

A novel by the author of *The Bridges of Madison County*

Robert James Waller

Puerto

Vallarta

Squeeze



THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY
SLOW WALTZ IN CEDAR BEND
OLD SONGS IN A NEW CAFÉ
IMAGES
BORDER MUSIC
JUST BEYOND THE FIRELIGHT
ONE GOOD ROAD IS ENOUGH

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Warner Books
Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10017
Visit our website at www.HachetteBookGroup.com

First eBook Edition: September 2009

ISBN: 978-0-7595-2482-8

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For flowers

and sad songs.

And for Jim Flansburg and Jim Gannon
who trusted in me, early on.

I mean, Luz was really good, kind in her heart and all that. Christ, she was just a simple country girl, doing the best she could for herself. “You should’ve seen her—she was knock-’em-dead beautiful sometimes, most of the time, with a flower in her hair and pink lipstick on. Even in that cheap straw hat Clayton Price bought her. I still see her that way... in that cheap straw hat and yellow dress and him carrying her across a little river in the Mexican backcountry—a butterfly in the keep of a fer-de-lance.... Clayton Price, that sonuvabitch. Still, you had to admire him in a perverse way. I even felt sorry for him a couple of times.

Danny Eugene Pastor, October 199

Clayton Price’s edge was that he never hesitated, never once, not as long as I knew him. While the rest of the world was standin’ around waitin’ for the bell to ring, he was already out of his corner and swingin’. In the old days, he’d have been gone while the bad guys were still gassin’ their trucks. Can’t figure out what happened, what he musta been thinkin’ there at the end.

Mackenzie Watt, mercena

WHEREVER IT IS MEN GO

This guy Lobo, whose real and true name was Wolfgang Fink, played better than good flamenco guitar in a place called Mamma Mia in Puerto Vallarta. Had a partner name of Willie Royal, tall gangly guy who was balding a little early and wore glasses and played hot gypsy-jazz violin. They'd worked out a repertoire of their own tunes, "Improvisation #18" and "Gypsy Rook" as examples, played 'em high and hard, rolled through "Amsterdam" and "The Sultan's Dream" with enough power to set you two times free or even beyond that when the day had been tolerable and the night held promise. Lobo, sun worn and hard lined in the face, looking over at Willie Royal bobbing and weaving and twisting his face into a mean imitation of a death mask when he really got into it, right wrist looking almost limp but moving his bow at warp speed across the strings, punctuated here and there by Lobo's stabbing ruscados and finger tapping on the guitar top.

Good music, wonderful music, tight and wild all at the same time. On those nights when the sweat ran down your back and veneered your face and the gringitas looked good enough to swallow whole—knowing too they looked just that way and them watching the crowd to see who might be man enough to try it—people would be riding on the music, drinking and clapping in flamenco time, dancing around the dinner tables.

It was crazy back then, crazy good if you didn't look too close. The music as a mustering-out call at first, then later in the evening as wallpaper for the nighttime thrusts of a rumped expatriate army whose soldiers never spoke of bolixed lives and stained little souls. Upriver Sally was working in bronze and Hillside Dave was foundering in what he called his "Regressive Matisse" period. Most of the rest were just talking about doing something—nothing small, understand—the "gonnas" per hour roughly equaling the number of tequilas consumed. From any kind of distance at all, it looked like amoebas navigating a glass slide, on the search for the nearest pile of food and being more or less content with what they found, mostly less. Less seemed easier and didn't require a reduction in beach time.

But none of that mattered unless you thought about it. And thought was to be restrained, if not suppressed, regarded as some antiquity from a former world. A world from which all had fled... or had been released, depending on your charity and point of view. Reflection or remembrance, any or all of that, pulled up things best left buried deep and covered over. Sifted through, boiled down, flipped twice and double fried, it had become a simple place to be. A kind of perverted Darwinism, where the flesh ruled but the species declined.

So it was: the music played and the people clapped. And the people danced and things were good for a while in the evenings. In Puerto Vallarta, in a place called Mamma Mia.

Luz María and Danny went there almost every night except when the royalty checks were late coming from Danny's New York agent. In that case they'd lie around their grubby little place down on Madero and drink cheap tequila and screw their heads off, which was sometimes even better than listening to Willie and Lobo. Or maybe something like Willie and Lobo—tight and practiced and wild all at the same time. After living with Danny for two years, and starting even before that, Luz had willingly shed most of the old strictures and hangups of village life, including Catholicism. That wasn't easy, but once it was done, it was done, and done full and pure and forever. That's what Danny believed, or wanted to believe. Made things easier for him, thinking that way.

As Danny said once, speaking with the kind of certainty coming from a ragged blend of drink and experience, there's absolutely nothing like a twenty-two-year-old Mexican woman who's gotten herself liberated and opens up and starts screaming for Jesús Christ to save her immortal Catholic essence while doing every single thing standing in direct contradiction with her words and really meaning she hopes Jesús won't take her now at this moment—maybe later, but not now—not now, with her body sweated and her head tossing from side to side on the pillow and her slim, brown legs waving in the air or draped over the shoulders of a gringo—Danny Pastor, in this case—who's doing his best to put her headlong through the adobe at bed's end and making other superior efforts at seeing she at least spends time in purgatory, if she lucks out at all.

Anyway, on a soft, hot night in 1993, when the sewer system was having its own troubles south of the Rio Cuale, Danny and Luz drifted up from Madero to hear Willie and Lobo. But the sound system in Mamma Mia wasn't working up to expectations. That's what Lobo claimed and got sullen about it. After a while Willie started saying that, too. So Willie and Lobo took a long break and went to work on it, broken speaker or some such thing. Luz and Danny walked down the street, dodging tourists and sailors who'd come off an American military ship anchored in the harbor.

For no reason other than doing it, Danny pulled Luz into a hangout called El Niño. El Niño had big wooden shutters that swung open on two sides, along the front where you could look west across Paseo Díaz Ordaz through exhaust fumes and see the sunset on Banderas Bay, and also on the south side looking down on Calle Aldama, where street merchants held up fake silver bracelets to the tourists sitting in El Niño because the guide books said that's where tourists ought to go at sundown.

In the corner of the main room was a particular table where you could put your back against the wall and sweep the room and see who came in, who was walking along Aldama on your left and what was happening out on Ordaz. On the night in question here, with the bar crowded and people talking louder than conditions called for, that special table was occupied by a guy with neatly combed, medium-length silver hair. He was wearing a blue denim shirt and khakis and sitting by himself, drinking a Pacifico with lime. Had a photographer's vest folded over and lying on the windowsill next to him.

Luz and Danny found two seats at the bar and were drinking straight tequila shots with lime plus the usual salt. Danny was talking to the bartender about fish and sun and passing days, while Luz María moved her hand along his thigh—sometimes a little higher when she thought nobody was watching. The touch of Luz María's hand along his leg—and sometimes a little higher—got Danny thinking maybe they ought to stumble back down to Madero and get crazy with love when he noticed the guy at the corner table reach under his vest on the windowsill. Nothing too unusual about that. Later on, Danny couldn't remember why he was paying attention to the man or, for that matter, to anything at all except what Luz was doing along his leg.

Smooth and easy, but quick at the same time, the man checked the room, then lifted the vest a little. Had a gun under the fold, some kind of automatic pistol with a noise suppressor on it. Nobody was watching this except Danny, far as he could tell, since a mime was doing his thing across the street on the Malecón, the cement promenade along the sea, while a Mariachi band was playing just behind the mime and sending out a high decibel count for thirty yards in all directions. Everybody was concentrating on the show, including the waiters, while the bartender was tending to someone down the line. But Danny Pastor was staring at this guy with silver hair, like he couldn't believe what was going on was going on and sometimes still can't believe what happened actually did happen when he thinks back on it.

Up came the vest a little more, the gun still mostly covered, and the man's hand jumped three

times. No sound that Danny could hear over the Maríachis. Just a slight bounce of his hand when he fired. ~~He folded the vest double, stuffed it in a knapsack sitting on the floor by his chair, and looked around.~~ After scanning the room one more time, the man got up and laid out a ten-peso bill, then made his way through the tables and went down the front steps to the street.

While Danny was sitting there temporarily immobilized and feeling like he'd just watched a short instructional film on audacity, which ended without being finished, all hell broke loose out on Ordaz, the Maríachis cycling down a little at a time as they figured out something had happened. First one trumpet peeled off, then two of the violins, then the second trumpet stopped, and so on, until they ground down raggedylike and out of tune. They were all looking south along the street, and people were running along the Malecón in the same direction as the band was looking.

Danny slid off his stool, the bartender asking, "*Qué pasa?*" Danny said he didn't know what was happening but that he was going to find out. He walked over to the table where the shooter had been sitting, leaned across it, and looked out in the street. People were crowded around a green Nissan sedan, and he couldn't see anything, so he went down the stairs of El Niño and out on Ordaz.

An American naval officer was lying on the cobblestones, his body twitching and blood coming from a neck wound. Danny, gut tensed, walked past the officer, glancing down at him then quickly away. He went over to the Nissan, stepped on the back bumper and looked over the crowd. Two Mexicans in white short-sleeves and white pants were holding snub-nosed .38s in both hands, pointing them at the sky while they sweated buckets and looked all around with a kind of strange, crazy fear in their eyes. A heavysset gringo in gray slacks and a resorty shirt was lying face up, with the bottom half of him on the street and the upper half on four steps leading from the street up to the Malecón. Dead center in the gringo's chest was a dark wet spot and a pencil-size slice on his left temple where a bullet had grazed him was oozing red, and he was not moving even the tiniest muscle from what Danny could tell.

Danny went back inside and told Luz and the bartender what he'd seen, mentioning also he didn't think it was a good place to be hanging around in general, not even for a minute and time to finish their drinks since the *policía* were arriving in waves of sirens and confusion. He figured they'd be up in the bar pretty soon, hassling everybody's ass, and he was also thinking he might've been the only one who saw anything, so he hustled Luz María out the back door and over to Morales, heading south toward their place on Madero.

Danny was holding Luz's hand and pulling her along pretty fast. She was half running to keep up with him and asking what was going on, why he was hurrying this way. Probably some kind of premonition, but for reasons that weren't clear to him, he wasn't ready to tell her the whole story, that he'd seen the hit. All she knew was some kind of shooting had taken place. She didn't know Danny had seen the shooter do it and that he was pretty sure he'd been the only one who saw it.

After a few blocks, Danny slowed down and Luz decided an ice cream was necessary. They bought her a cone and walked another block. When they got to El Rondo, little joint with a three-stool bar and four tables, Danny said he needed a drink. Felipe poured him a double tequila and said it was too goddamn hot even for this time of the year and if the goddamn rains would come, things would cool down a little. Danny nodded and wiped his face with a paper napkin.

Luz was licking her blackberry cone, Danny watching her pink tongue circle the mound of ice cream. She watched him watching her and started moving her tongue slow around the ice cream and over the top of it, then put her mouth on it and sucked a little, keeping her eyes on his all the while she was doing these things. She sat back and licked the ice cream from her lips, taking her time and grinning at Danny.

Felipe, who was noticing this unhurried dance toward later-on ecstasy, patted his face with a bar rag and looked at Danny. ~~Danny shook his head and gave Felipe a grin and shrug, still trying to put together what he'd seen fifteen minutes earlier. And shivering inside when he pulled the images up, in the way of remembering a dream you say you don't want to remember but keep remembering anyway because terror has its own fascination, if it's once or twice removed from your own reality. Once or twice removed—terror, that is—until it slow crawls over the transom of your life and pauses there for a moment, looking around for you, eyes bright hard and caring not for your transient joys and sorrow, tongue casting about for your scent.~~

Movement out on the rim of his left eye, and Danny turned slightly. The man carrying a tan knapsack hesitated at the door to Felipe's before coming inside. Silverish hair and khaki pants. And light blue eyes, maybe gray blue, looking as if they'd seen to the end of things and back. Kind of dead eyes, but with a flicker of something far back inside, like a flashlight coming toward you through the dark from a long way off. Danny's heart seemed not to be working at that moment.

The shooter eased onto a chair, nodded to Felipe. "Tequila, *por favor*."

Luz was looking at the shooter. So was Danny, but trying to appear as if he weren't. Still, he couldn't help glancing at the knapsack the man put under the table five feet away, thinking the two of them, he and the shooter, were the only ones who knew what was in there, but believing the shooter didn't know he knew. And what was in there was the worst kind of bad you could imagine. Danny ordered another double while Luz chewed her cone down to nothing and stared at the shooter in the direct, impertinent way she had when she was curious about something or somebody.

After drinking half his tequila in one swallow, the shooter lit a Marlboro and looked straight at Danny. He was older than he'd seemed when Danny had watched him in El Niño, maybe in his middle fifties or a little more. Dark circles under his eyes, the kind coming with age or from worrying too much or from not getting enough sleep too many nights in a row.

"*Buenas noches*," the shooter said, lifting his drink up an inch or two in a miniature salute. Gave Danny half a smile, hard smile though.

Danny nodded, said the same thing back to him, working at keeping his voice steady and feeling some bit of a thing coming around in his mind and swimming in there kind of eel-like, more than just hazy shadows yet still not formed in any recognizable way. But it had to do with writing and making money from writing. Maybe the first real money since *Chicago Underground* had come out six years ago. After that, it had been downhill to here, and *here* was beginning to lack a certain charm.

Following *Chicago Underground*, the recollections of an ace reporter, he'd turned to fiction. His first novel, *All the Boys Who Ever Were*, had shown its face in 1989 and fallen on it. "Naive and self-congratulatory; intrepid young journalists in search of truth, regardless of the cost to themselves," said one critic. Another sliced even harder: "However much journalists might like to think of themselves as serious writers, there is, or should be, a rather profound difference between fiction and journalism (though one must admit that difference is becoming more and more indistinguishable). Nonetheless, whatever Mr. Pastor's credentials as a newspaper reporter may be, he certainly is not a novelist and should return forthwith to what he apparently does best—reporting."

As the checks from his agent thinned down to survival money, Danny kept telling Luz and the dross down at Las Noches, where the gringo would-bes and might-have-beens and were-at-one-times hung out and devastated their livers, that he had five or six good ideas under way. What he had and knew he had was rubbish, tales already told a hundred times over and nothing to separate his telling of them from what'd already been said. But he was thinking, not too clearly, and more at the level of instinct than conscious thought, there might be a hell of a story in all this if he could just figure out

how to bend it the right way. Get the story, then turn the virulent bastard over to the cops. Perfect: Danny gets rich, Luz is happy, the shooter hangs for his indecencies, and... the goddamn critics get it shoved up their noses.

The shooter helped Danny along, or maybe pushed him along, as Danny came to think of it later on.

"I'm looking for a ride up to the border... know any-one going that way? I'm willing to pay well for a lift." He was speaking English with pretty good diction, a slow and almost lazy cadence to his voice, keeping his words quiet enough so Felipe couldn't hear. Didn't matter, since Danny was pretty sure Felipe didn't understand English anyway.

"That's a long haul," Danny said, shoving his hands underneath his thighs and sitting hard on them to hold down what might have evolved into a noticeable shake. He looked down at his feet and could see the third toe of his left foot peeking at him through a hole in his sneakers. "Three, three and a half hard days, depending on where you're headed."

He glanced at the shooter. "Most people fly down here except for truckers and those who have long-term rentals or own houses."

Danny was sweating even more than the evening called for, but nobody seemed to notice. The shooter kept one foot against his knapsack, knowing that way where it was all the time and keeping close track of it. A taxi horn honked twice in the street, and a group of tourists went by Felipe's door, a male voice shouting, "Are you sure this's the right way to Pizza Joe's?"

"Danny has Ford Bronco named Vito." Luz had finished her cone and moved into the conversation, smelling money. She knew they were short, and Luz liked margaritas and going uptown to hear Willie and Lobo and eating lobster at a beach restaurant up the coast in Bucerias. The shooter looked at her; lots of men looked at Luz. She was turned toward him, fine, slim legs crossed and running out from under her lavender dress, the hem of which had worked its way above her knees, wheat-colored sandals hanging from only one toe with silver nail polish on it.

"Who's Danny?"

Luz poked her finger against Danny's arm. "This Danny." She was grinning and speaking pidgin English, which she did sometimes, even though she handled English just about perfectly when she felt like it. Danny signaled Felipe for another double shot.

The shooter waved off a mosquito buzzing around his right ear, looked at Danny. "You interested in giving me a lift up there, to the border? Say, Laredo or Brownsville, maybe farther west?" Slow, easy words, as if he didn't care when he might get to the border or if he got there at all.

"Not particularly. If I were, I'd charge a hell of a lot more than a first-class ticket on Mexicana would cost." Pretty good, Danny was thinking. A little cagey, showing lack of interest, but still leaving the door open, slowly getting back some of the old confidence from his killer journalism years. Do it the way you did when you were courting the Chicago mob and getting the dope for *Chicago Underground*, making them think they were tough, practical guys who grew up on the scramble while the carriage trade was going off to college. You've handled big dicks before, and the shooter comes off as an easygoing country boy compared to the Chicago wiseguys. Not too smart, either, shooting from the window of a crowded bar. The Chicago kids would have done it in the back on a dark street and ridden the evening train afterward. Danny—Danny boy—get up and get on the high wire and walk it. Walk the wire, concentrate on the other end and don't look down.

The shooter finished his drink, smiled again in that something less than genuine way of his. "I don't like airplanes, never have. Friend dropped me off here from his sailboat. How much?" Now he was concentrating on Luz and her legs or the sandal dangling expectantly from her toe, or some or all of that.

Danny sank back a little. This wasn't working out quite the way he'd expected. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but this didn't seem to be it. ~~He was feeling somehow he ought to be more in control of the plot, yet the shooter seemed to be moving things along at his own pace.~~ But there was something here worth the telling, something that could bring in some real money and a first-class piece of writing to boot. Danny didn't know much about Mexican law, but in the States this would be called aiding and abetting. If he hauled this guy's tail up to Laredo or wherever, would he be getting himself in serious trouble? Probably, but only if he actually knew the shooter had done something... which he did know.

On the other hand, a writer's got to take risks sometime, especially when you're short and might have to take some kind of real job if things don't pick up. Sit around on your can down at Las Noches and nothing happens. *Rolling Stone* would jump at this stuff if he did it as a Hunter Thompson gonzo kind of piece, or maybe it could be serialized in *Esquire* for ten grand and turned into a novel later on. Maybe a film option, too. Call it fiction or write it under a pseudonym. Or make up stuff and pass it off as true, call it "new journalism."

Danny's agent was good at figuring out those details. He could hear her saying, "Go for it, Danny boy; this jerk's nothing more than offal for the great American sausage machine called publishing. What're you going to do with your remaining days, follow all the bullshit dictums of the careful life? Keep your hands in the boat, stay away from the road? Get a do-it-yourself will kit, have a V-8? A buck's a buck, take 'im down. Besides, it'll help with your support payments to Janice and little Robbie, which I understand you're not making at the present time and better start making if you're ever thinking about coming out of Mexico and joining the American parade again."

Something popped inside. "Three thousand American, plus expenses. Fifteen hundred up front." Danny figured it was an absolute ripoff price, making it seem he wasn't all that anxious to go north.

The shooter didn't even blink. "Done. When can we leave?"

Caught on the stagger, Danny waited a second or two before answering, feeling his mind trying to make decisions without any help from him. Brain sent message to mouth, mouth talked. "Day or two. The Bronco needs a little work."

And while he was saying this out loud in a lurch toward high chance, he was also saying to himself: Back up, back down, get out and go home. Still, events have a force of their own once they're under way, and it was too late, somehow. Somehow, too late. Confusing: tequila, money, Luz, back to *el Norte* and better things... no... yes... shit, what am I doing?

"Would an extra two thousand plus twenty-five hundred front-end money get me a departure in the next couple of hours? I have to meet someone in Dallas." Some part of Danny's mind was working on the shooter's accent, trying to place it. Mostly nondescript midwestern, with a hint of East Coast here and there on certain words.

Somewhere in the middle of a tunnel closing behind him, Danny Pastor was looking backward and going forward at the same time. Mouth again: "The Mexican high-ways are messy, gets long and lonely out there, especially at night. Things can go wrong."

The shooter thought for a moment, then spoke slowly with an interior smile underneath his words: "Sounds like an overall description of life to me. What's the problem, bad fellows?"

"Maybe. Break down and the local thugs who have a general dislike for gringos might try to beat on us. Word is, bandidos are back in business on Fifteen up north and also around Durango, east in the mountains. On top of that, the *federates* can think up about a million reasons to give you trouble, even if you aren't involved in any trouble to start with. They operate as their own law, more or less. Hard to tell 'em from the bandidos. Mexican law descends from the Napoleonic Code, not English common

law, so habeas corpus is not part of doing business down here. They get you in jail and figure you'll just sit there for life or until someone from the States sends a few thousand in bribe money to get you out."

The shooter toyed with his empty shot glass, tilted it up, and looked at the bottom. "Well, there's two of us. We can watch each other's backs, can't we?"

He glanced up at Danny, who wasn't sure whether the question was rhetorical or required an answer, decided on the former, and focused momentarily on where the shooter was fiddling with his shot glass—the little finger on his left hand was missing.

In any case, by the easy way he'd said it, the shooter obviously wasn't worried about village thugs or bandidos, maybe not *even federates* or anyone else who might jump up and get in his way. He'd just cracked some important-looking gringo plus a naval officer for whatever reason, and he was sitting there with that hard little smile of his, like the whole thing was an evening stroll along the Malecón.

Danny was still considering a fast tunnel backward toward the light of where he was an hour ago, toward recommended and sensible boundaries. Alternatives: Stay in Puerto Vallarta and ride Luz María's warm and willing body into another thousand sunsets, get some real work done on another book while waiting for the next royalty check that'd be less than the previous one. Good choice, if low risk and even lower money were the criteria.

Or, haul ass off into the Mexican night with a killer who might just put a pencil-size hole behind your right ear somewhere out on the road. At that level, bad choice. Still, five thousand for the ride plus another ten for the serial rights plus a book would sum to plenty of long, easy nights of Willie and Lobo, not to mention Luz, who could get especially willing and somewhere on the far side of enthusiastic with lobster and drink swirling around in her soft brown tummy. And maybe a few dollars up to Chicago for Janice and little Robbie, show good intentions and that sort of thing. Besides, Danny figured the shooter had no quarrel with him, and professional hit men don't hit anybody they don't have to. That's one of their survival tactics, which is something Danny knew from his newspapering days on the streets of Chicago.

So there was the business of money—the compulsions of greed or necessity, usually indistinguishable—plus the tequila in Danny's head and the consequent upward slope of his risk curve toward imprudence. Not to mention ill-considered wed to misguided and penny wise cum imbecility. Later on, Danny Pastor would know Proust had it right: "It is always thus, impelled by a state of mind which is destined not to last, that we make our irrevocable decisions."

Some years before, Janice, Danny's first and only wife, had said it differently, "Danny, make it a personal rule never to make decisions when you're drinking. They're always bad ones. Tattoo that rule on top of your thumb so you'll see it when you lift the glass."

As they used to say, and put on T-shirts now, tequila has four stages:

I'm rich,

I'm beautiful,

I'm bulletproof,

I'm invisible.

Danny was at stage three and climbing when he decided to take the shooter north, toward wherever it is men go when they're out of their minds or in need of money... which amount to the same thing most of the time.

Danny's '68 Bronco, torn seats and modified to three-on-the-floor with a choice of either two- or four-wheel drive, was boxy and high set and pretty much a rolling disaster. Standard issue for the expats who hung around beach towns. He'd bought it when he'd first come to Puerto Vallarta three years before, from another gringo down there squandering life. Salt wind and gritty dust had taken the original brown paint, and where you couldn't see primer you saw rust, and where you couldn't see rust you saw holes. After holes, infinity. It was parked under two scraggly almond trees, by the side of the building where Danny and Luz had an apartment on the second floor.

The shooter stared at the Bronco. "Kind of a forlorn old sailor. Think it'll make it to the border?"

"With two days to get it ready I'd say the chances would be pretty good. Pulling out like we are, middle of the night and all, it's anybody's guess. I've got some new plugs and an extra fan belt in the house. I'll bring 'em along.

"Luz, start filling up those empty plastic water jugs we've been saving; we'll probably need to top off the radiator more than once."

"How many miles on this thing called Vito?" The shooter touched one of the Bronco's fenders.

"Engine was replaced in seventy-six. Hundred and twenty-seven thousand on this one."

When the three of them had left El Rondo, Felipe, in a condition of studied lassitude, not to mention squinch eyed and feigning disinterest, was wiping off tables and his face with the same towel Felipe was getting on, but he hadn't lost his taste for pretty señoritas, and the gringos came and went leaving young Mexican women behind and in need of counseling or a place to stay. One never knew. He'd gone to the door and watched the rear of the señorita's lavender dress until they'd turned a corner and headed down Juarez, ducking back inside for a moment when the tall man in a blue shirt had turned and glanced at him.

Danny had taken them down darkened back streets, past closed restaurants and tourist markets and small hotels with neon vacancy signs missing a letter or two. Danny and Luz had walked ahead of the shooter, who paused at each street crossing before stepping out and catching up, moving on long, easy strides of the kind that were soundless and a throwback to the veldwalkers who measured their distances by days and lifetimes. Later on, Luz would remark on that, how the tall, thin man hesitated at street crossings, as if he were afraid of being seen, how he covered ground like a big cat, like *el gato* walking soft in a mountain night.

Halfway across the bridge on Insurgentes, they'd gone down stone steps to an island cutting the Rio Cuale in two. The island was dark, and a short way along it was a suspension bridge crossing the southern half of the river. A drunk had been hanging over the western bridge cable, vomiting into the river. They'd passed around him and cut down Constitucion to Madero and the apartment.

In a state of tequila decline, mouth dry and nerves wobbly, Danny Pastor moved around the Bronco, checking tires, aware of the shooter standing a few feet away. Someone was playing a guitar in a nearby building, slightly out of tune and sounding muffled and distant and being just about the perfect launch music for Danny's version of a run to *el Norte*. On a Tuesday night, with tomorrow a work day, it was mostly quiet along Madero, except for a group of people gathered at the end of the block, talking fast and pointing uptown where sirens were going off.

"What else we need?" The shooter was leaning against one of the trees by the Bronco, looking up

and down the street, then at Danny.

“I’m not planning on camping out,” Danny said. “There’re resthouses, hotels, and other things of various stripes in the larger towns along the way. Depends how fancy you want to get. We’ll take some food, drinking water, and tools in case Vito decides to get balky, “fou got a hat? The sun’s a cannibal during the day.”

The shooter gave his knapsack an easy slap. “Everything I need is in here.”

Danny was pretty sure that was as true and profound as language got.

“Where do we pick up the food and water?”

“It’s a little this side of eleven-thirty. There’s a couple of small stores on Insurgentes that stay open late. We’ll get some things on our way out. “You sure must be in a hurry.” Danny wished he hadn’t said that, about the shooter being in a hurry. Not that there was anything wrong with it—a little off-the-cuff remark that might be expected—but it didn’t need to be said. Don’t say any more than you have to say. Stay back, stay quiet, watch and listen.

“Not that much of a hurry. I finished up some business here tonight, and I’m restless. Got to see a man in Dallas in a few days, like I said, but I should make it all right. I thought if we got under way pronto, it might give us time to take a more scenic route on the way up.”

“Mister... hell, I don’t even know your name. Mine’s Danny Pastor.”

“You’re right, not very mannerly of me. Peter Schumann, here.”

Danny didn’t believe him and went under the hood, checking the distributor wires, adjusting the carburetor. “Like I started out to say before we got into introductions, *any* way up to the border is the scenic route.” His voice was reverberant in the closed space between hood and motor. He turned the carburetor screw, and the engine revved up for a moment before he leveled it back down.

“You’ve obviously never seen the Mexican highway system. Not bad in parts, pretty raw other places, holes in the pavement that’ll break an axle if I hit one in the dark, cattle standing in the middle of the road when you come around a corner. At night a whole lot of the Mexicans drive with their lights off for reasons that’ve never been all that clear to me. It’s a mess. Decided where you want me to drop you off, which border town?”

“Still thinking about it. Got a map?”

“Damn!” Danny had skinned two knuckles on his right hand yanking out the oil stick in the dark. He straightened up, wiping his hands on a greasy cloth. “There’s a good Mexican road map under the driver’s seat. Little torn and smudged, but still readable.”

The shooter pulled a small flashlight out of a side pocket in his knapsack and unfolded the map.

Vito turned over, rough and noisy, billowing blue smoke into the black night, bringing down a curse on Danny’s head from the apartment building next door. He shut off the engine just as Luz stumbled out of the house with a gallon water jug in each hand, long-billed fishing cap on her head and sweater over her shoulder. She’d changed into old jeans and a white T-shirt with “Puerto Vallarta Squeeze” printed in faded green letters on the front and featuring two halves of a lime lying over the appropriate parts of her chest along with what was supposed to be a rendering of lime juice dribbling down between those parts.

“Wait a minute,” Danny said. “You don’t think for a minute you’re going along.” Risking his own hide for a story was one thing. Bringing Luz under that cloud was something else again.

She nodded. “I want to see *el Norte*”

“Luz, we’re not going to the United States. I’m dropping Mr. Schumann off at a border town and heading straight back here.”

She looked up at Danny in a way that promised double helpings of whatever she could invent that

was new and different and depraved, if he'd just take her on this voyage. That kind of skin-soft persuasion wasn't good enough, not this time.

Still, explaining why she couldn't come along was going to be tough. For all she knew, the shooter was just some crazy gringo who didn't like airplanes and had business in Dallas. If Danny told her about him, she'd know something she didn't need to know, something that could hurt her if the shooter found out or if the *federates* started asking her questions for whatever reason. The *federates* had ways of getting information when they wanted it, especially from a woman.

On the other hand, if this was simply a delivery job to the border, there was no reason why she shouldn't go. And if Danny said absolutely not, no way, she'd piss and moan and cry and maybe just take off somewhere, the way she threatened to do whenever they had a serious scrap. On top of that, she'd tell everyone they knew about this safari into the high North. It wouldn't take overriding genius for someone to pull the shooting together with Danny leaving in the middle of the night accompanied by a strange gringo who had to get to the border fast and didn't like airplanes. Even the *policia* could figure that one out.

"It's okay with me if she comes along." The shooter studied the map while he talked, face thin and shadow-lit by the flashlight reflecting off the map. "You drive, she handles food and water and communications problems or whatever, I watch the horizon for bandidos and other perils of the road. It's a nice three-legged stool of mutual support."

"See, it all right with him if I go along."

Shit. Getting complicated, as if it weren't already complicated enough. The shooter had practically invited her, and Danny had no way of explaining why she couldn't come without taking her inside and whispering in her ear. In that case, she'd tear her hair and plead with Danny not to go. The sum of all these little pieces was the shooter would sense something was wrong and maybe do bad things to both of them.

Danny gave it another try, a feeble one. "Luz, the Bronco has only two seats... no place for you to sit. The back'll be filled with gear." She'd worked that out already and said she could sit on the sleeping bag and stack the supplies around her.

She went back up the stairs for the sleeping bag and three cans of Pennzoil stashed under the sink. The shooter had to use the bathroom and followed her inside. Somehow, in a way Danny couldn't quite get hold of, the situation was taking on a life of its own. Things had a way of doing that when you hadn't thought them through ahead of time. It was called the *Qué Será, Será* school of planning, the wrinkled blueprint for Danny's life over the last few years when he'd decided, without deciding, to let the tropics have their way with him.

Danny slammed the Bronco's hood and watched Luz come out of the apartment building. She walked over to him, carrying a sleeping bag, a big flashlight, and a small duffel bag of clothes for Danny. An overweight couple stopped and asked how to find a bus out to the Sheraton. The woman, with blue curled hair underneath a beribboned straw beach hat, spoke with a grating nasality. Danny glanced at their name tags carrying a "Snap-On Tools" logo and suggested they walk down to Insurgentes and find a taxi, easier this time of night. They moved on, complaining to each other about bus service in Mexican towns.

He checked the building's doorway, no sign of the shooter, then spoke low and hard to Luz. "Don't say *anything* about us being in El Niño tonight or about the shooting. Got that? *Nothing* I'll explain later." She nodded, obviously confused but trusting him and glad to be going along. The shooter came out of the building's doorway, looking up and down the street as he walked.

They closed up the apartment, piled in the Bronco, and backed onto Madero. Luz burrowed in

behind Danny and the shooter, nesting in a melange of water jugs, cans of motor oil, and other gear. The shooter handed Danny twenty-five one-hundred-dollar bills.

“That’s a lot of cash to be carrying around, particularly in Mexico.” Danny was shifting into second and rolling toward Insurgentes.

The shooter took a navy blue ball cap from his knapsack, bent the bill into a half oval, and pulled low over his eyes.

“I have my quirks. I don’t like airplanes, and I don’t like traveler’s checks or credit cards.”

Danny handed the money back to Luz. “Stick this way down inside the sleeping bag. If we get stopped by the *federates* or the judicial police, I’d prefer not to have my pockets bulging with American *dinero*.”

He glanced at the shooter. “Aren’t you afraid of being rolled, carrying around that much cash?”

The shooter was slowly moving his head back and forth like a radar antenna, scanning the street ahead and both sides of it.

“It’s been tried.” He spoke in a detached way, as if he were on time-share, concentrating on something else. “Five of the boy-os made a move on me in Manila once.”

“What happened?”

“Didn’t work out the way they’d planned. Overconfidence will do that to you.”

Danny should have listened to those words. Later on and looking back, he was pretty sure the shooter was trying to tell him something, but he’d been concentrating on getting them through the streets and thinking about what this story would do for his wallet *and* his reputation—a whole new rejuvenated Danny Pastor, comeback kid and demon of the talk shows, recipient of literary prizes and hero to right-thinking citizens everywhere.

He’d never realized how tricky it is to know something about somebody and not let them know you know when you’re trying to help them for all the wrong reasons. Insurgentes was a bright, major thoroughfare running north through town, eventually tying into other streets and leading toward the airport. The problem was how to get out of town without being noticed and at the same time not be too obvious about it so he didn’t tip off the shooter about knowing more than he was supposed to know.

Danny parked the Bronco on a side street near the Rio Cuale and went around the corner to a small grocery store on Insurgentes. Fruit, candy bars, cheese, loaf of bread, two gallons of drinking water. And a bottle of Pepto-Bismol, economy size. As he climbed in the Bronco, a truckload of police bounced north along Insurgentes, siren blaring.

“What’s all the excitement?” the shooter asked, sounding innocent and only a little curious.

“The hombre tending the store says there’s been some kind of shooting over on Ordaz. That’s what the sirens and traffic are about. The *federates* probably will be stopping everybody on the highway out, looking at papers, searching cars, and all the rest of that good crap. I’m going to take a back route that’s a little rough, but it’ll save us a lot of time and hassle.” Pretty decent, reasonable explanation. Christ, Danny said to himself, I’m already thinking like a criminal.

“That sort of thing happen often here? Shootings?” The shooter was lying back, seeming to be relaxed, flicking cigarette ashes out the side as they bumped over cobblestones. But he never stopped looking everywhere at once.

“Not very often. Lot of petty stuff, not much heavy violence.”

“Who got hit?” Interesting choice of words. Most people would have said “shot” or something along those lines.

“Don’t know for sure.” Danny swerved to miss a rumbling bus carrying night workers north toward the big tourist hotels. “Apparently an American navy officer and some other gringo. Most likely a ba

fight.”

He couldn't see Luz's face, but she had to be wondering just what the hell he was doing and why he was saying less than he knew. And the bar fight explanation was a little weak, since American naval officers weren't given over to that sort of thing.

Danny took the Bronco into the back streets of Puerto Vallarta. Across the Rio Cuale at a shallow spot, through the storage yard of an old foundry, in behind the new Pizza Hut, and down a dirt road where the poorest of the Mexican workers lived, which included most of the locals. He could still hear sirens six blocks west, in the general direction of El Niño. The *policia* and probably the army, maybe *even federates*, were running around like malevolent Keystone Kops, but most of the regular people were turning in for the night. Whatever had happened was none of their business. So what if a couple of rich gringos were down on the cobblestones. If it wasn't bullets, it'd be AIDS or dope or booze. A lot of them came here, running away from something back home and toward a sleazy, inelegant end in the white enclaves of Puerto Vallarta. For the Mexicans it was something to talk about at work tomorrow, but not important in the day-to-day scheme of surviving poverty and feeding the family.

Back down the years, someone had installed a roll bar in the Bronco, and the shooter was hanging on to it with his left hand, smoking Marlboros with the other, knapsack between his feet on the floor and staying quiet. Danny moved along an arroyo in four-wheel drive and suddenly there was Route 200. He stopped short of the highway, let Vito idle, and walked up on the road. A *federate* station sat just north of the airport. They were a mile north of the station, parked in a riverbed, with the traffic looking normal along the highway. If there was a roadblock, which Danny guessed there was, it must have been closer in to the city, probably at the *federate* outpost. The Bronco climbed up the riverbank, rolled over broken glass, and hit the pavement. Danny took it out of four-wheel drive, and they headed toward *el Norte*, windows down and the breeze beginning to dry the sweat on Danny's face and everywhere else.

Danny talked to the shooter without looking at him. “In about an hour I'd like to know which border town you want. If we're heading straight north toward Nogales, I'm going up a coast road for a while. It takes a little longer, but we'll avoid some of the heavy truck traffic around Tepic. Otherwise we'll curl back southeast toward Guadalajara and catch the roads up to Laredo or El Paso or Brownsville.”

The shooter's flashlight bounced around as he studied the map. “According to what I'm seeing here, we don't have to make the decision that early. Looks like another east-west road further north. Comes out of Mazatlan and heads over to Durango.”

“Yeah, but it's a horror story. Some guy once counted the curves between Mazatlan and Durango. Claims there're thirty-three hundred of'em. Also lots of falling rock up in those mountains, all kinds of small boulders lying on the highway, bandidos on top of that. But it's your nickel.”

The shooter said nothing. They blew up the middle of Bucerias and then past the turnoff to Punta de Mita, where Luz and Danny used to swim naked at night and sometimes in the afternoons before Japanese fat cats started in on it with their fences and bulldozers and condo blueprints.

A little farther north, Luz poked him in the shoulder and shouted over the wind, “Guamúchil.” Danny nodded and thought of the little village off in the jungle. A woman in Guamúchil made tortillas the old way, by hand, rice-paper thin and filled with hot salsa. She cooked them on the top of an oil drum cut out and laid over a circle of rocks with a fire underneath. Luz and Danny had gone there once, bought a handful of the tortillas, and walked through the jungle, eating them and sucking on wild limes. Danny had wanted to see a boa constrictor, but they hadn't found any. Boas are hard to get a fix on, that's what someone told him. “You have to know their habits and watch the overhead branches.

An hour later Danny pulled off the road a kilometer south of Las Varas. They sat there in darkness, big stars on the other side of the windshield, Vito idling like a slow coffee grinder with teeth missing. He turned the ignition key. Dead quiet except for crickets in the background and the ruffle of night breeze around them.

“Which way?”

The shooter was looking at the map again, using his little flashlight. He folded the map, stuck it under the seat, and lit a cigarette. “Let’s hold off on the choice for a while. Take that coast road you were talking about, the one with less traffic. We’ll talk routes again at Mazatlan. I might want to head up to Sonoyta.”

“Where the hell is that?” Danny had never heard of Sonoyta.

“Stay on Fifteen up to Santa Ana, just like you’re going to Nogales. At Santa Ana, take Route Two west... goes right up to Sonoyta.”

“What’s the U.S. border town there?”

“Isn’t any. Ajo, Arizona, is a little north of the border, Gila Bend’s another forty miles past Ajo.”

“That’s a long way from Dallas, if Dallas is where you’re headed.”

“Sonoyta, maybe.” That’s all he said.

Danny started the Bronco, turned left in Las Varas, and took the three of them northwest through the warm Mexican night. He’d hung a radio off the dashboard a year ago and flipped it on now; song he’d heard before was playing. Luz had told him it was based on an old Nahua poem from the days of the Conquistadors:

Nothing remains but flowers and sad songs
Where once there were warriors and wise men... .

The shooter looked out Vito’s right side, into darkness. He looked that way for a long time, then put a worn desert boot up on the dash and slouched in his seat, ball cap pulled even lower than before as if he were sleeping. But Danny was pretty sure he wasn’t.

Recoil. Counterpoint. As Danny Pastor shifted the Bronco into third gear, running toward *el Norte* through the blanket-soft night of coastal Mexico, a Learjet 35 climbed out of Andrews Air Force Base through light rain and headed toward cruising altitude. Walter McGrane loosened his seat belt, pulled up the cuff of his safari jacket, and checked his watch: Puerto Vallarta by dawn. He settled back and studied the two men in the club seats opposite him. A never-ending line of them as the years went by, young and hard and confident. Always the same, young and hard and confident, while Walter McGrane just got older. Dressed in jeans and windbreakers, on temporary reassignment from a special ops branch of the army, they drank coffee and talked a language made obscure and privileged by the acronyms of their trade.

Packed in two black duffels lying in the narrow aisle were the tools of that trade. The long guns: M-40A1 sniper rifle fitted with a 10X Unertl telescopic sight; M16A2 high-capacity assault weapon; Remington pump shotgun, full-choked and with seven inches cut from the barrel for close-in work. The sidearms: Smith & Wesson .40-caliber automatics.

Each had a webbed vest with extra clips for the assault weapon and thirty rounds of match-grade hollowpoint ammunition for the sniper rifle, a handheld radio, minibinoculars, compass, canteen, extra pistol magazines, penlight with filter, Mace, camouflage paste, first-aid kit, plastic arm/leg restraints, notebook and pen, a clip-on thermometer for monitoring temperature changes and compensating for their effect on bullet trajectories. Those things, other things, neatly arranged in the vest pockets.

The Lear bucked once, then again, and the men across from Walter McGrane held Styrofoam cups away from their laps, letting coffee slosh over the rims and onto the cabin floor. When the plane had cleared the turbulence and leveled off, McGrane opened his briefcase and unfolded one of several detailed maps of Mexico he'd been given at his briefing two hours ago. Son of a bitch, this would have to happen the day before his thirty-second wedding anniversary. Not that he cared much about anniversaries of any kind, but his wife did, and he'd have fires to put out at home for the next six months and be reminded the following year of how he'd missed the last anniversary. All because of Clayton Price.

As with all wars, Vietnam had produced its share of crazies, and now Clayton Price, a.k.a. Peter Schumann and other handles, had become one of those who'd apparently gone over to rogue. Never would have guessed it, that's what had been said at the briefing. Never would have guessed it about Clayton Price, but then they were all time bombs, particularly the sniper teams—the years of training to kill, and the killing itself, the flattened value structures and suppressed emotions necessary to carry out their work. Some could be flat and cold for only so long, living as they did with the recollections of blood and brain shots clearly monitored down the long lens of a twenty-power spotting scope.

Walter McGrane studied the map and wondered which way Clayton Price would run. North probably. Or maybe he'd bolt for the jungles of Central America. Price understood jungles as well as anyone and far better than most. He'd been one of the best shooters who'd ever worked for them, one of the best who'd ever lived, strange and distant, with more patience than a boulder. That's why he'd been called "Tortoise" in his Vietnam years, slow and methodical and patient. Somebody once said if Clayton Price slowed down any more, he'd be moving backward. That is, until the right moment came.

and he instantly evolved into something more like a snake. Reptilian, in any case, whether he was waiting or striking.

That's what was said about Clayton Price when he was young and fast. But it was generally agreed now that he was getting old, too old and out-of-date, thinking too much and asking questions about things he didn't need to know, losing his edge. The Covert Operations Unit had stopped using him five years ago except in certain circumstances where an extra hand was needed.

Old and out-of-date. Out of round. Out of step and style, out of order and out of tune. Clayton Price — Tortoise—and Nightingale and Centipede and Broadleaf, a few others. The shadowmen, operating in the information penumbra cast by governments when moments of secrecy are required and things need to be accomplished without the rest of the world knowing about them. Well, scratch Centipede. He'd never made it out of some godforsaken Middle Eastern place last year—South Yemen, the rumors said—land mine or gunned down by laser-controlled Gatling as he cut his way through concertina wire. Whatever got him, it was something metallic and forever and final. That's what Clayton Price had heard. And political repercussions afterward; that's what Walter McGrane knew for sure.



The radio Danny Pastor had slung from the dash kept on playing: warriors and wise men, flowers and sad songs, Mexican night rolling by. Luz María was awake, saying nothing. Clayton Price was awake and thinking about Centipede, about the time they'd gone into Ecuador as a team and taken out three revolutionaries who were using the drug trade to finance leftist efforts on behalf of a better world. That was damn near the end for both of them. If it hadn't been for the gutsy pilot in the old C-47, it would have been the end. He'd landed on grassed-over asphalt and slowed only enough to let them run alongside and climb in the cargo door, as if they were hopping a freight. Tortoise and Centipede, tight-lipped at first, then laughing and giving each other a high-five when they'd made it over the Andes. Insertion was hard enough, extraction was where it always got real close. Like now, in Mexico.

His shoulder pressed against the Bronco's door as Danny Pastor took Vito around a hard, left-bending curve. A long, strange life, it had been that all right. From the beginning, it seemed, promise to the field of battle. Way back in another time, he might have been something else, a sailor on one of Cook's voyages or a mountain man in the high evergreens.

Mountain men... from the Park Slope area of Brooklyn, you could see Manhattan across the East Paver, and on foggy days the towers resembled mountains; that's how he'd imagined it when he was young. He'd sat in the bay window of his parents' fourth-floor walk-up, three floors above an Italian restaurant taking up the whole bottom floor, and had thought about mountain men. He'd read about them in a library book and after that wanting to be one and having the freedom to go where the wind took you and coming back only when you felt like it. No buses, no subways, no school, none of that.

The day he'd left Park Slope for good was low hung and dark, foggy a little, and the towers had looked like mountains again. He'd stood there looking at them across the East River getting ice along its edges, thinking it might be the last time he'd see those mountains, probably for sure the last he'd see of them from this window. He was going to Minnesota, and he wasn't certain if there were mountains out there or not, didn't think so. Lakes, though, that's what his mother said. She'd told him

that a week before, exactly a month to the day after his father had pulled out, leaving Clayton and her alone.

When Clayton had asked, “Why’d Dad leave us?” his mother replied, “Elmer just felt closed in, I guess.” She’d been all weepy and slumped over when she’d said it.

Clayton was the youngest of five children, the other four gone and paying their way, and his parents had been old by parent standards when he’d come along, unexpected and unwelcome.

“We didn’t plan on Clayton,” his mother had said once to a friend of hers and not aware Clayton could hear them talking. “There were things we wanted to do, and they didn’t include another child. My God, four are enough to raise in this world.”

“Land sakes, yes.” The other woman had nodded in fast agreement, sweeping her hand as if she were brushing away unwanted children. “I should think so. We stopped after three. Nobody needs a caboose these days.”

His mother had sat him down and told him what was for sure and what had to be done. “Clayton, I’ve found a job at Landowski’s Cleaners over on Fourteenth, but I can’t make enough to take care of us both, Your grandparents out in Ely say it’s all right if you come and live with them for a while. It’s real nice there, lots of lakes and woods, You’ll be happier out of the city. I’ll find a smaller place I can afford and send along a little money if I can.”

Clayton Price had looked at his mother, blue eyes running toward gray looking straight at her. His father was gone, his mother was sending him away... . “We didn’t plan on Clayton... . There were things we wanted to do.” He’d understood, in a way. She already looked old at fifty-two, as old as his grandparents looked in the photograph on the bureau in her room, and they looked older than Jim Bowie’s grave.

Clayton may have understood... kind of, why his parents hadn’t wanted him, how he’d screwed up their plans. He may have understood... kind of, but he’d been only ten and a caboose at that, and Ely, Minnesota, had seemed forever out there someplace.

Margaret Price and her unexpected youngest son had ridden the train to Manhattan. There she’d put Clayton on a bus headed west. November 29, 1952, that’s when it was, and snowing heavy by late afternoon. Margaret Price always remembered afterward how hard it had been snowing when Clayton got into the Greyhound. Army had defeated Navy 7—0 earlier in the day, Ike was going to be the new president, the French Union forces in Vietnam were doing pretty well and looking as if they’d stopped the march of communism right in its tracks.

The bus had rolled out of the Port Authority Terminal and Margaret Price was waving to Clayton on that day and not able to see him very well behind the steamed-up windows. Clayton Price had eight dollars in his pocket, and Ely, Minnesota, had looked like a long way down the road. He’d wondered again for about the millionth time why his father left when and how he did, just pulling out that way, and that was something nobody ever knew.

“The bus drivers’ll help you, Clayton, and your grand-folks’ll meet you in Duluth.” His mother had said those words somewhere around twenty times that one afternoon before the Greyhound closed its big door with a sigh and headed for a far place.

Clayton had wiped at the steamy window beside him, making circular motions with his mitten on the glass, trying to see his mother one more time. She’d stood there and was hard to see in all the smoke from a lot of buses and on the other side of a window that was dirty on the outside and which Clayton couldn’t get perfectly free of steam on the inside no matter how hard and fast he’d wiped it. People were already carrying Christmas packages, hurrying through the weather and passing in front of and behind Margaret Price in her black cloth coat and faded orange scarf. Big wheels turning and

Margaret Price running then alongside the bus on the wet street with her purse hanging over her left arm and flopping out there all the while she ran. And Clayton reading her lips with which she was saying, "I love you," but he didn't believe it then and didn't later on and never would after that day.

When he'd finished boot camp at Parris Island in 1960, both Margaret and Elmer Price had come down for the ceremonies. He hadn't invited them, but his grandmother had written Margaret and said Clayton had joined the marines partly because his teeth needed a lot of fixing and the government said they'd fix his teeth if he joined up. His parents had gotten back together a year after he'd left Park Slope but never said anything about him coming back there and sending instead some money to Ely each month to help out with his board.

His head had been shaved close for the ceremonies, and he'd received a special award for marksmanship. A younger Clayton Price had been able to hit a jackrabbit on the run in heavy brush by the time he left Ely, could do it with a .22-long rifle bullet. He hadn't cared much for shooting at stationary targets the way they had in boot camp, and it wasn't hard measured up against what you had to do in the woods, particularly for Clayton Price. Some people can draw faces or make pool balls dance to any tune they want right from the start; others can think through mathematics and paint in watercolors. Clayton Price could handle guns and eventually outshot twenty-six hundred other marksmen at the National High-Power Rifle Championship at Camp Perry, Ohio. He did that later on in the early sixties, did it shooting at a target a thousand yards out where the bulls-eye looked like a pinhead down his scope.

His parents had come up to him after the ceremony and all full of pride and saying how fine he looked in his uniform. Clayton hadn't smiled, not even a flicker of one, and he hadn't been trying to hold it back or anything, it just hadn't been there for these people from another time, from a different planet or another world, was how he thought of them back then and still did ever after in the times out in front of him. But the marines in addition to fixing his teeth had taught him something about being a gentleman, so he'd shaken hands with both of them and hadn't done any more than just that all the while his mother was standing on her tiptoes and kissing his cheek and having her picture taken with him. Said then he had to go, even though he hadn't gone anywhere except back to the barracks, where he'd cried a little over seeing those people from another world again and knowing then he'd never go near them, not one more time in his life. Also knowing the best way to go from there on out was not to count on anyone ever again or even to care for anyone again or let anyone care for you.

And a few years later, dawn and warm rain falling on leaves and grass, mist above the rice paddies. Twelve hours in the "hide" with gnats around your face and ants crawling in your ears and under your clothes... leeches hanging on to you... mosquitoes biting and you can't swat them away, no movement allowed. Becoming part of the landscape. Estimating windage by the feel of it on your face and the bend of grass five hundred yards out, watching heat waves to get a sense of how the bullet will ride. Living for a week on nothing but water and basic C-rations—peanut butter, jelly, cheese, and crackers. Four more killing days to Christmas, as a major had said before the chopper took off last night.

Lying there, concentrating, looking for a movement of brown or green in a wall of brown and green. Scanning the natural lines of drift where people tend to walk or rest. Mornings and evenings are best. Charlie's just waking up or tired and careless after a day's work.

The beat of your heart against the earth, the smell of solvent residue coming off your rifle bolt, a flat-shooting Remington 700 with a Redfield nine-power scope.

"There he is," your spotter whispers. "The hamburger in the door, epaulets and clean uniform, binoculars. NVA colonel."

Officers: Always look for the clean uniform, the binoculars, the one with a radio man close by.

Dumb bastard's standing in the door of a hut, yawning.

Check your body position and scope picture.

"I make it eight five zero yards," you whisper.

"Eight fifty, eight seventy-five," your spotter whispers back.

It all seems kind of... kind of dreamlike. "four teacher, White Feather, calls it his "bubble," going into a place of concentration and focus so clear that it becomes a universe of its own where nothing and no one can intrude.

Check again: the bend of grass, the heat waves.

Wait for the flattest part of your breathing cycle.

Control the trigger pull, the follow-through.

The recoil against your shoulder, and on the other side of the valley, a man jolts back into the darkness of a hut.

Your spotter gives you a thumbs-up, and the two of you begin a reverse crawl down your escape route.

The world of Clayton Price.

A strange world, and a long, strange life, aloneness mostly, loneliness sometimes. Never a woman for any amount of time. Nothing like the one riding close behind him, the one he could smell in the compressed space of a Bronco called Vito when they slowed and the breeze no longer blew away the pleasant mix of perfume and sweat coming off her. He straightened in his seat and glanced back. Luz María was looking at him.



In the Learjet hammering southwest, different smells. The distinct, unalloyed scents of coffee and gun oil. Walter McGrane glanced up when he heard the soft click of a rifle bolt. One of the men across from him was examining the sniper rifle. He watched the man work the bolt, checking over the tool of graceful agony that could have been a candidate for an award in contemporary design, curving metal and angular parts machined to a level of precision usually reserved for fine watches. The man, machined to precision like the rifle and known to him only as Weatherford, ran a soft cloth along the barrel as if he were touching a woman.

The rifle, forty-four inches long and weighing a little over fourteen pounds with its scope, was chambered for a match-grade 7.62,173-grain bullet. One second after being fired, the bullet would hit the center of a man's chest at a thousand yards, over a half mile away, every time, in the hands of a skilled marksman, and the men across from Walter McGrane were skilled. Sometime in the next few days, if things went well and the Mexican government stayed out of their way, the reticles on the sniper's scope would lie across the chest of Clayton Price, who would never hear the sound that killed him.

Walter McGrane didn't like going after one of their own. He didn't much like any of this anymore. But so be it and so it lay. He was a field man by his own preference, and he'd been ordered to do it by the Pure Intelligence office boys, the suits, the idiot theoreticians, "espiocrats," as le Carre or somebody had called them. Those who'd never used a dead drop in Bucharest, had never worn goggles in the blowing dust of Algeria while a jeep climbed rocky outcrops, had never done a goddamned thing except go to school. Had no idea what the field was like, the calm and concentration on the face

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