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# Flying Into the Sun

by Paul Ogier

Amistad Publishing

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Flying Into the Sun

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Amistad Publishing

Everything in this book occurred, but the names and identifying details of many people have been changed to protect their privacy.

To recreate the story, I used notebooks and diaries written forty years ago, as well as photographs and pilot logs. Several entire passages and conversations were taken from the notebooks, including the one in which Mexican Federale Rafael Solas tells Steve that American women are cold in bed.

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## Praise for Flying Into the Sun

*“Tourists in Mexico are warned not to drive at night. Cows, burros, dead animals or broken-down cars might be just around the bend—even bandidos. Tonight, the danger is crazed, drug-running gringos flying down the mountain, blowing past anything threatening their rhythm.”*

~Flying Into the Sun

*“This is fantastic!! It's going to be BIG! I see a movie!”*

~Chris Cantara, commercial pilot

*“So many great parts in the book. Magical Mystery Tour down the mountain was excellent. The book captures a hidden Mexico that tourists never see.”*

~Eric Knight, semi-pro surfer

*“F\*\*\*\*\* awesome!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”*

~Dave Bicknell, guitarist and software engineer

*“I think it's great. You are a very accomplished storyteller. As a US expat living in Mexico I found the Mexican details to be quite accurate.”*

~Tom Bailey, expat living in Mexico

# Map of Mexico



Route south to Oaxaca is in the center. Route from Oaxaca with the weed starts south, then up along the Gulf of Mexico.

# Flying Into the Sun



**SURFBOARDS, AIRPLANES and WEED**  
**ACROSS the MEXICAN BORDER**

a true story

by Paul Ogier

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**FOR THE GOOD PEOPLE  
OF MEXICO**



## PROLOGUE

Chicken 1979

“Buenas tardes, Capitán.”

“Buenas tardes,” I replied.

I sat down at the desk along the right wall of Veracruz’s flight office and began filling out a flight plan.

“A dónde vas?” the agent asked from behind the counter.

The collar of his blue shirt was unbuttoned and his tie was loose. He had been helpful in my education of flight procedures in Mexico.

“I am flying to Los Leones north of Tampico to go fishing,” I answered. We spoke in Spanish.

“Ah. Very good. And your friend? He is not accompanying you?”

“No. He must return to the United States for work.”

The printer behind the counter ran for half a minute.

“Tampico has clear skies,” the agent informed me.

I handed him my flight plan from Veracruz to Los Leones. He laid it on the counter and marked it with a pen while I read the printout of Tampico’s weather.

“Muy bueno,” he said and smiled, proud of me.

“Gracias.”

He signed the top copy and detached it, then handed me the two carbons.

“Buen viaje,” he bid. *Have a nice trip.*

“Gracias, amigo.”

I taxied the Piper Arrow to the gas pumps where the young fuelers topped off the wing tanks and filled the four plastic gas cans in the baggage compartment. We joked as they polished the windscreen, and I added a nice tip when I paid.

Although the wind blew from the east, planes were taking off to the west to avoid making noise over Veracruz. The tailwind would increase my take-off distance, but Veracruz’s main runway was a mile and a half long, so the slightly increased take-off run wouldn’t be a factor for the small Piper.

After lifting off, I raised the landing gear and continued straight out farther than normal so the control tower wouldn’t notice my turn to the south. I flew the highlighted course on the chart in my lap and watched for the landmarks circled in ink: a road, a power line, a river and another road. Eighteen minutes after takeoff, a narrow rectangle of gray appeared ahead in the green jungle. Even with 260 hours under my belt, I still got a feeling of accomplishment when an airport or even a landmark showed up exactly where it should.

I lined up with the runway and landed east, into the wind. On the rollout, I spotted our rental VW Rabbit parked beyond some bushes two-thirds down the runway on the left. I spun around and set the parking brake adjacent to where Todd was dragging the two suitcases through the weeds. With the engine still running, he climbed onto the right wing and hoisted the suitcases behind him one at a time. I reached over and pushed the door open against the wind from the propeller. Todd kept his back to the door as he shoved the luggage onto the rear seats. He started to say something but stopped in mid-sentence as he stared through the windshield.

“Fuck,” I read on his lips.

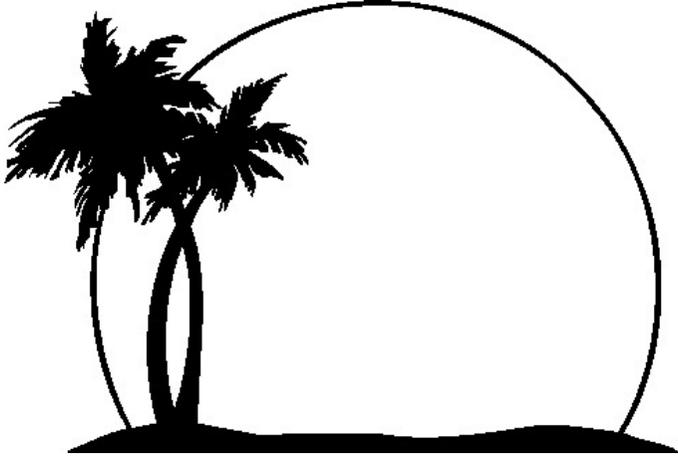
I looked ahead. A truck painted in army green was hauling ass down the runway toward us.

“See you in Houston,” I said.

Todd jumped off the back of the wing, and I latched the door. If there had been enough runway behind me, I would have spun around and taken off in the proper direction—into the wind and away from the truck. But there wasn't enough runway behind me. I'd go off the end before I could get airborne. My only option was to take off where I had enough runway—toward the truck. I shoved the throttle to the firewall and held constant, adrenaline-driven pressure against it.

Getting into the air before our paths met was not something I could hope for. When it comes to aeronautics, physics beats hope every time. It was down to an old-fashioned game of chicken. I stayed on the centerline of the runway and watched the airspeed needle slowly rise as the truck got bigger. If we hit, then we hit. Stopping and giving up was not an alternative. One stint in a Mexican penitentiary was enough for one lifetime.

# Latin America 101







## CHAPTER ONE

Mexico, Fall 1974  
*(five years earlier)*

I turned to see who tapped my shoulder, and a skinny guy with a ponytail began speaking Spanish too fast for me to understand. Dan and I had just spent an hour at the outdoor market in Veracruz. This wasn't the first time we'd been harassed by an ambitious vendor or someone asking for a handout. We kept walking. Dan stopped and grabbed my arm.

"That smelled like pot. Maybe he was trying to sell us some," he said.

We walked back and found the guy with a filter cigarette between his fingers, but it wasn't tobacco he was smoking. He offered us a hit, then removed a small newsprint packet from the front pocket of his jeans. Inside were several marijuana flower tops so long he had to unfold them to show us. Threads of red ran through each bud.

"Pelo rojo. Sinsemilla (Sin-se-mee-ya)," said our new friend. *Red hair. Without seeds.*

Sinsemilla buds came from female plants that had not been pollinated, allowing them to grow larger and more potent. We bought the bouquet for three dollars.

"Tienes papeles?" I asked.

He delicately removed four cigarette papers from the pocket

of his faded Black Sabbath tee-shirt.

“Un regalo,” he said. *A gift.*

Dan and I had departed Houston three days earlier with our surfboards strapped to the top of my '66 VW Bug. We crossed into Mexico and made camp on pure white sand under pine trees near Tuxpan. The next morning, we awoke to shoulder-high emerald waves. It had been months since I'd surfed without a wetsuit, and I felt like Superman, flying light and free across the faces of the waves. As I sat on my board and waited between sets, I could see the contours of the sand bottom eight feet below.

Outside the surf, pelicans descended in a line and glided inches above unbroken swells. Inland, beyond the pines, dark hills rose into the morning's pale blue sky, and pockets of fog still hung in low areas.

After sixteen years of non-stop education, rules and regulations, this trip was overdue. No more academic pressure; no more getting up early to drive the freeways at rush hour for a class at the University of Houston. No more wasting life. While sitting on my board surrounded by everything that mattered, it was clear I should have quit college a year ago when the Vietnam draft ended and I no longer needed the college deferment.

The remark of a classmate in writing class had nailed the college coffin shut. Both he and I were of the opinion that in order to write, one must first experience something to write about. Sitting in a classroom and listening to a teacher was a waste of time.

“If we had any balls, we wouldn't be here,” had been my school chum's final say on the matter. I wondered if he took his own advice.

“Fins,” Dan said. He looked past me to the outside. Fins could be sharks, or maybe not.

As I turned to look, he said, “Dolphins.”

We watched five or six fins go in and out of the water beyond the surf. When they disappeared, we searched all around and tried to predict where they might emerge. A minute later they

surfaced closer to us. Dan rubbed the layer of wax on top of his board with his palm, and it sounded like the dolphin-speak in documentaries. I did the same. Whether the sound attracted them or not, two dolphins surfed toward us, completely immersed in an unbroken swell. When the pair got near, they turned to the right and cruised inside the wave, staring at us through the water with their right eyeballs.

“That was weird,” Dan said.

“They were checking us out.”

A set came through, and I caught the first wave. When I stood up, a dolphin surfaced on each side of my board. They cruised parallel for a while, then shot forward, crossed, and returned alongside me. The dolphins repeated the maneuver twice while I tried not to hit them. As I paddled back out, I wondered if my avoidance tactics had disturbed their formation surfing. Maybe so, because they all resurfaced a hundred yards down the beach. Dan and I surfed in, broke camp and drove to Veracruz.

While studying the map back in Houston, we noticed Punta Roca Partida jutting into the Gulf of Mexico from an east-west coastline a hundred miles south of Veracruz. The beach would catch a direct swell from cold fronts, and there might be nice waves peeling from the point. The closest town to Roca Partida was Toro Prieto, and it would be our winter home in the sun.

We stashed our new weed under the dash, and Dan drove south from downtown Veracruz along the seawall. After passing a hacienda-style hotel called the Mocambo, we were out of the hustle and bustle of the city. I put in a Neil Young cassette, and “Cinnamon Girl” started us off.

A straight road went through flat, green fields dotted with shrubs and small trees. When we drove through towns, metal-dome speed bumps stretched across the asphalt and forced us to come to complete stops sometimes. The bumps were called “topes” (tóe-pe<sup>z</sup>), and road signs usually warned us of their arrival.

As we slowed through the towns and their topes, locals

gazed at our surfboards on top, but some were more interested in who or what was inside the car. They looked through our windshield and stared into our eyes. There was considerable pondering going on, and I wondered about their conclusions.

Between towns, men plodded along the road in the shade of their sombreros. A few rode burros, and some walked and led burros by ropes. Several burros had bundles of sticks on their backs, and a few men carried sticks piled on their own backs.

An hour out of Veracruz, the Gulf reappeared to our left, and we cruised on a ridge of high, grassy dunes. We drove by Alvarado and a tall Spanish church, then crossed a long bridge and became surrounded by hills and jungle. In thirty minutes, the land flattened.

“The turnoff shouldn’t be far,” I said. The map lay across my lap. Dan nodded.

Even though the only law enforcement we had encountered in Mexico had been at the routine checkpoint twenty kilometers south of the border, we decided not to smoke our newfound weed until we got off the main road. Our long hair didn’t seem to be an issue with anyone in Mexico, maybe because we were strange enough just being gringos.

Too bad the same attitude didn’t prevail in Texas. The previous year during a nocturnal drive to South Padre Island to surf, a Kingsville deputy sheriff stopped me and a few friends south of Corpus Christi. The officer didn’t say why he stopped us, but it most likely had to do with the surfboards on top of our car—a textbook indication of hippies and illicit drugs.

“We don’t go for long-haired hippies in this county,” the deputy told us.

County patriotism was new to me. Regarding hippies, it was true I didn’t cut my hair often and I liked to get high, but I heard hippies didn’t bathe. That’s not me. I want a shower at least once a day. And hippies gave up everything and lived on communes and believed in free love. I had nothing against hippies. I admired them.

The deputy studied us, then added, “You are by far the

scroungiest looking bunch I ever seen.”

There was no pleasing this guy. Maybe a couple of the others were scroungy, but I certainly wasn't.

He informed us that if he found anything illegal in the car, anything, he repeated, we would get a free ride to the station for haircuts. It had been five years since Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper were blown away by rednecks in *Easy Rider*, yet long hair and scrounginess were still on the books as criminal offenses in King Ranch territory.

The lawman didn't find anything, and we departed with our scalps.

Not so fortunate were four surfer acquaintances arrested by the same deputy sheriff two weeks later. They had diligently stashed their pot but forgot about the open bottle of wine. The cops confiscated their car, and our friends were driven to jail where the deputy proved to be a man of his word by shaving their heads. Their experience was heightened by the LSD three of them had dropped an hour before their arrest.

Psychedelics in jail sounded like a bad trip to me, but they seemed to have made the best of it. Our friend said he was still tripping in the morning when one of the deputies came to work with bloody pieces of toilet paper stuck all over his cheeks because of razor cuts. It gave our friend the psychedelic uglies, big time. He laughed as he recited his tale and didn't seem to mind his own scabs on his shaved head. They were all released the next day—the deputy sheriff having done his part for the Get a Haircut/Keep America Beautiful campaign.

“This might be the turnoff up here,” Dan said and took his foot off the pedal.

A sign displayed an arrow pointing to the left, but the top was bent down. We could only read the bottom half. It wouldn't have been Toro Prieto, but it could have been Punta Roca Partida without the Punta.

I looked at the map. “It's gotta be.”

Dan turned left onto the dirt road, and I put in Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick*. A few minutes later, as Ian Anderson sang

about society teaching the young man to play Monopoly and sing in the rain, the VW jerked to the right. The front right tire was flat. With all the potholes we had encountered, I was surprised we lasted this long. We had the spare on in twenty minutes.

“We can go back to that Vulcanizadora on the main road to get the tire patched,” Dan suggested.

Mexico was inundated with shops that had huge tires hanging from trees with “Vulcanizadora” or “Taller” printed in white across them. We backtracked and got the flat fixed for eight pesos (64 cents).

Continuing on the road to Toro Prieto, we crossed a bridge with clear water rushing underneath. Changing the tire and waiting for the repair had made us grubby and sweaty. We put on our baggies and waded to some boulders in the middle of the river. The temperature felt twenty degrees cooler under the trees, and we sat and listened to the water rushing around the rocks.

“This might be a good time to sample one of those buds,” Dan said.

He went to the car and rolled a joint. The pot was good. Its smoke expanded fast in my lungs, and I coughed. It sure wasn't dirt weed. It was straight from the fields. After a few hits, Dan dabbed the end of the joint in the river. Waste not, want not.

A breeze swept under the branches, and birds alerted the neighborhood to the two gringos smoking reefer in their river. We sat on our boulders and listened. We were in Mexico now, almost at our destination. It was time to slow down and smell the sinsemilla flower tops.

We eventually unfastened ourselves from nature and got back on the road. Dan flipped the tape over, and *Aqualung* played.

Pastures rolled by with cows and horses and bulls with horns and low-hanging balls. Lime-green, dome-shaped hills appeared on our right. Beyond them, dark green mountains faded in the distance and humidity. We drove past cornfields and groves of avocados and oranges, and fields of what looked like corn but

without ears of corn.

Peasants and burros with sticks walked along the road, and a shepherd herded his goats to the side so we could pass. Forty minutes later, a green Gulf of Mexico filled the windshield.

The road curved right and paralleled the Gulf until it narrowed abruptly and offered us a fork. We took the left branch toward the Gulf, and several houses bumped by on our right before we ended up in front of a tin roof supported by varnished tree limbs. Wooden tables sat on the dirt under the front part of the roof, and a store or restaurant made up the back half. A man stood in the shadows behind a counter, watching. Dan and I got out and made our way through the chickens pecking at the dirt. The man raised a hinged section of the counter and came through.

He was short and thin with thick, coal-black hair and a brown face. With his abrupt mustache and upright posture, he resembled a 50- or 60-year-old Mexican Charlie Chaplin. He held his right hand out rigid and we shook.

“Soy El Mio. Siéntese,” he said and pointed to one of the tables. We sat down.

El Mio? That meant “mine.” Was his name Mine? Maybe I misunderstood.

“Soy Steve. Esto es Dan,” I told him.

“Mucho gusto,” he said.

“Su nombre es El Mio?”

“Si.” He nodded.

“Quieren refrescos?” asked El Mio.

“Si, una Coca, por favor.”

“Dos,” said Dan.

El Mio brought our refrescos and returned behind the counter. I looked around. Where we now sat had been just a spot on the map a week ago—an idea. Now we were part of this new reality. From under the roof, I could see only four small houses, but there was no shortage of roosters and chickens and pigs: baby pigs, medium pigs, big pigs and huge pigs. Some might have been hogs. My knowledge of swine extended only to

Arnold on the TV show *Green Acres*.

Dan and I were anxious to scope out the surf, so El Mio guided us along a path and through a slot between tall sand bluffs. We looked out on a tranquil green Gulf that stretched 800 miles to Texas. In front of us, transparent waves too small to surf peeled evenly into a small sand cove. We weren't disappointed. Our plan was to wait for cold fronts to bring swells. Down the beach, far to the right, Punta Roca Partida rose out of the water like the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Es esa Punta Roca Partida?" I asked El Mio just to make sure.

"Si, es La Roca," he answered.

Dan and I looked at each other. The point was at least a mile away. Maybe there was a village closer to it, or maybe we could drive over and camp out.

Between us and Punta, I noticed a low, flat island a thousand yards from the beach. Birds swarmed like gnats above it.

"What is that?" I asked El Mio in Spanish.

"An island," he answered.

"Does it have a name?"

"It is the home of the pelicans."

In the distance, the birds didn't look that big.

"All of them?"

"Yes." He smiled.

We took a different path back to the store and came upon a clear, fast-moving river. El Mio told us it was Toro Prieto's source of drinking water and where villagers bathed and washed clothes. El Mio talked non-stop as he guided us around, and although he spoke fast, we seemed to get the gist of what he said.

As we approached the store, a woman emerged from an area of thick bushes a hundred feet to our left. El Mio saw us looking and said those bushes served as their bathroom. Three pigs ran squealing and grunting into the brush. El Mio pointed to corn cobs lying near the bushes. With words and gestures, he explained that the cobs were for wiping el culo. He grinned as he told us the pigs kept them clean for the next user. Dan and I

had brought our own supply of toilet paper.

That evening, El Mio cooked fish and rice on a kerosene stove and told us almost everyone else in the village used wood stoves, which explained all the stick-toting. A cute girl wearing a sleeveless black-and-white dress brought a pitcher of cold, pale-green liquid. She was slender and tan with sun-tinted brown hair that fell past her shoulders.

As Dan and I drank the limeade mixed with some sort of alcohol, I noticed a line of minuscule ants running from the bottom of the pitcher to its rim. When I pointed out the ants swimming in our limeade, El Mio smiled.

“No toman mucho.” *They don't drink much.*

I asked El Mio how he could serve cold drinks without electricity, and he said that a truck brought ice every day. He pointed down the main road we had driven.

The girl brought a second pitcher, and El Mio introduced us.

“Está es mi hija, Isidra.” *This is my daughter, Eeseedra.*

“Hola, Isidra,” I said. “Soy Steve.” I started to shake her hand, but she held hers still.

“Hola, Esteef.”

Dan introduced himself, and she walked back behind the counter.

By the time we finished the second pitcher of limeade, it was dark. El Mio lit an oil lamp. I went to the Bug and retrieved our Coleman lantern. After placing it on a table, I pumped it and lit the filament with a match. El Mio watched and nodded.

Men from the village meandered in. They wore neat clothes and looked like they had spruced up. Dan and I were an attraction. Unlike El Mio, the lantern intrigued them, and they came to our table and asked about it. After a beer or two, they became more talkative and wanted to know where we were from, and what we intended to do with the tableros on top of our car.

I knew “olas” meant waves, but the only “ride” I knew was manejar, which related to driving a car. I basically answered, “We like to drive our boards on the waves.”

Most of the men in the village were campesinos, they told us, and worked in the fields, planting and harvesting corn, fruit and sugar cane.

After three pitchers of whatever was in the limeade besides ants, Dan and I didn't feel like setting up our tents. We laid our sleeping bags on the hard dirt between the tables. In the morning, over huevos rancheros and refried beans, we decided to stick to our plan and wait for a cold front. We would remain here in Toro, and if the waves weren't good enough, we would hike or drive to Punta Roca.

In the afternoon, El Mio led us to a wooden shack with no roof and said we could stay in it if we wanted. Villagers helped us cut palm fronds and construct a thatched roof. I had learned enough in boomtown Houston to be able to build tract homes, but this was my first thatched roof. That night, Dan and I discovered the Bug's AM radio could pick up KILT in Houston. We began monitoring the nightly news for impending cold fronts.

After settling in, we asked where we could put our trash but had difficulty getting our point across. Apparently, the residents of Toro utilized everything, and what they didn't use, the pigs ate. We had learned firsthand the pigs indulged in a non-discriminatory diet. Some pigs were so big, they were the size of calves and shook us awake in the middle of the night when they scratched their backs against the corners of our hut. We ended up piling our trash a short distance from the shack where we planned to burn it.

A few days later we were walking along Toro's dirt main street, and through a window we saw one of our discarded Pringles' potato chip tubes at the center of a dining room table. Forks, knives and flowers extended out the top of the red cardboard tube.

\*

Because of Dan's magazines, we became the source of social unrest in Toro. While loading the car in Houston, I had noticed the stack of *Playboys* in one of Dan's boxes but didn't give them

much thought. I was more interested in the three-book set of *The Teachings of Don Juan* in the same box. I had read Carlos Castaneda's first book and was anxious to read the next two about Don Juan, a Yaqui Indian medicine man in Mexico who guides Carlos Castaneda in his spiritual quest to become a Man of Knowledge.

According to Don Juan, when most people begin a quest to learn, their purpose is faulty and their intent is vague. They hope for rewards that will never materialize because they aren't prepared for the hardships involved. In the first book, psychedelic peyote buttons help Castaneda master the first stage of learning.

Dan's *Playboys* soon proved useful at the twenty-kilometer checkpoint south of the border. As Dan gathered our documents for the soldier in charge, I was told to pop the VW's hood. Two soldiers rummaged through our things while another walked around the Bug and looked inside.

When the two in front discovered Dan's magazines, the other two soldiers joined them, and they began leafing through what they called "*Los Libros de Mujeres (The Books of Women)*" and joking with each other. We got out of the car and Dan handed our visas and car documents to the chief, who only glanced at them before giving them back. The soldiers continued to paw the magazines, and we became impatient.

"Tell them to take one," Dan said to me.

"Pueden tener uno si quieren," I told the soldiers.

They took their eyes off the naked women and looked at us to verify their good fortune. As we drove away, I saw the soldiers in the rearview mirror, still in a huddle over their *Libro de Mujeres*.

From then on, we put the *Books of Women* on top of our stuff in the trunk to persuade soldiers to wrap up their search, and we kept our passports, visas and car papers together in the glove box so we could hand them over quickly.

The scandal in Toro began when the men who had helped with our thatched roof saw Dan's box of *Playboys*, and we let

them look at a few. Our abode soon became the place to be for the men in the village. They would stop by to say hello, then sit down in front of our shack and talk with us for a few minutes before one would utter the magic words “*Libros de Mujeres*” with a guilty smile.

When the women in the village learned what their husbands were up to in their off-time, they ostracized me and Dan, not even reciprocating a measly “*Buenas*” when we walked by. While the men lounged on the grass and perused *Los Libros*, their wives stood on the hillside with infants in arms, looking down at the decadence brought by the gringos. To top it off, these episodes unfailingly occurred immediately after Dan and I had partaken of the *sinsemilla*.

I thought about *Star Trek*'s prime directive not to interfere with the culture of alien civilizations. Although I didn't remember pornography mentioned in the TV series, we had absolutely interfered with the culture of Toro. Something needed to be done. Dan and I consulted.

While several of the men lay on the grass enjoying the naked *mujeres*, I went into our shack and returned with half the *Playboys*. I handed them to the largest aficionado.

“We don't want them. They are yours. *Un regalo*,” I told him. *A gift.*

He stared at me.

“No, no puedo,” he said and shook his head, most likely having considered the consequences with his real-life *mujer*.

I held out the stack to the *hombre* next to him, but when he reached for them, the first guy had a change of heart and intercepted. Word quickly spread we were no longer pornography dealers, and the women became friendly again. Since Toro now possessed porn, Dan and I had still violated the prime directive, but at least we were no longer a part of it.

\*

We survived on the supplies we bought in Veracruz: canned tuna and sardines, Chef Boyardee, peanut butter sandwiches and pop tarts, and we supplemented our diet with items *El Mio*

stocked in his little store. In the evenings, Dan and I often ended up at the tienda for dinner and cervezas. Isidra and I talked.

“Cuantos años tiene, Esteef?” she asked me. *How old are you?*

“Tengo veinte años. Y usted?” *I am twenty years old. And you?*

“Tengo veinte años, tambien.” *I am twenty, also.*

“Donde aprendiste Espanol?” she asked. *Where did you learn to speak Spanish?*

“En escuela.”

I had taken one semester of Spanish in college and the usual classes in high school.

At night, Isidra and I sat in the VW and listened to cassettes. She rested her hands on the steering wheel and focused through the windshield as if she were driving. I put in Pink Floyd’s latest album, *Dark Side of the Moon*, and the introduction to “Time” played with its cacophony of alarm clocks.

“Es esa música?” she asked. *Is that music?*

“Por Pink Floyd, si.”

She asked if a lot of music in los Estados Unidos sounded like that, and I told her no. Her natural beauty and expressions shone in the amber and blue lights of the dash as she concentrated on the music. Could a girl from a remote Mexican village understand lyrics about ten years passing you by before you realized you missed the starting gun?

“Dónde vive en los Estados Unidos?” she asked. *Where do you live in the United States?*

I removed the map of Texas from the glove box and spread it across our laps, then reached up and flipped on the overhead light.

“Yo vivo aqui,” I said and pointed to where Texas and Mexico were separated by the thin blue line of the Rio Grande. “Estamos vecinos.” *We are neighbors.*

“Si.” She smiled and stared at the map. “Esta muy lejos. Cuanto tiempo a manejar aqui?” *It is very far. How long did it take to drive here?*

“Un dia,” I answered.

I couldn’t read her expression, but, like me, she might have been wondering how such a different world could be just a day and a blue line away.

“Tiene una novia?” she asked. *Do you have a girlfriend?*

“No. Tiene un novio?” I answered. *Do you have a boyfriend?*

“No.”

\*

One evening, El Mio and I sat at a table and talked. He glanced at Isidra, who was working behind the counter.

“Ella es muy presentable, no?” he asked. *She is very presentable, no?*

I looked over at her. It took a few seconds to realize that El Mio had just asked me if Isidra would be an acceptable wife to take back to the United States. Isidra and I had known each other three weeks. We had only talked and walked along the river and beach—no kissing, no nothing. If she had given me signs, maybe I would have made a move, but I didn’t know anything about Mexican customs. American customs were hard enough to figure out.

“Si, ella es muy presentable,” I answered.

When I returned to our shack, Dan was lying on top of his sleeping bag reading Carlos Castaneda’s third book, *Journey to Ixtlan*. I picked up the second one, *A Separate Reality*, and thought about what El Mio had said.

The surf remained small, but Dan and I often paddled out in the afternoon for rejuvenation in the warm salt water, and to watch the lines of pelicans glide by after a hard day’s fishing.

We also explored, and would fill our canteens with river water and hike all around. One Saturday afternoon, we stumbled upon a group of locals hanging out in a barn, listening to a guitar player sitting on a wooden table at the front. We hadn’t met any of them, but they knew about us—everybody knew about us—and we were invited in. Some looked almost our age, but most were younger.

After performing a few folk-sounding Mexican songs, the

singer asked if either of us played. I took the guitar and began finger-picking Neil Young's "Tell Me Why," but the guitar was so out of tune, I stopped to tune it. I used the low E string for reference, and when I got to the last string, it snapped—just like that. I hadn't even raised the pitch of the first string. The smiles in the group went blank, and mild shock appeared on the guitar owner's face.

"Tiene una otra streeng?" I asked. *Do you have another string?*

"No." He shook his head.

No problema. I'll buy a new one.

"Hay una tienda?" I asked. *Is there a store?*

"Aqui no," he answered.

Of course there wasn't a store nearby that sold guitar strings. The closest one was probably three hours away by car—as if anyone had a car. I felt bad. I was only trying to tune the guitar for them, and now they didn't even have an out-of-tune guitar to play. Strike two on the prime directive front.

"Disculpame," I said. *I'm sorry.*

Dan and I walked out of the barn. Like everyone else, Dan stayed silent. He was most likely disappointed in me, too.

KILT finally announced that a cold front had passed through Houston. If the front moved as fast as its winds—about twenty miles per hour—the swell would arrive in a day and a half.

At dawn, our thatched roof blew away, and everything inside was strewn and drenched—including us. Apparently, cold fronts picked up speed as well as strength when they crossed the Gulf of Mexico.

Strong winds made the big waves unrideable for two days. It was not what we expected, though in hindsight, it should have been. Wind that comes from behind the waves makes them choppy. Wind that races 800 miles across the Gulf of Mexico blows them to shit. On the third day, the wind subsided. The waves still sucked, but we were afraid the size would drop overnight, so Dan and I paddled into the brown chop and attempted to surf the unpredictable peaks.

Villagers gathered on top of the sand bluff in their sweaters and serapes. They had waited weeks to see the beings from another planet do what they had come to do. We did not impress them. The few waves we caught allowed us to drop in and ride along the face for only three or four seconds before they closed out, i.e. breaking all at once. We spent most of the time paddling to keep from being swept down the beach by the wind and current. All of our observers except one disappeared after twenty minutes, and I was pretty sure it was Isidra who remained. I tried hard to get at least one decent ride and failed.

That evening at El Mio's, no one mentioned our surfing. Maybe they thought what they had watched was normal, or maybe they didn't want to embarrass us by mentioning it. Dan and I were bummed out. The attraction of staying in Toro the entire winter, living the laid-back tropical life and surfing warm waves, had lost an essential ingredient.

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El Mio told us Isidra and her cousin were preparing a meal for Dan and me. I understood it would not be just a regular meal but a special family meal. He said Isidra was a good cook, muy buena, and grinned.

El Mio sat at the end of the table. Isidra sat opposite me, and Dan faced her cousin, Taña. Dan had made it clear early on that he wasn't interested. Taña was no Isidra in the looks department. We ate sliced beef, rice with an orange-colored hot sauce, and a vegetable called ayote, which tasted like squash. Dan and I complimented the chefs.

Two hours later, as I lay in my pup tent inside our roofless shack, I felt queasy. Dan said he didn't feel so good either. Within minutes, we were both outside throwing up. Diarrhea ensued. Throughout the night, we crashed through our tent openings to make it out in time. To try to reach the community bushes would have resulted in disaster. When our illness continued for three days, Dan diagnosed us with amoebic dysentery.

"It's an omen," he said. "No waves, dysentery and no pot."

The sinsemilla had helped us through the worst of our infirmity but was now depleted. Smoking always put us in a good mood. Dan wanted to leave and find another place to surf. I considered it. The only attraction in Toro for me now was Isidra, and who knew how or if that would work out? I couldn't argue about the bad surf, and we might get sick again from the food or river water.

“Any ideas where to go?” I asked Dan.

We tallied up. I had \$290, and Dan was rich with \$600—enough to travel far and long. We unfolded the map and saw the Pacific was just a jaunt across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. From there, we had the option of going north up the Mexican coast or south to Guatemala. El Salvador was on the other side of Guatemala, and a friend and I had surfed big waves there the summer after graduating high school.

We read through our Sanborn's car insurance documents and found that our insurance was valid for all of Central America. Even though passports weren't required in Mexico, we had brought ours, which was a good thing because most of the Central American countries required them. El Salvador it was.

When I told El Mio of our plans, he nodded, no smile, and stared at me. I looked around for Isidra, although I didn't know what I was going to say. Would she think our time together meant nothing to me? Would she care?

Dan and I stopped by the tienda in the evening for final cervezas, but Isidra didn't show up. After packing our things in the morning, we parked in front of the store and settled our account with El Mio. There was no sign of Isidra. I couldn't leave without saying goodbye. When I asked El Mio where she was, he told me she had walked to the river. I grabbed my camera from the car. I had taken a good picture of El Mio and his wife with all their children, but Isidra had been absent.

She was sitting on a rock, facing the river. As I approached, she stood and turned toward me. When I got closer, she backed away. I stopped.

“Me voy,” I said. *I'm going.*

“Ok.”

“A El Salvador.”

“Adios,” she said.

“Yo regresaré después El Salvador.” *I will return after El Salvador.*

She looked at the ground in front of my feet.

“Una foto,” I said and held up the camera.

“Por qué?” she asked. *Why?*

To remember you, I almost answered before I realized that wouldn’t sound right.

“No lo sé. Para tener,” I said. *I don’t know. To have.*

When I raised the camera, she shook her head and started to turn away. I snapped a photo. Afterward, she allowed me to get close enough to shake her hand goodbye.

El Mio was behind the counter when I got back, and I bought two Cokes for the road. Over his shoulder, I saw my carved miniature surfboard that had disappeared when our roof blew away. It lay on the table where Isidra did the store’s paperwork. I had intended to give it to her when I finished it.

We said goodbye to El Mio, and Dan bounced us along the dirt road that brought us to Toro three weeks earlier. He requested Crosby, Stills and Nash, but both CSN albums were on opposite sides of a tangled cassette, so I put in Jackson Browne’s *For Everyman*.

The same countryside rolled by, but the movie through the windshield now had more depth. I knew about the shacks we passed and the campesinos who lived in them, where they got their water, why they toted sticks, and that the fields with the stalks resembling corn were sugar cane fields. Caña dulce. I had sipped its juice and chewed the canes.



## CHAPTER TWO

El Salvador

*Bandidos*

We slowed for the topos at Santiago Tuxtla and San Andres Tuxtla, then turned south around Lake Catemaco. At the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, we made a right and drove its hundred miles with a gusty tailwind rocking the Bug the entire way. At the Pacific, Dan turned south and we drove a half hour before coming to a stop behind traffic. I stuck my head out the window and saw soldiers in green uniforms at the front. We were 200 miles from the Guatemala border.

The cars inched forward while several trunks were opened and searched. A soldier carrying a rifle walked to my window. He bent down and looked across to Dan. I took off my sunglasses. He was younger than us and said nothing as he turned to me then back to Dan. His face was pocked, and his oval eyes were as black and shiny as obsidian. I couldn't read them, but I got the impression we were his first long-haired surfers. Another soldier walked to the back of the Bug and looked through the rear windshield at our boxes, tents, Coleman lantern and everything else.

"Papeles," the soldier finally said.

Our documents were in my lap, ready to go. If Dan and I aspired to become Men of Knowledge per *The Teachings of Don Juan*, being Men of Papers was a step in the right direction.

The soldiers could search all they wanted. The only thing

that would interest them would be the *Libros de Mujeres*. He returned our papers and motioned us on with no search. At the Guatemala border, we were told we couldn't enter the country without yellow fever vaccinations. We backtracked to a clinic near Tapachula for inoculations and still crossed the border before sunset.

Ten minutes into Guatemala, a loud bang came from the engine compartment, followed by a consistent pop, pop, popping of what sounded like an air rifle firing. We got out and opened the engine hatch. A spark plug was lying on the sheet metal to the right of the engine. The Bug had blown a plug, and the threads of its hole in the engine were stripped.

We had just passed a huge tire leaning against a tree with the words "Taller Mecánico" emblazoned in white, so we limped back to the shop. During my senior year in high school, I had rebuilt the engine of a 1959 Karmann Ghia by reading *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive* by John Muir. Later, I worked at Kevorkian's VW repair shop. I was curious as to how this problem would be resolved.

The mechanic picked up a huge bolt in his workshop and drilled a hole in it. Then he screwed the spark plug into it so that the firing part stuck out the bottom. After drilling a bigger hole in the engine where the spark plug normally went, he screwed the bolt with the spark plug into the new hole. We paid him two dollars and hit the road.

With a name like the Pan American Highway, we figured it would be the route to take, so we turned north from the coast and climbed a muddy road into rain and mist and night. The so-called highway dragged us through every city, and after depositing us in their centers, offered no clue how to exit.

"All paths are the same, but only one has a heart," Dan recited as we circled Quetzaltenango's town square at midnight trying to figure out which street would get us back to the highway.

He was quoting *The Teachings of Don Juan*. The correct path was one with a heart, and would make for a happy journey

as long as you stayed on it. It would give you strength, while other paths would weaken you. With Don Juan's guidance, Dan and I followed the path with heart out of Quetzaltenango and all the other towns we encountered during the night.

As soon as we came to a decent road back to the coast, we jumped on it. Our map showed the coastal highway as paved, but long sections were dirt and rock. When there was pavement, we sometimes drove even slower to avoid the fathomless potholes.

The road gradually rose six or seven feet as it approached rivers, then ended abruptly in mid-air, resuming in mid-air on the other side. Spray-painted arrows on plywood signs and trees directed us off the road before we became Evel Knievels, but the real feat was not to miss those signs in the dark. Bridges might some day connect the two sides.

By sunrise, Dan and I were beat. We set up camp on a volcanic sand beach and slept. In the afternoon, we learned how fast you can run on sunbaked black sand and still get the soles of your feet scorched. The waves were small, but they had Pacific Ocean power and hinted of what lay in store for us. Before crossing into El Salvador the next day, we parked in a river and washed the car and ourselves. Afterward, we put on clean clothes—our border clothes.

When my high school friend Jack and I had gone to El Salvador three years earlier, no information had been available regarding surf spots—only that there was surf. A taxi drove us down the coast in search of waves and dropped us off at a fishing village called Majagual. We spent two sleepless nights in a thatched room above a raucous bar while trying to surf big, closed-out waves during the day.

The second afternoon, a fisherman on the beach urgently tried to tell me something. I finally understood that the water had many big fish that ate people, and that *tiburón* meant shark. I paddled out and relayed the message to Jack.

Back then, Jack and I continued south to Zunzal Point and ended up as housemates of a Peace Corps worker who lived

across the road from the point. We shared the house and the rocky point break with two Floridians who surfed with their ankles tethered to their boards by bungee cords. When they wiped out, they didn't have to swim all the way in or over rocks to retrieve their boards. Jack and I took a bus to the coastal city of La Libertad and bought bungees and leather, and the Floridians showed us how to make leashes. It changed everything. We had freedom to try things we wouldn't have before.

Dan and I now rolled into La Libertad and discovered that El Salvador had been discovered. The town was jammed with surfers in baggies and huaraches. After a month of not seeing another gringo, we were culture-shocked. The waves would surely be crowded. We drove to the point to check out the surf and parked under palm trees in front of a new restaurant. Where waves normally peeled across the mile-wide bay, there was only smooth, blue water.

We sat on a porch overlooking the ocean, and someone sitting nearby told us a surfer from Texas had married a local girl and built the restaurant two years ago. My pride about being in El Salvador before it was discovered diminished. Not only had another surfer come here soon after me, he had married a local girl and built a restaurant. He was a person who went for what he wanted.

The guy we were talking to said he knew someone who was looking for roommates to share a big house in town. Dan and I drove to the house and talked to a curly-haired surfer from New York City named Lenny. His hometown surf breaks were Long Island and Coney Island, which I thought was just an amusement park. We liked the house and unpacked the Bug. Lenny told us there were more surf spots north and south of La Libertad, but a vehicle was needed to get to them. He said most of the surfers in town had arrived in El Salvador by bus or plane and didn't have cars. The outlook for uncrowded surf improved.

We set up our hammocks on the porch and waited for surf. A week passed with no waves, and a bummed-out attitude

descended upon the surf community. When there were waves, surfers fought for them. They paddled past others to get closer to where the wave would begin breaking so it became *their* wave. But when it was flat, we were all brothers (and a few sisters) in mourning.

Dan and I became bored.

“We should go for it,” he said.

He was talking about returning to Mexico and bringing back weed to La Libertad.

“To smoke or sell?” I asked.

“If we’re going to do it, may as well make it worth our while. This place needs something.”

I agreed. I laid Castaneda’s *Journey to Ixtlan* on my stomach and looked over at Dan in his hammock.

“We’ve got to get our passports renewed in a few days anyway,” I said.

When we had entered El Salvador, the customs official only wrote fourteen days in our passports. To get an extension, the normal routine was to drive up to the capital. Leaving the country and re-entering would also get us an extension but wasn’t worth the hassle—unless an incentive was added. I looked up at the tin roof and visualized a map of El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico. I saw the army roadblock 200 miles into Mexico.

“Let’s look at the map,” I said and went into the house to get it.

I laid the map on the tile between our hammocks and pointed to where we had run into the roadblock.

“If we go to Veracruz, or anywhere far into Mexico, we’ll have to go through that roadblock,” I said.

Our eyes settled at the same spot on the map. Dan reached down and put his finger on it.

“This road here, before the roadblock. It goes up to this city, Tuxtla Gutierrez. It looks big. Maybe we can score there.”

We rose from our hammocks and walked to the Bug to see where we could hide some pot. A strip of metal trim ran along

the bottom of the back of the rear seat's backrest. We removed the trim and particle-board cover. Inside the backrest were four large black springs and mucho available space.

We kept our mission to ourselves and told our new acquaintances we were exiting the country to get more time stamped in our passports. Lenny said he knew an agent at the border who would give us ninety days if we asked. He wrote the person's name on a scrap of paper and said a few dollars would facilitate the request.

As we journeyed north, Dan and I studied the roads and the border crossings at Guatemala and Mexico. Four hours after crossing into Mexico, we turned right and climbed the mountains to Tuxtla Gutierrez. There were no army or police stops along the way, and we settled into a hotel near the town center. Now all we needed was a connection. After dinner, Dan and I split up to improve our chances of scoring. I walked to the zocalo (the town's main square) and sat on a bench, then strolled about and had a cerveza or two.

\*

I woke up when Dan came into the hotel room and sat on his bed. He hadn't had any luck finding weed, but he thought he had scored with a cute American girl until she left for a few minutes and returned with her sister who was single, unlike herself, and not attractive. She had led him on, Dan complained.

"I made a connection," I told him.

He straightened up.

"Some guys were smoking pot, sitting at the town square away from the crowd. I sat down a few benches from them and they waved me over. One said he knew where to get kilos of some good mota. That's what he called it."

"Mota," Dan repeated.

"We're going to meet on the road south of town at noon. Five kilos for a hundred and fifty bucks."

Dan nodded.

"Are we buying the same stuff you smoked with them? Was it good?" he asked.

I removed a half-joint and a book of matches from the top drawer of the dresser and handed them to him.

“It’s not like what we bought in Veracruz. The guy said the weed is compressed into bricks. But it’s strong and tastes good. And the bricks will be easier to stash.”

Dan took a few hits and was back in a good mood.

The next day, we met my new connection at a closed restaurant on the highway and followed him a short distance up a dirt road. After consummating the deal, we hid the five bricks inside the back seat, then raised the backrest upright and put a sleeping bag and cardboard box behind it in the luggage area.

Although we only had two borders to cross, we would be stopped on both sides of each, so there was a potential for four inspections. That didn’t include any pop-up roadblocks the army or police might spin across our path.

Leaving Mexico and entering Guatemala went smoothly. The agents stamped our passports, issued car papers, and we were on our way. They didn’t even ask us to open the hood. In Guatemala we stayed on the coastal road, and the border with El Salvador came earlier than expected. It was night, and Dan was kneeling on the rear seat, reaching over the backrest to re-stash some pot when two soldiers appeared in the headlights. I hit the brakes and told Dan to get back up to the front, pronto.

“I’m almost done,” he said.

“Hurry, we’re at the station.”

One of the soldiers motioned me forward, and I continued slowly. I had to go fast enough not to raise suspicion, but I didn’t want them to see Dan climbing back up to the front. Dan fell into his seat a hundred feet before we got to them. Good thing it was dark.

A soldier walked to my side, and another went to Dan’s. My guy held a clipboard and asked for our papeles. Dan handed me our documents, and I gave them to the soldier. He walked around the front of the car and disappeared into a small building on our right. No one told us to do anything, so we stayed put.

The soldier on Dan’s side walked directly to the back of the

Bug and shined his flashlight through the back window. Had he seen Dan climbing over the seat?

“Venga,” he called. *Come.*

Did he see some weed or skewed trim Dan hadn’t finished reinstalling in his haste? Shit. What were we thinking—smuggling marijuana across international borders?

Dan and I looked at each other and got out of the car. I walked in slow motion around the back to where Dan stood. The soldier pointed a finger through the rear window where his flashlight aimed. Our own flashlight lay on the floor behind the backseat. It was on and illuminating the entire left half of the luggage area as well as the backrest and trim. I saw that all the screws were in place and no contraband was in sight. Exhale.

As the soldier and I looked at each other, I tried to read his thoughts on the issue. I finally shrugged, and so did he. Dan opened the passenger door and reached over the back seat for the flashlight. As we followed the soldier into the office, I gave Dan a very dissatisfied look. The first guy handed back our passports and car papers, and we drove away.

Two hundred feet down the road came El Salvador’s entry. I parked in front of the immigration office and we walked inside. Where did I put that piece of paper with the customs official’s name? It was probably buried inside my duffel bag. A real Man of Papers would have kept it secure with all the other documents.

“I’ll put money in the passports,” I said to Dan. “We could luck out and it’ll be the right guy.”

I slid both passports to the official behind the counter, one with a U.S. ten-dollar bill inside. American dollars were valued in El Salvador. He looked at the passports and money, then up at me.

“We would like ninety days, por favor,” I said. It seemed like he was waiting for an explanation.

The officer nodded and removed the bill. I watched as he stamped our passports and wrote ninety days in both. Alright. He began to close them but hesitated and stared at my open passport. He looked up.

“You have already been in the country. I am sorry. I cannot give you ninety days,” he said in Spanish.

What? What kind of law was that? He stared at me with droopy, sorry eyes. Did he want more money?

I took another ten-dollar bill from my wallet and placed it on the counter.

“No puedo,” he said. *I can't*. He shook his head and drew a line through the ninety days and wrote fourteen days underneath. “You can go to the capital for an extension,” he told us and closed our passports.

Dan was standing to my right, watching. He reached in front of me to grab the second bill, but I placed my hand on his arm to stop him. The official turned to Dan with an expression that appeared hostile in any language. Then he gave me a stare that I took to mean “your friend just fucked up.” But I could have been wrong. Maybe I was the one who fucked up. What was apparent, though, was that we had breached some rule of bribe etiquette. The agent slid our passports to us—without the cash.

The next day, we began spreading joy across the land, selling ounces for thirty dollars and transforming the heretofore sullen attitude of the surf community into something positive. Everyone became upbeat and optimistic, taking stock of things that had become mundane: the banana and coconut and papaya trees that grew in our yards, the hummingbirds that siphoned nectar from red and yellow and blue flowers, and the gigantic afternoon thunderstorms that mushroomed over the Pacific, drifted into town and dumped rain to cool our world and make it pleasant for an evening stroll through La Libertad. Best of all, a swell arrived.

As expected, the point at La Libertad was crowded, so Dan and I drove north and checked out other spots. Zunzal, where Jack and I had surfed with the Floridians three years before, also had too many surfers. We continued north to the town of El Zonte and surfed a right point break at a small half-moon cove by ourselves.

A few nights later, I had it in my mind that I needed to get

out of the hammock to do something—that Dan and I were waiting, but I couldn't remember for what. How long had we been lying in our hammocks listening to Genesis' *Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*? It was a double album, and one side of an LP ran about twenty minutes, and two sides of an LP fit on one side of a cassette. I had flipped the tape over, so we must have been lying here for at least forty minutes. Did I flip it over twice? That wouldn't make sense. I tried to figure out which side was playing but couldn't. One thing certain was that I was thirsty. My mouth felt like cotton.

Dan hadn't said anything in a while. Or had he? His eyes were open and aimed at the underside of the porch's tin roof. I looked up and saw a line of ants moving across a wood beam that supported the rafters. Is that what Dan was looking at? As I stared at them, another line of ants appeared to the side. I turned to look at those, and a third line of ants appeared in my periphery. When I turned to those, they quit moving as if they saw me looking and stopped, all of them at the same time. What kind of awareness was that? And why would they care if I watched?

While I observed, the ants melted into the wood—into a dark brown line. After some focusing, I realized there were no ants. I had been looking at a split in the wood beam. I turned back to the previous lines of ants. They, too, no longer existed.

I remembered what Dan and I were waiting for. We had traded a few ounces of weed for two dozen hits of blotter acid and were waiting to come on to the hits we had taken. The waiting was over. I extricated myself from the hammock and went to the refrigerator for a cerveza.

After our beers, Dan and I walked down to the water. We sat on big rocks and watched phosphorescent waves peel across the bay under the full moon. Instead of sand, the beach was made up of different-size round stones. We listened as they rolled around on top of each other in the surf. I felt their vibrations through the boulder I sat on—Earth's vibrations.

Sometime later, we walked along the shore to the town

cemetery. The moon shone so bright that our shadows were as distinct as if the sun had been out. We wandered among the tombstones and read their names and dates without a flashlight. Back at our house, we smoked a doobie and put Fleetwood Mac's *Future Games* in the tape deck. We lay in our hammocks and listened to the long mellow songs and the faint surf and rolling rocks. I closed my eyes, but my brain didn't sleep for a while.

I awoke around noon with the post-psychedelic blues—the emptiness caused by loss of the acid-enhanced perception. Late afternoon, Dan and I paddled out at Libertad Point and surfed with the crowd. Although we both caught waves, neither of us liked to fight for them. I preferred my communion with Mother Nature more peaceful.

Dan and I decided La Libertad was not for us. Hanging out in Surf City was not the reason we had traveled south from Texas. In addition, our house did not have soul—a concept we learned from Carlos Castaneda. We had gotten off track. The next day, Dan and I drove to El Zonte and found a house to rent—a ranchita, the owner called it (*small ranch*). We moved in the next day and watched the sun set behind our own point break. Back on track, just like that.

The swell stayed decent, and we surfed the point alone until a surfer we had met in town got off the bus with his board. Dan and I were a little bummed, but, really, three surfers at a point break wasn't the worst thing in the world. Scott was from North Carolina and had learned to surf on Cape Hatteras. As we paddled out, Dan and I mentioned we had each taken a hit of acid.

I caught a few head-high waves and got acclimated to the acid, then a real set came through and I was dropping, almost free-falling, down the face of a big wave. It was peeling right, so my back was to it. When I got to the bottom, I sank my fin and looked above my right shoulder at a rainbow-sparkling wall of water. I felt the warmth of the colors. They tickled. I smiled, maybe laughed, and projected to the top of the wall, just below

where a million tiny white bubbles popped and sizzled.

The wave began to tube, so I slowed and let it fold over me while the shore disappeared behind my personal waterfall. Before the wave closed out, I shot through the aperture, went down a little, then up and over the top and into the air. I came down weightless and landed hard on my board while the ocean glittered all around. I was still living the ride when the top of the wave blew back, and cool, fat droplets showered me.

I paddled back out and took a place between Dan and Scott, who sat too far out. He was playing it safe—away from the rocks. I was about to tell him to paddle closer to us when a big fin rolled over at the surface five feet behind him. Fuck.

“Shark behind you,” I yelled.

Dan turned to me.

“Fucking shark,” I yelled. Dan didn’t hesitate. He paddled.

Catching a wave would have been the quickest way out of there, but a glance to sea showed none on the horizon. I paddled fast and hard behind Dan and hoped Scott did the same. He was the one most likely to be attacked. But if he got ahead of me, I would be the chosen one. When I’d made some distance, I turned to Scott and saw he had kept up with me. At that moment, the shark’s fin came out of the water the exact distance from him as before. Behind the shark, a wave broke.

“It’s right behind you. Catch the wave in,” I yelled.

I clenched the rails of my board, and was rocked to the beach by an avalanche of white water. Scott caught the same wave. Dan stood on the beach, watching. My high had disappeared for the moment. Funny how adrenaline tops acid.

\*

The time for our passport renewal arrived, and we drove up the mountain to San Salvador. The line at the counter moved slowly. When we handed the official our passports, he studied them and said, “Un momento” and disappeared through a door in the back. Un momento later, he returned and ushered us around the counter and through the same doorway. Inside the office, a chubby Salvadoran in a brown uniform sat behind a big

desk.

“Siéntese,” he said. We sat down in front of his desk.

He stared at Dan and me for several seconds, then held up two ten-dollar bills and a piece of paper, all stapled together.

“Did you give this to an official at the border?” he asked in Spanish.

I studied the money.

“Yes,” I said. We couldn’t lie about it.

“Why did you give money to a government official?”

The tricky part would be predicting the consequences of any potential answer. The only way to play it was the ignorant, naïve route. We were just twenty-year-old, stupid, gringo, college kids. What would they do?

“Because we wanted to stay longer in your country,” I answered, which wasn’t an explanation, but it was the truth.

The colonel or major or whatever kept his eyes on us and shook his head. We had upset him.

“You have committed una ofensa grave,” he said sternly.

If those words had similar meanings to the English they resembled, it wasn’t good.

“You have forty-eight hours to leave the country,” he told us in Spanish.

He wrote in our passports and made it official by striking them with a hand-carved wooden stamp. When he gave them back, “48 horas a salir del pais” was etched into a new page. *48 hours to leave the country.* Fuck.

\*

Dan and I watched the waves from the back porch of our ranchita and wondered what we were going to do. We had just settled into a house with soul and its own point break, not to mention our steady income. What would we do with the pot if we returned to Mexico? But we didn’t want to go back to Mexico.

That evening, we told our surfing acquaintances in La Libertad about our misfortune. They came up with something we hadn’t thought about.

## Flying Into the Sun

“Costa Rica,” they said. “Head south.”

“Good surf.”

“No crowds.”

“Go for it.”



## CHAPTER THREE

Costa Rica

*The Brotherhood*

Honduras came first, followed by Nicaragua, then Costa Rica. Before each crossing, we washed the Bug and ourselves in a river and put on our border clothes. The coastal route was a mix of asphalt, broken asphalt, potholes and rocks, and the Bug was not happy about it. Thin aluminum tubes protected the pushrods at the bottom of the engine, but nothing protected the aluminum tubes. The rocks we drove over kept bumping and bending them, and oil began to seep at their ends. The solution was simple—keep adding oil. We stopped for oil more often than for gas. One night, we were forced to make a pit stop at a small factory for whatever oil they were using in their machines. The Bug didn't mind. That oil would be gone in four hours, and a flashing yellow light would alert us to its thirst.

In Nicaragua, we sidetracked to a black sand beach that sparkled silver in the sunlight and dropped steeply into waves that broke right onshore. A grove of coconut trees extended from the beach to nearby hills, and Dan and I sat in their shade as parrots flew under the fronds, squawking en masse. We dropped some acid and went swimming. It was the first time since Toro I had gone in the ocean without a board, and I floated serenely on my back while surging in and out.

Afterward, Dan and I sat at the top of the steep beach and

timed it so our somersaults coincided with waves crashing onto the sand below. We were back on top, drying and baking, and I was staring at white foam receding on shiny black sand when I felt a tapping on my leg. I turned to Dan. His face was twisted as he pointed over his shoulder. A campesino stood six feet away, wearing a ragged straw hat and a baggy shirt tucked behind a rope belt. I saw why Dan was making a face.

Four dead iguanas hung from the guy's right shoulder and down his chest. Below that shoulder was no arm. Under the brim of the hat, his right eye appeared as a white marble, and a vertical scar cut into the cheek below. The sight of him and his iguanas probably would not have affected anyone level-headed, but Dan and I were not level-headed at the moment. I laughed. Then Dan laughed. Then Iguana Man laughed. The iguanas did not laugh, but one opened its eyes. They were alive.

“Fresca,” the man said and grinned. *Fresh*. His missing teeth were balanced by an equal number of gold ones. Did he wink at me?

Dan and I managed a conversation with the guy. He had gotten messed up in a machete battle during a border war between El Salvador and Honduras. We declined to purchase any iguanas, and he continued down the beach.

Upon entering Costa Rica, we had yet to decide on a precise destination. The Nicoya Peninsula was near the border, but friends had surfed there, and I remembered the pictures they took of too many sharks patrolling the water close to shore. Dan and I continued to the capital to scope the lay of the land.

After a few nights at a hostel in San Jose, we headed to Quepos on the Pacific. For a couple of days, we paddled across a wide river adjacent to the town and surfed decent-sized waves on a long beach. We got a few good rides, but most of the waves closed out.

Further exploration revealed a white sand beach alongside a tranquil ocean thirty minutes south of town. The bartender at a restaurant told us we were at one of three coves just designated a national park named Manuel Antonio. We could get to the

other ones by crossing a tidal river up the beach. There were actually five coves, and all had been owned by a retired American until Costa Rica declared eminent domain and took possession of the first three.

We drove over the sand to the tidal river and looked across to where the road disappeared into the jungle. The river was too deep, so we left the VW on the beach and waded to the other side. We hiked under a solid canopy of branches and breathed thick, flowery air as parrots and red macaws fluttered in the branches overhead. In ten minutes, the path opened to white sand and blue water with two peninsulas extending out at each side. People swam and waded in the water, and tents were set up under a row of trees at the top of the beach.

Dan and I drove back to our hotel and checked out. When we returned to the beach, the river was down because the tide was lower, so I circled back over the sand to pick up speed, and we splashed across.

We spent the next several days snorkeling for puka shells, stalking schools of yellow and blue fish and hiking the rocky ocean ledges to the fifth cove and beyond. It would have been paradise except for the monkeys that dropped from the trees and stole from campsites and cars, and the psychedelic-colored land crabs that tried to creep into our sleeping bags at night. One left a claw on Dan's finger when he tried to evict it from the back floorboard of the car. During the day, hundreds of crabs moved as one and covered entire sections of the beach like something out of a science fiction movie.

The peninsula on the right side of the cove was nearly an island since it was connected to the shore by only a narrow strip of sand. The monkeys supposedly lived there, so one afternoon Dan and I set out to explore Monkey Island and maybe find their lair and everyone's stolen stuff.

We climbed up through a jungle so dense, the atmosphere had been sucked dry, and our lungs worked hard to breathe within the vacuum. At the top, we shimmied out a branch that extended horizontally from a rock cliff and sat with our legs

dangling over the cobalt Pacific hundreds of feet below. A yellow trimaran motored from around the point and passed directly below us. I yelled down, but neither of the two sailors in the cockpit looked up.

After descending back into a shady forest, we sat against a fallen tree and smoked a joint.

“I don’t think this is where the monkeys live,” Dan said.

“They could be out stealing.”

Leaves dropped onto the forest floor nearby. But leaves shouldn’t make that much noise. Dan and I looked up. Nothing, and no more falling leaves or branches. When we stood up to continue our search, the dropping resumed. We looked up again and hell broke loose—monkeys from hell. Dozens of them bombarded us, and they were no longer hiding. They jumped up and down on high branches and threw things at us, and something brown and soft hit Dan in the shoulder. It was shit. Monkey shit. We ran, and they chased us from above and threw more branches and shit. The only quick way out was to jump into the water and swim across the cove to our beach.

\*

Tents were for short-term residence, so we found a shack on the road between Quepos and the coves for five dollars a month. It came furnished with its own outhouse and water well. There were very few houses along the road, and the only one we could see from our new home was a bamboo mansion that two rumored ex-gold smugglers had built. The Bug was happy to have a home, too. It quit leaking so much oil, I guess because the engine wasn’t getting as hot with the shorter drives.

\*

After moving into our shack, Dan and I were driving back from Quepos when, up ahead, a girl in jean cutoffs and a scarf around her head was thumbing. Dark red hair fell from under the scarf onto her shoulders. I stopped.

“Hola,” said Dan from the passenger seat.

“Hola,” she replied.

“A dónde vas?” I asked, across Dan.

“La playa.” *The beach.*

“Vamos.” *Let’s go.*

Dan got out, and she climbed into the back. I would have preferred her in front, but Dan had seniority.

Sylvia was vacationing from Panama and had been in Costa Rica for two months. She said her nickname was Panama Red, which was a type of weed from Panama—a very good type. As we drove, Bob Dylan sang “Like a Rolling Stone” on the cassette deck, and she started singing along in English.

“Habla inglés?” I asked, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

“No.” She returned my gaze, then looked out the side window and resumed singing.

“No entiende las palabras?” I asked. *You don’t understand the words?*

“No,” she said and added, “Un poco.” *A little.*

I dropped Dan off at our house and drove Sylvia to the beach.

“Necesita regresar a su casa?” she asked. *Do you need to return to your house?*

“No.”

We sat at the bar in the beach restaurant and drank a beer or two. She told me she had seen me before. I was surprised I hadn’t noticed her.

The next afternoon, Sylvia and I rendezvoused at the restaurant and walked across the tidal river to the strip of sand that connected Monkey Island to the cove. She took off her top and leaned back in the sand. This was new to me. I had heard Europeans sunbathed topless. We swam in the cove, then lay down on a towel and kissed. That night, Sylvia stayed with me in my room (the back porch of our shack) and soon spent every night there.

\*

When Sylvia needed to retrieve clothes from where she had been staying, I drove her. She walked across the front porch to the side of the house, raised a window and crawled through. The front door opened and I went in. When I asked why she had to

go through the window, she mentioned something about not having a key. Sylvia grabbed her stuff and we left.

Her temperament was something new for me. She would get mad for unknown reasons, and I figured it was the hot-blooded Latin thing I had heard about. She once slapped me in the face, flew out the front door and disappeared down the road to the beach. I thought that was the end of her, but in the evening, she strolled up to the shack wearing a thin, blue halter top she had somehow fashioned from a handkerchief of mine.

One night, the landlord's wife came to our house, worried and almost in tears.

"Mi hijo, mi hijo. Yo no se dónde está." *My child, my child. I don't know where he is.* Her son should have returned from the beach hours ago, she said.

"Vamos a ver," I said. *Let's go see.*

I drove her to the restaurant on the beach where her son sat on a bar stool, drinking beer with his buddies. He was 18 or 19 years old and told his mother he would get a ride home in a little while.

\*

"Something's going on," Dan said as he looked out our window.

Sylvia had hitched into town, so it was just us at the shack. I looked up the road and saw two black-and-white police cars parked in front of our smuggler neighbors' bamboo palace.

"We need to hide our stash," I said.

I went to the back and placed the baggie in a hole in the dirt, then put a rock on top of it. Dirt and rocks surrounded our house.

When the policia arrived, Dan and I were sitting nonchalantly at our dining room table. Dan laid down his paperback as I welcomed them. The chief asked for our passports and told us they needed to search the shack. He directed one man to look inside the house and the other to search outside. No one went to the Bug, where five pounds of mota were still hidden in the back seat. Dan and I and the police jefe sat at the table and waited. The policeman who had gone to the

backyard returned way too soon. He held up the plastic bag containing our pot and cigarette papers.

How did he find it, and so fast? Had he seen me hide it? I know I had kept out of view.

He handed the baggie to the chief, who examined it. There was only enough for three or four joints. The chief said nothing, and we waited until the other officer finished his search inside the house.

“Come to the oficina de policia tomorrow morning at ten,” we were told.

El Jefe put our passports in his shirt pocket, and the three police walked across the road to our landlord's house. Fifteen minutes later, the police cars drove toward Manuel Antonio.

“What do you think they’ll do?” Dan asked.

“I don’t know.”

“How can they prove it’s ours, anyway?” he said. “They found it in the backyard, not in the house or on us. It could’ve been there before we got here.”

He had a point, but the Quepos cops wouldn’t buy it.

“We didn’t deny it,” I said. “And they didn’t arrest us. If it was serious, they would have taken us in, don’t you think?”

Dan stared at his fingers tapping the table-top.

\*

At ten a.m., we sat across a desk from the police chief and awaited our fate. He opened a drawer and pulled out our bag of pot, then looked at us for a few seconds before laying it on the desk. He stared at us some more, then looked down at the pot. We get it. It’s our weed. We’re muy malo.

“Marijuana is illegal in Costa Rica,” he said in Spanish.

I nodded in acknowledgment of our sins as did Dan. We were just college kids on a break, trying to catch a few waves. It wasn’t like we were criminals. The officer looked at Dan and me a bit longer, then slid our passports across the desktop to us.

“Gracias,” we told him.

I stood up and looked down at the plastic baggie on his desk. We had plenty of pot, but those cigarette papers were hard to

come by. We'd have to go back to inhaling the 50-year-old wallpaper from the walls of our shack. *Cigarette papers aren't illegal, are they, señor?*

As we walked out of the police station, I figured it had to have been our landlord telling the cops what great hombres we were that got us off.

A few days later, our gold-smuggling neighbors told Dan they learned the reason for the search. Someone had informed the police that gringos living on the road to Manuel Antonio were selling marijuana. The snitch was Sylvia's ex-boyfriend. The window she had gone through had been at his house.

He belonged to an association called The Brotherhood of Eternal Love, based in California. Six months earlier, Costa Rica cops had busted him for possession of hash oil that his Brotherhood had been moving through the country. The government confiscated his passport and told him they would return it after he spent all the money in his Costa Rica bank account. That was his punishment. When he discovered Sylvia had ditched him for me, he had somehow found out about our selling weed and told the cops. *Brotherhood, indeed.*

Even before Sylvia came into the picture, Dan and I had been spending less time together. He now hung out with friends in Quepos. Dan had been a good traveling and business partner, and I must not have been too bad, either, since he had asked for a divorce only once. We took the pot out of the back seat and divided it so we could each sell what we wanted whenever we wanted. I buried mine out back (far from the house, this time).

\*

A week later in Quepos, I ran into one of our ex-gold-smuggling neighbors. We talked a little, and he asked, "How do you feel?"

"What do you mean?"

"Physically," he said.

"Fine. Why?"

"Your eyes are yellow."

My eyes were brown. I didn't understand.

“The whites of your eyes are yellow,” he said. “You feel good?”

I thought for a second. “Actually, I have been kind of tired.”

“I think you’ve got jaundice.”

*Jaundice?*

“Is your piss dark yellow or brown?”

“Come to think of it, it has been dark. I had wondered about it.”

He gave me directions to a doctor who confirmed the diagnosis. But jaundice was just a symptom of many diseases, the doctor told me. I could have malaria, typhoid, typhus, dengue fever or hepatitis. There was no way to tell, he said. My eyes were yellow because my liver couldn’t remove impurities from my body. Mosquitoes were the source of some of the diseases, but unsanitary living conditions could also have been the culprit.

There had been no shortage of mosquitoes on our expedition. And regarding unsanitary conditions, there was the river water we drank and bathed in at Toro, the dinner that gave us dysentery, the bad fish I ate in La Libertad, the yellow fever vaccination at the Guatemalan border, and who knows what else.

When I told Dan about my jaundice, he was certain I caught it from Sylvia. The doctor prescribed hard candies. It would help the liver, he said. I ate hard candies for several days and became more tired. I also had a fever.

For the first time, the heat and humidity became uncomfortable, and I felt I wasn’t going to get better in Costa Rica. When I told Dan that I planned to fly back to the States in a couple of days, he bought what pot I had left.

When I decided to leave a day earlier, Dan was at the beach, so I left him a note. In San Jose, I checked into the same hostel we stayed in when we first got to Costa Rica. In the evening, I walked to an old movie theater to watch *Papillon*, starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman. I was sitting up in the almost-vacant balcony when Dan walked in holding a bag of popcorn. He told me he had come to San Jose to find me but hadn’t expected to see me in the theater. He just wanted to watch the

movie. Dan said his original share of the pot was in the back seat of the Bug. I had been driving around with it for two weeks.

The next morning, Dan removed the weed, stuffed it in his backpack and hopped a bus to Quepos. The only luck I had finding long-term parking was a police storage yard, which would have been funny if Dan's pot had still been in the back seat. I flew to New Orleans, then took a bus to the Spring Branch district of west Houston where my parents lived.

The bathroom scale read 128 pounds; my normal was 145. Not too bad. A Houston doctor confirmed I might have any of several tropical diseases, but that I would eventually get better with no treatment. His only advice was not to drink alcohol for a year so that my liver would heal. I wasn't a big drinker anyway.

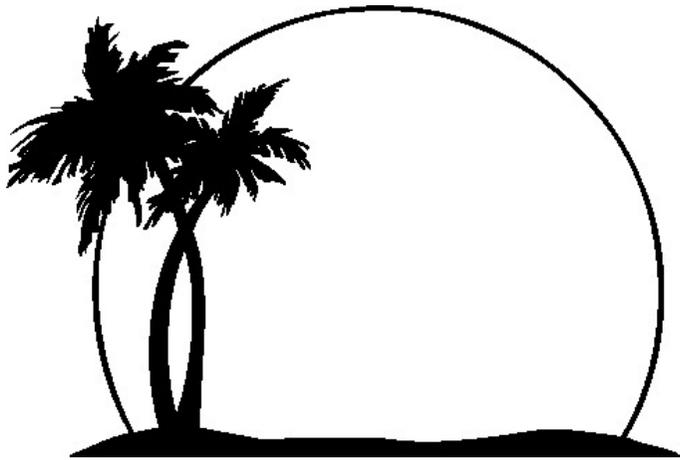
At the library and bookstores, I learned that massive doses of vitamin C hastened the recovery of most of my potential tropical diseases. I took massive doses of vitamin C, and in four weeks I was well enough to join the carpenters' union. If I played my cards right, I might someday aspire to journeyman and earn a good, honest living and contribute to the gross domestic product. It wasn't college, but my father seemed happy about it. Two months later, I had enough money to quit and fly back to Costa Rica.

\*

Before I could drive my Bug from the police storage yard in San Jose, I spent two days replacing stolen parts. When I made it to Quepos, the ex-gold smugglers informed me Dan had flown to Colombia. He was probably sitting in a dormant volcano drinking yagé with the Indians and learning the meaning of life. That was what we had both planned to do.

Instead, I sold the VW for \$600 and bussed up through the same six countries Dan and I had driven with the weed. I even surfed in El Salvador, where immigration officials never noticed the prior forty-eight-hour eviction stamped somewhere in my passport.

# Mexico Business







## CHAPTER FOUR

### Oaxaca & The Zapotecs

I returned to Houston and learned Dan's mother had committed him to a mental institution after he told her about his acid trips in Central America. Why he mentioned them to her was beyond me. My father had become a lawyer after retiring from the Navy and worked from his own neighborhood law office. Dan telephoned him and was out before I got back. My father told me Dan hadn't been in a big rush to be released because he had a new girlfriend inside the facility. Afterward, Dan chose to reside with a friend of ours rather than with his mother.

Dan and I had our differences in Central America, but we also shared experiences none of our friends related to or cared about. To us, though, they weren't just experiences. They were life. Three friends who quit college the same time we did were back majoring in finance, law and computer science. Dan and I made plans to continue our own education. We would return to Mexico and bring back weed.

First, we needed a source; a destination, a spot on the map. Tuxtla Gutierrez, where we bought the kilos we took to Costa Rica, was too far—not to mention the nearby roadblock. The city of Oaxaca (Wa-haw-kuh) caught our attention because it shared its name with excellent weed we sometimes got hold of in Houston. Oaxaca lay in a valley where two mountain ranges

came together one thousand miles south of the U.S. border. The medium-size city looked big enough to find a connection and allow us anonymity.

We loaded up my newly acquired '66 Plymouth Valiant and tied our boards on top to maintain a gringo surfer image. The boards would also come in handy for crossing the weed. We passed through the twenty-kilometer checkpoint, and I put in The Eagles' cassette, *On the Border*. "Already Gone" played—my adios to the Machine.

On Mexico's mile-high central plateau, a four-lane divided highway took us south across an infinite brown plain dabbled with cactus, rocky peaks and spires of black lava. At two checkpoints, we were on our way pronto, but near Queretero, older officers moved between the soldiers and were not distracted by our magazines of naked women. The search was more thorough than at previous checkpoints. We could not return this way with the mota.

Twelve hours after crossing the border, we descended into the bowl of smog and traffic that is Mexico City. Our fast pace fizzled on a congested road with stop signs, brake lights and car horns. An hour later, we climbed out of the city on the south side. The air cleared, and snow-capped Popocatepetl Volcano and neighboring Iztaccihuatl rose into the twilight. Eight more hours to Oaxaca.

I reached under the dash for the baggie of joints, and we celebrated our transit through the Federal District with Mexico playing across the windshield and Carlos Santana playing through the speakers. By the time Popo and Izta disappeared behind us, Dan was asleep facing his window. Including the leg from Houston, we had been on the road for twenty hours.

Just before morning, we came to a vista spot on the right. Dan and I got out and looked down. Beyond a low ridge, twinkling city lights competed with the dawn. Oaxaca was no longer just a spot on the map. Dan lay down on the back seat, and I stretched out in front.

At noon, we checked into a hotel and walked around town,

scoping everything out and making our gringo selves visible to potential connections. The next day, we played tourist and visited Monte Alban, a city of pyramids and temples built by Zapotec Indians 1,000 years before Christ. We learned the Zapotecs considered themselves the very first people, and believed all life sprang from the Tree of Life in nearby Mitla.

\*

Dan and I were sitting on a bench at the zocalo like we had done the previous two nights when someone sat down to my left.

“You are American,” he said.

He appeared to be a few years older than us, clean-cut and with a fairly respectable haircut. He wore striped green slacks and a black-and-white checkered shirt. Maybe it was Mexican fashion. Dan sat to my right.

“Yes,” I answered.

“You need something? Smoke?”

I nodded. “Si.”

“Un poco? O mucho?” *A little. Or a lot?*

“Un poco mucho,” I answered.

He smiled and nodded.

“I can help. Venga.” *Come.*

We followed him a couple of blocks to a small park and sat on a bench together. His name was Guillermo, but he told us most people called him William because he spoke English. He knew where to get some “material.”

“What is the price?” I asked. “Per kilo.”

“How much do you need?”

“Possibly fifteen kilos.”

Smalltime. But fifteen kilos equaled thirty-three pounds, which Dan and I could sell for \$350 a pound. We would make \$11,000 on a \$500 investment. Our expenses amounted to gasoline and hotels. By keeping our load small and easily manageable, there would be less potential for problems—and failure.

“Thirty dollars a kilo, más o menos,” answered William. “Depends on what they have and the quality of mota you want.”

“We want it good,” Dan said.

“Claro.” William nodded. *Of course.*

“Who are we buying it from?” I asked.

“The people in the mountains. Los Indios. You will meet them.”

“When can we do it?”

“Tomorrow night.”

William told us we would not need to bring money. If the Indians had what we wanted, we would return to complete the business.

The next night, I drove south from Oaxaca with William in the passenger seat and Dan in the back. Fifteen minutes out of town, William pointed to a truck inspection ramp on the left side of the road.

“Normalmente, it is used for truck weighing and inspections. But during the day, police sometimes put roadblocks and look in cars for mota and armas,” he said. “Do not drive past here with the material.”

I looked as we passed. The station was closed.

“I will show you where you are able to go around,” William said.

A few minutes later he pointed to a dirt road on our left.

“You turn there,” he said. “Is a store. Go left after the store. Drive ten minutes and you will be past the checkpoint. You will see a road. Turn left. Do not turn before.”

I looked at Dan in the rearview mirror. We weren’t going to drive north after buying the pot. We didn’t know William. He might be planning to snitch us out to cops or his friends or whomever. Also, Oaxaca was a known pot-growing region, and the popular transport route was most likely to the north. The cops had to know that. Dan and I would go in the opposite direction, south, and cross the Isthmus of Tehuantepec before heading north along the Gulf.

“The Indios do not know themselves as Indios,” William said. “Some people call them Indios to say they are lesser. They are good people. You will see.”

“What do they call themselves?” Dan asked from the back.

William turned to him and shrugged. “They are the people who live in the mountains.”

A sign for the town of Tlacolula appeared in the headlights, and William pointed to a turnoff.

“There. Go right,” he said.

I turned off the highway and a minute later, we stopped at a small store with an illuminated Superior beer sign on the roof.

“We must bring a gift for the people in the mountains,” William said.

Dan and I followed him into the building to the back wall where bottles of liquor lined the shelves.

“Mezcal,” William said. He picked up a bottle of amber liquid with a label that read Monte Alban. A fat worm or hairless caterpillar bounced along the bottom of the bottle.

“Don’t worry. Is not alive. Is un gusano. A worm,” William said.

“We were at Monte Alban yesterday,” said Dan.

“Is the best mezcal,” William said as he picked up another bottle. “This is good, too, but Monte Alban is best.”

The second bottle had a label with Gusano Rojo printed next to a cartoon of a drunken señorita worm in a dress. Inside, a worm bobbed along the bottom. William put that bottle down and picked up a second bottle of Monte Alban.

“This is for our friends in the mountains,” William said as he held up one bottle. “And this is for us.” He raised the other bottle.

I paid for the mezcal and we continued driving. In ten minutes, we exited the highway onto a dirt road that cut across flat land with few trees. When we passed through a sleeping town, six or seven dogs attacked our tires and doors viciously. They may have been normal perros during the day, but at night and in the pack, they were a frothing, collective evil. They chased the Valiant until we were out of the village and continued barking in case we had any idea of returning.

Mountain silhouettes grew under the starlight and eventually

flanked us. We continued through the valley, listening to the sound of chirping crickets and dirt crunching beneath our tires. The air became chilly, and I rolled up my window. After dipping across a dry riverbed, William had me turn left, and we drove another five minutes.

“Turn off the lights. There, next to the casa.” He pointed to the right.

I switched off the headlights, turned right and parked with the shack on my left.

“We wait,” said William.

He lifted one of the mezcal bottles from the floorboard, took a long swig and held the bottle out to me. I wanted to stay alert and ready for anything that might happen, then considered one sip might relieve any potential anxiety. I took a drink and passed the bottle to Dan. It burned my throat as if I had just drunk gasoline.

“Many people take a limón after, or beer,” William said. “Los Indios like it alone. Me, también.” He took another swig.

“If the Indios offer you anything, you must accept,” William told us. “Many times, a cigarette is a gift from them. They are poor.”

“We don’t smoke,” said Dan. He took a drink and handed the bottle to William.

“You put it behind your ear,” William said. “It is a courtesy. But is the same in all Mexico. You should not refuse a gift. Los Indios will offer you something. It is their custom. Like the mezcal we bring.”

William took another drink and looked back at Dan.

“Okay,” said Dan.

“How long do we wait?” I asked.

“Maybe they bring samples. They know we are here. And why. But not for which mota and the quantity. You said you want colas. Some people ask for the material in bricks.”

“Colas” was slang for flower buds, and would bring a better price if not pressed into bricks. Another five minutes passed, and a light appeared in the shack's window.

“We go now,” said William.

He led us to the front door and tapped lightly. It opened, and a short, stout man with black hair trimmed straight across his forehead greeted us. He wore matching loose white pants and shirt that resembled a karate outfit.

Light flickered from an oil lamp on top of a wooden table in the back right corner. The table and its one chair were the only furniture. There was a door in the middle of the back wall where the man must have entered. He said something to William in a language other than Spanish, and William and our host sat down on the dirt floor. Dan and I joined them.

As William and the Indian spoke in the strange language, Spanish was tossed into the mix but not enough for me to understand what they were talking about. The Indian’s short sentences had a rhythm and ended abruptly with a spitting sound. William handed him the unopened bottle of mezcal. He smiled, unscrewed the cap and took a drink, then passed the bottle to me and said something. I looked at William.

“He asks where are you from?”

“Los Estados Unidos. Tejas,” I told him.

The Indian pointed to his chest and spoke again.

“He tells you his name is Francisco, and he is Zapotec,” William said.

“Soy Steve,” I said to Francisco and pointed to my chest. He turned and smiled at Dan.

“Dan,” said Dan.

As the mezcal made another round, Francisco removed a green and brown bud from the pocket of his pants and held it out. Red threads were entwined throughout, similar to the weed we bought in Veracruz a year ago.

“Colitas puras,” Francisco said in Spanish and smiled. (Colée-tahs.) *Pure little flowers.*

He handed the flower top to William, who traded it to Dan for the mezcal. Dan put the bud to his nose and nodded, then passed it to me. It smelled strong and fresh, and when I squeezed it, resin stuck to my thumb and finger. I gave the bud back to

Francisco.

“Bueno,” I told him.

“Fuma,” he said and handed the flower top to William. *You smoke.*

William went to the table and began rolling a joint. Francisco pulled a baggie containing cigarettes from the pocket of his shirt and handed it to me.

“Gracias,” I said. “Para mas tarde.”

I removed a cigarette and placed it behind my right ear, then passed the bag to Dan.

“Gracias,” he said to Francisco.

William lit the joint and took a couple of hits, then walked from the table and handed it to me. The weed tasted as good as it had smelled. I blew out the smoke before it expanded too much.

“Muy bueno,” I said to Francisco.

He smiled.

“Good enough?” I asked Dan after he took a hit.

The weed was obviously good enough, but I thought Francisco might want to hear it from Dan.

“Bueno,” Dan said, exhaling. “What’s the price?”

“You want fifteen kilos?” William asked.

“Yes,” Dan answered. I nodded.

William talked with Francisco and told us the cost would be 450 pesos a kilo—about \$540 for thirty-three pounds. And it was available now if we wanted.

“No. Tomorrow night,” I said. “If that's okay.”

William translated and Francisco nodded.

“How does it come?” I asked William. “Flower tops or bricks?”

William consulted with Francisco.

“Long stems of colitas, each kilo tied with string,” William answered.

We said goodbye to Francisco and maneuvered through the silent night until we encountered, then fled Satan’s canine corp. We were asleep in our hotel room before two a.m. Tomorrow

could be a long day—and a long night.

After breakfast, Dan and I bought plastic garbage bags, duct tape, drinking water, batteries and snacks. We filled the gas tank, checked the tire pressures and topped off the radiator.

“The farmacia might have something we can take to keep us awake,” I suggested.

“Like No Doze,” said Dan.

At the farmacia, I explained to a woman in a pale blue uniform behind the counter that we would be driving late and needed something to stay alert. She went to the back of the store and returned with a box of Octodron.

“Este es el más fuerte,” she said. *This is the strongest.*

After returning to the hotel, we translated the ingredients and learned Octodron was an amphetamine—speed, and would have required a prescription in the States. It would suffice.

At ten o'clock, we picked up William and stopped to buy two bottles of mezcal. When we got back on the road, he opened one and took a drink. Dan and I abstained. We had a long trip down the mountains ahead of us.

I parked with the shack on my left and a burro tethered to a tree on the right. Francisco led us through the back door and along a narrow trail through brush. We came out at a small clearing with several wooden shacks. An oil lamp hung from the porch of one house and allowed us to make our way to a hut at the clearing's opposite edge.

Another Zapotec stood inside, wearing the same white outfit as Francisco. We shook hands, and he spoke with Francisco before leaving the room. Francisco motioned for us to sit on the dirt floor.

“He has gone for the material,” William said.

William presented the mezcal to Francisco. He took a drink and handed the bottle back to William. They conversed in their blend of Zapotec and Spanish, and when the mezcal came around, Dan and I took a sip or two to be polite. Another Indian entered, and we shook hands. He sat down against the back wall and began to chant, pausing to take a drink of mezcal when it

came to him. Francisco occasionally interrupted his conversation with William to chant along.

A mantel extended from the front wall above a fireplace. At the mantel's center stood a framed picture of the Virgin Mary with her head and body surrounded by a golden halo. A worn black-and-white photograph of someone leaned against her, and on each side was a stone figure resembling a cat. A thin plume of smoke rose from a bowl at the mantel's right end. The chanting continued.

"What's going on?" I whispered to William.

He talked to Francisco, who turned to me and said something in a mix of Zapotec and Spanish. I didn't understand.

William said, "A person in the village has died, and they are helping him on his way to the next life."

"Is that the Virgin Mary?" I pointed to the framed picture.

"Is the Virgin of Guadeloupe. She is Indian and has appeared to the people in Mexico. She is important for all Mexico, not only to the people in the mountains."

William looked up at the mantel. "The panthers are important to the Zapotecs," he added.

I wondered how many sacred virgins there were.

When I turned back to Francisco, he smiled and nodded. I smiled back and looked up at the altar. In their conquest of Mexico, Cortez and his priests had tried to extinguish the Zapotecs' heathen gods and replace them with their one true Christian god. But the Zapotecs had combined the two religions and even created their own Virgin Maria.

The Indian who left earlier returned with a burlap bag. He folded down the top, and the scent of flowers filled the room. After delicately separating a bud from its hand-tied kilo, he handed it to William, then sat down against the back wall and began chanting with the other Zapotec. The flower top was red-hair sinsemilla, the same as the sample we had smoked the night before.

Dan and I knelt before the open bag and inspected the thirty-three pounds of puras colas. The most pot I had seen before were

the five kilos we bought in Tuxtla Gutierrez. But those had been bricked, and barely resembled what lay before us. This would go for \$350 a pound, possibly more.

William rolled a joint and took a hit before passing it to Francisco. I didn't need to test it. It was obviously good, and I wanted to stay alert. When the joint came around, Dan and I took only a hit or two or three as a courtesy. I removed the Octodron from my front shirt pocket, and when the mezcal came to me, I washed it down with a decent swig. Dan did the same.