed her things into a satchel and left. (Apparently her sister had secured an only somewhat less desirable location in front of a small museum down the street. Less traffic there, true, and the absence of God's immediate attention was also a disadvantage. But the passersby would be composed more predominantly of tourists with dollars and euros. Also, she'd only have to work—recline, with a pained, despondent expression—for half the day.)

Watching her shuffle off, the boss was nervous. But not because he'd read the papers and knew something connected with these Imperialist Killings might happen at any moment. There were police around, even more than usual, to deal with that.

Not *too* many cops, though. That's *one* thing, he had to admit, that the city did right. As long as the tourists came to spend their money, the local officials kept the balance: enough blue uniforms to hold a lid on everything, but not too many to scare off the cash elephants. (Mexico City slang for gawking foreigners who tend to be overweight, even the Europeans.)

So the imperialism threat—or whatever it was—would get managed. What *he* had to manage that morning was cash. Co-operative dues—the money he handed over to a greasy city administrator in return for control of the Cathedral begging slots—had been raised. He'd have to raise his fees in turn. Which would require upping his workers' income. So he trolled back and forth with uncommon sternness, grinding his teeth and chain smoking.

An old timer, one of his authentic geriatrics, was taking a brief break from poverty to nibble a delicate croissant and sip his Starbucks cappuccino.

Had the old man forgotten everything he'd learned over the years?

A swift kick of dirt in his face for the carelessness. Then the boss stomped the paper cup, scalding the old guy with splashing coffee. "As long as you finish it up fast," he concluded, "I guess I'll let you keep that bread thing." (Always nice to end on a permissive note. It's the key, he'd learned, to discipline: hit hard, then cut a bit of slack. It leaves them feeling grateful.)

Next, a fresher worker, the son of an annoying in-law, was cursed for having taken a shower and combed his hair before arriving. "*No seas pendejo*, if you want to meet *chicas* join the choir."

"I wanna meet an *American* girl," came the excited response. (One of Mexico City's stubborn urban legends is that young American females routinely fall for down-and-out locals as long as they're well-groomed, present clean fingernails and have firm rears.)

The boss winced and made a mental note to find a new oc-

cupant for that slot next week. In-laws be damned. On second thought, trading the stupid kid for the old woman he'd just evicted seemed like an ideal and fast solution. He scanned the plaza, but she'd escaped. So he coughed deeply and spat on his nephew who demonstrated that he'd absorbed the lesson by not cleaning his face.

Next Sunday would be better.

An American walked past into the Cathedral, the woman at his side was probably American too. The boss twisted his lips into an almost convincing smile. A Mexican followed obediently behind; the back of his head received a sneer, the heel of his boot a gob.

The boss did not like Americans, and he *hated* Mexicans who failed to share the feeling. He did like American money, though.

•

"Stop, just stop," insisted Marina, her patience almost exhausted. It wasn't even dawn, worshippers only trickled into the Cathedral and Luis was *already* sniveling that he hadn't gotten any pictures he could sell.

It looked like a *long* day. Maybe nothing was going to happen at all. And even if it did, how many hours were they going to have to wait? Five? Twelve?

None of them had really slept the night before.

They'd all had too much coffee that morning.

"The best thing for me to do right now," Luis persisted, "*might* be to just go with what I've got. I'm saying take the pictures I've already got to *Reforma*."

"Yeah," said Anderson, "bring them *worthless* pictures if something happens here today and someone *else* gets the shots. The ones showing whoever's really behind all this."

Luis had to admit the point.

They waited.

Worshippers kept arriving.

The daybreak service neared. A sprightly novice—with an aged deacon observing—made his way among the pews, passing out stapled sets of photocopied sheets with the morning's readings, psalms, hymns and a summary of the sermon. A heavy wooden box followed the distribution. There was a slit carved in its top, an excruciating Christ painted onto each of the four sides. Pesos clinked into the frightful container.

"The congregation, the acolytes, everyone seems *fidgety*," observed Marina as the three huddled in one of the distant pews. "Maybe it's just the cold."

"Bulging cassocks," said Anderson.

"*What?*" came back Marina, maybe suspecting something untoward.

"Bulging cassocks—the acolytes' gowns—they're all bulging because they're wearing sweaters underneath."

"Yes, I'm aware of what a cassock is. I didn't know *you* were such an expert?"

"I was an acolyte. Not exactly a Catholic but I wore my *cassock*. Or...was it a *surplice*. One of those anyway."

Marina raised her brow.

"*Quit speaking English*," demanded the *Jornada* reporter in Spanish. His finger tapped anxiously on his camera's shutter button. "*Quit it*," he pointlessly repeated.

"It's pretty surprising," said Anderson "how *young* most everyone is. I mean, I thought we'd see grandmas and grandpas, the usual sprinkling of crazies and that's about it."

"They have to work today," explained Marina. "They come here first, then go to their jobs."

"6:30 in the morning. That's serious believing."

"That's Mexico."

Soon the Bishop ascended the main altar and gazed on his flock. An impressive gathering of devotees more or less filled the sixty closest rows of pews. Then came about twenty rows intermittently occupied. Another twenty barren. Finally, there

were the few people—Anderson, Marina, Luis among them—toward the back. Of those, a decent percentage had cameras. Luis pointed at one and sneered, “*He* doesn’t deserve to work at *Reforma*.”

The pews way behind sat empty.

“*All* of God’s lambs,” the Bishop pronounced, his frail voice struggling to even make it to the end of his sentence, “should come near to hear the gift of God’s words.”

A few of the back-sitters moved forward. Not many.

The Bishop repeated his instruction, this time seemingly chanting it and then adding a kind of ad hoc prayer.

No effect.

“He seems to be calling down a *curse* on us,” commented Marina.

Luis appeared bothered by the insolence, but didn’t say anything. Or maybe he was bothered that she spoke English, or possibly that he hadn’t understood the words. Whichever, his mouth twisted, then quivered with irritation.

Anderson didn’t notice, he was trying to make out the features of a hulking, owlish presence up near the altar; it was a man spying out from behind a column. “It...it’s *him!*” Anderson saw, just as the organ surged.

The Mexico City Cathedral’s organ is among the world’s most towering and shiny. Also equipped to produce a tremendous noise, the entire building shook as its tubes wailed.

“*Que?*” said the *Jornada* reporter.

“Who?” asked Marina at the same moment.

“Don’t speak English!”

Now the solemn chorus joined in with the musical lauding. The sound was impressive and, judging by facial expressions, hell for those suffering a hangover.

A skinny lector stationed beside the altar was nearly impacted by a tile falling from the dome above. Perturbed, he bent and carefully gathered the visible shards. After reassum-

ing his position he admirably resisted the temptation to look up.

The Bishop hadn't witnessed the incident. As it occurred off to one side, probably few noticed. But EC, who'd been peering around the adjacent column, definitely caught it. And Anderson, who'd been watching EC, saw too.

EC eyed the dome. Composed of precious hand-painted tiles, something is definitely depicted up there. But it rises so high above the floor—and it's so *little*—that it's nearly impossible to make out exactly who the figures are or what's happening. Fluffy clouds are there, blue sky. Some people float, they may be winged.

After considering for a moment, Anderson pointed out EC to the *Jornada* reporter. Being a reporter, he required no further instruction. Squeezing out wordlessly, he crept around toward the very suspicious and somewhat plump American.

With Luis gone, Marina slid down the pew slightly, until her thigh touched Anderson's. It might've been a tiny display of affection, or tenderness, or maybe something closer to a maternal instinct. Regardless, it was unlike her. And it was good. Anderson touched her arm.

They watched what came next together.



In the thirteenth century—according to the firm cleric who replaced the doddering Bishop at the altar—a humble Belgian girl was tormented by an unrelenting vision of the moon. It was a bright orb marred by a small black imperfection. After years suffering both the omen and its inscrutability, a heavenly apparition descended to reveal the meaning. The moon represented the Church calendar, the black spot the absence of a feast honoring the earthly body of Christ. "At the request of Pope Urban IV," taught the young priest, "the omission was rectified. A ceremony was composed by the most Sainted Thomas of Aquinas."

Meaningful pause.

The stern theologian sensed inadequate (maybe only vague) interest from his flock; he adopted a more intriguing, almost conspiratorial tone. "Several *documents*," he confided, "from the Vatican as well as *papal* declarations establishing certain past events as true history and others as merely curious anecdote, agree: the music Thomas composed was so profound, so glorious that a *sculpture* of Jesus that Thomas kept near his desk actually...*wept*." He froze dramatically.

Anyone would've thought the presentation was finished. It wasn't though. "It wept...*real blood*!"

Neither Anderson nor Marina were surprised to learn that Thomas was amazed by what he saw.

"The marvelous sight," declared the priest, "unburdened Thomas of all earthly hesitation and he sought bread to *absorb* the heavenly gift. Being a humble servant of our Lord, he possessed only moldy scraps. So *that* is what he scraped across the dirty floor of his chamber to soak up the fallen and priceless tears."

Another expertly dramatic stop.

The priest straightened, stood tall to announce his final conclusion, "Then Thomas raised the dripping miracle to his quivering lips...and ate!"

"My God," shrieked Anderson, "*obviously*, it's Corpus Christi!"

Marina stared.

"Corpus Christi, *body of Christ*, this is the worship service for the feast of the body of Christ!"

Gratefully, Marina didn't say something like, "Calm down." She also didn't say, "You need some sleep." Which he did. She finally did react in her own way, though, to the priest's story. A muffled "Holy," she gasped. Or maybe it was something not quite so devout.

For Anderson, an equally breathtaking realization. He saw

the connection laced through this, undoubtedly the last day. Everything was captured by a single word. Anthropophagy.

If he'd been less intellectual, Anderson might've found a more dramatic term. It means almost the same thing but penetrates deeper: cannibalism.

●
The edible and empire
●

What made the conquering of the New World more than just another of history's legion wars was the details: hideous, but also arresting. It was the turcas shredding fingers, the hands ritually severed, the glamorous words accompanying the sword's insertion, the dead Montezuma in the zoo of his own insanity.

As for the *conclusion*—the final collapse of Aztec civilization at Tenochtitlan—what underlines the episode are the unique eating habits. Cortés wrote:

When the Aztecs fled we pursued, tripping over bundles of corn they dropped along with the roasted bodies of children they'd been carrying to satisfy their ghastly hunger.

This memorable diet explains one of the otherwise baffling lines found in Cortés' letters. After relating how a group of his scouts captured a small band of Aztecs transporting gold and silver ritual objects, Cortés merrily reports, "The Spaniards returned to camp with booty for ourselves, and victuals for the native slaves."

More poignantly, Cortés was able to bring some minor native tribes over to his side just before the decisive Tenochtitlan assault with a strange but tempting promise: exquisite *thigh* meat. According to the offer, all those who betrayed their own people and joined the Spanish would receive an abundance of it, all they could eat.

To satisfy the promise—and Cortés was a man of his word—

an entire company of native slaves was charged with a task most would find disagreeable. They were to trail close behind the charging Spaniards, and quickly butcher the fallen.

In the midst of the last battle, the fast-advancing Cortés occasionally interrupted his fierce warring to swing around and check on the work of his unique rearguard. He marveled. The defeated and overrun Aztec warriors generally weren't dead; they were expiring tortuously after having been penetrated by a lance or hacked by a sword. (This, by the way, was another of the humiliations heaped on the natives: they *didn't even merit the dignity of a finishing blow* from the haughty Spanish.)

So, they were grounded back there, wreathing.

Until the real slaughterers leapt to them. How zealously and masterfully the cutting was performed; in the midst of shrieks and manic convulsions entire legs were cleaned in seconds. After the meat was chopped away from the bone, it was rolled into a ball, rapidly stitched closed with natural fibers and deposited in a bloody shoulder bag. Then off to collect the next set of tender loins.

Further behind, scavengers—the elderly too slow to slice flesh from the living, and children, too inexperienced to make the brutal cuts—followed along stabbing at the remainders.



There's a flinty religious connection between the Aztec eating described in Cortés' pages, and something commonly believed in Cortés' time.

On his last night Jesus was surrounded by many more than twelve disciples, but before sunrise most ran. Why? In a dizzying understatement, the Bible calls it "a hard teaching." To be fully redeemed, Jesus taught his closest followers, they'd have to, "Eat my flesh, drink my blood."

Worshippers in the Mexico City Cathedral today obviously don't think too much about it when they line up for the communion rite; it's a lot easier to swallow when it's ceremony, not

reality. It's difficult to imagine, though, that those disciples who remained to face their harshest test thought about anything else once the corpse was pulled from its cross.

After stowing the limp body in a cave the hardiest believers were sealed inside with it. Three days were required to finish their choking work.

Centuries more were needed to complete the symbolic work: substituting the eating of the body with the metaphorical belief that it went to heaven. And replacing real flesh and blood with ritual bread and wine.

Anderson whispered rhythmically and excitedly, but undertoned by his sleeplessness, "O wondrous gift indeed! The poor and lowly may, upon their Lord and Master feed!"

"What!" hissed Marina.

"It's *lyrics* from the *hymn*, the hymn Saint Thomas composed for just this day. Just this service on just this day!"

There was some minor irregularity on the altar. An acolyte doubled over, scooped something from near his feet.

Another tile startlingly landed, cracking apart behind him.

"Here," insisted Anderson as he picked up the prayer and song booklet they'd purchased, "here, here." His finger darted beneath the lyrics of the morning's central hymn.

Marina wasn't looking at the page, though. She was entirely devoted to staring straight at him. Eyes focused, she tried to calm him with her expression.

Anderson didn't see. "*Sacris Solemniis*," he ran on, "*that's* what it's called. It's *the* hymn for Corpus Christi. Didn't you go to church when you were little? Marina?" he asked. "*Marina?*"

"Look around," she ordered.

Anderson scanned.

People seemed to be peering back at him.

"Sorry," he whispered fiercely, meaning sorry for his volume. "That's *it* though, I'm sure, *that's* the connection."

"There," she stated, then pointed with her eyes.

Off to the side of the main altar EC was observing them too. Then he was signaling, waving, insisting they come to him. His flabby body wobbled along with his arm's abrupt gestures.

Meanwhile the Bishop doddered back to the altar's center where he received the necklace microphone. With unsteady fingers it was turned on. "Special attention," came the fragile speech, rumbled by the amplification, "must be directed to the perfect music created by Saint Thomas to mark this feast occasion."

As the Bishop was an aged, weakened man it took him longer than most to hear that his amplified voice reverberated. The words echoed and wrinkled: "These hymns," he pronounced, "have bec...b...become cherished treasures..."

He stopped to let the voice settle. Though the problem was in his ears, he wiped his eyes. That did nothing to straighten out the sound when he began again. It kept bending over, doubling, maybe tripling.

"Alright," hissed Marina, tense with Anderson, worried about him and disconcerted by the amplified voice's strange echoing. "Alright, but what does it *mean*?"

"I'm not *completely* sure, but it *can't* just be a coincidence, it's, well, probably..." Anderson struggled on, but it was hard to hear the rest: the Bishop had summoned determination and raised his voice to its fragile old maximum.

•

Above in the Cathedral dome four loudspeakers were screwed together into a sonorous box. An especially distorting sonorous box since each speaker faced inward, directing its sound against its partner which blared straight back no less forcefully.

The inwardly arranged speakers obviously worked at cross-purposes, but the *real* problem came from the fifth. Bolted on top of the others, it faced down into the group. Its rear labeling completely exposed, many technical numbers were visible

along with symbols, letters and the word sub-woofer. It was a deep rumbler.

Left on its own, this black and angular sound contraption couldn't produce anything more threatening than garble. It couldn't possibly affect the Cathedral. The building's dome and walls had resisted earthquakes, a sinking foundation and five centuries. The place was hardly vulnerable to noise attack.

In fact, the dome's hard stone and brilliantly painted tiles were so mightily dense and formidable that the entire structure faced only one real threat: its own weight.

For more than three-hundred years that threat had been deferred by the iron tension ring corseting the dome's base.

The ring had been broken, though. The same imperfectly organized squad of workers that embedded the sound system had also pried it apart at one of its corroded junctures. Three hundred years, that meant, of the Cathedral's slow settling and realigning was free to be compensated all along the roof's critical circle.

Worse, the loudspeakers had been arranged to vibrate encouragement. Bolted directly onto one of the tension ring's now available ends, every sound passing into the air also shook directly through the dome structure and around the vulnerable rim.

Name wrote it into his journal this way:

*The Bishop's words travel the ring's length, every syllable a
trembling apology to the laws of physics so long defied!*

"Poetic!" he inscribed underneath.

•

"This is starting to *get* to me," said Marina, rubbing her ears and hoping to shake Anderson away from his barely coherent rambling.

It worked, at least partially. Anderson seemed to gain sobriety as he shifted from (morbid) historical interpretations of the

Bible to the Bishop's voice-vibration. He scanned the Cathedral, searching for an explanation.

"And," Marina added, "I just can't help feeling like everything's getting, I don't know, it seems like more and more *unpredictable*..."

Anderson could've returned a soothing phrase, but he was nervous too.

"You see," insisted Marina, "*we don't know* why we're here. I mean, it seems like the right place and the right time for *something*, but if we don't know the *what*, then, well..." She couldn't find her conclusion.

Neither could Anderson.

Marina, "Maybe we should leave."

Anderson didn't think so, "And what about *Luis*? We leave and nothing happens, then tomorrow morning we're splattered all over the *Jornada*. Or worse, *Reforma*."

"I'm worried about *today*."

The antique Bishop who'd been stuttering and pausing finally composed himself—or at least reconciled with—the overbearing sound of his own voice and charged into what remained of his pronouncement. "These treasures of our faith and worship, these most blessed and even miracul... miraculous compositions must be sung with *gusto* on this won...wondrous feast day." There, he'd gotten through.

Slowly, he made his way over to a severe chair.

Another tile dropped from above; an attendant scurried for it.

The massive organ growled and yawned and gradually worked itself into a somber musical introduction. Anyone peering carefully could see the choirmaster in the cage behind the altar crisply assuming the podium. The members, eager to sing, came to their feet. Somewhere a switch was operated to open the three choral microphones. The conductor raised both arms. It was *Sacris Solemnis*.

Marina dug in. "Too much is *out* of our control. We're not ready for this. We *can't* be. Listen, we *don't* even have an idea of what we're supposed to be ready *for*."

And it wasn't just them. She wanted Anderson to look at EC standing beside the altar. Even from so far away she could see uncertainty puffing his face. And worry too. Behind EC, Luis was snapping pictures nervously, and without any real focus.

Everyone, everything, it all seemed disoriented.

But back in the rear pews Anderson acknowledged none of it, "I'm *sure* it all makes sense, we're close, we must be, I'm just not seeing *exactly* how..."

Marina's patience stretched toward breaking, but she waited, held out for Anderson who pushed harder: "I don't think, well, I *do* think—it seems clear—that at least it *must've* been horrible for the Spaniards. I mean, it had to be...what they were forced to see..."

Anderson plowed on. Marina colored with doubt, or maybe illness. She couldn't believe he was turning back down that crazy line.

Anderson went, "In a sense... Doesn't it seem like the Aztecs eating their own people, doesn't that actually make them *more* authentically devout? Maybe there's something in that..."

Now Marina felt sick, not just fluttering nervousness but penetrating unsteadiness. It was in her stomach, like being grabbed down there in one direction and another.

The choir's hymned words were as frightfully loud as they were indecipherable.

Anderson tried moving ahead, "And...and..."

Marina, urgently, "I *need* to leave. We should go. *I've* got to go."



Part of what Name set in motion that morning intersected with a particular flaw in the Spanish Empire: God.

The flaw's easy to see. Spain conquered the New World to

globalize the kingdom of their all-powerful God. But, if God's *really* so powerful, then shouldn't He be able to do the kingdom by Himself? Why should the Spaniards sweat for it? Better to relax and enjoy the pleasures of domesticated locals scurrying about obediently.

It makes sense, and essentially it's what happened. After the first burst of empire the conquerors took it easy; they trusted divine intervention to hold everything together.

That rolled on for a few centuries, until the whole structure collapsed under the weight of its fat and lazy rulers.

So the basic problem with the Spanish empire—or at least the reason it fell—is that they believed in God.

Which makes religion an affliction of empire, a weakness.

Name knew that, and carefully wrote it into his journal. He penned the key paragraph in a special color, violet, tinged with...*pink*. Why the added tone? As Name noted in small, very precise lettering at the page's bottom, for an important reason: to show that he realized how his lines *could* be read. Cheap melodrama. But, he added and underlined, only by a *complete* dolt.

The destruction of the Cathedral is a poem of ruin. Like my earlier productions it elegantly repeats Cortés, but this time *my* event proves superior—*far* superior—to the original. *Nothing* will be constructed from these stones emptied of all holiness. A religion in all its gory and venerable customs will fall, but no new god will rise. Only empire remains, on our earth.



Anderson and Marina in the Cathedral weren't quite so eloquent (if that's the right word). "The, the thigh meat of the Aztecs," Anderson babbled, "was *fresh*, it had to be. Obviously. But then on the other hand—"

"I don't really," Marina interrupted, "*feel* good." She leaned and pushed at Anderson whose unsteady thoughts were dis-

organized even more by the contact. She hit him again, really knocking him this time, probably trying to get him moving, or maybe just out of her way.

Then Anderson felt it too, lightly. Quivering innards.

Surprised at his own disgust he held up for a second, concentrating on taking a slow, deep breath. The subject of cannibalism—and its twisted use by Cortés—was unpleasant, but he'd stood and given very graphic presentations *dozens* of times in rooms *full* of people without getting queasy.

Of course it's a disagreeable experience, talking about it in public. No one enjoys being eyed by others who're nauseated by what you're saying, offended too. It's all there in the faces glaring back: suspicion, revulsion, hostility. It leaves you cold, feeling strange, uncertain of yourself. You feel like a weirdo.

But you don't literally feel sick, and that's what was rolling over Anderson.

"It's the *building*," Marina blurted.

Immediately he knew it too.

And the entire Cathedral: tense postures, faces twisting back toward the exits.

Explosion of movement.



Usually earthquake fatalities in Mexico City are few and random. A quick shaker hits, popping a clump of cement out from the upper corner of an old, wobbly building. It breaks the skull of a delivery boy zipping down the sidewalk. Or, a floor collapses into the apartment below, extinguishing a bedridden grandmother.

But several times a year major quakes roll through, and whole buildings collapse, claiming dozens. And that's not the end of it. The breaking walls tumble in one direction or another, and down goes the neighboring structure. Then the next. The wreckage typically extends until reaching a natural stopping point, like a street. (An unspeakable aesthetic pleasure

lies in the zigzagging destruction as pictured in aerial photographs.)

When you live under a threat that constant and grave, your body becomes *supremely* sensitive; even in your sleep or during vigorous sex it learns to register and transmit the feeblest of pre-shocks.

The transmission's result is, first, an animal state of confusion. In the guts something's wrong, out of balance. The mind doesn't know what, though. You still don't know as your body tenses and prepares. You feel very awake, healthy, energized.

Suddenly you get it.

You move.



Just outside the Cathedral's three main doors, the beggars had not been producing. True, it was still very early, but if things kept on like this...

The boss responded. He instructed his most obtrusively needy workers to take the standard aggressive steps. Squeeze into the doorways, extend a gnarled leg, or a hand with an empty cup right across the passages. Force people to do more than ignore, they had to actively *avoid*.

Water got spilled beneath the semi-prone bodies of a few older workers. Putrid smells—the boss had his own secret recipe for the stuff—supplemented the visuals.

The *big* push came, though, when a door got shut down. The operation generally lasted about ten minutes (any longer and acolytes emerged to shoo everyone away). One of the beggars got designated to suffer some kind of collapse—in the afternoon it was obviously heatstroke, in the morning the symptoms were the same, but the cause less obvious—and two or three others were directed to administer comfort and radiate concern.

With that spectacle of suffering and compassion in full effect, someone pushing through one of the two *other* nearby doors

could be counted on to dig deep into a pocket and produce a generous handful of change. Maybe some bills.

Which triggers still more giving because generosity is a virus like any other. One person comes down with it, then the next in line gets infected too.

•

Marina and Anderson together swung out of their pew, then hurried back toward the doorways.

The delay Anderson had caused, though, his resisting Marina's attempts to push them out earlier proved costly. They were engulfed, overrun by more alert and quicker worshippers already storming for the exits. It wasn't Anderson's fault, his body simply hadn't been in Mexico long enough to learn to register the earliest earthquake signs, and his instincts hadn't been trained to react instantaneously. Others had.

True, a small part of the congregation demonstrated religious authenticity by remaining solidly in their pews. But the rest, they failed the test of faith as badly as their stampede was frantic.

•

Viewed from the square outside, one Cathedral door was completely blocked by bodies falling over poverty-stricken beggars. The other two openings disgorged worshippers, but they were stumbling and tripping out of the building, and the way couldn't remain unplugged for long.

Inside, Marina pulled Anderson back from the shoving rush barking, "We'll go through the side!"

"What side!"

"Sagrario!"

No assent necessary.

Together they veered back into the row of pews, climbing over and skirting down the long benches. For anyone watching it had to seem heartless how they trampled elderly worshippers who knew the futility of asking their weary bodies to run, and also the younger ones who sat fixed in their unwaver-

ing faith. But luckily, no one was watching. There was only total absorption by every single person; they were either fleeing or praying.

Anderson and Marina reached the false panel hiding the way to the adjacent building. The sturdy and obviously devout novice charged with guarding the door moved to confront them. Marina—elegant, regardless of circumstances—*flowed* past.

Anderson got knotted up.

Their faces pressed close, Anderson saw: the young man was sorely tempted, but at the same time he *cringed* before the disgraceful urge to retreat into the forbidden—but probably safer—place.

The struggle was brief. Torn against himself, the troubled Mexican proved unable to resist Anderson's modest muscular force.

Bending and pressing around the defeated guard, Anderson thought to pull at him, give him a reason—or an excuse—for joining their flight. But as he turned to reach, he saw a train of young attendants in plain cassocks rushing his way.

Their ornamental crosses bouncing off their chests, their intentions weren't clear.

Not wanting to risk getting dragged down there, Anderson left the poor guard at the door and slid out. He should've known, though; in dire circumstances those of imperfect faith always outnumber those who remain committed. The young churchmen only wanted to escape, like most all the rest.

A higher priest also joined the rush. Naturally, given his position and opulent vestments, he assumed a shepherding role. "*Palabra a las monjas!* (Alert the nuns!)" he yelled to no one in particular as he pushed into the murky Sagrario, right behind everyone else.

No one gave the alert. The man's authority—owed to him out of respect for the sacred rituals and traditions he represented—had shattered.

Still, the priest did command respect for his knowledge of more earthly things, like the Sagrario's layout.

Without hesitating all fell in line behind his confident lead. Down the main passage, left around a corner, quick steps along a short, narrow way, another sharp turn, rapid march, massive doorway.

A thick baton of wood was heaved up and pushed aside, leaving the mammoth door free to swing open.

The group pushed. It *refused* to give. Then it did; they spilled out.

All reality was wrong.

•
EC in the end
•

EC witnessed everything, right to the finish. Standing almost directly underneath the Cathedral's dome as the tiles started falling, he could *hear* something wasn't right up there.

He kept searching and peering until he saw: the odd concatenation of loudspeakers juttred from the rim. Barely visible and so high up, it was one of those things you missed if you weren't looking for it, but could see if you were.

EC eventually saw, and stared until making out exactly what the dark boxes were.

As another tile fluttered down he didn't imagine sound waves threatened the building. But the reverberations *would* keep shaking loose the dome's decorations until someone in authority perceived the cause and stopped the amplification.

Wait, possibly *he* could discover the off switch. Naturally he waved Anderson—who was accompanied by that damned Marina—to come over and join the effort.

What a *fool* he was. And he knew it too as he watched Anderson completely ignore him. How many times had experience taught it? His chore was solitary.

The truth is, EC was happy like that, alone and saddled with responsibility. It marked his nobility. Or at least dedication. He dwelled in the feeling until interruption, the gathering tremors of earthquake.

On the altar the Bishop was already throwing himself—or more like dropping his decrepit body—across the sacrament. Impossible to determine whether the man sought to protect

the symbolic blood and body of Christ, or was seeking protection by embracing it.

To his credit, EC was never one to hide behind what he idealized; he served. And he saw an opportunity. So the Director of the American Embassy's Cultural Extension—the man in charge of prettying his nation's face for the outside world—dove toward the pitiable Bishop. The plan? Embrace the fragile priest and accompany him from the building. Imagine the publicity he could generate for his beloved international cooperation with *that* selfless generosity.

It also crossed EC's mind (no denying it) that the act *might* be enough to win a trip back Stateside, the one he'd been working for so patiently, and for so very long. The Church, he knew, held *considerable* international power.

EC reached out for the old Bishop.

An assortment of novices and acolytes, unsure of this strange and foreign man's intentions, intervened.

A brief shoving match on the altar ensued.

Behind, the chorus continued. Their bodies oscillating with their music, they barely perceived the building's trembling. And caged as they were inside their latticework box, they couldn't see how they were being abandoned by their congregation.

Still, these *were* long-time residents of Mexico City, difficult to slip an earthquake past them. So listening carefully you heard voices cracking. And in their eyes discomfort streaked, then fear. A very small number edged out of their files and, robes fanning, rushed for the exits. The dam broken, most of the rest took off too.

Some stayed and hymned on, though. These singers, they proved the most steadfast of the morning worshippers, voices rising and falling like they were already in some other place.

The clamorous thundering ended.

One second of nothing, two seconds, three.

The earthquake was finished.

It was a tremendous wave of peace washing away the trembling. All stopped, everything. Existence lost thickness, became a photograph. People could see themselves and others but, for a moment, nobody moved, no one could act. Only the diligent voice of the reduced chorus continued. The sound came nude, though, without its amplification.

The fragility of that singing gave perfect voice to the peace filling the church. And since those at the center—the ones in religious uniforms occupying the Cathedral's altar—were idealistic men who'd devoted the substance of their lives to praying for holy signs, the moment penetrated even deeper. Instinctively they reached out for one another in fraternity. It felt like a miracle.

Grace shattered.

The blow was crushing: a noisy collapse of wood and metal components as bolted-together speakers slammed down onto the massive stone altar. Disintegrating on impact, destroying all tranquility, the broken pieces shockwaved out from the heart of the Cathedral.

●

At the quake's onset, the *Jornada* reporter had been one of the most desperate to escape. He'd rushed, hurling smaller, older people out of his way and shoving at the bigger ones while cursing his wretched luck. The *other* photographers who'd begun the morning seated with him near the back, they were all out fast. But he'd gone—*thanks to that gringo Anderson*—up to the altar. Now he'd have to fight through everyone to escape.

But they were too many, there was no way to force through the herding crowd.

Which meant he found himself still caught inside when the silence came, and then the dreadful crashing.

Finally, stability. The earthquake was over, the crashing from above finished. Nothing more was going to happen.

Nearly a minute of silent concentration—hands clenching his camera, eyes watering—was needed to pull every one of his frantic thoughts together, to remember who he was.

He remembered. Instantly he was sprinting back toward the ruined altar, shooting pictures as fast as his cheap camera allowed. They were visually impressive photographs, also very newsworthy, and definitely exclusives. Reporters wait their entire lives to get shots like these.

There were spasmodic clicks, and prayers of not entirely religious gratitude.



What had happened? Above in the Cathedral dome the sound-amplifying boxes that had been filling the place with disconcerting, confusing waves of echoing words and noise cut to silence. They'd managed to rumble loose from the iron tension ring, or, as later inspection revealed, they'd actually broken part of the rusty thing off.

The stretch of graceful placidity that everyone felt so powerfully came as the speakers drifted down, their broken electrical and sound cables twisting freely behind.

The quiet seemed to languish through time, probably because so much adrenalin coursed through everyone's blood. In reality, though, it could only have lasted seconds.

Then the smashing across the altar and the moment cracked.

While some saw what had occurred and so kept themselves together, most everyone else in the Cathedral only heard the shocking impact. Automatically their panic-stricken desperation returned. It had to: stark fear's natural when you're pursued by something loud, moving and dangerous and you don't know what.

So the congregation wedging toward the doors kept wanting out. And the renewed threat of being squeezed tremendously by the throbbing mass intensified the yelling, scratching and fighting.

Underneath there was moaning from those who'd been—and were being—trampled.

•

Below the Cathedral dome, the old Bishop rolled off the altar shuddering and colorless. The falling wood and metal hadn't directly nailed him, but shrapnel and shock smashed through his body. The *Jornada* reporter got there just in time to catch the holyman's last breaths.

The string of stills would've won numerous awards had he not bested his own accomplishment seconds later, and entirely accidentally.

EC was there too, at the altar scene. He'd sturdily remained near the important Bishop through everything, even after he'd been elbowed aside by the protective clerics. Made to understand that his role was to receive blessings and not give them, EC could only watch, which he did.

Now these good and protective churchmen—descendants of those first believers who'd stood at that exact spot five centuries earlier proclaiming the entwined empires of Spain and God—were wrestling with their own demons. For them, it could only be annihilating, the bestial crashing of those infernal loudspeakers. Their ceremonial bible, crucifixes, standards and the rest scattered and broken on the floor, it all mocked the choices they'd made for their lives.

But these weren't crumbling men.

Finding rejuvenation in their bitter disappointment, they plunged back to the work of their mercy. Rushing to surround the fallen Bishop, they once more shoved away the American heretic who'd dared intervene.

EC could only pull back still further from the possessed caregivers and watch as they administered.

The Bishop rattled and expired.

The *Jornada* reporter fired his camera.

Despair engulfed the American, his opportunity was completely gone.

In the dome above, a projecting strip of rusty metal was hanging precariously. When it broke off, the rectangular shape glided the metal shard calmly through the air.

Below, EC wallowed.

It would be, the *Jornada* reporter saw, an elegant picture. A man alone and disconsolate, better, an American. “I *love* American suffering,” he whispered, aiming and clicking.

He didn’t get the picture he’d aimed for. Far better. In so many ways.

The camera shutter opened just as the wafting iron stick glided into the base of EC’s throat. The next shot caught a fountain of blood from the neck and portrayed the eyes as almost missing; they’d been sucked back into the skull.

The backbone structuring EC’s plump body remained perfectly straight while he fell back, as though his corpse had absorbed the iron stake’s rigidity. From the floor, blood kept squirting and bubbling.

Stunned by his luck—and after the gusher was finally spent—the reporter spun around, searching for Anderson and Marina. “My God,” he ejaculated, “I hope there’re more American dead!”

•

Outside the Sagrario, Anderson and Marina and the rest of the small band were astonished; their new reality disconcerted almost as much as the earthquake. People sauntered calmly underneath balconies. Others were actually *going into* aged buildings. Irritable tourists snapped at each other. Children played. Souvenir hawkers circled. Nothing wrong.

Hearts slowed, a new balance was found.

Eventually and wordlessly Anderson and Marina made their way around to the main plaza. In front of the Cathedral people were being laid out and cared for, probably by friends or family members.

One received neither water nor concern; her pockets were turned out, her shoes gone.

Worshippers kept pushing out from the building.

Police officers were hurrying into view, a few of the younger ones actually *ran* toward the scene (a rare sight). One and then another patrol car came too, lights flashing.

The commotion naturally attracted attention and onlookers. Still very early in the morning, there weren't many tourists, but the locals gathered.

More police cars—some blaring sirens—arrived. Another wave of lookers followed.

A critical point began forming. Police and passersby massing drew still more gawkers who pointed and whispered about goings-on inside.

Some wanted to see for themselves, then more did and it wouldn't be long before the flow would reverse: more people pushing in than out.

As for the Cathedral structure, it seemed fine. Even weeks later, after the broken tension ring was re-secured and mortar forced into new cracks, it wouldn't be clear exactly what had happened. The entire building must have shifted and wobbled at some point, definitely. But it can be hard to tell the difference between a mass panic reaction to something happening, and a mass panic reaction to some people panicking.

Either way, standing outside the Cathedral that morning and watching police arrive, Marina judged, "It looks like it must've been...almost...*nothing*? I mean, we overreacted. I guess."

Anderson didn't hear her voice ringing false. Not that it would've mattered.

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Meanwhile
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At the Mexican National Museum of Anthropology, the request was unprecedented. The Museum's guards were being asked to transfer temporarily over to the damaged Cathedral.

It did make sense, though. Undeniably the religious building is powerful heritage. And not only the structure, the interior is stocked with the past's significance: etchings in the stone columns, the singular antique bible on the altar, statues, paintings. Even the plastic Christ figures adorning the nooks seem authentically local. (Where else in the world can you find Jesus represented as a plastic action figure?) So, since history radiates everywhere in the Cathedral—and since the guards stationed at the Anthropology Museum were trained to recognize and preserve historical artifacts in emergencies—it seemed reasonable: get them over there as quickly as possible.

Damage needed to be chronicled and estimated, losses minimized, renovation initiated.

Besides the professional considerations, there was another good reason for the transfer. As the nation's highest sanctuary and symbol of forgiveness, the presence of uniformed police inside the church could only be seen as an abomination. And since the mortality rate of Mexico City cops compares with soldiers in war, they understandably insist on remaining in God's good graces. So even the ones who dare enter the Cathedral won't stay long. Guards from the Anthropology Museum could fill the void unobtrusively, and keep the order over there.

It all made sense.

"Umm, how many of us are supposed to go?" consented the supervisor. He seemed curious and probably already counted himself among those who'd be dispatched. Since the Museum opened late on Sunday, he didn't have anything else to do. It was a boring shift through the early morning, sitting there, listening to his small battery radio.

It had been about fifteen minutes since the first, raw reports of a "*susto*" (a commotion) at the Cathedral began trickling in.

"How many?" the supervisor repeated.

"We could really use...well, I figure about twelve guys or so. That *should* be enough to settle things down over there, get some control, you know. We've got cars down on the street, we can drive you over, get you there fast."

"What about here?"

"Leave the doors locked," joked the decorated police officer. Then, more seriously, "If twelve go, how many does that leave you?"

"Five. But..."

"But?"

"I thought, well, maybe *I* should lead my men there. *I am* the leader, you know."

"Yeah. So if you go too there's still going to be enough for here?"

"Until we open. It don't matter that much, the next shift'll get here just before anyway."

"I can leave," the policeman said, "some of my own guys to help cover the place."

•

Days earlier Marina had stood in front of the same Museum door and found the identical head security guard somewhat less cooperative.

She'd expected the resistance, though, and even enjoyed watching the contrived passion, the *nearly* authentic fervidness

of his insistence: there were *no* circumstances under which he could allow her into the just deceased curator's office. *None*. Why would she have imagined...?

As Marina had also expected, she couldn't appeal to a higher authority. The Museum Director was "unavailable."

She insisted.

The new response, "The boss is *away* from Mexico City. We don't even know when he'll be back. Nope. So why don't you just try again, maybe in a week...or something?"

Fifty pesos (about \$4.50) later, the guard sent one of his subordinates off with a handwritten note. Just to make absolutely sure the Director hadn't returned from his trip *unexpectedly*.

He had.

"How gracious of you to come," the Director said, after glaring at the security guard and suspiciously eyeing the wooden box Marina had set on the ground next to her. "Your condolences *are* appreciated."

Marina bowed her head.

"You understand," he went on, "that *no one* may be allowed, especially during this grieving and busy time, into the curator's office."

"Yes, I understand perfectly," answered Marina. "Perhaps, though, I could *entrust* this to you." She bent down to retrieve the box.

While the Director's eyes dug into her cleavage, his hand quickly gestured for the guard to go help her lift the small crate. Since the guard's eyes were in the same place, he didn't see the command until too late. Then a brief episode of clumsiness as the two men simultaneously (and politely) rushed to relieve Marina of her burden.

They did, but the situation deteriorated since the hapless guard had no idea whether he should respectfully relinquish the box to his superior, or, faithfully demonstrate his subservience by holding the weight entirely on his own.

The Director was similarly uncertain, and they wrestled for another moment.

Marina—who often asserted that chivalry and misogyny are synonyms—imposed order by closing her blouse not one but two buttons. “These articles,” she then explained, “were, in a *special way*, quite valuable for the curator. He allowed me to hold them briefly on...well, I guess I’d say a *private* loan. If you understand my meaning.”

The Director didn’t. He was, however, intrigued by that word “valuable.”

“I’ve considered it,” Marina went on, “and decided that it’d be a *betrayal* if I didn’t return them, a betrayal of his memory at least. I know he has no inheritor, still...”

“Oh,” interjected the Director, “but he *does*. He’s willed everything to the Museum. His papers alone are priceless.”

They weren’t, Marina knew, as did the Director. They’d be deposited in the trash within a month. But the curator’s informality was legendary, so there was always the possibility that something more interesting than paper could turn up hidden in his chaotic office. *Maybe* there were items squirreled away there that hadn’t ever been formally listed in any of the Museum’s catalogs, items no one even knew existed. Items, in other words, that could be stolen without committing a crime.

The Director had already poked around. Nothing but eccentric and weird things found so far.

The fact that he *had* poked around wasn’t surprising. Soft but persistent rumors had long circulated that this connected Director—he’d ascended to his position as a political favor—held “undisclosed knowledge” regarding the infamous 1985 robbery of the Museum.

There was no proof, though.

Given what Marina knew about the slimy guy, and the nefarious people he consorted with, she almost certainly would’ve reached the same conclusion. Except for a piece of information

that she and no one else held. Still, the fact that the Director hadn't done the '85 robbery didn't mean he wasn't a robber.

The undeniably handsome man conceded slightly, "I *suppose* that given your *personal* relation with the curator, a very small exception might possibly be made this once. I can't allow *you* in, of course. But, I could arrange to have that box set inside with the rest of his things. We should be able to start cataloging it all by the end of next week."

"I *would* feel," Marina said, sensing that she had the man under control, "better if these articles were included. I'm fairly certain that they haven't been formally documented."

"Good," the Director barely restrained himself. "I'll take care of it immediately. And personally. *Toute suite!*"

He grabbed the box and lugged it away.

Marina left.

Twenty minutes later, the Director wheeled out of his private office and marched—annoyed, disdainful—to the curator's room, opened the door, and heaved the box onto the floor. The contents had proven even more worthless than the rest of the junk he'd discovered in there. "*Pinche* tools," he muttered.

Tools is what they were, labeled with dates, places and the reference numbers of specific artifacts that had been discovered with them.

As the Director was a clubby bureaucrat without archeological experience, he failed to notice that among the hammers, picks and brushes there were also wrenches not typically employed by archeologists in their digging.



The piece of information Marina held that cleansed the Director of any suspicion in the infamous robbery of the Mexican Anthropology Museum was very personal. The thief was her father.

The straight facts about the case are well known. As reported in the *New York Times* on 27 December, 1985 (it was a slow

news day, the theft dominates the front page), a total of 140 items were stolen.

They included many smaller gold pieces, most of them decorative, and a few major historical works. The most valuable of those, according to the *Times* in a follow-up, was an Aztec obsidian jar. The size of an extremely large coffee mug, it was carved into the form of a horrid monkey. Actually, it was more like a giant mug in the howling embrace of the toothy animal.

Definitely, it was *perfect*. Unchipped, brilliantly shiny, an unblemished window into the past.

The theft resounded through Mexico. Limitless outrage, no effort or expense was spared to resolve the case. But there was no major news to report for three and a half years.

In June 1989, the *Times* informed its readers that “111 of the 124 originally stolen artifacts” were recovered when the thieves tried selling them to a drug dealer in Acapulco.

Why had the crime’s resolution taken so long? According to the newspaper account, investigators were frustrated for all that time because they assumed experienced professionals were responsible. But, it turned out, the culprits were amateurs. Two university dropouts with addiction problems.

Druggy incompetence, the conclusion follows, is the best competence.

That’s the wrong conclusion, though. The right one was known perfectly by Marina’s father. Expertise camouflaged as incompetence works better than the reverse. It worked for him, anyway.

The key to what *really* happened—and you’ve probably already taken account of it—barely involves the hazy dropouts. It involves raw numbers: the 140 objects originally reported stolen, the 124 *later* reported stolen, and the 111 finally recovered.

Start with the discrepancy of sixteen, 140 minus 124. It traces to a discovery made several days after the crime by meticulous

investigators. A small bag was found deep in a shrub in the garden surrounding the Museum. Apparently, it had been accidentally dropped by the escaping thieves. Inside the cotton sack, the intricate bells of copper, the exquisite necklace, the precious ceremonial ornaments and—most important—the obsidian vessel were covered liberally with the robbers' greasy fingerprints.

The solidity of that proof annihilated any credibility that might have been attached to the bizarre story the thieves told years later when they were finally caught. They claimed that a tall, foreign man—probably American—had approached them with a wildly generous offer. He'd come into, he said, possession of the stolen artifacts *everyone* in Mexico was talking about. But he couldn't do anything with them. Obviously he was far too obtrusive with his accent and ignorance of local customs to discretely sell the objects in the country. And trying to smuggle them out, well, that seemed too risky. More, he was desperate, he *needed* money, he needed it *now*. That's where the two dropouts came in.

If they'd take charge of quietly selling the stolen items, they could keep half the take.

Sounded very good. They *were* tempted to ask exactly how this man acquired the artifacts, but didn't. They hurried past questions because the American was *so* naive. Maybe he wasn't blindly trusting, but pretty close when he directly *gave* them 111 of the original 140 stolen pieces. "Sell these," he'd said, "come back with half the money and then I'll give you the rest, the other 29 which are the *most* valuable."

He'd allowed them to examine the remaining 29.

Then he'd handed over intricate drawings of the crime, diagrams of the Museum with ventilation shafts marked and circles inked around specific display cases. "These should help you *prove* to your buyers," he'd said, "the authenticity."

So, they'd taken the 111 pieces along with the robbery-

diagrams, and left the American with abundant promises of a speedy return. Their plan: sell the haul as quickly as possible to any buyer they could find, then keep all the money and disappear.

But the discovery the very next day of the bag containing the 16 artifacts scared them. They didn't understand what was going on, not at all, but prudently they decided to lay low for a while.

They managed to stay low much longer than Marina's father had expected. Still, eventually the inevitable reality came: their incurable drug habits collided with empty pockets. No choice, they had to go to their stash.

Shortly thereafter a street drug dealer, after being offered a remarkable and unheard of exchange, saw the opportunity to buy some very serious immunity and turned them in.

The rest—as the official story has it—went easily. The evidence overwhelmingly proved that the two robbers cased the Museum, made sketches and plans (which they unwisely held onto), and then crawled through an air duct to reach and loot seven display cases. On the way out they dropped part of their haul in the garden.

It goes without saying that no one doubts the complicity of authorities in the robbery, at least some lower level people, some of the guards. How else could these clumsy stealers have avoided being seen or heard by the patrols supposedly circulating through the Museum? Nothing got brought to trial, though, leading many to suspect that the conspiracy actually reached up, probably quite high.

And that explains a strange but not irrational decision. The single and by far most valuable recovered piece—the obsidian vessel—was consigned for temporary safekeeping to the *only* man who could be trusted to not steal it: the man who already *could* have stolen it but didn't. The man who originally dug it up, the curator.

What he did with the priceless object to assure its safekeeping remained a mystery. In any case, an excellent copy of the vessel was fashioned and set on display along with the other recovered pieces.

A few changes were made to the Museum to improve security, and an opulent formal ceremony was mounted to commemorate the return of the stolen treasures.

Then the investigation closed down.

The numbers don't add up, though. 140 artifacts were originally stolen. 16 were recovered several days later. 111 were found when the culprits were arrested. That leaves 13.

No one believes the dropouts' claim that they never had them.



Seven of those thirteen were sold by Marina's father on the global, pre-colonial art market. That's one of the most lucrative of the black markets because the combination of artistic excellence plus historical meaning multiplies value. Rich people, in other words, can buy something pretty *and* something very interesting to talk about for one (not low) price.

As for the remaining six, Marina's father displayed and truly appreciated them in the privacy of his bedroom. Though most people would've called him a collector, he preferred the term "owner." Either way, the artifacts were respected.

Marina also thoroughly enjoyed them. She was less contemplative by nature though, and more manual and crafty. Where her father admired, she found pleasure in carefully fabricating exact copies, especially of the decorative pieces, the necklace, the amulet. Frequently she adorned herself with the replicas. (It was a good thrill for her, displaying the perfect copies of the priceless and stolen goods. Like flirting: coming close, but not letting yourself get caught.)

When her father passed away and her mother retired to an insane asylum, Marina was left with the original objects.

Time went forward and simply possessing them for the sake of possession came to strike her as inert, a foreshadowing of death more than a way of life. Marina was also, it could be added, somewhat less austere than her parents. So she eventually reached the decision to sell.

One by one she did, replacing the original pieces in her home with exquisite copies made with an artist's dedication.

Later on she also had some success selling the copies.

Word finally got out about her, though. Even in the painfully discrete underground art market, no one can sell the same artifact repeatedly without some people somewhere starting to figure that maybe they've been gypped.

So Marina wouldn't be selling any more in the future. At least not without seriously compelling evidence that what she was offering was genuine.

●

Of course, not everyone's concerned with authenticity.

The Anthropology Museum guard—one of the four who remained on the morning of the Cathedral disturbance while the rest went off to restore order over there—he never cared about how old the stone club was that knocked him on the head.

As it happens, it was first used nine centuries ago.

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Guilt and crime
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"This isn't good," stated Marina. Anderson grimaced. And agreed.

It didn't take long for radio stations to get people over to check "the Cathedral events." Driving back to Marina's place they listened to initial and disjointed facts as they came over the airwaves.

Their first discovery at Marina's was that her *very* expensive stereo actually lacked a radio receiver. "It never occurred to me," she explained, "to put anything on but discs." She stumbled around that for a minute, then they went back to the car and listened there for a while.

When the maid returned from the corner store with a clock radio, they moved to Marina's dining room. She chewed on a raisin and nut mix, he drank black coffee.

As it was an otherwise empty Sunday, the talk stations devoted continuing coverage to the morning's only event. It was the rawest of news. Reporters talking with anyone they could find, and feeding what they heard over the airways by cell phone.

Some witnesses who'd been trapped in the Cathedral understandably insisted that they'd endured a massive earthquake, no matter what anyone said. Odd, though, that no one outside felt it. So it went, and most people who spoke were eventually forced to accept assurances that the earth had, in fact, been at rest all morning.

Still, *something* dramatic happened. No denying that.

Other information came from people who obviously hadn't been inside at all. A flamboyant talker said the Bishop—exasperated by the weakness of human nature—had called down a *curse* on the rotten world. Then he composed a few lines of his own rhyming and hysterical threats.

Eventually, and intriguingly, the more sober voices made it clear that a suspicious pair of Americans (or Europeans, non-Mexicans anyway) had been in the Cathedral. "*Raros y extran-jeros*" came one description. *Weirdos and foreigners*.

Details varied, but most circled around a man who was tall, thin, blond hair verging toward brown. Light clothing. Probably he wore glasses. Or maybe not. Certainly he looked respectable, but also somehow...conniving. At one point in the morning religious service—just before the trouble started—he'd been talking or arguing or something. Very loud, everyone heard. It was English. What'd he say? No consensus there.

The other foreigner was tall too. Dark hair. According to descriptions provided by women, she presented a "nice," or "agreeable" figure. Men talked about her "body" and added some words that weren't crude, but didn't seem entirely congruent with Sunday morning in church.

Interviewers prodded the soberest witnesses for more details. Probably a sketch artist wouldn't be able to do much, but Anderson and Marina sure recognized themselves.

This also crystallized: someone had been killed—horribly—near the altar. Circumstances remained largely unknown. There was agreement that his head was mangled. And what remained of it did not look local. Light skinned, light-colored hair. Was he the same guy who'd earlier been spotted with the attractive woman? Unclear.

Soon a policeman was able to report that the deceased "looked gringo," but there was no way to confirm since "he got no wallet, no papers, nothin' like that."

No one asked whether the dead man still had his shoes.

But through the morning the big story, the part receiving the most riveted attention, a lot of hot anger, and constantly changing details was the Bishop's end.

The core element: the aged, beloved and devout servant of God had been *assassinated*. An awkwardly assembled block of loudspeakers fell from the dome above, apparently triggered to impact him. "They *missed*," lamented one witness, "but the job got done anyway."

Another added, "And I saw it too, an American I think, he went right for him, trying to finish him off. It seemed like some of the other guys up there, you know, the assistant and the other priests and that stuff, they were trying to defend him...our bishop I mean. Thank God. But that gringo, he just kept coming. I couldn't see what happened at the very end, but I think there was a gun. It might've been a knife."

Others weren't so sure about the weapons.

A soft-spoken adolescent who *possibly* thought she saw the Bishop just keel over the altar and die, *maybe* from natural causes, got heckled.

A dramatic widow swore on the memory of her deceased husbands that "the black death from on high sent him back to the Maker."

Finally, universal and total agreement on one point. Justice must be done. *Someone* had to pay, dearly. After all, how many souls had the noble Bishop saved over the course of his principled life? Could they be counted? Could the compassion he'd radiated over his flock even be measured in human terms? No matter the answers, "the extinguishing of his flame," as everyone was soon putting it, chilled his congregation, his nation, even all humanity.

It's true, came the speculation over the airways, that there's no death penalty in Mexico, but as the morning advanced an agreement seemed to form around the idea that perhaps the law could be changed...

A young cleric's attempts to quiet the violent passions were poignant, admirable and unsuccessful.

Luis the *Jornada* reporter was there too. He had his scoop and knew it. Appearing repeatedly on one station—and when not there he was probably talking on other frequencies—he promised that Monday morning “a major newspaper” would publish pictures “showing responsibility” and “evidencing intention of being criminal.” Whatever that meant.

He never claimed to have a photo of someone actually *doing* something. It didn't matter; his alert presence, the animated descriptions he produced, his coy references to “dirty foreigners” and various conspiracy theories, all of it fit together seamlessly. The *truth* would soon be revealed. And very conveniently, he let it slip, the culprits would be people who everyone already hated anyway.

For all those listening, it was gratifying to know that the guilty were about to get what was coming to them, and their suffering would be immensely enjoyable for everyone else.



A bad morning for Anderson and Marina. And it wasn't just that they'd been there, in the Cathedral. More stretched out behind. They were in front of the infamous building on Cholula Street on the day of the monstrous crime there; already circulating photographs nearly proved that.

Plus, Anderson was American, which fit with the man in the Cathedral, and the Imperialism Killer...just about everything.

Even worse, not only was he an American, the woman who always seemed to accompany him was that too, but with an awful *Spanish* stripe, a bloodline from her mother born in Seville. Meaning: it'd be hard to find a purer incarnation of Mexico's history of disgrace before the powers of empire than Marina.

Going back toward the beginning, there was the butchering of the piano player right in front of Anderson's house. And

Marina's chauffeur was a victim of the turcas. God knows what else.

"So," Anderson summarized, "we've committed multiple murders. We've attacked the honor of this nation by obscenely re-creating the march of Cortés. And now we've got the *Church's* wrath to face."

All that was worrisome. But the truth is there was another fact even more unnerving. Marina didn't produce *any* comment at all. Not even the obligatory, "At least God Himself isn't against us...yet."

Silence. Bad silence.

The morning wore on, the dimensions of the event grew because it was the *perfect* Sunday story. Blood, fear, God and death, but the charge of sensationalism *couldn't* be leveled. It was, after all, the most venerable Bishop who'd died. And, religious services in the Cathedral had obviously been canceled. Didn't the radio stations—and then the TV channels too—have a public responsibility to get word out? Shouldn't they also explain the reason, down to the last and smallest detail, for the extraordinary cancellation?

And if that connected with other crimes and abominations against the nation, shouldn't those facts be added to the steaming mix?

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Inside the Cathedral there was some confusion regarding who should be in charge. The police officers who'd performed the bureaucratic tasks required by dead bodies had taken their completed paperwork and left.

The Bishop's subordinates? Unanimously they were too humble to imagine themselves as possessing earthly authority.

When they arrived, the group of guards from the Anthropology Museum immediately busied themselves around the altar. On hands and knees, fragments of tile from the dome above were meticulously collected. Some attempts were made to puzzle the larger pieces together, but most were wrapped in

newspaper and set aside. Remnants of the destroyed loudspeakers were gathered into a pile less carefully. Other items were chronicled and listed on diverse sheets of paper. There was some discussion about the historical value of the severely chipped altar stone. It didn't get very far since no one really knew.

A man had been dispatched to locate a way up to the roof so any damage to the dome could be properly evaluated. Until he returned, it was difficult to see what more could be done.

So they loitered.

Since their profile—wearing pressed uniforms, doing nothing—was compatible with the leadership that seemed to be missing, it didn't take long for the radio reporters to zero in on them for interviews.

Attentively, Marina listened. What they were saying didn't matter so much, it was all either evasive or predictable. The *who* though, that caught her attention. "Why," she asked, "are *Anthropology Museum* guards there?"

Anderson didn't pick up on her emphasis. She repeated.

"What?"

"It should be the other way," Marina said. "It's the Church that should be guarding the Museum."

"?"

"Because *that's* the way it worked for Cortés."

Anderson wasn't sure if he was well, the thought that he was sensing an earthquake—a real one this time—washed over everything.

He was good enough, though, to catch Marina's point. You can't read too far into Cortés' letters without hitting one of his favorite reasoning strings.

Gold and silver were needed to finance the Conquista.

The Conquista brought God to the New World.

Therefore God countenanced the sacking of the Aztecs.

Maybe. But it's also hard to avoid noticing how *intensely*

Cortés revels in the sacked treasures. The silver charms, the gold, the copper decorations, all of it; he writes *pages* describing what his expedition carried away.

The truth is today no one can be certain whether the booty got taken in the name of God, or God provided cover for taking the booty, but knowing Marina it's not hard to imagine what she made of it all.

True to form, she asked (somewhat provocatively, she judged), "What was it, something like...40 amulets, 60 gold plates?" She was trying to remember Cortés' catalog of the pillaging at Tenochtitlan.

"Higher numbers, I think," said Anderson, catching up to her lead.

"Then there's my favorite, really, I remember this line perfectly: *a number of silver figures beyond reason's ability to enumerate.*" Which meant Cortés couldn't count that high.

"And if," Anderson asked, now in step with her, "you were going to be *true* to Cortés, if you were going to follow what he did, *do today* what he did?"

"The Anthropology Museum," spilled Marina, involuntarily. It was supposed to be Anderson who reached that conclusion.

In the end, though, he came through well, "The Anthropology Museum...whose guards have apparently gone to the Cathedral!"

●
The humiliating theft
●

My journal, Name wrote in his journal, can't *always* be flowery; vividness without sobering contrast, that's not colorful, just gauche. Bang, he slapped himself in disgust. What stumbling inelegance could be *uglier* than using the word "gauche?" (Unless you happen to be in France, obviously.)

Ink is permanent, though, nothing to do but press ahead. So Name turned to a fresh page, unsheathed his soberest ink, gray-tinged black, and wrote this question across the top: How did Cortés attack?

Well, enough of the boring shades. "The petals of my rare spectrum open yet again!" his voice rushed as he reached for the box of pens and the right color to answer his own question.

Should it be...red? Of *course* not; too easy, and too often banal. Like a prostitute's lipstick. But the curves and streaks of radiant orange, *those* could work.

The answer: Cortés adeptly manipulated distraction.

Here's an example from an assault on a holdout section of Tenochtitlan. Cortés ordered the construction of a monstrous catapult. Then he sent messengers to inform the section's defenders of their imminent destruction. While they concentrated on the wicked machine, the destruction came in from behind.

"So too *my* final act!" inscribed Name. Then he flipped back through his pages, carefully reviewing his own distraction mounted at the Sonora Market, that elaborate theater prepared to receive the museum curator. The re-creation of Montezu-

ma's end wasn't *only* a tool of misdirection, but the ghoulish scene (he almost made the crude mistake of calling it a "*tableau*") did draw attention away from a vital fact. And how *well* it had worked, how perfectly they were lured into their misguided questions. Everyone asked: how was it arranged? By whom? and mainly, how does it connect with those terrible acts of imperialism already committed?

But no one ever asked about the sad victim's...job! It barely registered that a *museum curator* was dead. Murdered!

So, no one bothered to pose the obvious question: just *why* would someone *want* to dispatch with a man who worked in the innards and knew all the secrets of Mexico's single great storehouse of priceless objects? Name celebrated the ruse by bending his fingers at the first knuckle, one-by-one, in opposite directions, and on his facing hands. (A difficult stunt of coordination, and a weird one, but really, most everyone has an eccentric habit they fall into when they're alone, and since Name was alone a lot, he had several.)

As for that poor curator, in the end he'd been abducted and transferred to an anonymous room. There, Name did the final work personally. That was necessary; he felt a moral obligation to take direct responsibility for it and, more practically, he didn't want anyone else knowing what the curator finally got forced to say.

It was a dreadful experience for both of them, especially because the curator proved so resistant to the turcas. "If the Aztecs had demonstrated a *similar* resilience," Name had complemented, without irony, "your people would've *retained* your treasures."

The response? The curator looked at his bleeding fingertips and the shredded fingernails hanging off and lost consciousness.

He awoke broken.

So the necessary information was extracted: arrangement of

security in the Anthropology Museum, vulnerabilities of the alarm system, the location of certain objects, instructions for the pieces' safe removal. The curator's words spilled out, mixed with spittle and regret, until there were no secrets left.

Then all that remained was to cut off any speculation about *why* the museum curator had died. So Name offered an answer that was firm. And wrong.

Note: Name is intelligent. Yes, he drives you crazy with his colored pens and pretentious speeches, but he's got a smart plan. And staying power too. It would've been easy for him to pull out at one point or another, just go home. He didn't have to do what he was doing. He certainly didn't need the job, and no one was forcing him to take the risks. There wasn't anything in it for him, at least not personally. He saw it through, though.

And the "florid" part of his existence, that went all the way too. So it was back to the journal where he wrote: The Museum's robbery will *perfectly* fit the parts of my drama into a single, undeniable...whole. In the language of the everyday man, it'll all make sense. The bulb will turn on! In *my* language, Name penned (in bold purple), coherence will receive delineation. "*Delightful* phrase," he murmured.

He took a moment to search for a still better word.

There was none, so back to his writing. With the curator's bizarre death now fully explained, he moved to the riddle that had received so much fantastic attention.

This is a suicide.

This fact fails to implicate the guilty.

It also fails to reveal who killed this man.

"All are released from the grip of the lines!" Name announced, waving his hands like a magician. *They hold*—he relished the inscription of every letter—*absolutely no meaning!* No hidden significance, no delicate symbolism to be found. *Pure* distrac-

tion! “Think of it,” he commanded himself, not *something* that misguided the public’s eyes but...*nothing*. When all look back to see what drew probing attention away from the fact that a *curator* had died, they’ll only find...gibberish! Could *any* distraction be executed more *expertly*?

No need to respond.

So the curator’s death in the Sonora Market was expertly done. But, what’s the purpose?

Name’s answer:

This final act will not only be one of history’s memorable museum thefts—and is not everything I do fit to *historical* measures?—it will also prove the most abject of my humiliations. The Mexicans fought for *generations* to get the Spanish to return those treasures, those rare artifacts from the past. Now, they’re the only things they have left to be proud of. The *only* things. Imagine!



Some of what Name wrote about the artifacts of past Aztec glory is true.

Certainly very few remain. Painted murals and decorations have faded, wooden things have decayed to nothing, all but the densest structures have fallen apart. Stone carvings and art—especially the religiously themed—got destroyed.

Spaniards took the valuable gold and silver, then hammered, bent, melted, did anything they could to render the booty more portable.

The small number of artifacts that *did* survive intact were maintained because they’d been sent across the Atlantic as evidence. As irrefutable proof, actually, of the barbarity and Godlessness—the savagery—of the New World.

Why go to the trouble? Because Europeans found it difficult to believe that colonizing the other side of the Atlantic could be anything but a walk in the park. Once Cortés nearly alone had driven his empire into the place’s core, it seemed like the

rest should be easy. After Cortés, the question always came, who'd *dare* resist Spanish might? It's unthinkable. The artifacts—especially the religious works—were sent to make it thinkable.

They demonstrated: the Aztecs were so barbarous, so primeval and loony that resistance *was* possible. In their ignorance and bestiality, the tribes and cities which hadn't yet fallen would fight on, they simply wouldn't know any better.

With the message communicated in Europe, the objects were mostly sacrificed for their cash value.

Still, a few survived. Some because they were so curious. Others were packed into royal vaults and simply forgotten. Also, there're rumors that certain provocative artifacts have been safeguarded by a cult in Valladolid and worshipped for their powers of bodily arousal. Hard to know for sure. For whatever reason, though, a limited number of unruined objects definitely made it through the centuries.

And for centuries, no one thought too much about it.

Until the 1930s and 40s when a Mexican government heated by nationalism proclaimed that the country's poverty and constant misery was caused by European contamination. Foreign habits, traditions, religion and blood, *those* were the culprits; they'd ruined everything. If only traditional Mexico could be recovered, the reasoning went, if a way could be found back to how things used to be, then the old joy, power, wealth and prestige, they'd come back too.

Few questioned the premise that abundant wealth and power existed before the Spanish arrival.

And exactly *how* the lost spirit could be recaptured, that wasn't entirely clear either. But getting back the objects of the past definitely made a good start. So recovering them became a national cause, a louder one every decade. And Mexico's relation with Spain, that began curling around recuperation politics.

Languorous but productive, the slow return home continues to this day.

One or another artifact is shipped annually to mark the Mexican version of Independence Day. The wounds of major earthquakes and similar natural disasters are normally soothed by a small but heavy crate transported across the Atlantic. When Mexico was knocked out of the 2004 World Cup soccer competition by the U.S, three not insignificant artifacts were hastily dispatched.

In Mexico, each retrieved piece is received heroically. *And why not*, writes Name, what *else* do they have to celebrate? The stunning jade necklace, the riveting silver mask, the delicate copper beads: something returns and it's as though part of the ancient soul is restored. Or maybe it's part of the aged pride.

Either way, the old humiliation will be re-imposed today in the Anthropology Museum.

•
To the Museum
•

The architects charged with the landmark project of designing and building the Anthropology Museum—sometimes called The Museum of the Mexican Nation—faced a difficulty as tremendous as the finally constructed Museum is majestic: a dearth of worthy display material.

It's not just that nearly all the precious metal artifacts went into Spanish melters, and most of the rest got worn away by time. Some culturally but not materially valuable remnants of Aztec life—painted murals, stone figurines, urns, ceremonial masks, bracelets, things like that—*did* get saved at one point or another. But since the vehement pride Mexico now pronounces about its distant past is a relatively recent invention, most of those artifacts found the destiny typical of curiosities. Oblivion.

From time to time someone steps forward with a remarkable find. An impressive hand-sized statue of an Aztec God is discovered in a dilapidated trunk in some remote pueblo, an intricately carved amulet emerges from an elderly woman's jewelry box. But most such objects were put somewhere by someone's great, great grandfather, then forgotten, and now are permanently lost.

Or: in the Mexican countryside most of the walls built to contain animals and mark property limits are made of piled rocks. Once in a while a farm boy comes home with a carved piece of stone he found while out doing repairs. It *has* happened that the rustic parents recognize the value. But almost

always they just send him back to work and ingloriously toss the rock onto a pile behind the house.

The result of all this is that almost nothing's left from the Mexico that was before Cortés. So when the decision got made in the early 1960s to gloriously monumentalize Aztec heritage with a proud and vast museum, those ordered to carry out the project were left at something of a loss.

Their solution was inspired. It was the museum itself, the architects and builders decided, that would transmit the glory of the past. No expense would be spared, no compromise made. The grandeur of the new Anthropology Museum *building* would provide the inspiration the few artifacts housed inside couldn't quite generate.

There's no way to know whether the builders were entirely blind to the self-serving aspects of their proposal. But if you visit the Museum you'll see that the taxpayers definitely got something back for all their money.

You'll be awed by the expansive central patio hewn from luminescent rock and open to the air above. You'll admire the clean and seductive lines of the building's design, you'll let them lead your eyes from one to the next great door opening to display rooms. What you find inside those rooms will mostly disappoint, but later you'll descend the broad stone steps—recalling the Tenochtitlan pyramids—and enjoy the elaborate garden rimming the Museum. Standing there, you'll find it's difficult not to feel the space's straight-lined, spare and resonant nobility.

When you stroll around the Museum's great reflecting pool—engulfed in wafting, cool air—you'll eventually hit a dense plaque. It describes how the circle of water was inspired by the lake originally surrounding the Aztec capital.

And of course there's the Museum's stirring entrance. It's a long, elevated bridge meant to re-create a causeway, one of those that spanned the lake five centuries ago and reached to the heart of the stone city.

●

Anderson and Marina were stirred by that long entranceway, paused as they were halfway down it, holding hands. It was a peaceful image of the two. Except for the security guards.

Three were stationed at the Museum's towering and closed doors in front of them, and then—suddenly—two others were standing rigidly behind. All five seemed to be looking back and forth with mounting urgency among themselves and toward the visitors.

"I don't like this," worried Anderson as the uniformed guards began converging.

"I agree," Marina calmly answered. They leaned or maybe slid slightly closer.

A few other people—some tourists, a couple gardeners—meandered about. But it was around 9:00 in the morning, and the Museum would stay closed for more than an hour. And given its location in the middle of huge Chapultepec Park, Anderson and Marina rightly felt alone.

Should they run?

Anderson might dodge past the approaching officers, there was a decent chance. But Marina, she'd always considered athletic activity crude: doubtful that she'd flat-out sprinted more than a few times in her entire life. Possibly as a girl playing with friends she *hurried* now and again. Anyway, she wasn't a runner. (Oddly, it occurred to Anderson to ask how she stayed so thin.)

This much was certain: if he ran, she would too. She'd have to, there wouldn't be any choice. And she wouldn't get far.

Intuitive as always, Marina sensed Anderson's decision to remain. She thanked him in her way, "I could scream if you like. I'm not exactly sure how that'd be useful in Mexico City, though."

●

Fingering his *Jornada* placard—ridiculously oversized, as

though there was something to be proud of in being identified with that rag—Luis watched as the five officers converged then pounced on the seemingly resigned pair.

Seeing it coming, Marina reached up and peck-kissed Anderson. Maybe whispered in his ear. The reporter also caught her slipping suggestive fingers into his shirt pocket. She even seemed to give him a little rub on the chest. “*Slut!*” he barked. No one heard.

What came next was pleasing. Dark, rough hands gripped and firmly marched the two toward the Museum’s doors. As the group moved brusquely inside, Luis checked over his camera nervously and determined to stay with them.

How had he found the two? They’d called him, which he enjoyed. He *deeply* enjoyed the fact that they were coming to him instead of the other way.

But the best was the pleading.

Yes, they’d pleaded for him to hold off, to not do anything with the pictures he already had, not yet. “Just wait, wait a *bit* more,” Marina implored. “*Two* more hours, please.” And she wanted—she begged—him, “to come *be* with us. We think it *has* to be the Anthropology Museum, that’s what everything’s about. We’re going there right now. And you too, *please*.”

These gringos, they were finally getting the right idea. They *should* be begging Mexicans to come help them out.

He responded with surprising poise. No triumphant exclamations, no threats, only a cool, flat message. He “might” come to be with them, or, he “just might” go straight to *Reforma*, bring that newspaper the photographs he already had. They’d just have to...wait and find out!

He loved dangling them.

●
Betrayal and death
●

Name waited upstairs in the part of the Museum reserved for offices. He sat in a particular one, the deceased curator's.

In a cleared area of the messy desk, a very sophisticated portable radio played. Tuned to one of the talk stations, it relayed accumulating news from the Cathedral.

Two backup radios lined up behind.

Sipping water from a bizarre mug, occasionally bending his ear toward the radio and alertly penning his thoughts into his journal, Name was a man nearly identical with Anderson in this sense: he found spontaneous action unbearable, but thoroughly planned endeavors were followed to their ends without deviation or pause.

The symmetry produced opposed realities. Since nearly everything leading to the present circumstances had been carefully mapped by one and simply encountered by the other, Name incarnated confidence while Anderson squirmed.

Marina's calmness was harder to explain.

So too her first sentence, "I see you found the obsidian," she complemented.

"The jar, you mean, yes. It was right *there*, of all places," Name gestured. "For all these years, any member of the *cleaning crew* could've made off with it on *any* night of the week. Imagine!" The shelf he'd indicated held an old electric coffee machine and nearly a dozen of the oddest, most lavish and largest mugs conceived by any civilization. All but one were big and weird. That one was big, weird and priceless. It was

the obsidian jar that had been entrusted to the curator's personal care after the '85 robbery.

Marina's face dropped, "The *number* of times—"

"The number of times," broke in Name, "that you came here *looking* for it. *Snooping*, I suppose, for hiding places. Maybe a compartment hallowed out under the floor? Or something behind one of those homely pictures?" The office was covered with photos of the curator posing at archeological sites beside dusty laborers.

"You read my mind," ironized Marina.

"No," Name, imperiously objected, "I read the world."

Marina refused to satisfy him with a reaction.

"I have attempted to calculate," Name continued, "the cost of a typical worker's *ignorance* of culture and the arts. Had one of the janitors recognized this particular artifact, pilfered it and sold it to someone with the correct means, he would have netted?"

Marina swallowed and produced a number.

"You mean in dollars, naturally. I had presumed a somewhat higher value, but no matter. Employing either my or your estimation, and subtracting the wages received for a night cleaning this office, you arrive at an objective measure of the cost of failing to receive a liberal arts education!"

He held up a sheet of paper displaying an ample number of zeros. "Of course," Name concluded, "this number should be multiplied by the number of working days in an entire life."

Anderson concentrated on moving generous volumes of air in and out of his lungs. His nerves were not subdued.

"Now these," Name said, "aren't so *exorbitantly* valuable but, I'm sure you'll agree, potentially quite lucrative. Assuming, that is, the appropriate buyer may be located. I'm sure *you* will do quite well with them." Across the dead curator's desk he arrayed a modest exhibition, taking the time to clear space for each artifact by pushing aside loose papers and frayed books.

Marina studied the objects as they were distributed. “Just out of curiosity,” she stoically asked, “how’d you get through the alarms?”

“How could *any* route have been followed except that leading to the fuse box,” he smartly replied.

Marina understood. She knew perfectly well of the notorious electricity situation in Mexico. Irregularly provided through a 1950s grid, it’s actually surprising that the circuit-frying spikes, blown breakers and bleak outages aren’t still more frequent.

They’re frequent enough, though, to explain why the Anthropology Museum’s alarm system needed to be wired to *ignore* electricity anomalies. Interrupting the power can’t be allowed to trigger the sirens since they’d be going off constantly. As a result, disabling the electrical part of the Museum’s security required nothing more than prying open a fuse box and shutting everything down.

Of course that should’ve been a limited vulnerability, since to *reach* the fuse box you first had to breach the outer shell of protection; you had to have already gotten through the front-door alarms and then devised a way to get past the circulating guards.

Or, as Name had done, simply tricked the guards into opening the door and leaving.

With everything shut down, Name had quickly shattered a number of the principal display cases. Others were left untouched since their contents weren’t worth the effort of lifting and letting fall a heavy stone. From the broken containers, some fifty relevant pieces—meaning both culturally and economically valuable—had been extracted.

Now Marina was studying about twenty of them. Peering, actually; in her head she knew they were genuine, but suspicion was bred in her. “The Tepotzlan breastplate,” she whispered, her caution surrendering to lasciviousness.

Small wonder she found its curves irresistible. The bodily

decoration—like the obsidian jar—is both meticulously fashioned and untrammelled by time. Possession of such a clean artifact is the fantasy of all private collectors.

"I find it," gloated Name, "*exquisite*."

Marina's eyes darted about the desk, cataloging, calculating.

Name enjoyed watching. He saw the mingling of her analytic mind, her experienced judgment, her urgency and the raw desire all together. "Could that *be*," he eventually spoke, "what it appears?" After lingering a moment he answered his own question, "Yes, indeed. You are *drooling* my dear."

Marina glared. Her finger did brush up against her lip, though.

"*Glorious morning!*" Name chortled.

"Tomb 7," Marina spat, meaning some of the items before her had come from a specific Mixtec burial chamber discovered near Monte Albán.

"Certainly not *this*," Name slightly corrected her. "The Chichén-Itzá *cenote*."

"Clearly."

A *cenote* is a natural well. The one at Chichén-Itzá is tremendously large and vaguely mystical. It's a hole—a nearly perfect circle—opening abruptly in the dense forest. Ninety feet across, it dives straight down to the waterline. In the centuries before the Europeans arrived, natives living nearby naturally attributed a divine origin to the opening and beseeched their Gods' favor with abundant offerings. According to various dredging expeditions, the most commonly received were: bowls filled with copal incense, flint blades, stone statuettes, gold discs etched with battle scenes, pregnant women.

The particular object Name had indicated as coming from the *cenote* was small, a ragged sheet of gold. Impurities in the metal streaked through, leaving the original design cut into the surface to appear as little more than faint scratchings. Still, the work enthralled.

"I'm very, very interested in a number of the cenote artifacts," Marina admitted.

"I'm hardly surprised. Only this one is set before you, however."

"You have the Vallejo Disc?"

"I do. It will remain here for my use."

Marina accepted with a nod. "May I hold it for a moment?"

"I'm sorry." The words were final.

Marina returned her attention to the objects on the desk; Name went back to his writing.

Anderson sat dismayed.

What left him disoriented was very personal. It wasn't seeing Marina and this forbidding (though well-dressed) man knowing and seemingly understanding each other. That only terrified.

What was much worse, what disconcerted, what sucked away Anderson's insides was the abandonment. Only minutes before he'd been so sure: all that had happened occurred *with* Marina, together, side by side. Now he saw that she'd come at everything from some completely different angle. Or, maybe she'd been with him, but only part way, and then she cut free so clean and sharp that no one could possibly have sensed that she'd gone. No matter which, he couldn't comprehend it in his mind, just like he couldn't turn his body in his chair to face her, to know what she looked like now. "*Marina*," he gurgled.

She shuddered.

Name was too diplomatic, too elegant to do anything but carry on with his pen as though he hadn't heard the wretched sound.

For Anderson, someone who lived through his mind, who constructed his own image—his self-worth—from his intelligence, the noise he'd just emitted was devastating. A public admission of helplessness, he'd allowed those gathered around him to hear that he had no recourse, no way to defend himself.

The powerful if somewhat ponderous thinking Anderson had always trusted to protect him from others who had more money or better looks or more connections or whatever, that had failed utterly. And everyone knew it. Everyone knew: he hadn't understood who she was. He hadn't even begun to see.

Who—he was at last able to coherently ask himself—responds to the name Marina?

No idea.

The scene was interrupted.



"I can hardly say," Name addressed (in grammatically perfect Spanish) the office's latest entrant, "that I'm *surprised* by your managing to find your way here. You've proven a more than passably capable member of your...how shall I put it? Profession?"

"You *are*," responded the *Jornada* reporter, his pronunciation a ridiculous imitation of what he presumably imagined to be a prim and educated accent.

Silence.

The staggering Luis had concentrated so intensely on how he spoke that the substance of what he wanted to say evaporated. He waved flustered hands, then managed to break through, "I *would* have you know that, I suppose, I *do* suppose that you are...my *benefactor*." A toothy grin.

Undaunted by a suppressed smile from Name (at least it wasn't a giggle), Luis turned to Marina and Anderson. He dropped the accent and blurted, "Like you guys know, I've been following you. But now you'll be *incredibly* surprised to find out this: I've had some help!"

"Not really," moaned Marina.

"Yeah really," came back the reporter, completely misunderstanding her. "I've had some, um, great help." He turned toward Name again, firmed up his posture, switched to the contrived pronunciation. "You *may* want to have this wide-

ly...*known*." He stopped there, apparently believing that what he'd said made good sense. He winked at Name.

Name offered a limp salute.

Back to Marina and Anderson and normal speech, "I've had an informant—a *real* one—I've been *informed* by telephone of where I've gotta get myself to get some great shots. Like the ones I already got of you two. You've already seen what I got that hit the front page, and you know I've got *more* of 'em."

He let that sink in for a while, then, "Well, my tips, they came from someone who's a lot different from *you*." He sneered at Anderson. "He's someone who's *respected*. He's *definitely* worth respecting 'cause he sees what *I'm* worth, which is something."

Name's lip curled slightly, and not in a good direction. It's fair to assume that he didn't appreciate others defining for him just why he should be respected.

Marina saw the annoyance, but didn't say anything. Her lips remained perfectly still.

Anderson chewed on one of his while continuing the monumental struggle to understand what was going on.



For a time, the only sound in the office was Name's fountain pen scratching in his luxurious journal. The lines came in flurries, occasionally interrupted by the author glancing up at his involuntary and voluntary guests.

Marina, he observed, was a study in poise. He wrote that.

On the other hand, the reporter, his eyes shot here and there like..? Name considered for a moment, then wrote: *like a frustrated bee in a field of artificial flowers*. "God," he loudly regretted, "*that* was a mistake. Written in ink, though, no retracting." He scowled at his pen. "I should know better, animal similes are *always* to be avoided. Unless you're Kafka, of course."

The *Jornada* reporter looked to Marina, then Anderson for help. None provided.

Name raised the volume on one of his radios, and lowered it on the two others. The Bishop's death received yet another confirmation. The dead American was mentioned. Speculation concerning the *meaning* of the event was intermittent and halting, but also determined.

Soon an unnamed man was put on to speak—apparently he'd been introduced at some earlier moment—and his balanced words, his calm presentation immediately conveyed the impression of thoughtfulness. Name cocked his head to listen, to carefully hear each word. Everything he'd done ultimately weighed on the balance of whether men like this drew the conclusions prepared for them.

"Sir, I command your desire!" the persistent *Jornada* reporter interjected. After a second he caught himself, "Your command *is* my desire. Sir."

Name blinked in dismay, then a wave ordered silence.

Nervously, the reporter began fingering his cheap camera. A reproachful frown ended that.

What Name heard from the radio evidently pleased. After pulling at his bow-tie contentedly for a bit, he informed, "We have adequate time here, *no* reason to feel rushed. We will continue listening to events, *monitoring* them. Then we'll take our leave safely, preceding the security guard rotation, but not before. I do want to record as much as possible here. I also don't mind telling you that I'm finding a certain...*thrill* in this morning's events."

Not that he was thrilled by the deaths. They were repugnant, depressing and, worst of all, *vulgar*. Unavoidable, yes, but still, a stain on his endeavor. Perhaps, Name reconsidered, the spectacles *could* have been produced without death. In the future, possibly they will be. For the present, though, he could at least congratulate himself—a silent moment was taken to do so—for his efficiency. A near minimum of lives had been dedicated to the project.

Had he *chosen*, he could have arranged for a much grander debacle in the Cathedral. The entire holy building could've been brought down. *That* would've brought attention.

Also ambiguity, though. The massive loss of life, the photogenic ruins, days and nights pulling broken bodies from the stones, the rumors that someone might still be alive in there, the inevitable saving of a "miracle child" after half a week of digging, all of it could only have detracted attention from *his* message. So it hadn't happened. The old building remained.

But what the Cathedral *represented*—empire in the name of God—that lay in ruins just as surely as if every rock had fallen. The thought tingled. Name set about capturing the sensation with written words.

The *Jornada* reporter broke in. "I believe," he announced, "that the time has come...*for some photos!*" Luis raised his camera.

In a single arcing motion Name withdrew a pistol and fired once into the Mexican's chest. "Nitwit," he eulogized.

After laying the gun on the desk, he rubbed his ears and apologized for the harsh noise. "Unpleasant," was the word he used.

The photographer had collapsed as though the shot extracted every bone from his body. "A gelatinous man in the end," Name wrote in his journal.

Marina was petrified.

From the floor, several wheezing breaths.

Anderson wasn't sure what had just happened.

The radio kept up.

Name addressed what remained of his audience. "The requirements for this final act were easy enough to foresee. I need proof—and given the quality of this unique nation's police investigations, the proof will certainly need to be the most crudely obvious possible—I need proof that it *was*, in fact, an *American* who mounted this historical theater."

Marina glanced back at the officers arranged in a semi-circle

behind her. Blank expressions; they were bloodless men who didn't understand English.

"*However,*" Name continued, "I cannot allow—" An uncomfortable blathering from the floor interfered with the thought. Name decided to wait until he could again command undivided attention. The pathetic noises faded, but then bubbled up again.

"Well," sighed Name, "let's hope *this* ends soon."

All eyes fixed on the pistol.

●
Conclusion
●

Anderson was told he'd remain in the Museum, trapped.

"This last scene," Name explained, "has reached an even *higher* climax than I'd envisioned. Blame will need to be assigned for this crime as well." He meant the reporter's demise. "An American has disdainfully snuffed out the most *patriotic* of nationals. Dastardly act."

A futile noise from the expiring body.

Name raised his voice, "In any case, it *can't* be said that our newspaperman hasn't fulfilled his responsibilities, *in excess!*" He swung a hand down sharply against his knee. Yes, to his horror—and he was horrified—he'd committed a knee-slapper.

Sobering realization. After sincerely asking to be excused, and honestly regretting the outburst, Name pleaded lack of sleep. In fact, he was so concerned with the appearance left by his inappropriate tone and humor that he pulled out a loose paper and calculated the hours he'd dedicated to his bed in the last three days.

They weren't enough.

Still, there was no excuse for it, for the indiscipline. It was, he knew, his one great defect. Probably there was nothing to do about it: the sharp outbreaks of immaturity had accompanied him through more than five decades of life and gave no indication of subsiding.

Later he'd consider how it could be that he held so much control over the world and so little over himself.

Right now, though, he had to focus, starting with his weigh-

ty eyes, on Anderson: "You will, of course, tell your...story, something about how you just *happened* to be sitting here in the Museum while *someone else* robbed the place. Is that believable? You're found in a robbed Museum—*with* a murdered body—and you're innocent *because?*"

Anderson had gotten enough of a grip on the circumstances to realize that for him the question wasn't rhetorical. That didn't mean he had an answer.

"I suppose," continued Name, "that you *could* explain to the authorities that you arrived here hoping to discover the culprit behind these Imperialist Killings everyone's been discussing so feverishly."

A pause got inserted so all could listen to a bit of radio commentary from the Cathedral; it showed no sign of cooling.

Something *had* just changed in Anderson, though. Name saw it. Small, it was a tiny glint but definitely there. Anderson caught Name's eyes, even appeared to forcefully *look* back. Conclusion: the man was sturdiying himself.

Good, thought Name, as he continued, "You *might* even decide to claim that you were serving some high ideal, tracking down this raging imperialist. Sounds innocent enough, doesn't it? Of course then you'd be *explicitly* connected with several committed murders. And after that, no doubt, *some* do-gooder out there will remember *seeing* something on the front page of that *Jornada* newspaper some time ago. And from there, it's only a very short step, isn't it? I mean to the name of the photographer who, as cruel fate has it, happens to be here, with you, and in *remarkably* poor condition."

A stop to listen attentively for any signs of life from the fallen Luis. None.

"That route," Name finalized, "does not sound promising."

Nothing from Anderson, who was beginning to feel somewhere near dead himself.

"*Actually*," Name corrected, "that route is considerably *more* promising than it first appears."

Anderson's eyes glazed.

Name sharpened, "I mean just telling the truth is promising. Using *that* as your alibi. It could be a way out."

Anderson reconnected.

Name, "For you, there *is* hope. None other than *I* will provide it. It is...what's so opulently written *here*." He tapped his journal. "No doubt it will be found *far* more dramatic—and therefore believable—than whatever tale *you* spin. At least from the perspective of the television and newspaper accounts that will surely come, there won't be any hesitation, the journal will be the truth. Do you see?"

Though he hadn't yet prepared his listeners to answer that question, Name halted, his face mixing a dash of exaltation with more serious contentment. He did deserve the moment. He'd performed masterfully, and let himself know it.

The other emotions filling the room were diverse, but not so positive.

Looking straight—disturbingly so—into Anderson's eyes, Name qualified, "But right now you have no way of seeing. It would be *impossible* for you to grasp everything I've set in motion. Small matter. You only need to know your *role*, your part in this memorable drama. You are to be...the messenger! No one could be better suited to it. You are the great analyzer of imperialism, are you not?"

Silence.

"Regardless, your knowledge of empire holds only marginal importance, your real qualification isn't what you've done but what you *are*. You're American, correct? Please, don't disappoint me."

Continued silence.

"You *seem*," Name said, "to be stewing." He began writing the thought. "Would this be the spelling, s-t-e-w-i-n-g? In any case, perhaps brooding would be the better term." The inscription was completed. "But let me stress what is *important*."

The next words came slow, measured. Name wanted no misunderstanding. He needed no misunderstanding because at that climaxing moment a single vulnerability remained, there was still a threat to all he'd done: senselessness.

Everything would come together magnificently *as long as* Anderson didn't go off and do something crazy. If he just acted reasonably, then there couldn't be any doubt. The perfect conclusion waited.

It's difficult, though, to fully shield a man from insanity, especially when everything in his life has been twisted all the way around.

Still, Name figured *he* could hold Anderson together. If Anderson understood, if he could be made to *entirely* grasp and *accept* his reality, that foundation should provide equilibrium. At least enough for him to stagger in the direction Name wanted.

A deep breath by the impeccably dressed planner. One last time he summoned to his mind the short speech he'd planned and tirelessly rehearsed. For a moment he reflected on it, admiring the words and cutting in a few small, last-second changes.

Then Name began, "Your position is...desperate. You will be found here. You will be cited as atrocious. You've soiled this national museum, not even for money but for your deviant imperialist ambitions. *That* is what makes your acts unpardonable. And how could you atone for ruining a country's pride? Will *any* punishment be too severe? The answer...should be chilling.

"Yet, you hold one hope. It is *this* journal which I will leave with you. In it, I admit to everything. And I describe it all... *wonderfully*. The details are abundant, the facts undeniable, the style elegant. No one casting eyes on *these* pages will doubt: their author must be the man who orchestrated and executed all that has occurred.

"Do you see? My audacious journal doesn't only reveal who *I* am and all I've done, in the midst of the vivid telling it shows *you* are innocent. That's the key, my dear young man, and something to hold onto. Now, it *must* be added that you'd be mistaken—*wildly* mistaken—to imagine that I wrote *so that* you'd be exonerated. Hardly."

Time was let run for the humbling thought to settle in.

Finally, Name went on, "Still, your salvation remains what it is. No matter the cause, you *do* have an opportunity to escape this predicament. And I am happy for it, for it all. Now, is that straightforward enough? I believe so."

Name held his precious journal up, then set it back down to finger through a few of the early pages. Some murmuring. "There are *no* terms," he eventually stated, "that are prudent here except those I propose."

Then came a bizarre moment. Name pushed the journal slightly in Anderson's direction and spurted, "As the plebeians say, *Never look a gift horse in the mouth!*"

The groan immediately following proved as deep and long as it was sincere. Name's entire body cringed at having added that trite sentence to his prepared script. "Improvisation so often fails..." he wheezed, before falling back on the lack-of-sleep excuse.

In fact, Anderson observed, there *were* heavy bags under his eyes. But they seemed puffy in an unnatural way, at least to him. Not to Marina. She recognized that Name had applied wrinkle cream to the tired skin. A bit too much.

Chastised by the absurdity of his "gift horse" comment, Name apparently felt the need to start his speech again.

After repeating how the journal demonstrated Anderson's innocence, he reached a conclusion more in keeping with the established mood. "So, you have no choice, trust me now, no choice but to hold onto these pages. Then, when you can, and *however* you can, display them, recite them, announce them,

scream them.” Probably, he quickly realized, that last part went a little too far; he toned it down. “That was hyperbole, of course. Now, this isn’t: the journal can and will save you, but you must...make it...*known*.”

Silence.

“Am I being clear? I hope so.”

Longer silence.

“You may escape your plight, but only by telling *my* story.”

Briefly, speech was replaced by writing. Then Name resumed, his voice sounded calculating, but also soothing, “We are *not* adversaries, our interests correspond. I’m confident you understand that. And even if you don’t, even if it *seems* impossible, then take a moment, not for me but for yourself. Think. We *both* need these pages to be read, our very lives depend on it. For you, obviously, I mean that literally. Without the alibi I’m currently writing, it’s *impossible* to imagine any termination for the rest of your days but the filthiest of confinements, a cramped cell, heinous abuses perpetrated by dirty fingers and sick bodies. Or worse. On the other hand, *my* jeopardy, obviously, is figurative.”

Dramatic pause.

“In a certain sense,” Name concluded, “that makes my situation even more dire than yours.”

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Name was a pretentious ass. Too smart to get called ridiculous, but he sure pushed the envelope. He was basically right, though, about Anderson. The trap was expert and sealed tight. Caught there in the Museum, blame would fall hard on the obvious culprit, and the only way out was Name’s journal recounting everything, from the beginning.

It detailed the killings on the border, the agonies of the turcas, the luring of Anderson and Marina along the trail of humiliations: from the hands severed in front of Anderson’s house, to Cholula Street, to the madness and death of the Aztec Emperor. The significance of the Cathedral disturbance

was carefully illustrated. Finally, the details of the Anthropology Museum.

There were curious drawings and meticulous diagrams too. Drops of Name's own blood on selected pages circled by inks of various colors. Photographs clipped from the *Jornada*.

The journal also spelled out in painstaking—which means boring—detail, the theory of Name's empire of humiliation.

In the end, all that remained was for an *American* to present the last and deepest indignity.

What could that be? What one disgrace remained to be imposed?

The truth.

"Could any degradation be more breathtaking?" Name asked. "Could any end be more perfect?"

In fact, yes.

•

Attention turned to Marina.

She would escape along with Name. No reason to sacrifice two people when one alone could present the jolting and beautifully written message of Name's contempt. Simple honor was also involved. She'd delivered Anderson to the Museum in exchange for a promise: when she left, she'd go with several significant artifacts. The promise would be kept.

No doubt it would've been better had Name been able to devise an infallible scheme for drawing Anderson into the Museum without her help. But that would've left much to chance, and no one blessed with genuine intelligence tolerates unnecessary risk.

So Marina was contacted, the offer made.

She accepted. Which was just a formal courtesy. She was in a tight spot. Name had explained—more like proved—that she had no choice. With only a few well-selected words he could hang her up in the guilt of the most abhorrent acts.

Hadn't it been *her* lowly but dignified chauffeur who'd had

his life wrenched out by imperialism's most torturous instrument? And it wasn't necessary to even mention her grainy pictures in the newspaper. She *was* reminded, though, that more photographs were out there. Plus, hadn't she visited the renowned curator on the last day of his life? An inconvenient fact. There were others, too: her relation with Anderson, and the butchering in front of his house... The list went on, including some unspecified things that hadn't happened yet but that would, according to Name, only make matters worse.

And, he finally asked, wasn't she an *American* in Mexico, the *worst* kind. Undeservedly rich and attended by a small cadre of locals continually abused by her haughty commands?

Obviously Marina refused to respond, but her sullenness couldn't loosen reality's grip. So Name made his offer, and she wasn't going to say no.

No one could blame her for saying yes.

That didn't *entirely* explain, though, why she'd agreed, it didn't capture her most personal thoughts at the critical moment. Name was interested, so he asked. "I must record the specific *reasons* for your betrayal. And in this journal we must always be honest, you *are* betraying your countryman, are you not?" He said that without glancing toward Anderson. "Will we say that you did it for perfectly comprehensible fear, for self-preservation, and also for...*money*?" He poised to write.

"It's my nature," Marina told him, flatly.

"Yes, that will do quite well, won't it? And how shall I elaborate?"

"Can we get on with this."

"I understand. You're right, of course. I will simply fill in the next lines with my own thoughts on the matter. Still, I'd *welcome* a contribution.

Marina answered with her eyes; refusing to see Name at all she danced them over the shiny artifacts on the desk.

Name surrendered to his writing. But uncharacteristically,

his words missed their mark. He depicted Marina as selfish and greedy.

Wrong. She's *selfless*.

She's not Anderson's ally or his friend or his lover or his enemy. She's not American or Mexican. She was born in a place but doesn't come from anywhere; she has memories but not much of a past. What makes her Marina is that she changes destinations for her whole life as quickly as she passes through the international terminal at the airport, as easily as she switches from English to Spanish. And that explains why Name was wrong to assume that she'd *betrayed* Anderson. She hadn't, she'd just gone in a different direction.

If Name had understood Marina, he'd have said she lacked principles. For her part, she'd probably say that she didn't need them. Basically, the two are so different it's hard to believe they live in the same world. Maybe they don't.

This is right: most people are someone, and for that reason they do the things they do. Marina does what she does, and that's who she is. For the moment.

Name couldn't get it through his head. He knew it. And it *bothered* him. So he tried again. "But there must be something *more* here," he asked. Which was about as close as he'd ever come to admitting that part of his world escaped comprehension.

Marina offered nothing.

Name colored slightly, "I...continue writing my thoughts." Then: "You may take possession of your objects now."

Trying monumentally to contain herself, Marina leaned across the desk and began sweeping and piling the treasures. After they'd risen into a mound of wealth, she stood and stepped back to look. Who knows what she thought. Then she came forward and began removing the artifacts singly, saying words like Pectoral Mictlantecuhтли.

"I have," said Name, a man of infallible etiquette, "brought a

bag for you." He rose from his creaking wooden chair to hand it over.

"But no loupe," answered Marina. She meant a magnifying glass that would help her confirm authenticity.

"Do you really have any choice but to trust me?"

There was no more to say.

There was the final act though.

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Marina shrieked at the last humiliation. Name stretched his delicate frame upward, extended the obsidian vessel—the "monkey mug" he called it—high above and cracked it down fiercely (but still in a *refined* way) against the tile floor.

Stunningly resilient, it broke clean into three pieces.

"It can stay like that!" commanded Anderson, thoroughly surprising himself. Maybe he was concerned for the priceless object's preservation. Probably, though, he just had to *say* something. Anything.

Name sighed. He slid the smallest of the three sections apart and stomped the rest. Crisp, penetrating snaps reported the undoing. Then he kept grinding until only pebbles and dust remained. Finally—mercifully—one of the corrupted policemen was ordered to gather the bits into a black heap. The single piece that had been spared pulverization was set on top, a kind of archeological tombstone. Any expert would immediately recognize the sacrifice it marked.

Next the Vallejo Disc was produced. Radiating its tenacious resistance to time, Name was clearly struck as he cradled the sheet of gold in his hands. True, the delicate surface had been discolored and worn by five centuries, but the original glory of the etchings, the plumed warring figures, the dancing women, the abandoned children, all of them captivated.

Name crumpled the thin gold like paper. He worked the folds and then dropped the bent mess onto the floor where it received the heel's indignities.

The Xipe Totec mask, discovered in a burial chamber it was meant to accompany a high priest on the way to the next world. Fashioned from small, polished stones and shells, the artifact promised and offered no resistance. With one stomp, tiny, decorative parts bounced and rolled in every direction. It sounded like a handful of marbles thrown across the hard floor.

Heavy breathing from Marina.

Defying expectations, Name made no move to crush the dispersed pieces. With the toe of his brilliantly polished shoe he even exhibited compassion as he nudged some, and then more back together. It wasn't long before anyone with only a bit of imagination could begin seeing how the shards and rounded stones fit into their original pattern.

"I don't doubt," Name spoke, "that attempts will be made to *reconstruct* this." He pointed vaguely at the remnants. "Probably, some success will be had." On those last words his voice unexpectedly wavered, then almost faded out. It did because the destruction perturbed Name's instincts: no one who's studied the past thoroughly and lovingly can completely enjoy destroying its relics.

Still, there was happiness in the *future*. That got Name's joy back. "*After* the reconstruction the barbaric mask will surely be replaced right here, in this very Museum. And since nothing else of more than *trivial* importance will exist after this morning, it will have to recall the supposed grandness of the past *entirely* on its own, and as *miserably* broken."

The thought of it deepened Name's tone, filling his voice with gravity. "And what more *suggestive* display could there be, what more searing reminder of all that remains?" Eyes glittering, his command of the moment surged, though his words held steady and calm. "*All* that remains, all they have left of their time before domination is...a single reassembled *death* mask. I do hope they catch the symbolism."

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The exit
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Name took Anderson's hand—almost tenderly—and tapped it against the glass of the Museum's broad front door. "You *might* think to hurl something through this. Hardly worth the effort, though. And I don't mean that as an insult to your, how does one put it...intellectual physique."

After the 1985 robbery the most impenetrable safety glass had been installed. The thick plates—normally used in airports for their sound-deafening characteristics—allowed the building to preserve its vast, airy feel while closing down tight to keep thieves out.

Or in.

No formalities to mark the end. "Not enough room on the journal's last page for any lengthy thoughts or discourse," explained Name.

The front door was opened, the electricity reconnected, the Museum alarm triggered.

The journal was held up, Name began reading, both to Anderson and, he imagined, the world. "Naturally, I wi—"

He stopped. Cleared his throat. Lips twisted sourly: obviously he hadn't anticipated the need to proclaim above the din of the alarm. (An error in foresight, which Name found almost as frustrating as the noise.)

Taking a deep breath he fixed his place solidly in front of Anderson and bellowed, "*Naturally* I will not burden you with remorseful statements. You are, I judge, sufficiently wise to perceive that I am indeed sorry. And that is enough."

Truth be told, Name *was* sorry. Which isn't to say that he was regretful. He went on, "You should also know that were you in *my* position—had you the capacity to accomplish what *I* am accomplishing—you would do just as I have. I respect you enough to say that."

Marina demonstrated that she was recovering from the shocking morning and resuming her normal relation with the world: her eyes turned up in her head.

Name didn't see. It wouldn't have affected him if he had.

"Finally, shouldn't you respect *me* for bearing the weight of *my* responsibility? Considering everything carefully, aren't you finally *obligated* to me? Shouldn't you...*thank* me?" With those stunningly pompous—but also sincere and difficult—questions asked, the reading terminated. The journal was awarded to its victim. Name strutted out.

Everyone else herded, some covering their ears.

Anderson remained. Through the wailing noise a just-discernible sliding and clicking. The front doors sealed.

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Part Two
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After the Museum
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I was scared, trapped that way. I felt lonely too, but not really depressed, it was more like frantic, a need to *do* something.

What though?

Maybe I should've been mad at Marina for how she turned on me. Well, definitely. But the shock was way too much, impossible to deal with anything except what I saw right in front of me, right at that moment.

What's going on now isn't quite so overwhelming, here's what it looks like. According to all the newspaper, radio and television reports, the stroke was masterful. The Museum's most valuable artifacts were cleanly stolen. Almost cleanly, there was that one dead reporter found.

Rumors of sales abroad floated right away. A daughter in the Thysene family (established in Spain, wealthy, well-read, a decent number of aristocratic titles) got quoted saying, "We've acquired some very unique remembrances of our nation's history in this world. They're part of the family's *private* collection now."

People put two and two together.

That young woman hasn't said a thing since. A Spanish newspaper put out a story saying she'd been "muffled by family elders."

Eventually one of those elders—a wrinkled countess always wearing pearls—got cornered by a microphone, a camera and a determined gossip reporter. The question was whether she

was afraid the Mexican government might *demand* the objects' return. The response, "They wouldn't dare."

So some things don't change, not even after five centuries. You've got to give the Spaniards that at least; they've got no more empire, but they sure still know how to do the old disdain.

What about Name, or whatever his real name is? It had to torture him, my slipping out of the Museum. I wonder how many nights he's spent awake, trying to figure out how I did it?

The best though is that his journal that he worked so hard on is all mine. I'm looking at it right now. He definitely had big hopes for the thing. He was *so* sure it'd be read by every soul in Mexico. Then he probably assumed it'd go international, around the globe the pages migrating fast from one translation to the next. And it'd last, too. Generations would line up and take their turn at finding the book appalling, but also irresistible. Just like Cortés' letters.

Well, it's been read exactly once. Maybe I'll burn it tomorrow. That hurts.

So he's off somewhere, grinding his teeth, gnawing fingernails, twisting on that infernal bow-tie of his and "ruminating" (that word sounds like him) on the truth. All his efforts came to...nothing.

I suppose I should enjoy imagining it, love the revenge. I don't, though. I try to, but it doesn't work.

This part, on the other hand, definitely gets through: it's really *funny*. What was supposed to be this great theatrical display of a nation's inferiority is turning into a kind of gawk and talk fest. I mean, thanks to Name people here in Mexico aren't learning a single thing about their (depressing) history, and there's hardly any grand, sweeping international humiliation. That's not to say the locals are happy about their best museum getting robbed, or they enjoy hearing some haughty Spaniards

gloating about it. Obviously not. But everyone's sure happy *talking* about it. The perfect crime and snobbish Europeans and secret artifact collecting. Why would anyone want to talk about anything else?

It was word of the "acquisition" in Spain that got everything going. That, and the Thysene woman bragging about it. She takes a catchy picture too, which helps. *Lots* of photos of her turning up in the magazines and newspapers down here.

Even the simplest shots, like where she's on a sidewalk in Madrid waiting for the light to change, they're attractive. She's not sultry or falling out of her dress or anything, but she gets you. If the cropping's not too tight you can check around where she's standing. No one squeezes close, they're keeping their distance. But the men, they check her from the corners of their eyes. And the women, they're ignoring completely, or breaking down and plain staring. So there's good drama in the scene—the bodies all at a safe distance while the eyes grab at her—and that makes *you* want to grab too. It's natural, obviously you want to see for yourself what everyone's looking at (or trying so hard to not look at).

Is it her long legs or the calm face or the way she's standing or the clothes she's standing in? Hard to know.

But there's no stopping it. In the magazines here in grimy Mexico City it's glossy pictures of this *Señorita* whispering to some confidante, or laughing in a triangle of friends. Marina would fit right in. They're cutting through doors marked "No Admittance," hooking around people waiting in line. She comes home late—maybe it's the next morning—her clothes and hair rumpled, she still looks good.

Occasionally some decadents mix in, some carousers, disgraced politicians, artists, a bit of shallow royalty. It almost seems like half Europe must be these lifestyle masters who give lessons in dressing distinctively and sniff at people who work for a living.

So, *that's* the story with the Anthropology Museum robbery here in Mexico. The subject comes up all the time, but it's not so much about the theft. There's always a mention, but the real excited words inevitably stray toward these beautiful people and their strutting lives.

More darkly (or maybe it's more intriguingly), there're rumors of "alternative" parties. It's been said that in certain coastal European retreats wealthy libertines are parading suggestive Aztec objects for dedicated archeology students, ditzy starlets, young men with plump lips and hard chests. Mexico's a deeply conservative place, so no one approves of these kinds of subjects being discussed so openly. But everyone sure wants the details. And who knows, maybe some of what's being gossiped and condemned isn't *entirely* false, maybe right now in some white villa overlooking the Costa Brava a wealthy lecher's getting laid. He's got Name to thank, at least indirectly.

So, we can say *something* got accomplished by the man. Ha!

Or maybe it's not that funny. I don't know, I'm not a very good judge right now.

This is certain, and it's really the main point: as easily as I got out of the Anthropology Museum the summer's infatuation with the Imperialist Killings finished. No one asked about tangled strategies for global dominance, or Mexico's colonial past, or how they supposedly fit together with this string of atrocities that no one really understood anyway. People just stopped caring. Who can blame them? The story didn't manage to go anywhere, it didn't find any solid end.

That's what must be the worst for Name, the irrelevance. It's people stopping paying attention to what *he* thinks is important. Which is like people stopping paying attention to him.



What about those photographs Marina and I pined over so much, the ones supposedly showing our faces and making us out as guilty?

Almost a week went by after that bad museum morning without them turning up, and I'd begun letting myself hope that *maybe* they'd disappeared somehow. Maybe they never existed.

They existed, but not much more. It seems like this reporter Luis couldn't scrounge up enough money for anything but the cheapest camera. Or maybe his lens was constantly smeared. Whichever, even the close-ups hardly show us. They show enough though, no denying it. If you set Marina and me next to his shots, you're not going to miss the resemblance.

I also have to admit that he was inhumanly good at *hiding* himself. Impossible to imagine how he did it. From no more than twenty steps away it's Marina and me side by side in Ciudad Juárez. And then we're pictured mingling at the expatriate party. There's one of us later on, passing down Cholula Street. He caught us reading a commemorative plaque describing Montezuma, and then loitering in front of the Cathedral.

But leaving the stealth aside, Luis was still a hack. How else can you explain that he didn't keep detailed notes—or any notes at all, actually—to describe what he had? Glaring result: the *Jornada* has no names and only the sketchiest context to put in the captions underneath its blurry images.

That must've driven them crazy.

It's also not clear how the pictures connect with the main story, at least the one everyone's talking about now.

The main story, quickly.

There was a devastating robbery at the Anthropology Museum. It was set up by a rigged act of sabotage in the Cathedral. The *Jornada* newspaper lost one of its more fanatical reporters in the episode. This same reporter possessed rolls of grainy photographs depicting two people seemingly linked to the so-called (and now barely relevant) Imperialist Killings. These two fuzzily portrayed individuals, apparently light-skinned, very possibly foreign, *may* correspond with that high-

ly suspicious pair of foreigners that witnesses reported seeing in the Cathedral just before events there began.

Given the connection, a task should be clear. Use the pictures to find the two, check and see whether they really were in the Cathedral, then find out whether they're connected to the Museum theft.

Things get confusing, though.

First, probably the man has already been found. I hate to say it, but for me it can only be called a tremendous stroke of luck that EC got nailed by that dropping chunk of metal. Everyone's assuming that *he* was the suspicious guy in the Cathedral with Marina. And why not? Didn't the American Embassy immediately identify him as one of their own? Which connected nicely with people in the Cathedral that morning hearing Marina and the man speaking perfect English. American English. Mexicans know the difference.

Obviously I'd like to think that EC and I are, well, let's say "not similar" in appearance. But we both wore white shirts that morning, and he did have that chunk of steel contorting his face. And even if it weren't for that, the truth is there's *some* resemblance. I'm taller, thinner, I've got more hair, but still, you can understand the mistake.

So, the moment's conventional wisdom says EC is probably the man involved. That leaves the question on her. She was clearly American. "You just had to *look* at her," people say. And she was *with* an American. Sounded like one too.

Which leads back into this as a likely chain of events. Two Americans—a woman and EC—were together and EC ended up on the altar where his life ended. With other accomplices, she went on and robbed the Anthropology Museum. The *Jornada* reporter caught her in the act. He wasn't armed. She was. Now she's in Europe, selling what she stole.

Makes sense.

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That's where we are right now. I mean really right now, it's where we are as I'm sitting here writing this sentence.

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It can't last, though. Let's be serious, sooner or later someone's going to connect the pictures with Marina, recognize her and say something. There *must* be people out there who've already seen. They just haven't let on. But someone will, and then everything else about her is going to come out too.

And probably, just about when that happens, someone's going to look close and see that maybe EC doesn't actually match up with the man everyone saw next to Marina that morning in the Cathedral. And even if no one catches the difference, really, how long before someone who knows me and my name makes the link, figures out *I'm* the one pictured in the newspaper with Marina?

Yes I'm growing a beard, yes I've moved into a hotel, and yes I'm getting a new name, so I'm separating from everything. That name change, I do admit it's going to take a while, but if the truth can just stay hidden long enough I could be alright.

Plus, everyone will figure I'm over in Europe with her. Or back in the States. I'm thinking the one place they won't look too hard for me is here. And I know this place now, the ins and outs. I should be able to stay low, have a chance.

Marina is the one to thank for that, for the chance, I mean. You remember that she left an envelope with me. It happened so fast while we were standing there out front of the Museum, I barely noticed. The guards, they were coming down on us so there was a lot to keep track of. I can put it together now, though. She leaned up against me and kind of slid her fingers and the paper—it was one of those old airmail envelopes, actually—into my shirt pocket. *To be opened* she whispered, *in dire need*.

I'm pretty sure that's what she whispered. Something like that, anyway. And when she was in my pocket with her fin-

gers, maybe she gave my nipple a little rub too. Incredible. Minx.

Later, when I was left alone in the Museum, her words were *supposed* to have their effect. They wouldn't have, though. Not at all, but Marina saved me again. I was standing there dumb, just watching them through those thick glass doors, hurrying away. Right before she got out of sight Marina stopped. Everyone else kept going, but she spun around fast and faced me. She tapped her hand on her chest.

Name was quick too, though; he caught her.

I think he misunderstood at first, probably thinking she was mocking me! That *is* what it looked like. To his credit he didn't laugh or smile. It didn't seem like he enjoyed it at all, if anything he seemed deflated, softened.

The main thing is Marina's little gesture didn't get me to the envelope in my shirt pocket. What got me was Name. As Marina kept at it, kept tapping herself, he sensed she might be signaling something. He couldn't know what, though. At a loss, he grabbed her hand, tugged at it and checked in *her* pocket. Nothing there, he decided to keep walking.

Maybe it's my imagination, but his stride seemed hesitant.

Then I was totally alone. I grabbed the small envelope out. I opened.

The sheet inside couldn't have meant much to anyone. Unless they happened to be trapped in the Anthropology Museum with the alarm ringing. On one side: a printed text photocopied from an old newspaper detailing step-by-step exactly how the infamous 1985 robbery happened. Just below there was another copied article; the underlined section listed the precautionary steps taken to make sure the theft couldn't be repeated.

Flipping the paper there was a handwritten note:

Go to office 112, there's a wooden box. If it's not there, look in 100. If not there, just look until you find it.

Pasted beneath the message there was a small picture of the crate, and a notation of its dimensions.

It was in the first place, back in a corner of the dead curator's office where I'd just been. Rushing to it I pulled up the lid. It was obvious, I'd been assigned a task. And I have to admit I was pretty naive, but here's what it felt like. The work was going to be for Marina and I *together*. It seems crazy now, but that's what hit me at the moment, that we were still sharing what was going on.

I don't mean I was blind. Not even someone as wholly detached from reality as I am could avoid recognizing that she'd been more or less balancing—*playing*—two men. Who knows, maybe there were more. There probably were.

I was one of them, so I followed the note.

Inside the box there were tools. Many kinds, but a lot of wrenches. I checked them out fast, no one had to tell me there wasn't much time.

Then on to the details of the '85 robbery and the security changes made afterward. Marina had underlined the important parts in the clippings, and that along with a few drawn arrows sent me right through. At the end, she added a few sentences telling me what I needed to do, just in case I didn't pick up on it. It was pretty clear without them, though. Simple, almost obvious.

Since time's not so pressing now, I can fill in the details a little. There's a single key to it all, the air circulation vents. What made the earlier robbery so *painfully* easy was that the thief only had to unscrew a few clunky bolts to get into the Museum. It was that quick because all the heavy vents had been screwed into place from the *outside*. (Aesthetic considerations were probably to blame for that little flaw. It needs to be remembered that the building itself was thought to be as culturally important as the artifacts it held.)

Whatever the reason, once Marina's father figured it out, he

didn't have to work too hard. He dug through the prickly bushes surrounding the walls, reached a ventilation plate, unscrewed it and pulled the massive steel grill out. Then he bent into the rectangular space and crawled through to one of the smaller interior patios. From there nothing blocked the way to the Temporary Exhibits Hall. And from there, the entire place.

Supposedly there were guards around, a lot of them. None admitted seeing anything, though. It was all normal, they swore, until it wasn't, until the artifacts were gone. But Marina's dad, he *must* have gotten to them. At least to a few. Probably we'll never know for sure exactly how or with what.

Anyway, after the robbery one of the implemented security reactions was—no surprise—the *reversal* of all the steel plates. So it was no longer possible to get into the Museum with nothing more than a wrench. It had become possible, though, to get out, and that's just what I was supposed to do.

Next came a quick and suddenly hopeful trip. Wrench in hand, I ran downstairs, through the permanent displays and the great patio, and then out the other side of Temporary Exhibits to what I guessed and calculated had to be the right ventilation plate. It was definitely a big one.

Holding three levels of thick bars, the air curved through but vision was blocked. Almost blocked, by leaning and folding against the wall I found just the right angle to peek through at green plants swaying outside in the breeze. No time, though, for getting lost in the whiff of freedom or something poetic like that. (I mean, no time for floating around in something like what Name would be writing here.) I just got to work.

The wrench fixed to a bolt, nice and snug. The fit was a *stunning* piece of luck since I'd just grabbed it at random out of the box. But while I maneuvered into working posture, nothing struck me about the coincidence, it didn't seem at all unusual.

In fact, it wasn't. I heaved a serious breath, gave my body a final strenuous twist and pulled mightily. A moment of resis-

tance...then the wrench jerked around. But *way* too easily because it didn't fit. Close, but *slightly* large.

Sprinting back to the box, I shuffled through the tools looking for a wrench that was *adjustable*. Nope. But I did find a smaller one.

Again a rush across half the Museum and to the grate.

Too small.

Going back this time, I retrieved the entire box. That was a good sign as it showed some flickering of coherent thought beginning to occur in my brain.

But incoherence soon returned. As I snapped out and tried one tool after another, this possibility crept closer and closer: Marina had managed to not purchase the *one* size that actually fit. Apparently—given the perfect brightness of nearly all the wrenches—she'd just gone to some hardware store and bought more or less every one that caught her eye.

The one I needed happened to be out of stock?

Clearly it wasn't, and though I expected some unforeseen obstacle to arise near the last moment, none did. So with the alarm rattling my ears and the right wrench finally in my hand, I gathered my muscles and my body's weight and turned the bolts hard, one by one.

When the last twisted out of the wall, the grate came too. I barely dodged its brutal drop.

●

A job remained: clean the mess in the office upstairs where everything was broken on the floor.

I'd *like* to say that the reason I went back up there to do it was to foil the imperialism plan. Wiping away the story Name was trying to tell, that'd be somewhat heroic. But the truth is, I wasn't in any condition for that. Nearly incapable of making decisions at all, I just threw myself into Marina's directions. What she instructed was done because she'd written it, and she wrote on the bottom of the paper that I was supposed to clean up.

In the back of my mind I suppose I figured it'd help *me* somehow. Maybe if I was caught later on I'd seem less guilty or something. I didn't know.

Now I can see it meant a lot to *her*. With the originals gone and everyone naturally assuming they were stolen, she could fabricate counterfeits of the wrecked artifacts and sell those along with the real ones she'd taken.

That's her business, though, not mine.

There's this: Marina telling me to clean up means she must have known beforehand what Name was planning, I mean that he was going to break everything and leave it there. When I put that together afterwards, wow, it smacked me. It wasn't so much how far away Marina was from me, how much she knew and hadn't shared. What hurt me is when I realized how *close* she must've gotten to Name to find out exactly what he planned to do. Pretty close, I guess.

By the way, I've also got to mention that one of the main reasons it was impossible to do anything in the Museum but what Marina directed was the *noise*. That accursed wailing, it just blew away any attempt to think. Even now when I go to bed at night I feel the echoing in my head, my ears. It'll never completely go away.

I suppose that alarm was rigged to do more than just blare, probably some kind of automatic call went out too. If it did, it very likely got ignored at the police switchboard. There're few more futile gestures in Mexico City than telephoning for help. The newspaper *Reforma* reported two days ago that about thirty-six thousand calls pour into the department daily. About thirty-four thousand are pranks.

I'll spare you the final details of my leaving the numbingly loud place. It went so smoothly that even for me taking the time to recall it seems tedious.

True, there was that *one* oversight on Marina's part, a single flaw in the large plan: she didn't leave a small broom and sack

in the crate along with the wrenches and things. They would've helped me with the cleanup. Then again, it must be hard to remember the little things in the middle of awesome imperialism, personal betrayal, betrayal of the betrayal, international robbery, artifact forgery, vast sums of diverse currencies and black-marketing.

Since those aren't my worlds, it was left for me to assume the hands and knees posture. I scooted from wall to wall of the small office collecting the scraps. There were chips of painted stone in the corners, jade bits under the desk, shards and black dust of obsidian. Ruined copper ornaments clinked and almost chimed as I piled them up. At the last moment Name had decided to carry out the wrecked gold with him. Who knows why. But I did find a wrinkled and abused strip between the bookshelves. Whatever else you may think about me, you shouldn't doubt that I'm thorough. Everything was gathered, very rapidly.

Then I hunted for a bag, a container, anything. There must've been a trash basket there in the office, and boxes. The crate with the tools could've been emptied. But I couldn't *see* any of that. I couldn't find what I needed because at the very last moment all that made sense was, *I've been abandoned again*. Marina had left me without instructions.

Now what?

For a minute it seemed like that might be it, the end. Incapable of doing anything for myself, I sat on the floor regretting everything. Then an answer came through, though, it just arrived, my own contribution. You couldn't call it more than a spark of initiative, a flash of *me* doing something. But it was that, definitely. Scooping up the wreckage by the handful, I dropped it down my shirt.

I remember striding through Chapultepec Park, away from the Museum. People crossing my path must have found it strange, this hurrying and clinking foreigner.

•
Disappearing
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No one could be surprised that Marina didn't come back to her Mexico City house. It *was* surprising that she managed to sell the place.

The day after the Museum I rode by in a taxi and saw the commotion. A family already moving in, their faces bright and proud of their new home in the best old neighborhood. Later I learned those people bought the whole property, furniture, clothes, everything. Cash probably.

So the question about whether Marina will be coming back here is answered.

Who knows where she'll end up, or even which country. Crossing national lines for her means nothing more than a chance to make fashion judgments about border guards' uniforms. Different flags? Those are only distinct color combinations. True, she prefers some cities and towns over others, but it goes no deeper than a pleasant climate or good seafood. She speaks only two languages, but since English is spoken around the world that doesn't narrow the possibilities. She could go anywhere.

Which is enviable. Think of the other extreme: Name was perfectly attuned to a world where it's impossible to leave America.

Yes, his body visited Mexico. Maybe he's still here, sitting in some park wielding his calm presence and impressive clothes to flirt with moms. They probably fall for it. Who'd suspect he's using them to get to their little boys? But no matter what,

he's always *in* the U.S. The word "abroad" for him means "province." Or maybe something less distant.

And he's right. It's easy to feel that way since the music played down here on the radio, and the kind of wine you're supposed to drink, and most of the newspaper headlines, and the clothes the teenagers wear, and what they want to be when they grow up, and everything like that, since all of it revolves around what's happening in America, it's natural to sense that America's everywhere.

Last Saturday we had a loud street march right past my hotel. They were protesting capital punishment. When was the last execution in Mexico? Who cares, they do them all the time in Texas.

The world gets to be a claustrophobic place. And global claustrophobia—the feeling that you can't get outside the United States—comes with rancor too. So many foreigners, they believe: since I'm earnestly engaged by what's going on in America, Americans should seriously care about...what's happening with me.

Name cares. He really does, and he wants what's best for them no matter what they might think. Most of the rest us? Not so much. There aren't many Americans engaged by what's happening across the borders. And abroad they sense that. They hate it, too. Which intensifies the claustrophobia.



Five centuries ago when Hernán Cortés and his soldiers came to the Americas they arrived as so starkly different from the natives that both sides doubted the humanity of the other. The Spanish assumed the locals lacked souls, the natives suspected the Spaniards were Gods.

Today, when Americans step onto what we're told is foreign soil, we arrive as the most familiar. They've been listening to all we say, watching everything we do and talking about it, endlessly. A young Mexican today who wants to impress his girlfriend will casually drop the names of cool spots in New

York and L.A. It'll come naturally since he'll know more about them than the trendy places in Mexico City.

So you can see the first and last global empires are different, but also the same.

•

Then there're the ones liberated from all nations, but while Marina knows no patriotism and doesn't recognize borders, she's not freed from *personal* empire. She'd go to war to protect her right to have a maid.

Fortunately, wars aren't necessary for that, just money. Here's how she's getting it. Difficult to forget her talent for reproducing historical artifacts. Well, that's what she's doing. Starting with what she carried out from the Museum—and then adding detailed photographs of what got destroyed there and that I cleaned out—she's got everything she needs to start making excellent copies for selling.

And if she's going to sell a copy instead of the real thing, why stop at only one?

Brilliant, simple too. I mean people think of stealing art and then selling it privately. *And* people think of forging a piece of art (say a painting that we know once existed, but has disappeared) and then selling that. What Marina's doing is taking the next, easy but still revolutionary step: putting the two together. Steal a piece of art *so that* it disappears, then turn around and fabricate multiple replicas for sale.

There's one great barrier to this serial fraud. A way's got to be found to lure buyers into handing over money without carefully checking to make sure that what's being bought is genuine. Since the amount of money is significant, so too the difficulty. Making matters worse, Marina's done forgery before—and been caught—so there's deep suspicion.

But she's found a solution.

The critical part is her infecting buyers with confidence that what she's selling is very probably real because *she's definitely the thief*. The *Jornada* newspaper comes in here, and with a nice

flourish. She must've been turning the idea over in her head almost from the beginning because way back on the day that our pictures hit the front page, she bought stacks of copies. Now she's got the false objects she's selling wrapped up for protection in those authentic pages. So while she's unpacking, she's already introducing her main selling point, "Oh, you've got to *look* at this picture... They came *so close* to nabbing me!"

Next she produces an unwrinkled copy of the newspaper for suspicious eyes to check over.

By the time her buyer finally gets around to actually looking at the heavy artifact, a layer of skepticism has been completely washed away.

"Resourceful," that's her word for it.

True, you can't see with absolute certainty that it's her who's pictured on those flimsy pages, but almost. And it's more than enough to create good trust, to open receptive ears for her story, which captivates.

According to her telling, she's got no idea about who the real bad guy was. She never hurt anybody herself, obviously, that'd be beyond her. All she did was follow along as the Imperialist Killings happened. She kept close, marked every detail. Sooner or later, she figured, if she was attentive enough and clever enough and fast enough, then *some* chance would come up, some opening for her contemporary pillaging.

"I was an imperialist...*parasite*," she admits, adding some fake shame, a contrived nervousness.

And the newspapers, they almost show it, don't they? She goes through the edition of the *Jornada* that came out with all the pictures found in Luis' apartment after he died. One page at a time, she moves slowly, pointing to each image and explaining the unique horror corresponding to it. There's a snapshot of her in front of my house, and soon after came the memorable amputation. She's on Cholula Street, and what came next is described in the paragraph underneath.

Since she's a good storyteller, she knows how to string out your attention, tempt you with hints about what's going to happen in the end, make you want to know. And once you do, she's pretty much got you under control.

Before most anyone else, as she recounts it, she figured the plot out. Some madman was re-creating the letters of Cortés. Heading off the obvious question, she assures that it *shouldn't* come as a surprise that she saw it so fast. Everyone knows her father wasn't only a thief, but also an expert in the history of the artifacts he stole. Just like her: she learned everything from Dad. So what would've been surprising is if she *wasn't* one of the first to put it all together.

As soon as she did, it was easy to see a step ahead. She knew what was coming, and could try to get there for it. "Which," she says, "is *exactly* what I did. I got there and waited, every time. Sometimes not *quite* the right place. Or I was a *bit* early, or late..." She tilts her head back, like she's remembering. "But I *knew* I'd get a perfect chance at something along the way. Sooner or later."

She soothes the artifact in her lap, admires it with her eyes and then brings it all back to the man sitting in front of her, "No way I could be sure exactly when, or how, but that's *always* the way imperialism works. It happens, and a lot happens, maybe different every time, but there's always little cracks, little chances for someone who's *resourceful*."

She really likes that word. Maybe because it doesn't seem deceitful, it's not like cunning.

Her chance came with the trembling in the Cathedral. She was inside when it happened. "You can see here," she easily relates, pointing to a section in the newspaper. A witness is quoted noticing a tall, foreign and suspicious woman in the back pews just before the disturbance. Marina reads her description again, stretching out the words. She knows it's a turn-on for a particular kind of listener.

Then she snaps his attention onto the important part. "When I saw those guards arriving from the Anthropology Museum—a lot of them—I *knew* there was something there, a chance, a good one. It didn't take me long to figure out exactly what. And you can see here..." she waits until his eyes drop to the object in her lap, "I didn't hesitate."

Now she's in Europe.

And she has another admission to make: the idea of selling doesn't come easily. How could it? All her life she's *desired* priceless things like these. And now she's held them with her own hands... She does exactly that with an obsidian carving. It's an alluring sight, the smooth, hard surface of the rock under her touching fingers, the silver of her spare rings against the deep black of the object. "It's hard," she says, "now that I've felt it." She means it's hard to sell.

There's no avoiding a sad fact, though. She needs money.

That's where the story ends.

It's a good one. Not far from the truth, either.

And it's perfectly suited to a demand that she has to make. To hold everything together, to get away with selling a fake—and not just one but multiple versions—the sale has to occur in a single fast transaction.

It *must*, she tells her leisurely buyers, because even though she's innocent of any bloody crime, she's still a suspect. Her picture's in circulation. "You can see *that* for yourself," she reminds, as though the photographs appearing in the *Jornada* prove everything else she's saying.

They almost do, and definitely they work for her final appeal. She *can't* linger, it's to be regretted, obviously, but there's no time for cautious verification of authenticity. "I've *got* to keep moving," she says, "until all this blows over." After slumping her shoulders to sigh, she straightens up, looks deep into him and adds, "Promise me now, please, you *won't* tell anyone."

Of course not.

There's no need to add the part about the exchange being their little conspiracy. And nothing's directly said about the secret sale's link to the rare boldness of the Anthropology Museum robbery. Buyers already sense all that, they can't help but feel the thrill of the theft. Plus, their silence about what they know, doesn't that actually make them *accomplices*? Probably, but without having to worry too much about police dragging them out of bed in handcuffs in the middle of the night.

"You know," Marina confides in the end, "I only stopped here to see you because *you're* someone who knows how to be...discrete. That's the key to everything, isn't it?"

Certainly the fact that her clients are all men doesn't hurt. But what really gets them is the whiff of elegant lawlessness, the grainy pictures, the daylight theft both smart and reckless, the temptation of something within reach, but only for a moment and, finally, the complicity. She waves some of that perfume in the air, and then it's off to the next salivating collector.

You have to respect her. I mean, at least for this: she's devised a way to twist the fact that people suspect her of being a thief into a reason for those same people to *trust* her, to hurry up and hand over their money. It's diabolical.

•

Name's journal. No one knows it better than I do. Given that straying from my hotel any more than necessary doesn't seem advisable, I've had time to learn—practically memorize—every page of the abnormal book.

It stinks by the way. There's a window in my room, but air never seems to blow through so now the smell's gotten into everything. I'm pretty sure it's the weird, fibrous paper that's the source. The handwriting's ugly as sin too, not the form of the letters but the colors. Pale violet, sickly and watery green, decadent orange. I can't wait to get rid of the thing.

For now, though, I'm holding onto it. It's all I've got, the only

evidence of some separation between me and everything that happened. So the smelly alibi will just have to stay here, safe with me, right at my side. It's wrapped in a plastic bag, that helps a little.

As you've already realized, most of *this* book is stripped from the festering journal. Between what Name wrote and I lived, it's not taking much imagination to fill in the rest. There's some speculation about Marina here and there, about what she thought as everything happened. And about what she's doing now. I could be off a bit, not much, though. I saw her a lot through all this. More than I've let on.

But that part of the story—Marina, how close I was to her and how far she ended up from me—I'm really too ashamed to tell much of it.

And because it runs on so long, some parts of Name's story had to be left out too. Like the journal pages describing how he got the turcas from the Sagrario library back at the beginning. That's a weird episode.

And obviously I had to cut out the most disturbing paragraphs, the instructive ones, the lines written to describe just how it was supposed to work, this empire of humiliation. No one wants imitators.

•

I've got a more pressing worry now, though, than any imperialism. I have to disappear.

Marina too, but it's easy for her. With money anyone can lose themselves in this world, and she's getting the money. Plus she's smart. She knows finding a place to live won't be a problem since apartments and houses—even very nice ones—get rented without questions when there's cash on the table. And getting around? No difficulty there either since taxi drivers don't ask who's in their back seat. Limo drivers don't either. (And then there's that slumming side of her, the part that likes getting down with the masses in gritty subways.) The end

truth is everything's going to flow for Marina, just like it always does.

I'm different. My disappearance will have to come cheap. And cheap means slow, careful, step by step.

It starts with a name change. That's already happening thanks to a little intercultural distortion. Most of us are used to people having a last name inherited from dad, and a first name chosen by mom and dad together. Then there's the middle name, occasionally it's mom's maiden name, frequently something else.

In my case it's mom's maiden name. That makes me Anderson Moriarty Nostromoses. Very ugly. (There was an Italian somewhere on dad's side, and mom's Irish. Anderson? Well, he was a guy in their past they won't tell me about.) Anyway, obviously I introduce myself as Anderson Nostromoses, it's how I'm known.

In Mexico, though, like in Spain, they do it the other way. The name inherited from dad is still the family name, but it's set right after the first, given name. Then mom's maiden name comes at the end, and it's seldom used. So, down here, anyone who hasn't been introduced to me, any Mexican with nothing to go on but my California driver's license, the old U.S. credit card that includes my middle name, my social security card, the Embassy ID they gave me when I arrived, all of it says my name is Anderson Moriarty. Nostromoses is secondary, like a middle name in the U.S.

With that confusion on my side, I ventured out and got a job teaching English. (My own modest contribution to Empire America.) There's no end to the private language schools down here, and they're *desperate* for native speakers since they can charge their students more for us, almost double. So if you've got that native-language advantage, you can walk into one of these places saying your name is Anderson Moriarty, and you want to teach.

The interview will abruptly end.

They'll shake your hand and thank you profusely for coming in. A secretary will scurry to print a little identification card. They'll find you a ragged book with pages of grammar exercises, vocabulary lists, and a few out-dated pictures of life in America. Then it's straight into the classroom action.

The teaching's nice. Easy, obviously, but what makes it gratifying is that you *can't* be wrong. I mean, since you're a native speaker, and since the course is about teaching students to talk like...native speakers, no matter what you say, you're perfect. It's not like discussing political history or something where there's always some nerdy book-head who's going to raise a hand and "remind" me that Cortés landed in Veracruz in *March* not May of 1519. In my English class, if I say, "He come at America on May 1519," then that's the way it's said.

And the students, they know it too. Sitting there, writing it all down, they don't open their mouths except to repeat exactly what I've told them, and as best as they can.

So the teaching goes fast. And then it's back to the office where they'll hand over some cash and another assignment.

After getting through a few more working days they won't say no when you tell them you're *uncomfortable* being paid under the table, you *want* everything honest, transparent and done right. You want to work legally. Which means you'll need a work visa from the government. Add something like this, "I'm just naturally a person who's very respectful of rules and regulations."

They won't say no, but they won't say yes, either. They'll answer yes, but next week.

After letting the week and then some go by, you feign indignation and *demand* to come aboveboard. You *can't* go on working without a legitimate visa. But at the same time make it easy for them. Promise you'll fill out all the papers, pay the fees, do the legwork, wait in the long lines. The *only* thing the

school has to provide is a formal letter of employment and their tax identification number.

They'll say, "Well, let's...umm... Alright, how do you spell your name again?"

Now Anderson Moriarty has something solid: an official, local letter spelling out exactly what his name is.

And if it's necessary, he can pull out some other plastic cards, papers and documents that don't dispute the fact. They even reinforce the name on the letter, just as long as no one's looking too close or thinking too hard.

Next stop, Office of Immigration. Here's what you need. Originals and photocopies of everything you can find with your full name on it. Six black and white passport photographs (front and side views, facial hair acceptable, no glasses). A good night's sleep beforehand. Very little caffeine in the blood. A positive outlook. Plenty of red, fifty peso notes for gifts to receptionists.

A generous bunch of those notes will have to be forked over if you get unlucky and the line you choose leads to a receptionist who happens to know that naming works differently north of the Rio Grande. But, these are low-wage government employees, most don't care enough about their work to bother learning that kind of thing. Typically, they'll glance at the papers and, not seeing anything leaping out as blatantly wrong, move them to a stack and dismiss you with a curt "Next."

Your task is to get those papers onto the *right* stack. That's where the bills will definitely come in.

The most important bribery rule is, no matter what, be cautious, be respectful, be discrete. *Don't* force it. If you do—if there's a sense that you're demanding a transaction instead of exchanging pleasantries—they'll recoil, act supremely offended, take your papers and that'll be it. You'll come back a day later to pick them up, then a week later, then a month. Nothing.

After that, the only thing you can do is wait until the memory of your face and name has faded, and start again.

The same goes if you offer the money in the right way, but too little. That's an insult, your papers will quickly find their way into the trash. And if you try sliding too much? Even worse, they'll think you're not only obnoxiously clumsy, but also suspicious. After pocketing the bills, they'll take your application and pictures and closely *examine* them. For someone mixed up with an infamous crime like me, that's very bad. (Actually, it's bad no matter what because when professional bureaucrats check carefully, they *always* find something wrong. A misspelled word, an "x" just outside the box...)

What you need to do is hand over the right amount of money in the correct way at the perfect moment.

Start by passing your application across the desk not as a stack, but page by page. No impatience. After the first, wait for a request or a gesture inviting each sheet. The relationship should begin with the understanding that the person across from you merits deference and is in charge.

Don't wait too long before offhandedly mentioning that back in the U.S. you used to work for the government too. "I suppose they pay lousy in every country," you could try saying. If she doesn't warm up a bit, add some more commiseration.

Keep going forward—slowly—until one of two things happens. She gets annoyed with your prattling, or, she melts into familiarity. If she's irritated, you've blown it. Tell her that it turns out you don't have all the required papers so you'll have to return later. *Smile. Apologize.* Walk away.

If she reclines slightly in her chair and starts looking modestly comfortable with you, then feel comfortable with her. There's no rush. True, a lot of people are pressed into the line back there, and there's a tense hum of irritation, but the work will get done. There's no reason for unpleasantness. You should be feeling good, why not help her feel that way too?

"At least," you could say, "they give you some space here. That's real nice. Where *I* used to work, I could *barely* fit my knees under the desk. Really, it's not that bad here, not at all."

Use that last line as a way to slip past her customary defenses, "I remember how I was always *so* cramped. Every day I spilled coffee or something all over myself. That's definitely one of the good things about having more room, you can dress nicely for work." Glance at her blouse.

When all the mandatory documents have been handed over, and after she's had a chance to run her eyes across them to make sure nothing's missing or obtrusively wrong, you pull out a few last papers. Maybe two photocopies of your driver's license. "Oh, then there're these. I'm not sure if they're *absolutely* necessary, but I thought it'd be good to have them, just in case they're helpful for you." Nine, fifty-peso notes go right under the top sheet. "It's not much," you say. "Just a thought."

Eyes meet, the two of you understand each other.

She'll group the papers into stapled sets before applying a heavy clip and then wrapping it all in a green folder with your name inked across the upper corner. Then she'll twist around and set it on a certain pile, the one holding applications already screened and approved.

Later, in back, someone else will have to approve them too. This is the place where the real checking normally happens, a line-by-line examination and if any doubt rises, any question or ambiguity, a supervisor gets called over. If that one's not sure, a signal goes up to the next higher level. The process goes on until someone just decides to reject the whole thing.

That trouble won't even get started, though, if a file goes to the backroom already approved. No one wants to contradict a coworker. (Why create a problem?) There'll be a cursory glance at the main sections, a page count, a look at the photo to confirm it's a normal person. Not much more. Out comes the green stamp pad and approval gets smacked onto each of

the important forms. (Next week when the rotation puts him in the receiving window and her in back, the courtesy will be returned.)

The lesson is that as long as you follow the bureaucratic protocol and avoid doing anything odd along the way—as long as you make it easy for them to make it easy for you—papers will flow.

Result. If you have all the originals and photocopies, you have the black and white headshots, you've got the right money, you're smiling, you're patient, and you arrive very early in the morning, you should walk out in the evening with a flimsy little booklet, your photo stapled to the second page. Called an FM3, it's your Mexican work permit. It's also who you are as far as the Mexican government is concerned.

I'm Anderson Moriarty. Call me Andy.

By this time next week I should have saved enough money to rent an apartment, at least a small one. First thing, I'll sign up for a phone line. That's a two or three hour wait just to reach the little window where they hand out the application. You get it, fill it in, and do the line again to hand it back. Installation (assuming the form doesn't get lost or rejected) takes about a month. Which explains why you pay so much more for apartments that're already hooked up. Mine will have to be a cheapy.

When the first phone bill comes, that's a proof of residence. One of those gets you a bank account.

When the first account statement comes, you've got *two* proofs of residence.

Back to the Immigration Office. You can prove *who* you are, you can prove you *work* in Mexico. You can prove you *live* in Mexico. Now, Andy Moriarty applies...to be naturalized.

It's an extended process and there's no way to know whether I'll be here that long, but you go through it as a *resident*. Which means you get an FM2. That's a nicely laminated card with

your picture, your name and below a long string of numbers and letters, the equivalent of a Social Security number.

With that you live just like any other local. Anyone wanting proof of who you are won't look any further or ask for anything more.

There won't be any need for the old papers and passport that used to describe my life. I'll burn them, not just throw them out because the garbage dumps down here are surrounded by shantytowns where entire families spend their dirty lives picking through everything that arrives. Their existences—especially parents sending children out into the smelly heaps every morning—have to be about the world's most desperate. It seems unjust, actually, withholding my old papers from one of them. A valid U.S. passport, that's a small fortune for the lucky urchin who pulls it out from the muck. Maybe it's a risk for me, though, letting my real name back into circulation. We'll see what I decide, what kind of person I am.

What's inevitable is that as weeks and months go by, questions will come. Someone I pass on the stairs most mornings will ask where I'm from. Or a guy in the apartment down the hall won't be prying, just wondering why I'm living here in Mexico. Others who get a little closer might ask how I like it: do I have an ear for the local music, a taste for the hot food? Maybe someone will ask me out one night. Or I'll ask her and she'll say yes. It's natural, people will want to know this foreigner, find out who I am. I'll have to learn along with them.

All citations from historical documents and news media are accurate, though summarized. Where available, addresses of internet pages have been cited. Links may also be found at www.empireofhumiliation.com. All translations by the author.

How to hire corrupt police officers in Mexico

Drivers stomp their accelerators while cheerfully cursing officer Gutiérrez who laments, “You see, everyone laughs at us.”

A teenager at the wheel of a dented van revs his mufflerless engine. His heated, acne-scarred face jerks to his radio’s blaring. Yelping, he slams his horn, flips his middle finger at a policeman, and blows the red light. “It just felt cool,” he later related.

“Those are just the reported accidents, there’re actually many more,” according to the dejected Chief Heras.

All from the article “*Fin de la mordida*” (The End of the Bribe) by Alejandro Almazán. *El Universal* newspaper (Mexico City, Mexico). Sunday, 16 November, 2003.

The article is on the internet:

www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_nota=54910&tabla=ciudad

The burning

The twenty undocumented immigrants found in a truck in Texas dead from heat asphyxiation are victims of America. More, the Mexicans are not criminals but workers and the lethally dangerous conditions in which they enter the U.S. represent massive violations of their Human Rights. We must demand an end to the criminal brutality with which the Americans pursue our co-nationals who cross the border.

From the editorial page statement “Migracion: Ni Un Muerto Mas” (Migration: No More Deaths). *La Jornada* newspaper (Mexico City, Mexico). 15 May, 2003.

The article is on the internet:

www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/may03/030515/edito.php?fly=1

Suspecting a frightening imperialism

1.

“On Being Disliked: The new not-so-unwelcome anti-Americanism” appeared 29 April, 2005, on the National Review Online.

It remains available on internet.

www.nationalreview.com/hanson/hanson200504290803.asp

Also:

www.victorhanson.com/articles/hanson042905.html

2.

The government of the United States has an immigration policy of silent murder. It's *migracide*, a whole new crime....

From “¿Pacto migratorio o pacto de justicia?” (Migration Agreement or Justice Agreement?) by Luis González Souza. *La Jornada* newspaper (Mexico City, Mexico). 17 May, 2003.

The article is on the internet:

www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/may03/030517/016a1pol.php?origen=opinion.php&fly=1

Humiliation in Tlascala

1.

The *Requerimiento* is on the internet; there are many versions with small differences.

2.

Messengers were sent from Tlascala begging forgiveness and pleading to become vassals. They brought gifts of feathered ornaments which they believed held high value. I laughed at their trinkets and ordered the hands of all fifty men cut off and sent them back crying back to their masters.

From: Cortés' second letter to the Emperor. Available on internet.

Cholula, past and present

I told Cholula's Chiefs that it was not fitting for me to deliver a message to persons of such minor rank as themselves. Even their masters in the capital of Tenochtitlan hardly merited hearing it. Nonetheless I commanded their obedience.

From: Cortés' second letter to the Emperor. Available on internet.

The party, the massacre

Awe crept over the Cholulans as they gazed on the mysterious strangers. There was no use in denial before such judges!

From: Cortés' second letter to the Emperor. Available on internet.

Imperialism

1.

A 2002 Zogby International poll found that 58 percent of Mexicans agree with the statement, “The territory of the United States' southwest rightfully belongs to Mexico.”

Available on internet:

www.immigrationcontrol.com/AIC+Zogby_Mexican_Opinion_Poll.doc

2.

The poll's important finding concerns attitudes toward the United States. Around 60 percent of Latin Americans have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S, a much higher figure than 10 years ago. Oddly, the figure is higher despite the fact that more Latin Americans than ever want to migrate to the U.S.

Available on internet:

www.latinobarometro.org/uploads/media/2005.pdf

www.independent.org/newsroom/article.asp?id=1637

The edible and the empire

1.

To be redeemed, Jesus taught his closest followers, this would be necessary: Eat my flesh, drink my blood.

From: *Bible*, John 6:53-60.

2.

When the Aztecs fled we pursued, tripping over bundles of corn they dropped along with the roasted bodies of children they'd been carrying to satisfy their ghastly hunger.

From: Cortés' third letter to the Emperor. Available on internet.

3.

The Spaniards returned to camp with booty for ourselves and victuals for the Indian slaves.

From: Cortés' third letter to the Emperor. Available on internet.

Meanwhile

1.

The New York Times, "Pre-Columbian Artefacts Stolen From Mexican National Museum." 27 December, 1985. A1.

2.

The New York Times, "Mexican Museum Artefacts Recovered." 14 June, 1989. C28.

After the Museum

Prank calls to police: *Reforma* newspaper (Mexico City, Mexico). 29 May, 2005.



