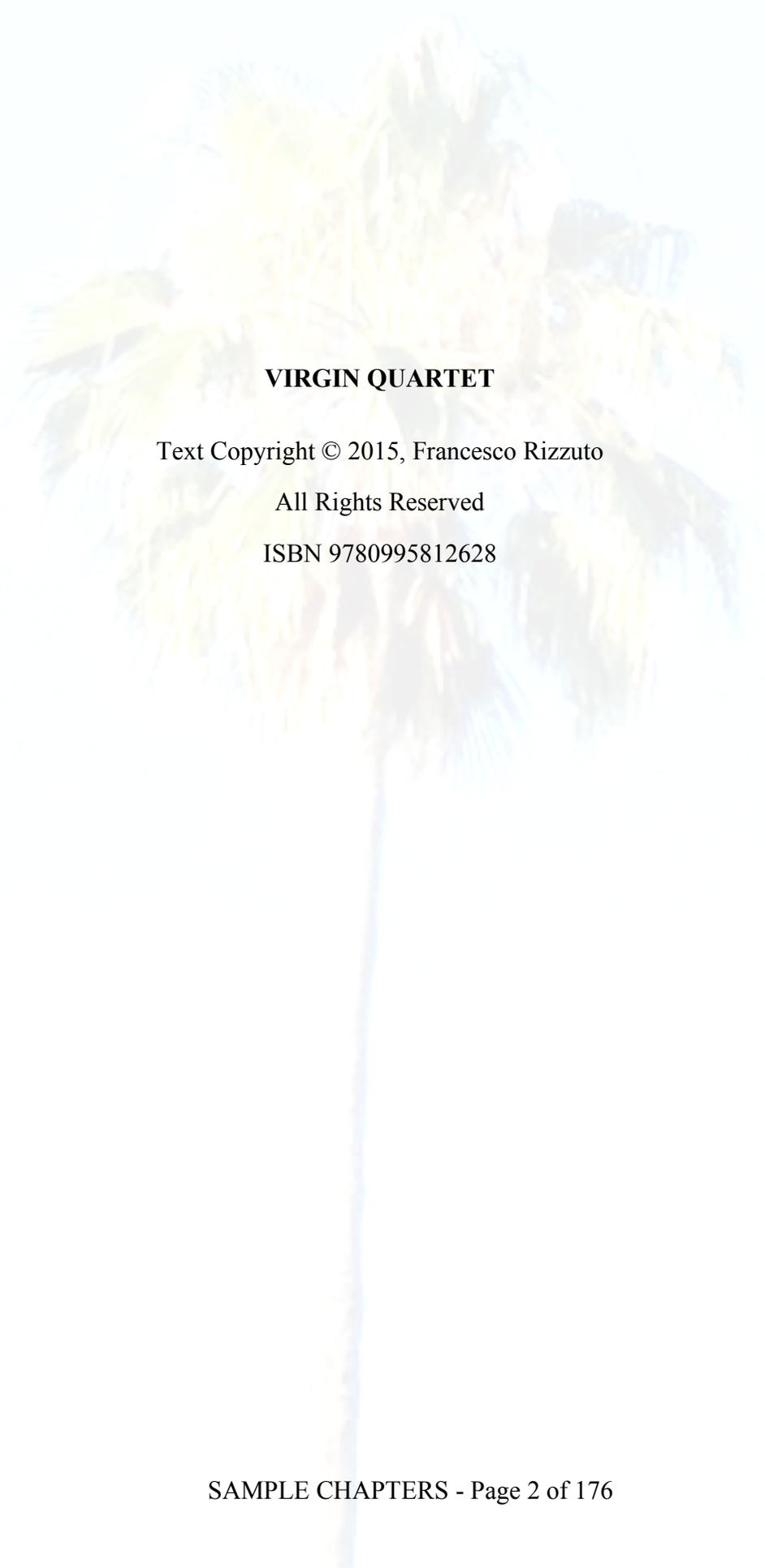
A tall palm tree with a slender trunk and a large, feathery crown of fronds, set against a clear, light blue sky. The tree is the central focus of the image.

VIRGIN QUARTET

FRANCESCO RIZZUTO

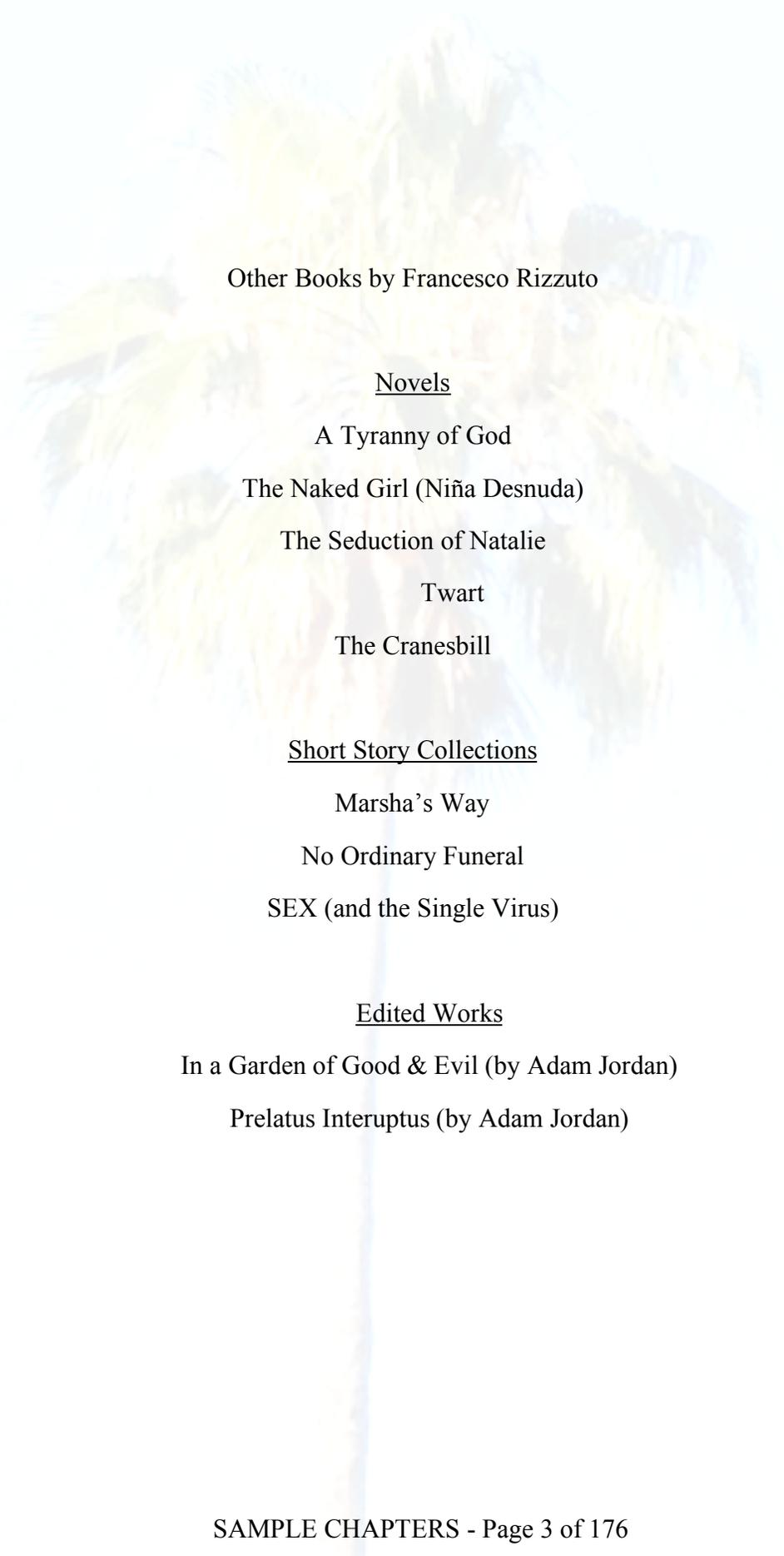


VIRGIN QUARTET

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“Well, I learned a lot. You’d be surprised. They’re all individual countries!”

U.S. President Ronald Reagan commenting to the press aboard Air Force One during a 1982 tour of Central America. Quoted by Lou Cannon in his article Latin [American] Trip an Eye-Opener for Reagan in The Washington Post, 6 December 1982.



EPILOGUE AS PROLOGUE

Overheard by a fly on the wall of 13765 West Sunset Boulevard, Pacific Palisades, CA 90271:

“Send the conveyancing documents to this address, will you please, Mister Gunn?”

“But Miss Jones, this is the address of the White House!”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

(To be continued....)



Episode One

The best place to learn a new language is in bed. That's what Miss Natasha Pennyfeather learned from Doña María Jesús del Rosario Dolores Paloma Alfonsa Victoria Amparo Eugenia Fernanda Teresa Francisca de Paula Antonia Josefa Rita Dominga Dorotea Faustina Santa Esperanza de la Encarnación O'Brian-Fitzpatrick Jones.

Episode Two

The arthritic M4A3E8 carves a torturous corridor through the forest of stumpy palmettos and towering saw grass outside the Alba Hotel Tegucigalpa. An ugly brace of badly painted black vultures – *los zopilotes* – grace each flank of the tank's olive drab turret. Its vintage cannon swivels like a hungry steel phallus toward the iron-barred window of the suite where Miss Jones anxiously paces wearing nothing but a pair of six-inch black stiletto heels and a plaited rawhide *látigo* draped like a quivering viper across her bare shoulders.

The tank commander peers down his gun barrel as the unsuspecting target struggles with two seemingly unrelated thoughts: 1) can halitosis be lethal, and 2) will El Coronelito report for discipline tonight? A fat manila envelope awaits him alongside chilled champagne and crystal laid out on a silver platter. Late. Again. More lashes.

A mud-brown cockroach the size of a mouse scurries out from beneath the black velvet upholstered sofa and across the terracotta tiled floor until Miss Jones quite expertly pinions it with the tip of her stiletto heel. Six hairy legs and eighteen tiny knees sweep frantically back and forth as putrid yellow slime oozes from the impaled insect's leathery exoskeleton to stink up the room. As if responding to a wireless message from the expiring roach, the lone artillery piece parked outside rotates in unison then retreats back into the Ixophorus Unisetus on its rusting iron tracks, one campaign short of the scrap heap.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of her door in the hotel corridor, a teenage Honduran soldier in camouflage fatigues with an assault rifle slung across his skinny torso stands a disinterested vigil as a gaggle of buff, crew-cut young males in trendy Ray Ban Aviators and tropical floral print shirts files in through the hotel lobby to rooms flanking Miss Jones. The clickety-clack-clickety-clack of the bell boy's tottering trolley signals the arrival of their green canvas barracks bags bearing the stencilled white letters 'US ARMY'.

Episode Three

Natasha rides cowgirl on a wooden stool inside a whitewashed concrete block hut, some hundred and sixty kilometers from the Alba Hotel.

Meanwhile, David I. Slattery's attention focuses on how the girl's ample hips and ass so convincingly adapt to the furry, black and white goatskin saddle, a message telegraphed directly to the bulge in his Jeans. He envisions her naked and straddling him like a steaming wild stallion, horse and rider galloping off into the vermilion haze of a New Mexican sunset as the film credits begin to roll.

His late father's stern advice to never mix business with pleasure intrudes on this image building that has progressed well beyond the loose denim bib of her Farmer Brown overalls, and the sudden, unanticipated thought of 'Dad' strikes David like a blast of icy water. The camera suddenly stops whirring. The director abandons the set. The screenwriter crumples his script into so many paper wads. The makeup artists all go home.

"Compartmentalize your life," the ex-vice-assistant executive director of the California Department of Motor Vehicles tells his son, "Keep your work and personal lives separate. Don't entangle yourself with workmates and especially not the female variety." Good advice coming from a man four times divorced and a value system to which Davie Junior never quite managed to adapt.

"Oh, and one more piece of advice, Son. "

"What's that, Dad?"

"You're never too smart or too old to be humiliated by a woman."

Episode Four

Today's task is to unpack and sort the contents of a large, unmarked wooden crate containing United States currency in 1000, 500, 100, 50, 20, and 10-dollar banknotes, then transfer the money to a metal safe installed in the concrete floor of the hut directly beneath their station chief's eating table and makeshift desk, as if no thief would think to look there for ten million dollars. The Corporate Air Services flight that off-loaded this cargo onto a clandestine airstrip shortly before dawn was refueled in darkness and airborne within minutes, its destination and flight plan unknown to anyone but the pilot, perhaps not even to him.

Over the coming week, David and Natasha will discretely transport the repurposed bills in smaller bundles to Tegucigalpa, the country's capital, some of which they will exchange for Lempiras discounted at several times the published bank rate, 'growing the money' as financial wiz kids call the process. After paying off all the big and little people, the rest of the cash goes to the Contra militiamen and their handlers bivouacking someplace outside their little village. One unconverted, unlaundered, unbeknownst-to-the-American-taxpayer envelope will find its way onto a silver tray under Miss Jones' watchful eye.

Officially, the two Peace Corps volunteers are here to assist villagers in drilling new water wells and managing agricultural resources in this subsistence economy, the poorest in the Western Hemisphere with the exception of Haiti that, like peninsular Honduras, is merely another island in a sea of poverty and exploitation. In reality, they haven't developed even a single well, other than one the villagers dug by hand for the airstrip and are idling away their two-year long stint teaching English and baseball to a handful of ragamuffin kids in Aguafría's one-room schoolhouse, volunteer work that David initiated out of sheer boredom soon after his arrival here some three months earlier. That is, until the box of money arrived.

In any case, there is no escape for David and Natasha because Dennis Roosevelt Boggs, the station chief, has confiscated their passports that are now held securely in his safe along with the ten million, out of sight and out of reach. There is a reason for this of course, as there are reasons, however oblique, for everything here in Central America's most troubled region. The vintage drill rig allocated to their project was totally trashed before leaving stateside and valuable only for its scrap iron content, while their station chief and some local politicians pocketed all the AID money earmarked for the well drilling program. That's reason enough.

"And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country," the late John F. Kennedy candidly advised the nation's youth before he was shot to death in 1963. David has been asking himself that very same question over and over and over again. Now it's newly arrived Natasha's turn.

The villagers, of course, do not dream of more water wells or bigger watermelons. Instead, they long to migrate northward through Mexico to the United States of America, the Land of Plenty peppered with Walmarts and K-Mart's and Targets. Yes, Targets. America, the most exalted place on earth, especially by people who'd never been there. "*El Imperio nos dará a comer...* The Empire will feed us," is the way they envision things. But then who was David I. Slattery to divest a poor child of his or her pipe dream, however scintillating and unreal it might seem?

So maybe the ad hoc English lessons have some long-term purpose after all, David tells himself, though this is certainly not the intent of the station chief, in his hammock this late morning, noisily sleeping off last night's liter of rum, oblivious to the nervous lime green chameleons scurrying back and forth over the mossy walls and a furry black tarantula lazily descending the frayed hammock cord.



Episode Five

By checkout time at the Alba, Dennis Roosevelt Boggs is checking out his face in a cracked shaving mirror suspended from a nail in the peeling plaster wall of his hut. Marta, his twelve-year-old housekeeper, assists the station chief in a futile attempt to curtail a nasty crop of ear hairs using the rusting point of a pair of barber scissors borrowed straight from Alfred Hitchcock's prop room. The impish thought of simply jamming the filthy instrument once and for all through his ear and into what's left of his brain is never distant from Boggs' mind. Once again he dismisses the thought as a too easy way out. In any case, he wouldn't allow his enemies the satisfaction. Hiding out here inside the Peace Corps is death enough.

As Boggs finishes surveying himself and weighs the merits of suicide over a thick mug of black coffee and a slender line of snow white cocaine, his two young minions reluctantly bundle a million dollars in assorted denominations into Natasha's pink carry-on suitcase for the bus trip to Tegucigalpa. Soon a recycled yellow Oriole school bus will rumble around the corner, past the Aguafria City Hall and ticket office, which is merely a corner table inside the Carranza Asedor y Taberna, and into the village plaza, throwing up a thick curtain of chalk dust and pea gravel, to where a dozen or so villagers and *campesinos* are eagerly waiting to board.

Today Natasha and David play the young tourist couple on their journey back to the capital, discretely taking their seats at the rear of the bus. They will innocently chat up one another, commenting on the colourfully attired villagers, o-o-o-h-ing and a-a-a-h-ing over the passing scenery, and grinning stupidly at other passengers. They will repeat '*buenos días*' in their bad accents, *ad nauseam*. Station chief Boggs has handed them a penciled note endorsed in a delirium tremens hand by the village's *alcalde* in Spanish instructing *las autoridades* to offer them safe passage, more a plea for mercy than a get-out-of-jail-free card and wishful thinking at best.

Natasha and David both know that in their current situation only money speaks truth and today they are mercenaries in a truth brigade pegged to the tune of ten million bucks. Boggs has generously promised them an eventual reward of fifty thousand each plus the return of their passports that according to Peace Corps protocol he's allowed to keep to risk their lives in what, back home in the mass media, President Ronald Reagan is describing as a heroic struggle for freedom in the region. But whose freedom is the President talking about?

In the window seat in front of them is a pretty, café au lait complexioned girl in a colorful Mayan-motif dress and woven shawl with a long plait of raven hair that reaches to her waist, tied at intervals with bright, rainbow colored ribbons. A scrawny white hen rests quietly in her lap, contentedly clucking and pecking at the girl's skirt. Her mother, who is an older and worse-for-wear version of the girl with long salt and pepper tresses in the same style, her cheeks darkened by sun and polished like old shoe leather, occupies the stiff aisle seat alongside her daughter. In her lap she supports a large and threadbare patchwork satchel filled apparently with their clothing and personal items, on a pilgrimage to the shrine of some obscure saint or perhaps to visit an ancient grandmother in the city.

The bus driver is about to shut the vehicle's front door using a squealing hand lever when a squad of local police – *las autoridades* – rolls up alongside in their battered white Ford pickup.

Before the dust-laden air has a chance to settle, two officers emerge from the driver and passenger seats while three more men, shabbily dressed in khaki with worn-out Adidas running shoes and armed with rifles and bandoliers slung over their shoulders Pancho Villa style, leap from the truck's cargo box. The five then strut round and round the stalled bus, corralling it like *vaqueros* circling a captured mustang, or *picadores* around a valiant but nevertheless doomed bull. One of the men kicks a tire. Whispering in conference with one another now, they act as if they were deciding whether or not to buy the battered wreck off a used car lot or slaughter an old milk cow for meat. The tire-kicker plants himself in front and motions the frightened driver to step down.

The officers are strolling up and down the center aisle inside the bus now, selecting passengers at random and pretending to scrutinize their papers. A moustachioed old man in a tattered straw hat rises to meekly offer the men a bunch of green bananas and is rudely shoved back into his seat. As they approach the young girl with the hen, the pinch-faced one who appears to be their leader nods to his cohort in an arcane code understood only by those who relish this kind of work. The understudy, whose sardonic grin reveals blackened teeth in a set of rotting gums, points a crooked finger at the girl, wordlessly ordering her off the bus. When her mother rises to protest, a blow from the brass butt of his rifle sends the old woman reeling backward into the seat, a bright crimson rivulet of blood streaming through clenched teeth from the corner of her mouth. Everyone else is silent, as if in the presence of the Almighty.

Head bowed in submission or perhaps in prayer, the girl walks silently up the aisle, almost serenely it seems, avoiding eye contact with other passengers, then descends the two metal steps to outside. Two other policemen escort her to the truck's tailgate. She climbs into the open cargo box then settles into a corner with the pet hen still resting in her lap, as if already knowing and having accepted with a certain native fatalism what is to come. The men, who now have what they want, abandon the bus as the driver restarts the engine and engages the clutch. The battered and bruised old yellow school bus then reluctantly inches its way out of the plaza and into the roadway, gradually picking up speed. The old woman turns in her seat to capture one last desperate glimpse of her child, tears streaming silently down her cheeks, stoic. The policemen in their dented white pickup fade with their booty into the cloud of grey-white powder thrown up behind the bald tires of the bus.

David is thinking to himself how much these men resemble the young American soldiers he remembers from family snapshots taken during the Second World War, except for the sneakers, of course. Here is where the so-called war surplus ends up, in foreign aid channels; like his worn-out, useless drill rig. He wonders whether the vintage rifle that the man with the sardonic grin had used to club the old lady only minutes ago was maybe the same one his Dad might have toted through war-torn Europe in 1944-45. Like the contents of Natasha's overalls, yet another unproductive thought, he decides. More apropos was the fate of the little girl and her hen.

And what did he do? Did he stand up in defense of the child against her kidnappers? Did he behave like a real American? Like a real man? And did Natasha intervene on behalf of a sister in distress? Did she show solidarity with the abducted girl? Did she?

David glances at his shrunken companion in her hard-plastic seat across the aisle then turns his face away, preferring to stare through a cracked and dirt-encrusted window at the fleeting semi-desert outside.



Episode Six

They smell Tegucigalpa and its twin city, Comayagua, even before the crumbling colonial metropolis looms into sight.

The stench of the Choluteca River crossing suggests that an animal offal rendering plant may be operating nearby or else something very troubling is brewing between its banks. David's civil engineering training tells him that the twin-city's sanitary effluent is discharging directly into the channel, in spite of the bus having passed near a number of sand banks along the route where gangs of barefoot women and girls in long, brightly patterned skirts, hems tucked into their waistbands, wade knee-deep in the current. Their laundry dangles like a warship's multi-colored signal flags from overhanging tree branches and low, stunted bushes, drying in the scorching sun after being coaxed and prodded and scrubbed clean against the protruding river rocks and boulders.

Puffy white clusters of soap bubbles drift downstream with the current to become airborne on the gusting wind, floating skyward like miniature hot air balloons to join the spotty cumulous clouds overhead. The girls and women splash and frolic and playfully banter, knee deep in the murky, microbe-rich water of the river, as if every fleeting moment of apparent joy had an elegiac cloud shadowing it. These sandy banks from the road shoulder to the waterline are littered with hundreds of discarded multi-colored polyethylene grocery bags, empty drinks containers, glass bottles and other rubbish that nobody has seen any reason to collect, as if all this post-consumer refuse were borne aloft by the Jetstream across the Rio Grande, then transported on the slower ponderous cumulous over Mexico and Guatemala to be deposited here in America's dumping ground. But this is not really so. Instead, none of this locally generated post-consumer waste is ever recycled; as if anyone even cared.

The wheezing old bus creeps gratefully into its dingy bay in the Comayagua depot, having survived yet another journey minus only one pilgrim this time.

When they select a waiting taxi from the makeshift stand in the plaza, the unsmiling driver demands payment in advance. A badly hand-lettered sign in the car's windshield advertises '*Servicio al Publico*' but there is no other indication that this vehicle is anything but a barely ambulant private wreck; no meter, no fare schedule, no taxi license displayed anywhere. When the recalcitrant driver reaches to take the pink suitcase and place it in the trunk, David blocks the man's reach, shifting the bag to his other hand while opening the dented car door. Natasha tugs at his shirtsleeve, wrinkling her eyebrows and tossing her head in an anything-but-discrete 'No', but the look on his features tells her to shut up and slide in.

She reluctantly climbs into the rear seat then distances herself against the door opposite, staring out the shattered window, angry for having caved in, for not being more assertive, at the same time secretly grateful that somebody was taking control of the situation. David's thoughts are running along rather different lines. Had he and this moody girl become unwitting partners in crime or are they key players in the struggle for freedom in Central America as station chief Boggs and their President and a bevy of Washington apparatchiks insist they are? Either way, she was already becoming a boat anchor when what he really needed was a sail and a swift wind.

Episode Seven

Gonzalo Manzanas rests his ponderous bulk in a monstrous, black vinyl executive swivel chair behind a spacious mahogany desk in his second floor law office in downtown Tegucigalpa where Boggs had suggested he could be found. A faux-leather bound, English language version of the Saint James Bible occupies a corner of the attorney's workspace. David expected it was there to impress the foreigners – whom the Hondurans call *Grenchos*, like the calculating tight-wad Grinch of Doctor Seuss fame – who come here for black market currency transacting rather than anything a legal eagle might need in his profession, since it's highly unlikely this oily little solicitor will be advocating for any clients in the court of Saint Peter, neither today nor in the Hereafter.

The man is short coupled with a paunch that strains the buttons of his sporty short-sleeve tropical print shirt. A Brylcreem-enriched shock of straight black hair is slicked back *a la* West Side Story. Silvery beads of salted perspiration dot a ruddy, pockmarked face that looks as if it could use another cold bottle of Port Royal, the locally brewed beer from San Pedro Sula, a city that currently holds the record for the most violent place in the Western Hemisphere, that is, if army attacks on innocent villages and Contra operations along the Nicaragua border are discounted.

His surprising command of the American language turns out to be a blessing. David is relieved to know he won't need to depend on his sketchy high school Spanish that was only marginally improved by a brief orientation course at the Peace Corps compound at El Rincon and in his last three months at Aguafria, for this transaction. Not to be placed on the defensive by the massive desk and the Good Book, he asks the man where he learned to speak such fluent English and if he'd ever been to the United States.

The lawyer places his right hand on the Good Book.

“Television. I learn from American television shows. You know? Ozzie and Harriet? Sixty-four Thousand Dollar Question? Twenty-One? I Love Lucy? Dat's my best show. I dig dat Desi wid his groovy Babaloo-loo!”

He drums the top of the desk hard using the heels of his palms, beating out a de-syncopated Cuban rhythm.

“By da way, young man, are you baptized? You give yourself to Jesus?”

Manzanas interrupts his drumming to stare into David's face, searching for whatever evidence of sinning is hidden between the freckles, blackheads and occasional ripe pimple.

“You look like a masturbator,” he tells David, as if daring him to admit the truth. Another drawn out stare. David neither confirms nor denies the accusation. His most pressing need at the moment is to take a piss.

“We gonna make a really big crusade dis weekend over der in the football stadium. Jimmy Swangaard gonna lead dose peoples in prayer. He's over der at the Alba Hotel right now and young man, you can bet dat ole Archbishop Matajudios he is gettin real upset. He dun like us

Born-Again Christians doin no missionary work in Cadolic countries, see? But hey, why dun you stick arowen here for da crusade. You can let Jesus into your heart. Repent an' give up dat filthy habit of yours."

Manzanas pulls a one-sheet printed flyer from a pile on the wall shelf behind him and shoves it across the desk to David. It's the program for the Swangaard crusade on the coming weekend.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

**Viernes, 02/22/1986,
Estadio Nacional**

**Sermon: The Man Who
Would Not Quit**

**El hombre que no se dio
por vencido**

Song List:

- 1. Hold On My Child,
Joy Comes In The
Morning**
- 2. A Brand New Song In
Glory**
- 3. The Thirsty Now Come**
- 4. He Comes On A Silver
Cloud**
- 5. A Crown Of Thorns**
- 6. Whisper Jesus**

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

**Sabado, 02/23/1986,
Estadio Nacional**

**Sermon: The Worth Of The
Soul**

El valor del alma humano

Song List:

- 1. Bring All your Needs
To The Altar**
- 2. At That Meeting In
Gloryland**
- 3. It Is Well With My
Soul**
- 4. Let Down Your Net**
- 5. Cherish That Name**
- 6. My God Is Real**

"Ah'm gonna personally introduce you to my good friend Jimmy."

"I don't think so, amigo" David tells him impatiently. "I got some kids back in Aguafria that need to brush up on their English so they can swim across the Rio Grande to the Land of Milk and Honey. They don't have TV's to watch. So let's do this money thing and get it over with, okay?" He needs to relieve himself but doesn't want to ask where the nearest toilet might be found.

Keeping his eyes trained on the visitor, the look on Manzanas' face shifts from toothy welcome to slack jawed grimace. He reaches into a desk drawer to retrieve a chunky, nickel plated revolver then sets the weapon to rest on the desk with its shiny steel barrel pointing toward David's heart that, without Jesus in it, has suddenly become the enemy. David can just make out the sinister grey-domed heads of the bullets nested inside the gun's cylinder, a miniature undertaker lurking in every chamber. Unsmiling, Manzanas licks his index finger then

starts counting out the Lempira notes into neat bundles while transferring their corresponding value in American currency back into the drawer, keeping one bloodshot eye trained on David. When David suddenly shifts in his seat to relieve the pressure on his bladder, Manzana's hand pounces like a nervous cat onto the handle of the revolver. He slowly draws back the hammer with his thumb until it clicks, then returns his attention to the money.

An angry woman is arguing with someone in the street just below the open window; the dull thudding of fists on flesh, then a short scream followed by the crisp snap of a gunshot, and another. Manzanans licks his middle finger this time and resumes counting out the bills.

Boggs had instructed David about what he later needs to do with the converted cash. But first he has to get safely away from here and today's tasks aren't even half over. Natasha awaits him downstairs in the street as Boggs advised them to do. Kidnappings are a feature of life in here Tegucigalpa which, after San Pedro Sula, is the second most violent city in the western hemisphere. If David doesn't come out after half an hour, she's to grab the next bus back to the village. And if she isn't there waiting when he emerges; well, shit happens, doesn't it?

She'd argued with David that this wasn't a kid's game, at the same time reminding herself that she needed the promised fifty grand to get the fuck out of there. Without money or passport, she was at the mercy of station chief Boggs, a person whom Natasha loathed and was now beginning to fear but at the same time was totally dependent upon in the situation. Asking him for a transfer or approaching the American embassy with her problem would be courting trouble given what was happening just now around Aguafria. It was the eye of a hurricane that she and David had unwittingly been drawn into, like it or not. She couldn't call home for help since she'd already burned that bridge and, in spite of the inconvenience and danger, her pride and stubbornness surpassed her survival instinct and common sense. Only a week after arriving in Honduras, she'd somehow allowed herself to be caught in a perfect storm.

After draining his kidneys into the toilet outside Manzanans's office, David stuffs four bulky manila envelopes inside the waistband of his jockey shorts then zips the fly of his Levi's and secures the wide, tooled-leather cowboy belt around his waist with his shirttails hanging over top. Twenty-three years old, he has suddenly acquired a substantial paunch, joining Manzanans in middle age. David rechecks his hairline in the cracked bathroom mirror for signs of recession. Feeling thoroughly depressed now, he reaches for the pull chain to flush.

When he leaves the elevator still towing the now somewhat lighter pink suitcase and bulging slightly about the waistline, Natasha lets out an impulsive cry of surprise and relief, like an overly inflated balloon that someone has suddenly and for no good reason stabbed with a needle.

Her first impulse is to hug him but she doesn't.

Episode Eight

Natasha Pennyfeather's only achievement in her relatively short life was the dubious honor of having been the first and only Black student ever to enroll in agronomy at Northern College, a traditional Whites-Only institution that churns out semi-educated farm boys for the State of North Dakota. The social dynamic shifted a few degrees with the Civil Rights Movement and the so-called Kennedy Era, when JFK's New Frontier became gospel and the newly minted Peace Corps its missionary arm. As the Vietnam conflict wound down, more farm boys drifted back with the G.I. Bill to pay their ways through the higher education system.

Natasha enjoyed her dubious status as one of only two females in the program, although her social calendar remained empty of invitations. It was a time of change, even in small town North Dakota, but dating a person of color was still considered daring and could bring unpleasant repercussions. Still, the emerging generation of dope-smoking, sexually liberated boys and girls of Northern College was gradually getting onboard with the new paradigm. Like any kind of social change in America, it would be painful, even bloody, and take a great deal of time.

She'd managed to escape a bourgeois hothouse of hired nannies and private schools and received a small monthly allowance from her parents sufficient to cover her student needs. This was fresh air in Natasha's lungs after a stifling childhood. The first thing the girl discovered on arriving at college was that she needed to use her inhaler less and less.

Only thing was, her Philadelphia born-and-bred parents, both prominent psychiatrists and leaders in the emerging Black upper class, could not figure out what it was she wanted with agronomy, a farmer's course of study that bordered on being a 'trade'. And North Dakota? Natasha's mother did her homework: Langdon, North Dakota, coldest spot in the continental USA with 176 consecutive days of below zero temperatures, cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.

Worse yet, by the 1980's, Black persons in the Dakotas who weren't porters on the Great Northern Railway were still cleaning white folks' toilets, not operating farms and businesses or counselling patients in upscale mental health clinics. They could have, indeed should have, seen their only daughter through Harvard medical school instead. She had even refused a coming out party that would have introduced her to her peers in Philadelphia High Society that had only recently opened its doors to persons of any color other than Snow White. Dwarves were still barred.

In the end, however, they would give their spoiled princess whatever she wanted, if for no other reason than to avoid another asthma attack. She was going through a delayed rebellious stage, they theorized together doctor-style, after which time she would move on to Harvard and a more serious line of studies. Who knows? Agronomy, they calculated, could become a stepping-stone to her doctoral thesis on nutrition. To Natasha, however, the choice was pure knee-jerk revenge for her parents having consigned her to a childhood peopled by hired nannies, daycare centers and boarding schools. Her preference for Farmer Brown style fashions was a throw-back to the dull, shapeless sweat suits she'd been forced to wear each day of her childhood, to her mind no different than the orange jumpsuits forced on the inmates of penal institutions, which was another American growth industry.

Natasha and the only other female student in her class, a White girl from Fargo who was assigned as her roommate, became lovers. It was Natasha's first experience with love, or even sex, other than some light groping initiated during therapy by her child psychiatrist, a Freudian colleague and friend of her father. She and Patty supported one another through undergrad studies and formed a mutual aid society against the attentions of too many horny farm boys. After graduation, it was their joint decision to take the late JFK's advice and join the Peace Corps together. The glossy literature promised that couples would receive the same posting, however remote the station, although it didn't clarify whether or not same sex partners constituted a couple.

So when Patty was assigned to the South Pacific and Natasha to Honduras, the joke was on them. They'd given their fingerprints, been profiled by the FBI, signed the paperwork and sworn the oath, and Natasha had already fought bitterly with her parents about the decision, in the course of which battling she angrily tossed out the message that she'd embraced lesbianism. The unplanned declaration was more a weapon of spite unleashed without any forethought than a political or gender preference statement. She wasn't going for acceptance; she only wanted to hurt them.

"That's okay, Dear," her mother had replied, suddenly calm, before slamming the door like a stick of dynamite.

Natasha drew a long tug from her inhaler then tossed the metal cylinder like a hand grenade at the door.

Episode Nine

David has memorized a roster of names that Boggs dictated to him and a list of places where he might, with some degree of luck, find said individuals. The list reads as follows:

Cardinal Jose María Cabezón Matajudíos, Archbishop, Catedral de Tegucigalpa

Doña María Jesús del Rosario Dolores Paloma Alfonso Victoria Amparo Eugenia
Fernanda Teresa Francisca de Paula Antonia Josefa Rita Dominga Dorotea Faustina
Santa Esperanza de la Encarnación O'Brian-Fitzpatrick Jones, AKA Sister Encarna,
Vicaria Abadesa, Convent of the Little Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Crown of
Thorns, AKA *the Convent for Fallen Society Girls*

Carlos Miguel Aracena, Tourist Information Bureau, Hours 10:00 – 11:00. M/W/F

Ramón García Delgado, Regional Director, Interminerales S.A., frequents the Coolidge
Hotel.

After exchanging some of the American money for Honduran Lempiras with Manzanos, Boggs' instructions are for them to check into the Alba Hotel Tegucigalpa using the room key he'd entrusted to David. Boggs doesn't trust Natasha and why should he? She was a relative newcomer to Aguafria and only sent there to give the agricultural aid project an air of authenticity in case some visiting gaggle of congressmen happened to pop in during a taxpayer funded junket around the hemisphere. He let her tag along with David as a minder, expecting that she would scurry back to the village like a scared rabbit at the first sign of trouble. In the meanwhile, one less pair of eyes to annoy him, Boggs tells himself. He doesn't trust David either, perhaps even less than Natasha, but it's a different kind of mistrust. A man might cut your throat but he usually has a reason. A woman, on the other hand, didn't need one.

While David looks for a taxi to carry him to the rectory of the Cathedral of Tegucigalpa, Natasha is in another on her way to the Convent of the Little Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Crown of Thorns, a place where males are not admitted unless they wear ermine-trimmed crimson robes or, as the drill dictates, enter through the service door. Their plan is to regroup afterwards in the lounge of the Alba, stash the remaining contents of their suitcase in the room safe, then look for a greasy spoon where they might score a decent meal. David especially likes Honduran-style tamales, similar to the Mexican variety but moister and wrapped in banana leaves instead of cornhusks. His mouth is watering at the mere thought of a pile of steaming hot tamales chased down with a few cold bottles of the local beer and maybe a shot or two or three of Flor de Caña, the popular dark Honduran rum.

"His Eminence will see you now, Señor David." A stubby, brown-robed assistant with large horn rim glasses and crew cut hair ushers him through an anteroom where a mile-high vaulted ceiling is frescoed with flocks of plump semi-naked cherubs floating about a puffy white cloud in the center of which an elongated and richly clad *Inmaculada* perches on a long and shining, crescent-shaped silver horn, her eyes rolled heavenwards in orgasmic abandon or perhaps an epileptic fit. The boy looks young enough to have stepped out of the ceiling too,

except that he lacks the pink cheeks and blond curls of the *putti*. He is dark skinned with a thick unibrow and the spikey black hair of the *Indigeno*.

A tall, elaborately carved pair of Spanish baroque doors open onto an immense salon with red and gold tapestried walls, filigreed iron balconies in the colonial style, and a huge crystal chandelier hovering like a cut glass helicopter in the center of the room. Directly beneath this airship, the Cardinal José María Cabezón Matajudíos is slumped over a massive cocobolo wood desk that underneath the clutter is even larger and more magnificent than Manzanas'. Angled on a richly ornamented, carved ebony stand in the center is a red leather bound, gold leaf trimmed New Testament that makes Manzanas' Good Book look like a low budget imitation, \$3.95 or two for \$5.00, this week at Wall-Mart. Atop the man's skull, a purple satin skullcap shimmers like a mini-halo in the soft afternoon light.

"Up Miguelito, up. Up the ladder. *Sube*...That's it! Miguelito! *Joder!* You are *boracho* again, my little friend." A small grey mouse perches precariously on the rim of a glass tumbler at the top of a miniature plastic stepladder. The scruffy rodent struggles to grasp a cube of foul smelling cheese suspended by a string over the glass, its nervous little whiskers twitching to and fro while attempting to elongate its body enough to grab the prize in its teeth. The other end of the string is held firmly between the thumb and middle finger of the Cardinal's right hand, raised over the glass of ambrosia as if in blessing, his left hand clutching the neck of a bottle of Jack Daniels Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey.

"He is a stupid creature, this mouse. First he drinks the whiskey to get courage then he tries for the cheese. He never learns." The Cardinal rests the bottle on the desk, grabs the tiny rodent by the end of its long whip-like tail and suspends it, head downward, all four legs thrashing wildly, over the whiskey glass, trying to decide whether or not to reward such a poor performance with the piece of cheese. He drops the frantic animal into the glass instead.

Ignoring David's astonished gaze, the Cardinal reaches inside his ermine trimmed cloak to retrieve a national lottery ticket bearing a serial number identical to the one David keeps in his wallet next to the photocopy of his passport, which he hands to David. There are four matching coupons and each of David and Natasha's contacts will need to produce one before they hand over an envelope of money and say *adiós*. After collecting all four coupons, they are free to return to Aguafria where station chief Boggs has another task awaiting them.

When the lottery is drawn next week, will Boggs share the winnings with them? Instead, if and when the whole operation finishes successfully, the airstrip plowed under and planted with corn and the warehouse dismantled, Boggs has promised to hand them each fifty grand along with their passports and a ticket aboard a TACA flight to Guatemala City. Although Boggs trusts no one, David has decided to trust his boss on this one. Like Natasha, however, a youthful lack of perspicacity easily knocks out common sense in this, the very first bout.

The Cardinal raises the tawny manila envelope in his hand as if to assess its weight and therefore its value, as his colonial predecessors must have once done when receiving tribute in gold from their enslaved Mayan subjects.

"Our Holy Mother Church does not run on Hail Mary's, does she, young man? God needs money to do his work in the world. Especially here in this troubled place".

Episode Ten

Dearest Mother,

Things have been eventful for me but not in a pleasant way.

I am still here in Aguafria. Because of stress and emotional strain over this awful divorce I am in the middle of, I ended up in a bad way back in the end of January, and in the local hospital, which by the way is a total shit hole, having suffered a heart attack. They discovered blood clots on my lungs and put me on Coumadin (blood thinner medication) and apparently overdid it, and I found myself back in the same shit hole about a week or so later with another chicken doctor telling me that I was one click away from a stroke or worse, if there is anything worse. I don't know if it's true or just another way to squeeze more money from me which of course I don't have. My Peace Corps salary is insufficient to keep body and soul together, especially after the garnishment. Enough said.

Well, now the medication has been adjusted, but it has been a very hard recovery and I'm still broke despite a small bonanza that's come this way.

Partly because of all this awful drama, I instructed my lawyer to settle the divorce as quickly as possible - with no more dogged fighting - and between Lisa's added fury at me for getting involved here with a much younger woman, and partly because of her lawyer being a S.O.B., I am ending up with really nothing in the way of money or property - Lisa is getting everything I have - including a big chunk of my government pension (I will have around five hundred a month to live on, that is, if I can ever return to the Land of the Free) - all the property (the house in Laguna Beach is deeded to her and her father, who is also a S.O.B.), the apartment in Manhattan, and all of my savings. I am getting nothing.

At fifty-eight, I can't see any future for myself. I feel terrible about all the changes, mostly about the hatred my ex-wife now has for me and the censure of my peers, the fact I have been forced to move from my house of over twenty years, give up the eight Mastiffs whom I love, and a lot of my possessions, taking refuge in this armpit of a village in the far reaches of no-man's-land, not to mention having lost you forever. And, of course, the criminal charges that our President has very kindly placed on hold pending this assignment; a kind of payback, I suppose. Awful.

I hope you and Father are resting peacefully in your graves.

Your loving son,

Dennis

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