



Blood

Relatives

Víctor Celorio

BLOOD RELATIVES



BLOOD RELATIVES



BLOOD RELATIVES

Edited by:
Blue Unicorn Editions

Printed by:
InstaBook Maker (tm)

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

InstaBooks are distributed and printed through:

INSTABOOK

For more information write to:

InstaBook Corporation
www.instabook.net

BLOOD RELATIVES

BLOOD RELATIVES

Víctor Celorio

BLOOD RELATIVES

BLOOD RELATIVES

1

The Presidential candidate raised his hands to stop the applause.

The crowd that was crammed into every space available in the open field inside the housing development roared even harder, his faces full of passion. The candidate saw those faces looking up at him in tense expectation. They had an enormous need for somebody like him, and he could feel that need as if waves of electric responses. He knew very well their need for even a small glimpse of hope, a hope that only he could provide, because after all he was one of them. He had also grown up poor and had seen his parents suffer not because they didn't have money, but because they didn't have hope.

He paused until the noise subsided.

He looked up to the clear, transparent sky. It was an splendid day, bright and sunny, and he thought it was the kind of day for which he had prepared his entire life. Everything was beginning to happen. After some problems in the early days of his campaign, he had finally found the right issues, and the right tone to promote them. For the last month he had worked his audiences better and better every day, felling each wave of electricity coming off the people; each one energizing him, invigorating him. They made him strong. He was

BLOOD RELATIVES

bringing that much needed hope to them, and more important, he would deliver on that hope. This encounters with his people served to reaffirm his purpose. He swore himself, once again, that he would deliver no matter what or who stood in his path.

“Change is unavoidable, my friends, and it will happen sooner than you think. “ he said, raising his tenor voice above the remaining cheers. “Yes! You and I will see it happen, because the future of this great nation of ours is in our hands and nothing, I repeat, nothing! will stop us from building a better Mexico. Viva México!”, he shouted, finishing his speech.

“Viva México!” the crowd roared.

He came down from the platform with an agile jump and he was immediately surrounded by the waves of human flesh. Fans, bodyguards, businessmen, party members, union organizers, old women, children, beauty queens, hundredths of people pushing in, shouting at him, wanting to touch him, to grab him, to deliver written petitions into his hand... It was difficult to walk. Step by step he advanced into the crowd. It took the candidate five full minutes just to advance a few meters on his way to his van, but he loved it.

He enjoyed tremendously this feeling of being liked by these people, these poor people who were beginning to trust in him, and in his ability to lift them to another level. He loved to be surrounded by them as he was now, because it felt like a safe return to his origins.

That’s when it happened.

He never saw the hand gun pointing at his head. He never heard the shot, and he never felt the bullet going into his cranium just below his right ear, entering the brain at 300 feet per second and shattering instantly everything in its path.

He was alive...and then he was not.

2

A week later a border patrol officer found him lost in the desert. The first time she saw him she thought it was a mirage.

Literally.

His half naked body was like a mad reflection on the almost white sands of the Arizona desert.

It was high noon on the long stretch of land which is that part of the country along the border with México, between Yuma and the town of Lukeville. At first Ana thought she was mistaken, but her training and her two years as a female member of the border patrol made her stop the car when she saw the movement at the distance, among the mesquite and the chaparral.

She took out her binoculars and focused them on the figure which was moving under the blinding glare.

His halting steps and stumbling made her realize he was sick.

Then she saw the guns.

He was armed. Heavily.

As he approached she was able to identify the weapons: he was carrying a shotgun in one hand and with the other he was dragging an M¹⁶ by the muzzle. He also had a handgun at his waist. His body was covered with desert dust. His face was half hidden by a

BLOOD RELATIVES

handkerchief tied around his forehead. He took a step, then another step, then another, painfully, slowly, as if each one was the product of an individual effort. He fell on his knees, got up after a few moments, and started again.

It was painful for Ana just to watch him.

She radioed for backup.

She waited.

Several times she had to contain the impulse of running toward the man.

She waited until he was closer to the road. She pulled her own weapon, covered herself behind the patrol car and took a shooting stance.

“Drop your weapons and raise your hands! Immediately!” she shouted.

He did not seem to hear her at first. He continued his slow, hesitating approach to the road.

“Stop right there!” she shouted again.

He ignored her.

She shot a round above his head.

He stopped.

“Drop your weapons or I will shoot!” she said.

He raised his head. His face was badly beaten and disfigured. His left eye was entirely closed. He tried to locate Ana, but the glaring of the sun would not allow him.

“American?” he mumbled loud enough.

“Yes. Drop your weapons right now!” she ordered.

He dropped.

Entirely.

His body fell as if the entire strength had left his soul.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She waited for a while. There was no sound in the desert. Everything was as still as the oppressive heat. She was miles away from any town. Lukeville was the closest, seventy miles to the East.

He didn't move.

She waited some more.

She thought he was probably dead.

She was sweating.

Then she felt silly keeping her stance behind her car, pointing her gun at the still body lying on the sand.

She came out and approached him carefully.

Pointing the gun at his head she took the arms away from the man and then tied his hands on his back.

Feeling better and safer, she walked back to her car and radioed for help again.

There was no answer.

3

The radio didn't work.

The car didn't work.

Her watch had stopped.

It took some time for her to understand what was happening.

She had found a *Zona de Silencio*. Silence Zone.

She was in one of those areas of the desert she had heard the locals mention with fear. Due to a magnetic phenomenon in those areas the electricity seemed to die. Nothing worked. Life itself seemed to disappear. That's why the silence seemed so deep, so eerie. The biggest known *Zona de Silencio* in the world was someplace deep in the Sonora Desert, across the border on the Mexican side. It was well known and researched. It was said that the Bermuda Triangle was another *Zona de Silencio*. Nobody was sure about that one. But among the inhabitants of Lukeville there was certainty that there were many more *Zonas de Silencio*.

Funny thing was that those *zonas* moved around the desert.

One day here.

Tomorrow there.

Scaring the people who happened to go into one.

BLOOD RELATIVES

But they were silly, and she was not. She was a trained officer of the Border Patrol of the United States. She would not be scared by a magnetic phenomenon, or whatever it was. She was courageous, and armed. She was young and strong, and she would not pay attention to the rumors she had heard about the Zona de Silencio.

No way.

The stillness was so deep it was almost heavy.

Nothing moved. There was no wind, no birds, no dust. Even breathing seemed different here.

Her prisoner moaned very loudly and she jumped.

“Jesus!” she screamed and pulled out her weapon.

She had forgotten she had a prisoner. A wounded prisoner who now was roasting under the merciless sun of the Arizona desert.

Ana put her gun away and began to drag the body toward the shadow of the patrol car. The body was heavy and moving it a few feet was for her more difficult somehow than moving the weights at the gym.

After she got him under the shadow of the car she took her canteen out of the patrol. She took a big mouthful for herself, and then sprayed some on her handkerchief. She dropped some of the moisture on the lips of the man lying in the dust. It had an immediate effect. The man moaned, shouted something in Spanish, and his body shook. She waited a few seconds and then let some drops fall on his lips.

He opened his eyes.

“More.” he said in English. “ Give me more”

“ Not so fast. It can kill you. We have to wait.”

He didn’t say another word.

He seemed to fall asleep.

Or unconscious.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She couldn't tell, but at this point she really couldn't care about the difference.

She had other things in her mind.

Like the sun that was shining above their heads.

It was only noon. There were at least seven more hours of sun ahead of them. In this desert you could get dehydrated after just two hours under the sun. Then your mind would start to play tricks on you. Many people had died near the road, virtually a few feet from safety, because their minds had given up under the pressure from the heat and the blinding light.

She had to protect herself against that possibility.

She took out a blanket she kept in the trunk of her patrol car as an insurance against the freezing nights of the desert. Most people don't realize that, in the desert, as intense is the heat during the day, the cold is at night. She opened the doors of the wagon and tied the blanket over them, so as to create a long shade under which she and her prisoner would be safe.

Then she analyzed her situation.

She was seventy miles away from Lukeville, on a dusty road used by the Border Patrol to check on the illegal immigrants trying to come into the country from Mexico. The road had no other purpose.

Even though the border was two thousand miles long, there were really very few places where people could cross easily and safely.

This was definitely not one of them.

This was perhaps one of the most dangerous of all points to cross the border. On the Mexican side it was called the *Gran Desierto de Sonora*. The terrain was hard and cruel, the heat intense, the desert merciless, the distance to any town so great, that very, very few people had ever tried to cross over in any direction at this point.

Most who'd tried had died.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Of course, the people from Lukeville added also the Zonas de Silencio as another reason why people never ventured on that part of the border. Because to find your way out of a desert you needed a compass, and inside the Zonas de Silencio the compasses didn't work.

And there was something else.

It was widely believed that inside the Zonas de Silencio people went mad.

They said that the same unknown forces that killed electricity did strange things to the minds of the human beings, and of animals too.

The animals knew it and all type of living things avoided the Zona de Silencio. All forms of life ran away from it. That's why the extreme silence. Ana had not know real silence until now. It was frightening. Nothing moved. Nothing cried, or cracked; there were no whispers from the wind; no rumors at the distance. Nothing. She even started to pull air inside her lungs forcefully just to hear herself breathing.

Her prisoner wasn't moving. She leaned over his face. He was breathing all right, deeply. She still didn't know if he was unconscious or asleep.

Sleeping seemed like a good idea. It was the best way to preserve energy and body fluids under the heat. The day before the thermometer had reached 100 degrees. The record was 127 degrees. It would be better if she didn't move at all.

She knew that her partner back at the station in Lukeville would launch a full search if he had not heard from her by six in the afternoon. It was standard procedure. They would send the helicopter from Tucson to speed up the search. From the air it would take few hours to find her. So she was looking at 20 to 24 hours in the desert. At the most.

Nothing to it.

She would sleep those hours off.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She checked her water provision. The water was hot, but the nineteen gallon tank was full. She made sure the knots holding the blanket above the doors were strong, and she made sure the makeshift roof was in the direction of the sun so as the hours passed the prisoner would remain under the shade. Then she tried to sleep.

First she tried lying in the back seat of her patrol car, but even with all the windows open the heat was so intense she couldn't breathe.

So she lay down by her prisoner. On the ground.

She closed her eyes and tried to think pleasant thoughts.

She could not.

She felled into a semiconscious state of mind were she wasn't asleep, but she wasn't awake either. She had rational thoughts like "I have to drink water", but her mind would promptly turn that into images of violent waves of burning water rushing to drown her.

She would think of her family, and instead of the usual love and kindness she received from her mother and her father, something she missed terribly since she had been sent to this forsaken post in the middle of nowhere, they would be shouting awful things at her.

She was aware she was having nightmares, but she wasn't able to shake them off her mind. She wasn't afraid though, because she knew they were just that, nightmares. Some of the images she even found funny, like the one that turned reverend Pearson, the very old minister of the church at Lukeville, into a punk with purple hair and lustful desires for all his female parishioners.

Other images were awful.

Like the one of a man with a gold tooth who was using his knife to carve out somebody's eyes.

She heard the screams.

Then she heard somebody talking. And that sound was what finally awoke her.

The sound was the voice of the man lying beside her.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“I think you are having nightmares.” he said very politely.

She stood up immediately and drew her weapon.

He was looking at her with the only eye he was able to open. The other one was shut by the swelling and the black bruises which spread along his cheek.

He tried to smile with his dry, broken lips.

“I am harmless.” he said.

She checked that his cuffs were still in place, and then looked around. The sun was still high in the immense sky. She couldn't have been asleep more than an hour.

“Could I have some water?” he said.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean just that. I will give you few drops of water until your body can stand the shock. Then I will give you some more. Then you can have a swallow or two. Do you understand?”

“But...”

“Do you understand me? I am not going to fight or argue with you. I am telling you the way it will be done. It is for your own benefit. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I do...but you don't have to shout. That's what I was trying to tell you. You are shouting.”

So she was.

For some reason she'd thought he couldn't hear her, or wouldn't understand her unless she shouted.

She didn't answer.

She took her canteen out of the wagon, poured some water again into the handkerchief, and placed it against her prisoners' lips. He chewed on the cloth anxiously.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She did it again several times, only adding a little bit more or water each time. Then, when she was sure he would stand it, she allowed him to swallow from her canteen.

“That’s enough for now.” she said.

“Okay. Thanks.” he said, and smiled.

In spite of the bruises, she could see that he had a nice smile.

She got up and pulled out her binoculars. She scanned the horizon with them.

“What are we waiting?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Did you have problems with your car?”

“Yes. No. Yes. Well, something is wrong.”

“Does your radio work?”

She didn’t like his asking questions, so she didn’t answer.

“If your radio doesn’t work either, we are inside a Zona de Silencio. You know what that is?”

She didn’t answer.

“A Zona de Silencio is a place in the desert...”

“I know what a Zona de Silencio is. So shut your mouth.”

“Okay. But you are shouting again.”

She didn’t answer.

She didn’t see any movement in the desert. All around them there was nothing but quiet sands, chaparrals, some saguaro cactuses, the blinding sun, the oppressive heat, and silence. That extraordinary silence which seemed to grow every minute.

She went back under the shade.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“My name is Paul” he said.

She didn't answer.

“Thank you for saving my life”

“I did not, and I haven't yet. Wait till we get out of here, then you can thank me.”

“Are you really worried?”

“Worried about what?”

“About your friends not finding us in time?”

“Are you kidding? They will be here very soon.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you so nervous?”

He was right. Why was she so nervous and irritable? She kept on raising her voice and being very aggressive against her prisoner.

“I am not. “

“Yes, you are.”

“I am not”

“Okay. Then why am I handcuffed.”

“Because you are a prisoner.”

“Why?”

“Why? Well, just because I found you wandering near the border loaded with weapons, badly beaten. It looks as if you have been in a war.”

“Maybe I have. But you have no reason to arrest me.”

“I haven't arrested you.”

“Yes, you have.”

“So sue me.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Maybe I will.”

“Look, I need some ID from you, and I want you to tell me what where you doing in the desert with all those weapons. Then we will talk about your handcuffs.”

“Okay” he said.

Then he didn’t say anything. She neither.

When she turned around she saw he was asleep again.

She observed him closely. It was difficult to determine his age because of his wounds, and the sunburns which made the skin of his muscular chest swell, but she was able to see that he was a handsome man. Around thirty, thirty five. The wounds he had did not seem very serious, although he had received a severe beating. From whom? Why?

She began to feel increasingly curious about the man lying by her side.

Who was he?

She examined him closer, and described him to herself in the manner taught and used by the officers of the border patrol to write their reports. He was a male Caucasian, black hair, black eyes, about 6 feet tall and 180 pounds. He suffered from severe exposure to the sun. The skin around his chest and neck presents lacerations and what seemed like cigarette burns. His face is bruised and swollen, specially his left eye. Presents also a deep cut about 5 inches long in his right arm; the wound is not bleeding. It looks like a bullet wound.

She could go on, and on, but of course, she thought, this descriptions never tell the whole story. They try to be very objective, yes, but objectivity is never enough when it comes to human beings.

How could she explain the sudden attraction she was feeling for this man?

She could not.

BLOOD RELATIVES

For all she could see he was a handsome man, yes: his features were well proportioned and balanced, but so what? There were millions of men like him. Why was she feeling attracted to him?

She looked toward the desert.

Because she was feeling lonely.

Ever since John had decided to leave this world, something of her had died with him. She had been partially dead for what now? Four years? God, yes. Almost to the day. She smiled and shook her head; unbelievable. John had been dead four years: she had been a Border Patrol officer for three years, and she had been living in the Lukeville outpost for the last two years, two months and one week.

It was amazing how fast time went by.

She got up.

She stretched her slim, wiry body and walked around the wagon.

She stopped by the side mirror and saw her face. She took off her sunglasses

Not bad for a thirty year old woman, she thought.

She was to be thirty next month.

She examined her face carefully. There were some small lines around her eyes, but they were caused more by the weather in the desert than by her age.

Nothing major, really. The damages of time had been kind to her so far.

She took off her hat, placed it on the front seat of the wagon, and then she let her hair fall free. She had a long mane of pure ash blonde hair that fell as a cascade down her back. With her hair loose, her features became more striking because of the contrast between her skin, which was the color of cinnamon, and her emerald eyes. It was a powerful combination that had always attracted male attention, yes, and female attention too. Sometimes for good, sometimes for bad.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Mostly for bad.

She had been born in California, the second child of Lolita Chavez and James McIntyre. Her mother had come from Spain, her father from Boston from Irish ancestors. Both of them were actors. Very talented, very warm, a very beautiful couple really. They had gone separately to California to try their luck at Hollywood and, as they loved to tell the story, they didn't make it in the movies, but they did make it with each other. Constantly.

Even now, after so many years of being “legally married”, versus the years they had lived together without being married, — time which her mother called their “illegal marriage” — her parents were always kissing each other, grabbing each other, seeking in each other the confirmation of their being alive. They were playful, and had a delightful sense of humor. They were great as parents. Ana had joked more than once that they had not given her any reasons to complain to her analyst.

Ana smiled when she thought of her parents. She loved them dearly. They were so alive, and it was so much fun to be with them... it pained her not to be closer to California, so she could see them more often. Maybe she would ask for a transfer. Maybe. Next year.

She took her hair brush out of her purse and began brushing her long silver mane. It felt good to have it loose like that. It was against the rules to have it this long, but out in the desert who cared? Really. She was almost two hundred miles away from any major city. Her supervisors came sparingly to check the outpost, and since she kept her hair wrapped in a bun underneath the wide brimmed hat of her uniform, nobody realized how long her hair really was. It reached her waist, and it kept on growing.

While she brushed her hair Ana remembered all the times she had been questioned as to why she, being so strikingly beautiful, had not pursued a career as a model or as an actress.

She could not answer what she was afraid to answer even to herself.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She could not scream the truth.

It was still too painful.

After so many years.

4

“Don’t move” said the man behind her.

She froze.

In a second she realized she had made a terrible mistake: she had been careless.

She saw his shadow on the floor in front of her. The shadow came closer. She tightened her muscles, waiting for the blow, and closed her eyes. Then there was a slight push on her butt, and that was it.

Surprised, she looked back. The man was stomping on the ground.

She turned around. Her hand reached for her gun in the holster.

“You had a scorpion on your...” he said, and stopped when she pointed the gun at him.

She looked doubtful. With the tip of his boot he showed her the remains of the insect on the ground; it had been a big one.

She replaced the gun on her holster.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“You certainly are a beautiful woman” he said suddenly, leaning on the wagon. He smiled. Even with the bruises his smile was very attractive, she thought. It made his face lit up, and the bruises somehow made him look even more virile. She almost smiled back, but she stopped herself, irritated.

“Why were you spying on me?”

“I was not. I woke up and I was looking for you. That’s all.

“Look, I want to make myself clear...”

“Paul.

“What?”

“My name is Paul. Paul Chadwick.

“Okay, Mr. Chadwick, you are talking with an officer of the United States Government. You will have plenty of time to talk and do lots of explaining once we get back into town. Meanwhile, sit down and don’t give me any trouble because I can and will shoot you. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, sure.” he said, smiling again. That smile... she felt ridiculous for no reason. That feeling made her even madder.

“I don’t think this is funny. I just gave you an order! Go back to your place and sit down. Right now!

“Okay.”

He turned around and went back to the shade. She felt his eyes on her through the windows while he circled the wagon. She tried to ignore him, but it wasn’t easy. She wasn’t used to dealing with a man like this. Up to now, her experience had been capturing meek and humble Mexicans who tried to sneak into the country illegally. Whenever she stopped one of them, they would obey her every whisper even if they didn’t speak English; it was enough for her to raise her eyebrows or make a signal with her eyes and the *ilegales* would run to please her.

This man was...well, he obviously wasn’t an illegal alien.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She finished brushing her hair, wrapped it up in a bun and put on her standard issued hat. She put on her dark glasses and went to check on her prisoner. He was lying on his side under the shade, asleep again, but when she approached he sat up with a surprising agility. She stopped. He looked at her, and for a few seconds she was able to see a very powerful mixture of emotions in his eyes: it was fear and decision combined. It was as if he were facing his certain death, but was willing to go ahead anyway. It was strange.

It lasted for a few seconds. Then he seemed to recognize her, to remember where he was, and he relaxed. He breathed deeply, shook his head and lay down without saying a word.

“Time to drink some more water.” she said.” Swallow it in small amounts.” she put the canteen on his lips.

He did as he was told.

They repeated the operation, and she could see how much good that small amount of water was doing to him. He was recuperating very fast.

“Raise your face.” she said.

He did. She emptied the canteen on his face and head.

“Oh, thanks”

“Thank you “she said.

“Me? For what?”

“You know, ... the scorpion?”

“Oh, yes. Well, now you owe me your life. Forever. Remember it.”

She smiled.

“For how long were you lost in the desert?” she asked.

“What day is today?”

“Wednesday”

“Three days.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Three days! It can’t be.”

“No. You are right. They were four days. I got lost on Sunday morning.”

“How did you survive?”

“By walking only at night.”

“Did you have any water?”

“No. Certain cactuses contain a lot of water, you know that.”

“Yes, but not many people know which ones. Are you a hunter?”

He smiled ironically before he answered.

“Yeah. Of sorts...”

“Where do you come from?”

“*El Gran Desierto.*”

“What do you mean?”

“I started out in the Big Desert in Sonora.”

“In México?”

“Yes.”

“How did you got lost in the desert?”

“I wasn’t lost. I came home.”

“Where were you born?”

“I was born in México, but I was raised in Texas by an aunt.”

“Where do you live?”

“Orlando, Florida. You can check it out.”

“Oh? What do you do there?”

“I am...I used to be a printer.”

“Why were you in México?”

“It is a long story.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Are you going anywhere?”

He smiled.

“I guess not, ma’am.”

She waited. He didn’t say a word.

“I asked you a question.”

“Yes ma’am, but I rather not answer it for now if you don’t mind.” he said. She did not know if his polite answers and demeanor were meant to make fun of her. He saw straight at her with the only eye he was able to open. He seemed sincere. She let it pass.

“I do mind. I am an officer...”

“...of the United States Government. I know. You told me before. And I will be glad to answer your questions if you tell me what are you accusing me of.”

“Illegal entry, for one. Illegal possession of weapons, resisting an officer...”

“I haven’t resisted you!”

“You wanted to know what I could charge you with. I’m just telling you.”

“Thanks. You are very kind.”

“So?”

“I want my lawyer.”

“Oh, so you now you need a lawyer.” she laughed. She got out of the sun and sat beside him in the shade.

“Look, I really don’t care why were you in México. Those are the standard questions we are supposed to ask anybody crossing the border, but I was just making conversation. If you don’t want to talk, fine. We’ll just get bored until they rescue us. Then you’ll answer our questions back at the station”

BLOOD RELATIVES

She laid down and closed her eyes. She hoped he wouldn't try to do anything with his arms pinned behind his back. She felt him looking at her for a long time.

“What is your name?”

“Ana.”

“That’s a Mexican name.”

“No. It's a *Spanish* name.”

“Are you Hispanic?”

“No. I am an American, okay?”

“You know what I mean. Are your ancestors Hispanic?”

“My mother came from Spain, but I have blood from Ireland, and Germany and who know where else and my father’s family has been here for the last hundred years. So, I am an American. Okay?”

He was silent.

“What about you?” she asked

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?”

“I don’t know where my family came from.”

“You said you were born in México...”

“Yeah, but I didn’t knew my parents. And my Aunt Christina wasn’t really my aunt; she took me in out of the goodness of her heart when she found me wandering on the streets of Nuevo Laredo. She married later with a man named Chadwick, and that’s how I got my name. They adopted me legally as their son. He died when I was 5, and then my aunt died when I was 15. So I had a family for a very brief period of time.”

She thought in silence for a little while.

“I know why you went to México...”

“Oh, really? Tell me about it.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“You went to look for your blood relatives.”

He thought for some time before he answered.

“Yes, that was one of the reasons.”

“But the part I don’t understand is about the weapons.”

“Is a long, complicated story.”

“I promise not to fall asleep.”

He smiled. She liked that. She smiled herself. It felt good talking to this man. She didn’t know why, but she didn’t want to question the feeling. It had been a long time since she felt like this, and she wanted to enjoy the moment while it lasted.

“But would I then be talking with Ana, or with the Officer of the United States Government?”

“With Ana.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“You promise never to repeat one word, or to hold it against me?”

“I promise.”

“I thought that you could not do that as an officer.”

“Not really. But I know that if you did something awful in México, they will charge you and we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Can you take the cuffs off?”

“No. They will stay in place until we take you to the county jail. That’s the law. And also my protection.”

“Against whom?”

“Well, I don’t know what you are capable of, so...”

“I thought we were becoming friends.”

“We are. Remember? I just promised you...”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“They are uncomfortable.”

“Sorry.”

“Can you loosen them up a little?”

“No. And stop pushing it.”

She saw him becoming angry. He clenched his teeth, and his jaws tightened. He closed his eyes and she saw the effort he made to calm down. He had a tremendously quick temper. One he had trouble controlling. But once in control of his temper he seemed, somehow, even more dangerous. He projected an enormous inner strength that she found fascinating.

He took a deep breath and looked at the horizon. She did the same. For a long time neither of them said a word.

The sun had begun to descend. By its position in the sky, Ana calculated it was around three. That meant they had at least 4 or 5 more hours of light. Then the sun would go down. Since the sand only reflects the heat, the temperature would drop very fast, and one hour later they would be forced to light up a fire to warm themselves.

“I went to México to kill a man.” he said quietly.

5

During the summer two years earlier, Paul had bought his third printing press and was extremely proud of himself and his team. His printing business was getting more and more orders every day, and many of them came from repeat customers. This was particularly important for Paul since it meant that his customers were pleased with his work and they came back for more. This, in such a highly competitive business as offset printing, was a compliment for the shop and the workers that Paul took personally. Whenever they praised the quality of a work, Paul felt as if they were praising him. When, on the other hand, there were problems, he felt they were his fault because he had not taken provisions to avoid those problems.

He was so totally devoted to his business that he ate and slept there almost daily. He only left at noon every day to run over his apartment, take a shower, read his personal mail and answer the messages left on his answering machine.

On that particular day he wanted to go out and celebrate the arrival of his new addition to the printing plant. It was a used machine, true, but it was a two head Heilderberg capable of printing 10,000 sheets of paper per hour in two colors. That meant that his production time would be cut in half, his costs would be reduced, and the margin of error would diminished even more. After paying for that machine he felt he would finally begin to see the economic benefits due him for his fours years of unrelenting efforts and work to make the business

BLOOD RELATIVES

grow. So far, he had reinvested every penny he had earned since he had started out with his small, old, rebuilt legal size press. With that little machine and his computer he had set out to compete with huge printing companies in Orlando.

And he was making it.

What he had offered his customers was something huge plants could not and would not bother to offer to small customers; the same service that a huge company naturally expected. Paul had seen in the computer the possibilities that would allow him to trim costs here and there so he could offer the same low prices in short run orders as in huge runs; and when the graphic software had come into the market, he was first in line to take advantage of it. He was able then to cut in half his delivery time, and then again by one third. His small company began to grow and now he had 17 people working for him. He had kept on buying printing machinery with his earnings, so he could get more customers, and so on...

It had not been easy.

He didn't care to remember how many times he had to stay up all night trying to work out ways to pay all his bills in time; or the permanent state of anguish that came with the knowledge that he could not afford any mistakes. A single order wrongfully printed could put him out of business because he didn't have an economic cushion to fall back on. He lived day to day, but he had managed to survive so far. Survive and prosper.

He figured he had one more year to go before he could really receive a decent salary from his own company, but he had created a business out of nothing and every time he thought about it he felt great. Not bad for an orphan, he said to himself at nights while he walked through the shop making sure everything was in order; he checked that all the orders were packed and ready to be delivered the next day; that all the machines were cleaned and oiled; and all the computers turned off.

Lately, besides his new machine, he also had another reason to be happy.

BLOOD RELATIVES

He had met Eugenia.

His sister.

A week earlier he had come back to his apartment for his usual quick noon shower and had found a letter that had been placed under his door.

A note was a better description for it.

The paper had only four lines.

Mr. Paul Chadwick:

I have reasons to believe you are my brother. I would like to meet with you at your convenience and talk.

Please call me. I am staying at the Holiday Inn over by the airport. Suite 707.

Eugenia Terrazas.

...you are my brother. That was the only phrase that jumped out of the paper into his eyes.

He had a sister.

Just like that.

He had called immediately.

The voice that answered was young and sweet.

“ Sí, bueno.”

“ Buenas tardes. Quisiera hablar con Eugenia Terrazas, por favor.”

“ Sí, dígame. Ella habla.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“ Habla Paul Chadwick.” he said. He had learned to speak Spanish while growing up in Texas. His friends had been Mexican—Americans or Chicanos and he had continued practicing it with the Cuban community of Orlando. He barely had an accent.

There was a moment of silence and then.

“ Oh, my God. I can’t believe I am talking with you.”

“ Excuse me, but who are you?”

“ Didn’t you read my letter?”

“ Yes, but...”

“ Look, don’t say anything. We need to meet face to face. What are you doing now? How about now? Would you like me to pick you up? Where are you? No, no, don’t tell me. At your apartment, of course. I’ll send the chauffeur over right away. What do you like to eat? Well, it doesn’t matter really. The important thing is that we finally meet. Oh, my God. I cannot believe it.”

She had said all of that without breathing. Paul laughed at the barrage. He would soon learn that Eugenia was always like that: she had this irresistible enthusiasm that she managed to turn into plans which rearranged everybody else’s lives.

“ I’ll be over in twenty minutes.” she said and hang up.

Paul couldn’t say a word.

She arrived in fifteen minutes.

It was the chauffeur who knocked at his door.

“ Mr. Paul Chadwick?”

“ Yes.”

“ Mrs. Terrazas is waiting for you.” he said. Paul thought he detected a slight tone of reproach as if he should have been waiting downstairs for her arrival.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“ I’ll be down in a moment. Thanks.” he said. He called the plant and talked to Sharon his secretary and explained that he wasn’t going back for the rest of the day.

“ Are you sick or something?” she said. She sounded worried.

“ No, why?”

“ Are you sure?”

“ Of course.”

“ Is this a real afternoon off?”

“ Yes.”

“ Oh, gee. You know, I’ve been working with you for the last two years and I have never seen you doing anything like this. You are not in any trouble, are you?”

“ Sherry...”

“ Okay, okay. Just needed to know. Have a great time, boss.”

“ Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

He hung up the telephone and found himself very nervous all of a sudden. His palms were sweating in spite of the air conditioning.

He made sure he had his keys, his wallet, and then marched down the stairs.

When he stepped out of the building the chauffeur jumped out of the car and opened the back door and out came an exquisite vision in white.

She was younger than he expected.

She smiled and instantly he knew. She was his sister. It didn’t matter when or how or whatever. Her face and her smile did not lie. They were so alike it was uncanny. They could have passed as twins if

BLOOD RELATIVES

he had been few years younger. She was a gorgeous female version of himself: her features were much more delicate, and her femininity was overpowering, but there was no mistake about the fact that both came from the same source.

“ I am speechless.” she said.

“ So am I.”

“ Do I get a kiss?.”

“ Of course” he said, and he kissed her cheek in a polite way, but she embraced him exuberantly and kissed repeatedly. She sobbed.

“ You know, when I first found about you many years ago I refused to believe it. But not anymore. A brother! I have a brother!” she said crying and holding tight to him. She embraced him and her crying played with his emotions and he didn’t know what he felt. Everything was happening so fast he couldn’t find the words to express his surprise and his utter amazement, but having this slender woman in his arms, crying into his shoulder made him felt something in his throat and in his eyes.

“ We better get out of here.” he said noticing the looks they were getting from people walking by.

“ Oh, yes. Yes, of course. Let’s.” she said and went into the limousine, and once inside she sat close by him and didn’t let go of his hand.

“ Pancho, just drive around please.”

“ Sí, señora.”

She closed the glass partition.

“ I’m sure you have tons of questions.” she said.

“ Yes.”

“ I can answer many of them, but many others I can’t because I just don’t know the entire story. However I’ll do my best, so where do we start?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“ You can start by telling me about you.”

“ My name is Eugenia Terrazas, but you know that already. Eugenia Terrazas de Sarabia. My father —and yours— is Octavio Terrazas Garza. Our mother's name was Beatrice Eugenia Terrazas. I am married to Sebastian Sarabia Gómez. Do you follow me?”

“ Yes. Go on.”

“ I first knew about you when I was ten years old. I heard my grandmother talk about our mother, and then she mentioned you, her lost grandson. She said she felt guilty not knowing about your fate. They were talking at the table by the pool. That’s the place where my grandmother would spend most of her time during the long hot days in Cuernavaca. Have you ever been in Cuernavaca?”

“ No.”

“ Of course not. In México?”

“ Once. Across the border from Texas. I went to Nuevo Laredo with my friends of high school. We got drunk.”

“ Yes, well. We don’t like gringos doing that. Anyway, my father got furious and shouted to my grandmother to shut up and mind her own business, and forbade her to ever mention the name of that woman again.”

“ That woman?”

“ Yes. Beatrice Eugenia. Our mother.”

“ Oh.”

“ I questioned my grandmother about it, but she wouldn’t tell me anything and she would just cry.”

“ Did you ask your father?”

“ Are you kidding? Nobody asks him anything. Never! So I didn’t have anyone to turn to and time went by very soon and I grew up, but I never forgot that conversation. Then, when I was eighteen, my grandma became very ill. It was only the two of us, you know. My father was always too busy with his businesses and his whores to pay

BLOOD RELATIVES

any attention to me. Well, that's not exactly true either. He was always watching over me, and made sure that I had anything that I ever wanted. From the time I was in kindergarten I had chauffeur and a bodyguard, can you believe it? It was as if he was afraid somebody would try to harm me."

She made a pause.

"When my *viejita* was dying, one afternoon I forced her to tell me the truth. She would not until I told her that God would not forgive her sins if she died without telling me. Then she told me. She told me about Beatrice Eugenia and you and me and father..."

"Stop for a moment. When was this?"

"When I was eighteen. Ten years ago".

Ten years ago. It meant that Eugenia was two years younger than him. He had been twenty then. He had still been in the army then, finishing his two year tour.

"Ever since then I have been looking for you."

"What happened to our mother?"

"That's what I was about to tell you. Nobody knows. Right after I was born, —I was six months old— they had a terrible fight. Grandma didn't tell me exactly about what was the fight, but Beatrice Eugenia ran away from the house. She took you with her. And nobody saw her again. Or you, for that matter."

"What did they fought about?"

"I don't know. That is the point."

"How did you find me?"

"It wasn't easy. About four years ago I received a letter from an anonymous person, saying that they knew who my brother was, and who had taken him when he was a child. The letter mentioned the name of a woman. I hired a private investigator to check things out. One thing led to another and after all this years here I am."

"Do you know who wrote the letter?"

BLOOD RELATIVES

“ No. The funny thing is that he or she didn’t mention your actual name; they just wrote that woman’s name, that’s all.”

“ Cristina Chadwick?”

“ No. Yes. The name was Cristina, but the last name was Peralta”

Paul nodded. Peralta had been the last name of his Aunt Cristina before she married the man who had adopted him legally and whom Paul hadn’t really known since he had died two years later when he was 6 years old.

“ With that name we combed first all of México. It took two years and a half. Then we got a lead about a woman named Cristina Peralta who had emigrated to Texas many years ago. I almost didn’t pursue it because the dates didn’t match and because by that time I was totally discouraged and I was beginning to suspect the private investigator had been taking me for a ride, charging me all that money for nothing. But he told me that he would do it for free until he found you. Then he expected to collect. That’s what he said. And he did. He found the trace of that woman in Texas. Found that she was dead. Found that she had had a baby with her which had not been registered until she got married with a man named John Chadwick, who died very soon, but who left a son named Paul Chadwick. After that it was relatively easy to find you. My big brother.”

She smiled and cried at the same time and kissed him again.

“ Oh, I have never been so happy in my entire life.” she said.

“ So you have no doubt about me?”

“ Do you? Just look at the mirror, for god’s sake. When father finds out...”

“ Look, I really don’t want to know any more for now. Let me assimilate what you’ve told me so far. Okay?”

“ Whatever you say. After all, you are my eldest brother.”

They laughed.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“ A few hours ago I was an orphan who didn’t have any family and didn’t know anything about it. Now I have a sister, a father, a mother who disappeared long ago...Jesus! I feel I just won the Lost Family Lottery.”

“ Me too”

“ Well, that means we have to celebrate this.

“ Sure. What do you propose?

“ Well, for starters how about having dinner at the best restaurant in Orlando?

“ Let’s!” she laughed and clapped as excited as a little child.

That night had been a huge emotional ride, full of high ups and very deep downs, but mostly ups. They had dinner together. Then they had drinks, and all the time they had talked incessantly about each other. It was a very strange night for Paul because at times he had felt as close to Eugenia as he had never felt to any other woman in his life. This, just after hours of meeting her. Very soon they had discovered they shared the same warped sense of humor, and that they had many of the same tastes in food and drinks. That night they laughed and told stories about each other and their studies and he told her about his business and his love affairs and she told him about life in México, and about what she liked and didn’t like about being married to Sebastian Sarabia, the politician who was a partner of “their” father.

By the time Pancho stopped the limousine in front of his apartment, dawn was breaking over the horizon and Paul was madly in love with his sister Eugenia. And she with him.

All of that had happened a week before.

Tonight she was supposed to fly back from New York to meet him again.

She didn’t arrive.

6

At first he waited in vain for her. When she didn't show up he expected a phone call, and when that didn't happen he thought she would send him a message, but days went by and nothing arrived in the mail from her.

He resumed his busy schedule and before he realized it an entire two weeks had passed by without hearing a word from Eugenia.

He felt stupid: in his excitement of knowing her he had forgotten a basic thing: to ask for her telephone number. He didn't have a way of reaching her. Didn't know her address, or anything else except some vague references she had made about her living on the outskirts of México city.

He made plans: he would fly to México City by the end of the month and search for her. If she had been able to find him, so would he.

One of his clients was a credit bureau. He got in contact with Peter Hamdkol, the president of the firm, and asked him to find out anything he could about a woman named Eugenia Terrazas who was a Mexican national and who had been in the country during the first week of the month.

He called him back within 24 hours.

"The woman you asked me about doesn't exist.

"What do you mean she doesn't exist.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Under that name, I mean. There’s no record of any Eugenia Terrazas anywhere.

“Can’t be. I saw her purse for a moment and she had an entire collection of American credit cards.

“Well, that might be but not under that specific name. If you could give me her maiden name or her date of birth maybe I could help you some more.

“Okay, thanks.

“Sure.

Paul thought about it for awhile and that night he drove to the hotel she had stayed at. He gave 100 dollars to the night reception clerk at the Holiday Inn and got two things: the reservation slip and the address she had provided when she registered. The reservation slip even came with a telephone number in México. And the name she had used was María Eugenia Terrazas de Sarabia. That explained why Peter hadn’t been able to find anything.

That was easy, Paul said to himself and went back to his apartment to wait for the sun to rise.

At nine he called Peter again and gave him the new name.

Then he called México.

The woman that answered was abrupt.

“La señora no está.” she said. And no, she didn’t know at what time she would be back. Would he like to live a message?

Paul hesitated and decided against leaving his name. His instincts told him there was something wrong, and it would be better if he spoke with her first. He said he would call back and hung up.

Before noon Peter called him back.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Well, the name you gave me its popping up like crazy everywhere. You were right; she has a collection of credit cards, but not that she needs them though. This lady seems to be coveted by every bank in the country. Must be really loaded. Her American Express is Platinum. You know what that means?

“Not really.

“With that card she could buy a 747 if she wanted. It has no limit. And they mean it. She is rated triple A. The tops.

“Thank you Peter.

“Do not mention this to anybody.

“Of course not.

“And congratulations. You got yourself a big winner. If she has any sisters, do think of me please “ he said, laughing.

If only you knew , pal, thought Paul.

He would stick to his plans. There was a direct flight to México City everyday. The flight itself took only three hours. He could leave next Friday, have a long weekend, and come back on Monday.

Easy.

Or so he thought.

7

The flight was great. He felt confident and relaxed until after he went through customs.

He stepped outside of the Benito Juárez airport in México City and the noises and smells and the frenetic movement around him felt overwhelming. He was back in his land of birth. He was back to begin a search that it might be fruitless. It was a strange sensation. For a moment he felt lost. Where to start?

In a second he was surrounded by taxi drivers offering their services. He choose a young man and boarded the white and green cab.

He sat in the back.

“Where to?”

“Hotel Camino Real. Do you know it?”

“Of course.”

He wanted to absorb the city. He had seen it from above as the plane prepared to land and it looked huge. He hadn't expected it to be so big.

The traffic was very heavy. He saw the mixture of truly old buildings with newer ones and was surprised at the amount of people walking down the streets. He saw a lot of poverty and he didn't like it the fact that at the stop lights the taxi would be surrounded by boys

BLOOD RELATIVES

offering to clean the windshield. The driver had to refuse it again and again every time he stopped the car. It was a tiresome routine. It was also sad. Paul was upset at so many young people having to do that instead of being in school. He realized very quickly he could have been one of them. That he wasn't was more a matter of luck than anything else.

"Is your first time in México?"

"Sí.

"Your Spanish is very good.

"Gracias. What is your name?"

"Basilio Sánchez, para servirle.

"Mucho gusto, Basilio. Yo soy Paul.

"Mucho gusto señor Paul. Look, if you don't mind I'll take you through downtown. It'll take a little longer, but I won't charge you extra and you'll get to see some of the important landmarks of the city. Is that okay?"

"Sure.

He did as he said, and took him through the Zócalo, the huge plaza which was surrounded by the Palacio Nacional and the old Cathedral build by the Spaniards after they had defeated the Aztecs.

"On that side of the Cathedral you can walk down to the ruins of the Aztecs." Basilio said.

Then he showed him the Palacio de Las Bellas Artes, and drove down Reforma Avenue toward Chapultepec Park. Paul was amazed at how good his driver was. At least ten times he felt they were going to crash, but nothing happened. The driver moved his car with grace along the small spaces without even a scratch, and without losing his cool.

It took them an hour to get to the hotel.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Basilio, do you have a phone number were I can reach you? I might need you to drive me around.

“Sí señor. Here, let me give you my card.

Basilio gave him a printed card. It had the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe on the back. On the front was Basilio’s name and a phone number. And his title. Tourist Guide, it read. Paul gave him a tip.

The doorman took his bags to the front desk of the hotel. It was a very large building. Not tall; it only had a few floors, but it covered a huge city block. The corridors inside were extremely long. He felt as if he had walked half the city only to get to his room. But once inside the room he felt it was worth it. The room was very comfortable and luxurious, and the glass door on the back opened to a small garden with a pool and a garden table.

Nice.

He took a shower, and then sat down at the table and placed the phone on it.

It was time to call Eugenia.

She answered on the first ring, as if she had been expecting his call.

“*Sí, bueno.*” she said.

“*Hola Eugenia.*”

She hesitated a little bit, and then recovered very fast.

“*Hola. ¿Quién habla?*”

“Paul Chadwick. *Estoy aquí en México. Me gustaría verte.*”

There was a pause.

“*Patricia, cómo estás?* Listen, I’m busy right now. Could I call you back? No? Why not? Well, at what time are you going back home? No, that’s too late. Listen, how about if we have a coffee? Yes, then you can tell me everything about it. How about around five. Yes? Okay. *En la Cafetería del Lago?* Okay.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

She waited. He understood that was his signal.

“*Cafetería del Lago*. Around five.” he said.

“*Sí, sí. Está bien*. Don’t worry about it. See you there. I might be a little late, but you wait for me. And would you please calm down? Stop crying. I don’t want you to make an spectacle of yourself. No matter what, wait for me, okay?”

“Okay.” he said.

She hung up.

She is incredible, he thought.

She had managed to convey information, make an appointment with him, and warn him all at the same time.

He looked at his watch.

It was very early.

He had about four hours to get to *Cafetería del Lago*.

At the reception desk he found a map of the city and the girl at the information desk showed him where to find *the Cafetería del Lago*. It was relatively close to the hotel. It was in the midst of Chapultepec Park, by the Lago Mayor, the big lake.

He decided to walk.

And he regretted it utterly.

He didn’t expect Chapultepec to be so huge. It was more like a forest than a park. Thousands of acres were devoted to nature in what he already knew to be the largest city in the world. And he felt he had walked all of them when several kilometers and several hours later

BLOOD RELATIVES

he finally arrived at the meeting place. It was a very pretty restaurant built on the side of the lake. It had a terrace that overlooked the lake, and he choose a table there. It was barely after five, so the sun was still out and the soft wind sweeping the terrace felt great.

He entertained himself feeding bread crumbs to the ducks on the lake while watching the beautiful women who arrived at the restaurant, escorted by serious looking men with mustaches and cellular phones in their hands. The cellular phones were very popular; it seemed like everyone had one and they were shown as if they were a status symbol.

At six he decided to eat.

She had said she would be there, even if a little late.

He ate a Carne Tampiquena, with tortillas and guacamole and a cold Carta Blanca.

At five to seven, he saw Pancho standing at the door looking for him. He waived discretely and the chauffeur nodded. Pancho left.

He came back five minutes later.

“La señora lo está esperando.” he said. She was waiting at the car. Paul paid the bill, and left. She was seated in the back of a humble Japanese car. Nothing luxurious this time. She herself was dressed in jeans and a blue silk blouse. She looked like a university student. Except for the jewels on the ears, arms, fingers...that was the only clue about her real status.

“Hola.” he said.

“Oh, Paul, you shouldn’t be here. When did you arrived? How did you find me? Do you have any idea how dangerous this is? I am sorry I didn’t see you in Orlando, but I had to get back immediately because father fell ill. You should have waited for my call.

“I wasn’t sure you would ever call back again. I was worried. And besides that I had to make sure you did exist in reality. You see, for awhile there I thought I had imagined you.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Nonsense, hermanito. How could I lose my brother after so many years of looking for him? Come here” she pulled him over and gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

“I’m sorry if I am bitching. I am very glad that you are here, it’s just that it was an enormous surprise. How did you find me so fast?” she said.

“Actually, it was very easy..” he said and he told her about the night clerk at the hotel, but took care not to mention what Peter had found.

Pancho had started the car and was driving around Chapultepec. He never left the garden and several times he seemed to make sure nobody was following them.

“Why all of these precautions? Why did you say it was dangerous to see you?”

“It’s because of my husband. He is a very jealous man. And he is a very important man also. I am well known in México and it wouldn’t be nice for the wife of a Secretario de Gobernación to be seen chatting with a very handsome man, would it? Even if he is her long lost brother.”

“Secretario de Gobernacion? That’s like State Department, isn’t?”

“Minister of Interior. Very powerful post. In México he is considered the second man after the president.”

“You didn’t tell me any of this in Orlando.

“Well, he was appointed just two weeks ago. As you can imagine, I have been a little bit busy. That’s another reason why I didn’t called you.

Paul thought about all of this for a moment.

“He doesn’t know about me?”

“Of course not.

“Why not?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

Eugenia was truly disconcerted for a moment

“Well, there is no reason, really. It’s just that I have to prepare the situation, you know. Like, I just found you. I need time.

“Time for what?

“Well, to tell father, for one. After all, you are his son.

“He didn’t care if I ended up like one of those boys cleaning windshields at the corners, so why would he care now? To me he is nothing but a stranger.

“Because...Look, I know there are many things going on in your head right now. I won’t even try to understand them. But you don’t know this country. You don’t know how things are done here, do you agree?

“Yes, sure

“Well, okay. Many things might seem strange to you, but they are not. You are just going to have to trust me, okay?

“So what am I to do? Sit around all day waiting for you to call me? Sorry, but I can’t. I am far too busy to do that. I came here to find out about you. How you were. I was worried about you. I came also hoping to find out a little bit more about my family, about my roots, but hey, I can live without knowing.

“What do you propose?

“I am going to be here until Monday...

“That’s just three days.

“That’s right. I would like to meet your family, if possible. If not, then I’ll just take my plane back, and I’ll keep in touch with you.

“It’s going to be hard.

“Eugenia, darling, I really don’t understand any of this. But I think you are lovely and I am very happy to be your brother. I love you.

“I love you too.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Now, if you please tell you driver to drop me off at a taxi...”

“Where are you staying?”

“At the Camino Real. Room 1224.”

“Okay. Pancho, vamos al Camino Real, por favor.”

“Sí, señora.”

“He’ll take you there, don’t worry. And listen, I am sorry about all of this. I guess I am worrying too much. But one thing is for sure; you really have the Terrazas temper in you. When you get mad your eyes flare full of fire and passion. I like that.”

Pancho drove very fast now that it was after 10 and the city was withdrawing to sleep. There were far fewer cars in the streets when they came out of Chapultepec Park.

In less than ten minutes they were at his hotel.

“I’ll call you first thing in the morning.” she said.

“If I’m not here, leave a message. I’ll find you for sure.”

“I know that.”

“Good night, sis.”

8

He entered his hotel room and after a shower he felt anxious to get out of there and hit all the nightclubs he could find open. He wasn't going to waste his first night in México City. No way.

"You were born here, dummy" he said to himself on the mirror. "That should mean something"

He left his room and went to the front desk and asked them about nightclubs. They told him about the bars inside of the hotel, but he dismissed them.

"I don't want to be with a bunch of gringos like myself." he said to the clerk. "I want to go where Mexicans go, you know?"

"Well, then you might want start with the Pink Zone.

"Pink Zone, what is that? Sounds interesting.

The clerk took out a map, and showed him an area which was marked in pink in the paper.

"This is the Pink Zone. It's near the hotel and it has plenty of bars, discos, nightclubs, restaurants, whatever.

"How do I get there?"

"Do you want to walk?"

"No more walking for me today, thank you.

"Then take a cab. The Pink Zone is only five minutes away.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Thanks, pal.

“Sure.

He did just that. He took a taxi outside the hotel, told the driver to drop him off at the Pink Zone, and five minutes later the driver stopped on a light on Reforma Avenue and Florencia. At night the city did look beautiful and well kept. It was only during the day that the city showed its neuroses and its frantic anxiety.

“The Pink Zone starts here.” the driver said “ It goes all the way out to Insurgentes and up to Avenida Chapultepec. Do you have a specific place in mind?

“No. Listen, could you drive around for awhile?”

“No hay problema.

“Great.

The driver drove him around the Pink Zone several times, pointing out the best places. By the third time they passed the same disco, Paul felt confident about finding his way.

He left the cab and started walking. He avoided the crowded places, where lines of people waited to go in, and instead he choose the more discrete bars and discos, where he could see the Mexicans in action.

And saw them he did.

In one bar he met Lorena.

They both exchanged looks at the Barra Libre, and pretty soon started a conversation. She was an Account Executive at a bank, she said. She was 25 and very cute. They chatted for awhile. Then they danced. Then she took him to her table. She was with a group of boys and girls just about her age. They invited him to join the group. Just like that. And they partied.

They danced at the disco until 3 o'clock. Then somehow everybody decided to continue the party in Sergio's apartment and off they went in three different cars. Paul was in the last one. He and Lorena sat in the back and they continued the heavy petting they had

BLOOD RELATIVES

already started inside the disco. Nobody seemed to mind. The other couples were making out also. By the time they got to Sergio's apartment things were so hot Paul had to wonder if this was going to be a free for all, but nothing happened. The girls seemed to cool off once inside the apartment, and the boys seemed happy singing old revolutionary songs while they drank more and more tequila. He got tired of this and said to Lorena that he was leaving. Without a word she went to pick up her coat, said goodnight to everybody and left with him.

The taxi left them at the hotel just as the sun was raising.

Lorena stayed with him the entire day .

They didn't leave the room for a minute.

She made love hot and hard, with a certain kind of despair to it that in itself added to the passion and lust they had inspired in each other. They would fall asleep and wake up and make love again, almost without speaking, in a kind of a prolonged drunken stupor produced by the desire which seemed to grow with each encounter, instead of diminishing with the fulfillment of it. It was a full delivery. She held nothing back, and neither did he. And the love and tenderness she inspired in him was real. He expected her to stay for the entire weekend, but Saturday night however she said she had to go back home and she had left, although promising she would be back the following day early in the morning to fetch him.

She didn't.

Mexican women, Paul decided much later, were something else.

The one who did call was Eugenia.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She called early on Sunday, just as he was getting out of the shower.

“Guess what?.” she said

“I give up. Tell me.”

“Father wants to meet you “

“You told him?

“ Sure. Isn’t that what you wanted?

“ Yes, but I didn’t expect you to do it.

“ Well, my dear, you have an appointment tonight at seven to go meet your father. I hope everything goes well.

“You are not going to be there?

“Of course not. This is between you and him. But I’ll see you for breakfast tomorrow. At what time does your plane leave?

“One thirty.”

“Oh, then we have plenty of time. I’ll pick you up early and we can spend the entire morning together. Would you like that?

“Sure.

“Okay. Now some recommendations. Do not argue with him. No matter what he says, no matter about who he says it, do not argue with him, okay?

“Okay.

“Look, Paul, this is a very important man you are dealing with. You don’t know how important your father is in México. And he has a temper to match his power, so do not make him mad, okay? I gather that tonight is going to be a heavy night for him: when I told him I had found you I swear I thought he was going to slap me, something he has never done. Then he calmed down and asked about

BLOOD RELATIVES

you, and how had I found you and things like that. Then he said he wanted to meet you. But I am worried, okay? I am worried about him, and about you. Two roosters inside the ring are never good news. So be careful, okay?

“It will be all right. Don’t worry.

“Okay, then I just have to ask you something: did you have fun last night?

“Last night I slept like a baby. But Friday was a good night. Had a lot of fun. I meet a girl and all.”

“Really? You going to have to tell me everything about it. Tomorrow. At 9, okay?

“Wait, you forgot to tell me at what time the meeting is tonight and where I have to go.”

“Oh, that’s right. Father wants you at his house at seven, so Pancho, the chauffeur, will pick you up at your hotel at 6. You have the entire day to have fun and to prepare mentally for tonight. So go out and flirt with the girls; they love gringos.

“Yes, sir. I mean, ma’am.

“See you tomorrow.

“By honey.

He spent the day by the pool, wandering, reading newspapers and thinking about his early childhood memories. He tried to remember something about his parents, but he had been just a two year old kid when they parted ways; he didn’t remember his father at all and his mother was a vague face which had faded out in his memory. He wondered what had happened all those years ago between his parents, why had they split and why Eugenia and he had been separated in such an unusual manner, as if they had been puppies. Why? Why? He had his head full of questions. What about his mother? Was she dead? Was she alive? What? Could he reach her? Should he try to find her? Why had he been given for adoption? Was

BLOOD RELATIVES

he given for adoption? His aunt Cristina never wanted him to consider her his mother, although with time he became her legal son, but she had refused to be called mother by him until the day she died. Why? And why hadn't he had papers until he was adopted by Mr. Chadwick?

At least now he was going to find the answers to some of his questions.

At four thirty he was ready, dressed in his best suit. He was really too nervous to wait inside his room, so he left word at the reception desk and went up to the lobby bar to have a Margarita cocktail.

At six on the dot the reception clerk called his name on the paging system.

When he answered the phone the clerk said only four words; "Your party is here."

Instead of Pancho, Eugenia's chauffeur, Paul was greeted by a uniformed chauffeur and by another man, also uniformed. Both were armed. Paul saw the guns under their arms, badly concealed. They led him to a Mercedes Benz parked at the main entrance of the hotel, and drove him through the city towards Las Lomas, the most exclusive and expensive neighborhood in the entire country. Paul had already a good idea of the city after reading the map with his printer's eye, and also after having talked with Lorena and the bellhops, and the waiters, and the whatever...he was discovering he was good at getting information out of people. That was useful.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Las Lomas was crisscrossed by streets named after mountains. In one of them the car turned right and then left and there, at the end of a cul-de-sac, the entrance to the house loomed large. Very large. It seemed larger than the entrance of the hotel, Paul thought. It covered about a block on the front.

Once inside the gate, after the gate was opened by the guards watching from a small cabin built with red bricks and glass, there was a garden flooded exquisitely with colored lights. The road went up among roses to the main door.

At the door there was another man waiting. He was also armed. He opened the door and very politely asked permission to pat him for weapons. He did it very fast and efficiently and then led him to a large room that had the fireplace on. There was a waiter with a white uniform and a napkin on his arm. The fire was roaring when Paul was seated and asked what would he like to drink. He said tequila, please.

He sat down up and then got up, nervously, not being able to think clearly.

The saloon was long and narrow and had many pictures and photographs on its walls. Since the light was dimmed, most of it coming from the fireplace, Paul had to get up close to see them clearly, and in all them he saw the same man in different attitudes and different years, with many different people and in many places, but always, in all of the pictures, he showed a magnificent smile, one that made him stand out from everybody else.

It was the first time Paul saw what his father looked like.

And then he showed up in flesh and blood.

He burst into the saloon.

Don Octavio Terrazas Garza was a short man, but his energy made him seem seven feet tall. He was also old, around seventy or so, but his tanned complexion and his forceful manners made him look much younger. He had lost most of his hair around the top of his head. His eyes were enormous black holes searching, looking, probing...

BLOOD RELATIVES

He came in and the waiter froze, expecting his commands.

“Leave us alone.” he said. The waiter left immediately.

“Buenas noches.” Paul said, realizing until then that he didn’t know how to talk to his own father. It was very awkward.

“Buenas.” the old man said.

The had exchanged those first words standing half a room away, as if they were afraid of getting closer.

The old man extended his hand silently. Paul walked over. It was a firm handshake. Up close the smile was charming, the intelligent eyes harder. Paul was close to six feet and much taller. Don Octavio rose his face to look him up closely while he held on to his hand, and then to his arm. He seemed to be searching for something on Paul’s face.

He let go abruptly and walked over to the bar. They sat on opposite sides.

“What are you drinking?”

“Tequila.”

Don Octavio poured two tequilas and they clicked their glasses.

“Salud.” don Octavio said. He swallowed his drink with one swift move of his arm.

“Salud.” answered Paul. He decided to take it easy with the tequila.

“So you are Jose Ramón.”

“Jose Ramón?”

“That was you name until the day your mother took you away.”

“I see. My name now is Paul. Paul Chadwick.”

“That doesn’t sound very Spanish at all. Are you ashamed of your Spanish blood?” don Octavio said, aggressively.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Not at all. The people who adopted me gave me that name.” Paul said, recalling Eugenia’s warning. However, he could not stop his tongue and added. “And I like it.

Don Octavio took another drink very fast and filled his glass again. Paul saw the old man up close; his features were hard, as if made out of stone. His nose was long, aquiline, bony. His lips were thin, almost nonexistent. His eyes were huge, round, always moving; they showed the intelligence behind them, but they were also cold and indifferent as if the intelligence which gave them life was also its only concern. His hands were rugged, and although well taken care of, remained the hands of a working man.

“What do you do?”

“I own a printing company in Orlando, Florida.” Paul had never felt more proud of his business than at that moment. If the old man thought he was going to ask something from him, he’d better start thinking differently.

“What kind of things do you print?”

“Everything. Mostly commercial printing.

“Commercial?”

“Yeah, you know. Invoices, restaurant tickets, flyers, that kind of thing.

“Oh. Do you make money?”

“Can’t complain. We have grown 100% each year. Last year we sold half a million. Next year we should have sales for at least a million dollars.

“And out of that how much is for you?”

“You mean profit? We have a twenty percent profit, after taxes.

“Twenty percent? That’s not much, is it?”

Paul didn’t know what to answer to that. Up till now he had thought twenty percent was very good.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Look, I really didn’t come to talk business with you.

“Oh, no? Then what did you came for?

“I came to meet you and to ask some questions.

“So you get to ask the questions. And I can’t. Is that it?

“No, of course not. I didn’t mean that.

“What did you mean then?

“You want to talk business, let’s talk business. I’m sorry if I was rude, okay?

“Okay.

They were silent for a moment. Paul felt that they had started on the wrong foot. He didn’t like that, so he tried to patch things up.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk business,” came the immediate reply.

“I said I was sorry.

Silence again.

They both looked at their glasses. Don Octavio filled his again and made a show of trying to fill Paul’s which was still full.

“You don’t like my tequila? It’s not good enough for you?

“Is excellent. But I’ve drink too much already.” he said.

“Oh, yeah? You don’t show it.

“I know. I have that ability.

“Its in your genes. The Terrazas don’t ever get drunk. You’ll never see a Terrazas losing his head over a drink. It comes from our Spanish blood.

“Really? Where are the Terrazas from?

“Our first ancestor came from Galicia with Hernán Cortes. Do you know who Cortes was?

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Yes. He defeated the Aztecs.

“Right. Agustín Terrazas Gómez de Valderrama was one of his soldiers. He was one of Cortes’ most trusted men. After Cortes was named Marqués de Oaxaca, he gave an encomienda to Agustín Terrazas Gómez de Valderrama. His encomienda stretched from Toluca to Michoacán. Those are cities 300 kilometers apart on the western side of México. Have you ever been there?

“No. This is my first time in México.

“Well, then you have a lot to learn.

“I agree with that.

“Your blood is good. I don’t know why are you ashamed of it.

Don Octavio talked as if Paul had decided to change his name on his own. Paul felt the urge to answer, but he let it pass.

“What is that?” he said pointing to a golden frame on the wall, which was displayed spectacularly.

“That’s the coat of arms of our family. It comes from Spain. It was earned fighting against the infidels during the eight centuries they controlled Spain.

“Interesting.

Don Octavio nodded.

“And all of those pictures? They seem to be important people.

“Presidents. The first one I met was Miguel Alemán. That’s him. He came to inaugurate my rubber factory. That was during the war.

“Which war?

“The big one. The Second World War. At that time México became strategically important. We were able to produce rubber. Not without problems, though. We were sabotaged twice by German

BLOOD RELATIVES

agents. They blew up the installations. But with the government's help we were able to resume production very fast. The Americans were behind us, too. They needed all the rubber they could get their hands on.

"I can imagine.

"No, you can't. You have never lived through a war like that. I remember how mixed up we were at that time. For a while it seemed that Hitler had a good thing going. When he took power I was very young, about your age " how old are you?

"Thirty.

"I was younger. And I was making a lot of money and I was a friend of the President of México. Ever since, I've meet each and every one of them. A few weeks ago the latest one came to have dinner here. I suggested to him to appoint Eugenia's husband instead of the panned he had before in Gobernacion. It seems like he listened to me. He is young, and ambitious. But in the end they are all the same. Politicians. They are a different breed.

"I agree."

"Yeah? How many do you know?"

Paul tuned around to face the old man.

"Is this a race? How many do I need to know before I can agree with you?

The old man watched him in silence and then smiled.

"Let's have dinner" he ordered.

"Sure," said Paul, although he wasn't feeling sure at all. He was feeling angry.

Don Octavio pressed a button and a waiter materialized. He gave orders and two minutes later dinner was being served on a small table by the fireplace.

"Sopa de hongos. Have you tried it?"

It was mushroom soup.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Not like this, no.

They ate in silence.

Then the second course was served. It looked suspicious.

“What is this?

“Try them.

Paul ate some of the meat which was floating on a heavy soup. It was delicious.

“They are escaldillas.

“What are they?

“Bull’s balls.

“What?

“Bull’s testicles, huevos, cojones...” don Octavio said, laughing at Paul’s expression. “You might need them.

Paul ate them with gusto. He thought that the ancient believe in the power of eating animal testicles was just an excuse. The truth was they were exquisite.

While they ate, Paul was thinking of how to approach the subject of his mother. He wanted to ask the old man about her, but didn’t want to upset him. So after dinner Paul asked him to describe more of the photographs. Don Octavio described most of them; and talked about how each of the photographs had meant an increase in his wealth and his power.

Then, suddenly, don Octavio said good night.

“I’m tired now. It was good to see you. Come back tomorrow”

“I was planning on leaving tomorrow”

“Leaving? Where to?”

“Back to Florida.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Nonsense. Promise me you’ll come back tomorrow. We have to talk about many things still, don’t you think?”

The old man looked straight into Paul’s eyes, anxiously waiting for his promise. Paul felt for the first time the overwhelming charm being applied to him. He couldn’t refuse.

“Okay. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Good. I’ll send my chauffeur to pick you up.” don Octavio said, and he walked out of the room.

Paul felt like he had passed the test.

9

The following morning Eugenia showed up at 8 am sharp.

She called him from her car, they met at the front desk, and they had breakfast at the Cafetería María Bonita inside the hotel.

“So how did it go?”

“Fine, I guess. He wants me to go back tonight.”

“Will you?”

“I promised him.”

“Good.”

“I have to ask you about mother. What do you know about her?”

“Nothing really. Besides the fact that she left one day, just like that.”

“Do you know why?”

“Nope. It’s one of those Big Secrets in the family.”

“Why did she leave you behind?”

“I don’t know that either.”

She really seemed to dislike the subject, so he let it drop. He would have to find some other way to find out.

“How about your husband?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“What about him?”

“Did you tell him about me?”

“No.

“You are not afraid to be seen with me?”

“I don’t care. He can do whatever he likes.

Paul didn’t press it.

After changing his plane reservations at the travel agency, they had fun during the first part of the day. Followed by her bodyguards “there were four of them in a different car” she took him to the Museo de Antropología, and they walked through some of the rooms, but the museum was so big they barely had time to see the most important areas. Thanks to the personal guided tour given by the Director of the museum “whom insisted in doing so after learning that the wife of the Secretario de Gobernación was there— Paul learned that at the time of the Spanish conquest there had been more than a hundred different tribes in México, each with its own customs and languages, and learned some more about the Mayas and the Aztecs. The Aztecs had been an imperialistic culture, and their warriors had dominated most of México all the way to Guatemala. They had a highly organized theocratic society, and had built it in a historically short span through military control. The Director of the museum was proud of the depth of his knowledge and he answered gladly all the questions Paul had.

For Paul it was as if he were finding a treasure in the closet. There were all those things he didn’t know about. By virtue of birth, they were part of him too; he felt that his roots extended hundredths of years in the past and it was a new feeling. He began to understand the people who filled books tracing their ancestry. Up to that moment he had been alone in the world. Now he wasn’t. It was as if he were suddenly richer, wiser, taller, stronger...

He was getting added value.

That, he decided, was what having a culture meant.

BLOOD RELATIVES

An added value.

Neat.

Eugenia left before lunch. She said she had to go and make sure the servants back at her house had everything ready because “El señor Presidente” was having dinner with them tonight.

She said it like that, very casually, in the same way that she had been name dropping all day long. Paul began to understand that for his family their political relations were of utmost importance. Later he would learn that this was true for most Mexicans. They thrive and prosper thanks to their friends in the government. Not so much through their efforts, but through their net of political connections.

Having a good friend in a good position in México meant more than a having a good business. Because in México very often without the first you couldn't have the second.

When he went back to his hotel he found a message from Lorena.

I would like to see you before you leave. Call me at work.

I'll be here till 5.

Kisses.

BLOOD RELATIVES

First he called Florida, to tell Sharon that he was staying a few more days. No, he didn't know how long. He gave orders on what they should do about the production, and about the payments in the bank; he arranged for Sharon to call the mechanic because one of the machines seemed to be broken, and postponed a decision to fire one of the new employees who was sick and hadn't show up for three days. He told Sharon to wait. If that man had been really sick, he would get another chance.

Then he called Lorena.

They agreed to meet at six in a cafetería in the Pink Zone.

"I thought I would never see you again," said Lorena when she arrived. During the day she looked even more beautiful than he remembered. She was dressed with a very elegant suit, formal but at the same time cut in such a way that allowed her to show her voluptuous body. Mexican women, he decided, were much more flirtatious than American woman.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"Because I didn't want to see you anymore."

"Why?"

"Because you are leaving. Our relationship has no future."

"I see. Then what are you doing here?"

"I had to see you one more time."

Paul kissed softly her lips.

"At what time is your plane?"

"Something came up and I'll stay few more days."

Her face lit up. She smiled.

"Qué bueno !" she kissed him happily full on the mouth.

"But I'm still leaving in a few days."

BLOOD RELATIVES

“That’s okay. I’ll cry then.

“I don’t want you to cry.

“I don’t want to stop seeing you. Not yet.

“I really don’t want to hurt you.

“You won’t. Don’t worry. Besides, don’t you know that we Mexican women like to suffer?”

“Really?”

“No, not really. But by watching the Mexican soap operas on television you would think so.

“Oh, I see.

“The second class reality of television. Watch it and learn what not to do, and how not to live.”

She laughed. She had a contagious laughter, full of life and innocence that he found very appealing. Paul looked closely at her. She kept surprising him. First by the way she’d let go of her passion, then by her internal beauty, and now by her intelligence.

“Look, Lorena, maybe you can help me.

“With what?”

“I need to find a person.

“Who?”

He hesitated.

“A woman. She disappeared long time ago.

“How long?”

“More than twenty years.

“I can’t help you, but I know who can.

“Who?”

“My cousin Roberto. He is a Judicial.

“A what?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Federal Police. And he is great. “ She looked at her watch
“He might be in his office right now. Let me call him.”

She got up, went to the pay phone by the rest rooms, and
came back in ten minutes.

“Done. He’ll meet us here in half an hour.

“Great. Thanks.

“Para eso son los amigos.

That’s what friends are for. Indeed. He kissed her again.

Roberto Hernández could not disguise his demeanor. He
looked like a cop, and acted like cop.

He entered the coffee shop as if looking for a fight. He was
big as a bull, with a chest the size of a refrigerator. His tie was loose at
his neck and he was sweating. His huge head was half cocked, ready
to ram whatever stood on his path. He had a mustache a la Pancho
Villa, and most of his teeth were gold filled, which gave him a more
ferocious aspect.

“Beto! I’m glad you came!” said Lorena and stood to kiss
him. She seemed to disappear under the embrace of that bear of a man.
Paul stood up too. He was about the same height as Roberto, but about
half the size.

“Look, Roberto, this is my friend Paul Chadwick.

“Nice to meet you “ said Paul. The bear took his hand in his
paw. Paul felt like a midget.

Roberto sat at the table without saying a word. He was
inspecting Paul carefully. He only opened his mouth when the waitress
arrived to take his order.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Bring me a coffee, *chula*. And one of those cheese cakes.

“Sí señor.

Then he turned his attention again towards Paul. He stared hard at him.

“So, are you in love with Lorena?

“Roberto! Don’t start with your jokes.

“Who is joking?

“Look, Roberto, this is serious.

“So am I. Have you seen me laughing?” he asked Paul with a slight wink in his eye.

“No, I haven’t.” said Paul

“See?

“I am going to get mad with you if don’t behave.” said Lorena.

“All right, all right. So what can I do for you, Mr. Paul Chadwick?

“Paul.

“That’s what I said.

“Okay, I am looking for a woman.

“Aren’t we all?

“An old woman. She disappeared about twenty five years ago.

“Disappeared from where?

“From here. From México City.

“When was this.?

“I told you. About twenty five years ago.

“Who is she?

“You mean her name?

BLOOD RELATIVES

“No. I mean who is she to you? Why do you want to find this woman?”

Paul hesitated for a second.

“Because she is my mother.”

Paul heard Lorena gasp in surprise. The cop opened his mouth to say something, but he didn’t and closed it again. The word mother did have a special effect on them.

Roberto the cop took out of a pocket in his jacket a tiny recorder. In his hand it looked even smaller. He fumbled a little with the buttons and then placed it on the table.

“Okay. Let’s start from the beginning.”

Paul told him what he knew about his mother. The name, the last time she had been seen, the manner in which she had run away with only one of her two children, the way he had been adopted by a couple in Texas, and whatever other details came into his mind from what Eugenia had told him and which might help.

While he told his story, Roberto devoured three slices of cheese cake, a coke, and about a litter of coffee.

Lorena didn’t say a word. She was mesmerized by the story.

When Paul was through, Roberto stopped the recorder and gave him his card.

“I’ll see what can I do. Gave me a call in two days.”

“Thanks. Although we haven’t talked about your bill.”

“Why do you worry?”

“I worry because I don’t know if I can afford you.”

“Look, Paul, this is México. Here we don’t do things only for money. I am doing this for my cousin. You are her friend, and her friends are mine. Está claro?”

“Yes.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Now, on the other hand, if I find you are behaving bad with my cousin, I’ll break your face. Understood?” he said all of this with a slight smile in his face. It was said as a joke, but the implied warning was real. He stared at Paul.

“Yes.” Paul didn’t flinch at the stare.

“Roberto...

“Don’t worry, primita. I like your friend. He is much better than the last faggot I met you.

“Gordo, I don’t want you scaring my friends again, okay? If you insist in doing that I won’t talk to you again “ said Lorena, very seriously. She was truly angry.

Roberto melted instantly.

“Don’t get mad, Lorenita. I am just joking, you know me.

“I do, but my friends don’t.

“Oh, all right. I won’t do it again. Is that all right?”

“*Lo prometes?*”

“*Lo prometo.*”

“*Está bien.*”

“Now do you give me a kiss?”

“Not until you show some results on what Paul asked you to do.

“Lorenita, give me a kiss.

“No.

“Lorenita...”pleaded the bear. Paul could not believe it, but it seemed like the bear was actually about to cry.

Lorena finally relented and kissed Roberto on his pouted lips. He beamed. Happy again, he got up and left the restáurant whistling and throwing his weight around like an elephant.

“I think he is in love with you “ said Paul.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“He is a darling. But he is so jealous: he is even worse than my father.

“I understand him.

“Are you the jealous type too?

“Not really, but with a beauty like you, everybody becomes the jealous type.” he said, and smiled.

“Oh, wow. What a nice thing to say. I think I am falling in love “ she laughed.

“What about dinner tomorrow night? “ offered Paul

“Just dinner?

“Yeah, but in my room.

“Let me think about it “ she said mischievously “ I’ll call you tomorrow morning, okay?

“Okay.

After that, Paul went back to his hotel to wait for his father’s messenger.

The chauffeur arrived late.

Very late.

Paul had fallen asleep sitting on the chair of his room when the telephone rang.

“There are some people waiting for you in the lobby. They asked me to tell you that don Octavio is waiting.”

Paul looked at his watch. It was four thirty in the morning!

He washed his face, and hurried down to the lobby.

BLOOD RELATIVES

It was the same routine as the day before, except that this time he was taken to another part of the house. A maid showed him the way to an inside pool.

The room was filled with steam. It smelled bad, like sulfur. He could barely see three feet ahead.

“There are trunks on the chair. Come on into the water. It’ll do you good. It’s thermal water “ came the voice of don Octavio from somewhere inside the steam.

He did as instructed. Changed his clothes and got into the pool. The water was very hot. He moved slowly until his entire body was wet. Then he tried to swim a little, but it was difficult.

“Just relax, *muchacho*. Let the water heal your body. This water comes from the guts of the earth. It’s shipped directly to me every week from the volcano. We merely keep it hot. Do you like it?”

“Feels good.”

“You have to learn now to relax, and to take care of you. Being in business is tough, and the only way to make it is if you have staying power, you know what I mean? It’s like being with a woman. If you last a minute or two inside of her, she won’t respect you. But if you stay in there long enough, she’ll adore you. Business is the same: it doesn’t matter if you make a killing today. That doesn’t make you a business man. What matters is that you have to make the business give you its honey everyday, every year, over and over, like a woman coming again and again. *Entiendes?*”

Paul nodded. Every time don Octavio said *entiendes?* he felt the urge to answer no. Don Octavio didn’t asked if he understood; he *ordered* him to understand. *Entiendes?* Sí, señor! Yes, sir! That’s why he felt like saying no. Just for the hell of it. Just to see don Octavio’s reaction.

“So tell me more about your business.

“Like what? What do you want to know?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“How big is it? How many people work for you? Tell me about it.

Paul did. He explained all the process, all the machines he had, described his innovations in the field and the results he was getting.

Don Octavio kept on asking questions. He was interested up to the point of wanting to learn even the smallest details.

Then, abruptly, when don Octavio decided they had had enough thermal water; he stood up and without a word came out of the pool.

He went into a small stall and had a cold shower.

Paul followed him. He began to realize the rude silences of don Octavio were a form of control he used to keep people on their toes. Paul said to himself that he didn't really care. As soon as he found out what he wanted about his mother, he would be out of this house and never to come back. So far, he wasn't sure he liked the man who was supposed to be his biological father. He found him pompous, rude, and self" centered. He had asked about Paul's business in so much detail so as to avoid the conversation converging on more intimate grounds. Paul realized that, but he could not find a way to ask what he wanted. He could not just come out and say "Oh, and by the way, whatever happened between you and my mother"

So they dressed in silence and then they walked into a glass" enclosed terrace. They sat down to have breakfast. The wrought" iron table was placed in front of the biggest window. It was dawning in the city.

"Look over there" don Octavio said. And explained what he was pointing at.

Over the horizon with the first light Paul saw the volcanoes don Octavio was showing him.

"See the one on the left? See how it looks like a woman lying down? It's called Iztlaccihuatl, which in Náhuatl means Sleeping Woman. The other one is called Popocatépetl. He is the guard

BLOOD RELATIVES

watching over the sleeping princess. The Indian's story says that they both were human at one time; They were of royal origin: She a princess; he a warrior prince. They were engaged to be married." Don Octavio pointed again "You see how red the color of the sun is? It's because of the altitude; we're at two thousand meters above the ocean. Isn't it an extraordinary color?"

Paul agreed. The color of the sun at sunrise was of an exceptional red, deep and heavy, like...

"Like blood, isn't it? The Aztec priests saw this every morning and every afternoon and thought that this was because the sun drank blood from the earth. And then an eclipse of the sun happened. And the priests' best explanation was that the sun had run out of blood. They needed to make a sacrifice to the Sun" God to replenish his batteries. So they started doing sacrifices. In fact, they got to like them so much that sometimes they had thousandths in a single day.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Anyway, so here we have our couple in love. " he pointed out toward the volcanoes—"Just before they are to be married he is sent to a *Guerra Florida*. You now what that was?"

"No.

"You really should read more about your country, you know?"

"My country is the United States.

"You were born here.

"That's right. And I would like to find out how I ended up over there.

Don Octavio was silent for a moment. He used the food as an excuse. Paul saw him thinking what to say. He decided to go back to his story.

"Anyway, our prince goes off to a *Guerra Florida*. It was an accepted form by which the Aztecs fought wars against other people and captured prisoners. They needed these prisoners for their sacrifices. The prince leaves his beloved and she has a bad feeling in

BLOOD RELATIVES

her heart. She begs him not to go, that she is afraid. He promises to come back, no matter what, to take care of her. The next week the bad news reached the princess: instead of a *Guerra Florida* the Aztecs had bumped into the Spanish conquerors and had a real war. Her boyfriend is dead. Unable to stand the pain she takes a potion to go to sleep, but the potion was too strong and she goes to sleep forever. The prince comes back, as he had promised, even though he is very badly wounded. He kneels by her side and ever since then he has been waiting for her to wake up.

The shape of the volcano on the left indeed had the shape of a very voluptuous woman asleep. Paul was able to see even the creases of the sheet which covered her body; the white snow covering the mountain gave that effect of reality to the illusion.

“Nice story.

“I always like to bring my foreign guests here.

“But you haven’t answered my question.

“Which was?”

“How did I end up in the States?”

Don Octavio smile disappeared immediately.

“How should I know? Ask your mother.

“That is my intention. But I need to find her first.

“Well, you won’t find her here. That’s for sure.” don Octavio’s answer was very brusque. Paul measured carefully his next words.

“Could you help me with some doubts I have? I know it must be difficult for you, but I am only asking things I believe I am entitled to know.

Don Octavio looked at the volcanoes for a long time before he answered.

“You are not entitled to anything. But anyway, what do you want to know?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“What happened? Why did my mother run away?”

“Because she is a crazy bitch.

Don Octavio said this with so much hatred in his voice that Paul almost jumped. Don Octavio’s eyes glassed over and his jaws tightened.

“Look...

“No. Shut your mouth. You wanted the truth, you will hear it. If you don’t like it, that’s your problem. Your mother was a crazy bitch. Ever since I met her I suspected she was a little nuts, but she proved it over and over. Until one day she just ran away.

“Did you try to find her?”

“No. What for? She probably became a whore. I didn’t want to know.

Paul didn’t ask the next natural question “And me? Did you try to find me?”

“Before she ran away, did you have her checked over by a doctor?”

“Her illness wasn’t physical. It was of her mind. She was sick of her mind.

“Of her mind?”

“Yes. Her mind. She was sick of the mind. Crazy.

“When did you married her.?”

Don Octavio thought for a moment.

“She was fourteen when I met her. I believed she was older. She looked older.” said don Octavio. *And you protests too much*, thought Paul. Fourteen years old! She had been a baby. Although surprised by this information, he tried not to show it..

“How old were you?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Thirty. I had just completed the sale of a good business in Veracruz. I was born in Veracruz. I grew up there. That’s where I met Miguel Alemán, helped him with his campaign, and came over to México when he became president.” don Octavio was in a kind of a trance. Paul didn’t make a noise.

“That’s when I met her. She was working as a secretary for a friend of mine. She was exquisite. She was tall, and had the body of a woman ten years older. Whenever she walked down the street, she’d stop the traffic. That’s how beautiful she was. She came from a noted family who had lost everything when her father, a diplomat, had sided with the wrong man during the Revolution. Then her father died. Her family was broke, so she had to work even at that age. That’s when I met her. I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. Instantly. Madly in love. It was as if she had taken my soul away from me. I couldn’t think of anything but her. I couldn’t even see another woman. That’s how much I loved your mother from the very first moment I saw her.

It took a lot of patience, but I won her trust and then her love. I took her and her family out of the misery they were living in; I bought her clothes, and cars, and jewels, and everything she ever wanted. I became her slave; anything to keep her happy. I thought I had won her love. But I never knew for sure. That’s what she took advantage of to keep me always insecure. Then, one day, she became pregnant and the two of you were born, first Eugenia and then a year after that she had you. Seven months after that she grabbed you and she left.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I told you, her mind was sick.

“And you never heard from her again?”

“Not a word.

Don Octavio’s frozen eyes were lost in the past.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Paul thought there had to be more to the story. He felt there were many things his father was not telling him, but it didn't make sense to press on. He wouldn't get anything from the old man that he didn't want to tell.

For a long time both were silent.

Then a maid came in with a portable telephone in her hand.

Don Octavio turned to look at her. His stare was so cold she froze two meters away.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's Juan on the line. He says is very urgent." she stammered with fear in her voice. She was almost begging forgiveness.

Don Octavio took the call. He waited for the maid to leave the room before he answered.

"What's going on?" he said and he listened carefully, but his expression changed dramatically. Paul saw the fury building up in his eyes.

"When was this?"

He listened.

"Who did that?" he said.

"That little fuck again! Who the hell he think he is?"

And then he exploded.

"Ya estuvo bueno. Que se vaya a la chingada. Llevate unos muchachos y pártete su madre al cabrón. Pero hoy mismo, de acuerdo? Quiero que el hijo de puta desaparezca hoy mismo"

Then he hunged up.

Paul stooped breathing. *Llevate unos muchachos y pártete su madre al cabrón... take some boys with you and work him over. But do it today, okay? I want the son of a bitch to disappear today, understood?*

BLOOD RELATIVES

10

Paul thought he had heard wrong.

He must have, because don Octavio proceeded to calmly finish his breakfast and then offered him more coffee, his anger gone as fast as it came.

“This coffee is from our plantation in Veracruz. Is the best coffee in the world. And we have an Indian cook who prepares it with a secret formula. She has never allowed me to find out how she makes it, but I know she uses salt. Try it.

Paul brought the cup to his lips and took a sip; his mouth was very dry. He repeated the words in his mind; *quiero que el hijo de puta desaparesca hoy mismo, entiendes?* No, there was no mistake. He had heard correctly.

“What do you think? Isn’t it great?”

Paul nodded. The coffee was really delicious.

“I have offered the cook millions of pesos for the formula, but she refuses. I’ve offered her to make her my partner so we can sell her coffee all over the world, and make tons of money, and you know what she says? That the formula is sacred and that it was given to her by a shaman, and that she would rather die than to sell that formula away. And she means it.

Don Octavio pored some more coffee in both their cups.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“That is the problem with the people in this country, you know? Their superstitions are more important than science; their beliefs more important than facts; their emotions more important than logic. They live in a different world. Especially the Indians. They live outside of the reach of the technology, and the modern culture of man. In some places they live like they lived five hundredth years ago. The Tarahumaras for example; they are a tribe that live in the state of Chihuahua. By a presidential decision they received as a grant the land that they live on. But as it happens, they live in the Cañón del Cobre. They own it. Ever heard of it?”

“No

“El Cañón del Cobre is bigger than Colorado Canyon. Twenty times richer. Just with the richness of its forests, and the precious metals from its mines, the Tarahumaras should live like kings because they are very few of them. But you know what? Because they distrust the modern technology, they live in caves just like hundredths of years ago. And because of their ancient beliefs they live separated miles from each other, so they are not organized socially and due to this they cannot harvest enough food for every body and every other year they have famines that are killing them very fast. They own one of the richest lands of México, and they are starving to death.”

“What about the government?”

“What about it?”

“Doesn’t it do anything?”

“Yes. The government respects their beliefs and their traditions. That has always been their position. To respect their traditions even if they are stupid.

“Nothing more?”

“Oh, yes. They send them food when things get desperate. But you know what? The Tarahumaras are bound to die. All of them. You know why?”

“No

BLOOD RELATIVES

“For the same reason that the Aztecs, being a warrior empire, having hundredths of thousands of men trained in the art of war, lost against five hundred poorly equipped Spanish soldiers... They lost because anybody that goes against history deserves to die.

Paul couldn't contain himself.

“Was this the reason you ordered a man killed just now? Because he went against history?”

Don Octavio looked at him straight in the eye. His eyes were cold, indifferent, but slightly curious at the question.

“No. I ordered him killed because he went against me.

Paul got up. Suddenly the room was too small for the two of them. He had to get out of there.

“I have to go.” he said.

“Why?”

“I have things to do.

“Well, I do too. But I gave you my time. You should have the decency to do the same.

“I am sorry, but I have learned much more than I wanted to.

“You mean about your mother?”

Paul didn't answer.

“Is this about what you heard? You are not a boy. You are a man. Take it as a man. It would be very disappointing to me if you could not take life as it is.” the old man said this with a slight warning implied.

“I have to take care of my business...” Paul mumbled.

“About your business...I think we can do something for you. I'll give orders today to have all of my companies do their printing with your company. How would you like that?”

“I didn't come to do business with you.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Well, I know. But you would be a fool not to take my offer. We are talking about a lot of companies, and a good chunk of money. Money that you need, I’m sure.”

Paul didn’t know what to say. He just wanted to get out of there.

He felt his father’s eyes watching him closely. He felt the danger behind that stare.

“Okay.?” Don Octavio said.

Paul began to sweat. The eyes of don Octavio were fixed on him, hard and cold like a snake’s, and he knew that if he refused, this man would probably have him killed too.

Just like that.

He nodded.

Don Octavio got up from his chair. He was a very agile and energetic man for his age.

“Good. I’ll introduce you to my lawyers.

“Now?”

“Yes. Right now. Wait here.” said don Octavio, and walked towards the door.

When he reached it, he turned around.

“One thing, though.”

“What?”

“Don’t ever mention to anyone that you are my son.

And with that he left the room.

“Gladly” murmured Paul to himself.

BLOOD RELATIVES

The rest of the day had been very busy.

First came the lawyers.

They were three of them.

They showed up half an hour after don Octavio left the room, sat with Paul and flooded him with questions, saying they had strict orders from don Octavio to transfer all printing orders to Paul's company. They made contracts, worked out forms of payment, and suggested possible solutions to anticipated problems "among their suggestions was that Paul should bring his printing plant to México sometime in the future"

Then they had lunch.

After two o'clock, six accountants arrived also and they made a bunch of projected numbers based on what had been written on the contracts and finally said it was a contract worth at least two million dollars a year. They all congratulated him and asked him how he had managed to convince don Octavio to give him all of his business. Paul just raised his eyebrows and said he didn't know. The accountants smiled. When asked how he got paid normally, he explained that he usually asked for 50% advance in all printing orders; they said this wouldn't be feasible because of the amount of work and the number of companies involved. He told them he didn't have the money to finance the orders. They talked at length among themselves, and finally came up with a solution, which was consulted with don Octavio by phone. He agreed; Paul would get a lump advance of two hundredth and fifty thousand dollars on the spot. The money would be gathered from all of the companies involved, each putting up a few thousand dollars. It would serve as a working capital for Paul. It would be renewed with each full payment after every order was delivered, and the companies would receive an extra discount for the interest the money would generate in the bank. That way there wouldn't be any glitches in the production and everybody would win. The companies would satisfy their printing needs, guaranteed at reduced prices, and Paul would never have to worry about money any more.

BLOOD RELATIVES

It was an excellent solution. They congratulated themselves for being so smart, and one of the accountants wrote a check. He walked out, and came back ten minutes later. The check had been signed by don Octavio. The check was delivered to Paul, and everybody looked satisfied.

Paul kept silent throughout out the entire process.

He felt numb.

Like it wasn't happening to him.

In normal circumstances he would be jumping with joy.

Now he felt dirty.

At five he left the house with the lawyers and the accountants. He asked two of the accountants to give him a ride to a taxi, but they were a couple of happy fellows and they took him all the way back to his hotel, making jokes and laughing nonstop.

11

Paul had a shower and then he laid down on his bed.

For a long time he just stayed there with his eyes closed.

He had a check in his wallet for a quarter of a million dollars. He would never have to wake up again in the middle of the night sweating cold because he didn't have the money to pay up the paper, or the salaries of his helpers, or the rent of his shop. He wouldn't have to worry about it any more.

But now he almost wished he did.

He had thought all of his life that having that amount of money in his pocket would make him feel pretty good. But it didn't. It didn't because he felt he hadn't earned it cleanly. He felt it as a payment on his discretion. As a way to keep him quiet. He had become an accomplice to a murder.

His life had changed dramatically in a few hours.

He had the money he had always longed for, and he had a murder on his conscience.

He could think of only one thing.

...quiero que desaparesca hoy mismo, entiendes?

BLOOD RELATIVES

He didn't answer the phone.

It kept on ringing the rest of the afternoon, but Paul didn't move.

He thought about possible ways out of the trap he was in. He couldn't just return the check. He had signed contracts and was legally bound. He thought about calling the police, but then...then what? He didn't have proof of anything; he didn't know who would be killed, or when, or even if... He had witnessed a vague order given on the phone to some unknown person. That's all. And even if he knew for certain that somebody, somewhere, would be dead because of that order, he had no way of stopping it from happening nor of denouncing it.

Then the ringing of the phone stopped.

The silence was worst.

He turned on the television, watched it for awhile, then turned it off.

He thought about catching the first plane back to Florida and forget about the whole thing, but he knew that the cold abyss he'd seen in his father's eyes meant death. If he crossed his path, he knew that don Octavio wouldn't hesitate to order a hit on him too. It didn't matter they were biological father and son. They didn't have a feeling for each other, nor a moral commitment, so they were just as good as strangers.

He got up and dressed to go out. He was leaving when Lorena arrived.

"Aja! Here's Mr. Paul Chadwick, all handsome and ready to go. And to think that I was worried for him." she said, smiling, but then she looked him in the eyes and stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Listen, I am not a very good company tonight. You'd better go."

BLOOD RELATIVES

“No sir. You invited me to dinner, and I am having dinner with you.

“I’m not hungry.

“Then I am not either.

“Lorena, I’m serious. You’d better go. We’ll do it some other time.

“Where are you going now?

“I don’t know. I’ll try to get drunk, probably.

“Okay. Then let’s go.” she said and she took him by the arm.

They didn’t go far. They stayed at one of the bars of the hotel. One where a trio of guitar players sang soft, romantic music.

He ordered a bottle of tequila and started drinking fast.

He had never gotten drunk. It didn’t matter how hard he’d tried. Not as a student and not even as a soldier, the two years he had been one. Now he knew he couldn’t. It was in his genes. The Terrazas family couldn’t get drunk. His father “who wasn’t his father” had told him so.

Tonight he wanted to probe him wrong.

Lorena watched him in silence.

She didn’t said a word, and only sporadically would lean on his shoulder or would give him a kiss.

“You are a good woman, Lorena.” he said to her many hours later, once they were back in his room. She was helping him get undress. After two bottles of tequila, he wasn’t feeling drunk; he was feeling just sick, and very tired. So tired he didn’t want to move. Never again in his life. “You are going to make some fellow very happy, you know?

“Yes I know. Now raise your leg.” she said, taking his trousers off.

“You know why I wanted to get drunk?

BLOOD RELATIVES

“No idea.

“Because today I made a big business.

“That’s good.

“A *very* big business.

“That’s *very* good, then.

“No, that’s bad.

“Yeah, why?

“ Because I don’t want it.

She kissed him on the mouth.

“But I want you.” he said, patting the bed by his side.

Then he fell asleep.

12

When he awoke he was alone in his room. His head felt huge, and like somebody was hammering a nail into his forehead.

Lorena was gone.

In the dresser there was a message.

Had to go to work. See you tonight.

Love. L.

He made up his mind. It was just another business.

He called Florida. Found out how everything was and, after some hesitation, he told Sharon the news. He had to; he had signed legally binding contracts. The orders would start to come pretty soon, and the people at the plant had to be ready. He felt very lucky to have somebody like Sharon to take care of things while he was gone.

She, of course, was elated by the news.

Especially when he told her she was getting a raise.

Twice her present salary.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God...” was the only thing she was able to say for awhile.

BLOOD RELATIVES

"I'm glad you like the idea."

"Are you coming back soon?"

Not yet.

First he needed to do some other things.

Like going back to sleep.

The following morning he called Beto, the detective.

"*Quihubo, mano*. What's up?" Beto said.

"Do you have any news for me?"

"Yes, I have some news. You are not going to like them, though.

"Give them to me straight.

"The woman you are looking for seems to have died many years ago.

"She died?"

"Well, we are not certain yet. There's no immediate family who can give us information. The people who knew her, the few we've found, think that she died. But nobody knows for sure when or where. They all agree that the last time they heard from her she was moving to Chihuahua, one of the states up north. With her kid, which I guess means you. It seems she was going to try to get out of the country. That was the last anybody saw of her. That was thirty years ago.

"Thirty years?"

"Yes.

"Nothing since?"

BLOOD RELATIVES

“No. Nothing. Not in the Seguro Social, or in the police files. If she is alive, she is a very healthy woman, because she has never seen a doctor, and she is also a very well behaved woman because I checked on the records and we have nothing on her. I mean, not even a parking ticket.

“Interesting.

“I am checking property records, to see if she owns any land, and the transportation records, to find out if she owns a car.

“And up north?

“I have a compadre working as a judicial over in Chihuahua. I will call him and ask him to check this out. Some way or other we should find out very soon. Anyway, that’s what I have. Do you want me to keep on checking?

“Yes, by all means.

“I’ll call you.

“Listen, I appreciate it. And I also wanted to tell you to send me your bill.

“Oh, yeah? You feel that rich?

“Yes. If you need expenses or anything to keep on digging, let me know.

“Well, that’s good. Yeah, I’ll need some money for expenses, but I’ll let you know. And I already told you what’s my price; you keep Lorena happy, and I am happy. *De acuerdo?*

“*De acuerdo.* Thanks man.

“*Adios, guey.*

BLOOD RELATIVES

Then he called Eugenia and made an appointment to see her the next night for dinner. After she agreed, he hung up and he called one of the accountants who had given him a ride to his hotel the day before.

He asked to talk to Felipe, a skinny funny man who had seemed the most friendly of them all.

“Sí, diga?”

“Hi, Felipe. Remember me?”

“Yes, sure. The lucky gringo with the printing plant, right?”

“Right. Listen, I need to begin planning the printing production and I have some questions. I thought that maybe you could help me.

“Why me?”

“You are the smartest of them all.

“I’m glad you agree. Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Well, to be able to estimate the printing needs of the companies I’ll be working for, I need to have some information, you know?”

“Information such as?”

“What do they do, for one. Their size; how many people work for them; things like that.

“Well, that’s easy.

The accountant began to answer his questions, and an hour later Paul had found out everything he could about all of his father’s businesses.

What he found amazed him.

His father owned directly about one hundred different companies. Ten of them were large enterprises, with hundredths of employees; another fifteen of the companies were medium size, with a dozen to a hundredth employees, but the bulk of his father’s

BLOOD RELATIVES

businesses seemed to come from dozens of companies which had only one to three or four employees. Very small companies scattered all over México, dedicated to everything; from agriculture to manufacturing, but most of them seemed to be related to tourism services. There were travel agencies, and tourist guides, there were beach stores, bars, fast food restaurants, motorcycle rentals and boat rentals...there were about forty five of such enterprises.

Every one independent from the other.

“Isn’t that very expensive?”

“What?”

“To keep them separate like that? Wouldn’t be better to have them all under a single corporation?”

“Well, actually yes. But don Octavio likes it this way, and that’s the way its done. It keeps us busy, but we don’t complain.

I bet you don’t, Paul thought after hanging the phone. Handling the legal paper of so many companies was enough to keep any lawyer or accountant happy for the rest of his life. But the administration itself of so many separate entities was bound to be a nightmare. How could they stop it from becoming a maze where anyone knew how to go in, but nobody knew how to come out?

Unless, of course, that is precisely what don Octavio expected to happen.

The lawyers had suggested that he should have an office in México, and they were right. He needed somebody to coordinate the printing orders from the Mexican companies, get them to Florida, and supervise the delivery. So he talked to Lorena.

“How much do you make at the bank?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

She told him. He made the conversion to dollars. It wasn't very much.

"How would you like to make four times that much?"

"You are kidding, right?" she said.

"No. I am not.

"Doing what?"

"Working for me.

She looked doubtful.

"Is it something illegal?"

"Of course not.

He explained to her what his business was, and about his stroke of luck getting this exclusive contract with a wealthy man -he didn't tell her he was his father- and about his need to have somebody coordinating the work from México.

"You would be the head of the office here.

"But I know nothing in your line of work.

"It doesn't matter. I'll teach you.

She still didn't seem convinced.

"I need you" he said sincerely.

She sighed deeply.

"After that, how could I refuse? I'm in.

13

The following day they set out to find a suitable office.

They needed something with enough storage space, easy to find, not too expensive, and with at least three telephone lines.

“The only real problem I see is the telephone lines.” she said.

“I thought that would be the easiest.

“Obviously you don’t know about the telephones in México.

“Nope. Tell me about it.

“Well, lines are very difficult to get. Sometimes it takes years to get one.

“Really?

“Really. And they are outrageously expensive. You have to pay for the lines in advance and then wait, and wait, and wait until they decide you’ve waited long enough and they plug you in. But even then you have no guarantee of the service. They break down very often.

“Why is that?

“Because...

“Because what?

“Because this is México. You’ll find that in México things do not work the way they are supposed to work.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“It doesn’t make sense.

“I know. Welcome to México. In this country nothing much makes sense.

“God, then I am glad I’ve got you.

“Don’t be too sure. Sometimes *I* don’t make sense either.

“You sound a little bit bitter.

“I am not, really. Sometimes I hear myself talking about México and I stop and analyze my feelings about it and you know what? I love México deeply. I wouldn’t want to live any other place in the world. I am not bitter. It sounds that way, but it’s not bitterness. I am just describing the situation of my country very objectively. You just get tired of laws that are not applied, of corrupt politicians and corrupt policemen; of telephones that do not work, and banks cheating on you. Uf! You better don’t get me start it, because I’ll bring out my list and you’ll be listening to me all day long.

“Come on. Every country has problems.

“Oh, I’m sure of that. It’s just that in México the problems seem so small in comparison with other countries, that you just cannot understand why they don’t get fixed. It’s not the big things that worry me, because big problems create big solutions. No, it’s the everyday little problems that wear you down, you know? In México, nothing works the way it’s supposed to and it is an everyday battle against the small things; you lose an enormous amount of time fixing things that shouldn’t have been broken in the first place.

“Why do you think that happens?

“Well, in this city is easy to understand. We are far too many in this city. We are too far away from the ocean, so high in the mountains that to do anything requires an extra effort. While the rest of the country is practically empty, we have crowded this city beyond reason. And we remain here, instead of leaving for the beaches. That’s something that both our cultures are to blame for; both the Aztecs and the Spaniards had highly centralized societies. So, you see, it’s nothing new.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“What do you mean by not having big problems? That sounds to me like a big problem.

“Well, it is. But the solution is simple; no matter how you approach it, in the end is a matter of administration. México’s real tragedy is that it has never been administered correctly. For me that is a small problem. By big problems I mean problems like you see in Europe or in the Middle East, where people kill each other just because they are different.

“That’s nonsense. What about the Indians?.

“Well, yes. I don’t like them, but I don’t go out and kill them. You see, it’s not their skin I don’t like, because they are as brown as I am. I don’t like their poverty. I see their misery and I get scared. They remind me of everything I have never wanted to be. I don’t like the way they live. If you want to insult a Mexican call him an Indian. I don’t understand the Indian way of thinking, and I don’t want to. I would much rather have been European, thank you.

“You are joking now.

“I am not. I tell you that deep down we don’t like our Indian half. Because of that half we have never been able to develop a clear identity. We don’t know how to describe ourselves. We don’t know who we are, really. Historically we have been everything everybody else has wanted us to be. And then we are not. By the time we think we have a description of our selves, we change immediately. It’s almost as if we didn’t want to know who we are, and who we want to be.”

Paul remembered all of the feelings he had experienced while walking through the Museo de Antropología two days before, and he remembered all the pride he had felt when learning about his Indian heritage. Then he remembered the shame and pity he felt for the Indian women and kids begging in the streets. Somehow he understood Lorena’s point; it wasn’t a racial discrimination; it was economical and social. He felt ashamed not of his Indian ancestry, but of the Indian poverty. He recalled also what don Octavio had said: that

BLOOD RELATIVES

the Indians were bound to disappear because nobody could go against history. It was impossible for the Indian blood to disappear because everybody in México had it one way or another; so what did don Octavio mean?

“Well, with so many problems here, do you think maybe we should rent a place outside of México city?”

“Yes, and no.

“Which means?”

“It would be nice to have a place outside México city, but then we would have the problem of distribution. How would you get the printed material to me, and how would we deliver it? This city concentrates such enormous amounts of resources, -be it economical, political, or physical - that it’s not easy to be out of here.

“I see. It’s a vicious circle.

“Exactly.

“What we do, then, it’s to rent a place now inside of the city, and then we begin to plan ahead for another office in a smaller city, sometime in the future. How about it?”

“Sounds good.

“And I think our office should also be relatively close to where you live.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to go crazy driving in this traffic.

“Thanks, but I think it’s too late. My sanity is already questioned.

“Nonsense. You are most rational woman I’ve ever known.” he said, and he meant it.

“That’s why I like you; you’re so smart. You recognize a good thing when you see it.

“Right. Now let’s get to work.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Yes, sir.

14

They looked at several places, but none of them gathered all the requirements; some of them were too small, others too large; most of them didn't have telephones.

"I didn't think it would be this complicated.

"Told you."

They searched the entire day, stopping only for lunch. Paul wanted to go eat in a fancy looking restaurant, but following Lorena's advice they went instead into a *fonda*. It was a small place. It had only four or five tables, and it was operated by a family; the mother cooked, the daughter brought the plates to the table, and the father cleaned the floors, collected money, and did everything else.

It was clean and Paul was very surprised at how good the food was.

It was called *Comida Corrida* and it had two soups; the first one was *Sopa de Fideo*, which was a thin spaghetti" like pasta in a liquid tomato sauce. Then they had red rice, with a choice of either a fried egg or a sliced banana on top; Paul choose the banana and Lorena the egg.

Then it was *Chiles Poblanos*. They were big jalapeño-like peppers, covered with a cream based sauce, filled with ground beef and cheese. They were served with fried beans on the side.

For dessert they had coffee and a flan.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Did you like it?”

“I loved it.”

“That’s a true Mexican meal.”

“It’s great.”

Paul was even more delighted when he paid the bill. He couldn’t believe it. When he made the conversion it was something like a dollar and a half per person.

“Is that it? Are you sure?” he asked Lorena several times.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

He left a big tip for the waitress.

When they resumed the search they had the same problems as before, but also found that some of the places they were looking at now were getting out of the way, far from the large avenues like Insurgentes and Division del Norte.

Finally they found something.

It wasn’t an office.

It was a house.

Two stories, well kept. It had a garage for two cars, and it was only three blocks away from Avenida Universidad.

It only had one telephone line, but the rest was nice.

“We can use all the bottom floor and the garage for storage, and the top floor for offices. What do you think?”

“I say we take it” Paul answered. After Lorena’s warning, and the experience’s they had all day long, he knew it was the best they would get.

BLOOD RELATIVES

They made a deal with the owner about the price, which Paul found steep, and the contract was promptly filled, but then more problems arose; the owner required two letters of recommendation, a bond, a collateral as a guarantee, three months of deposit, one rent in advance, one extra month as a deposit for the telephone... Jesus, thought Paul. You think we are leasing Buckingham Palace.

The man also warned them that they would have to get permission from the government to use the house as an office before they could use it as such.

“Well, we just have to come back when we have everything.” Paul said, discouraged and tired.

“Do you want me to hold the house for you?”

“Yes.

“Then you have to leave me a deposit for it.

Paul gave him the money. The man gave him a handwritten receipt.

“I’ll hold it for seventy two hours. No more. If you don’t come back by then, you’ll lose the deposit.” the owner of the house told them as he was closing the door.

Paul looked Lorena in her eyes.

“Do you think we will make it in time?”

“It’s going to be tough. I better start moving, don’t I?”

“Where are you going?”

“I am going to see some friends of mine to give me the letters of recommendation. Hopefully, they will also agree to put up the collateral guarantee.

“Okay. Tomorrow morning I’ll take out a bond, and go to the bank to get the rest of the cash for the deposits.

“The one thing that is going to be impossible to get by tomorrow is the government permit. They take a long time, if they give them at all.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Leave that to me. I have an idea. You just get those letters and the rest of the papers he asked for. Okay?”

“Okay.”

15

That night he went to have dinner with Eugenia.

His sister looked splendidly beautiful when the Maitre'd showed her to the discreet table she had requested. It was on a different level from all the rest of the very elegant restaurant, and they were safe from indiscreet looks.

"*Bienvenido, guapo.*" she said, and kissed him on both cheeks.

"You look lovely.

"So do you.

"And the place is great.

"Isn't? Is one of the greatest traditions in México. You could never truly say you've been in México City unless you have been here.

"I can see why.

"But we are not going to waste time talking about restaurants. We have very little time.

"Why?

"Because I asked my husband to join us here. He'll be here any minute, so hurry.

"With what?"

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Hurry up and tell me everything that happened with don Octavio. I am dying of curiosity.

Paul told her in big strides. He didn't go into the particulars, and didn't tell her the order he had heard don Octavio give on the phone. But other than that he told her pretty much everything.

“Is that going to be a good business to you?” she said.

“Yes, I think so.

“Well, he should have been much more generous with you, you know? He is a very wealthy man. And, well, he has never give you anything. And mother? What about mother? Did he tell you anything about her.?”

Paul decided to lie. He didn't want to hurt Eugenia.

“Not much. I am sorry.

“Don't be.

“He did warn me, though, not to say I am his son.

“He did? Old bastard. I don't believe it. After all of this years of not seeing you, he still has the gall of asking you something like that? And you told him to fuck himself, of course.

Eugenia was mad. Paul found amusing the way she flared and lost her control when she got mad. She reminded him of... himself.

“He didn't give me any time. He was leaving the room as he said it.

“Well, if I had been you I would have run after him and punch him in the nose. What a rude old man. He is the worst.

“Well, come down. It isn't that important, you know? After all, I don't considered him my father either. So we are even.

“You are right.

“ Besides, I have a different name. So nobody will notice...

BLOOD RELATIVES

“*Amorcito! Aquí estamos!*” Eugenia shouted all of a sudden. She got up from her table and ran to embrace a tall man; he was lean, strong, heavy mane of black hair on top of his head, and he wore glasses. He had a carefully groomed mustache. As he approached the table and extended his hand, Paul saw the intelligence of his eyes. Here is a smart guy, Paul said to himself.

“*Mira amorcito*, this is my long lost brother.

“*¿Quihubo cuñado*” he said, confidently, with a wide smile.

“*Mucho gusto.*” said Paul.

“Jose Sebastian Sarabia.” said Eugenia’s husband.

“Paul Chadwick.

“He calls himself Paul Chadwick because that was the name of the gringo family which adopted him. *Verdad Paul?*”

“Exactly.

“But his true name is José Ramón, and this is the first time he comes to México, and I don’t...

“Eugenia, shut up for a moment. Shh, *ya callate*. Let him talk.” he ordered. Then he looked at Paul. “You know, it is obvious you two are brothers. I mean, the resemblance is amazing.

“I came to the same conclusion the first time I saw Eugenia.

“When was this?

“About a month ago, when I was in United States last,” she said

“Why don’t you let him talk?” he said. He kept his smart eyes fasten on Paul’s face. He had a very intensive way of looking, as if he were examining a sample of some weird virus.

“Eugenia is right.” Paul said.

“Well, now. And what is the reason of your visit?

“I beg your pardon?

“Why are you in México?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Well, I...”

“Pepe, you promised...”

Jose Sebastian Sarabia looked at his wife, surprised, and then he remembered something. He immediately relaxed.

“You are right. I am sorry, *cuñado*. I have this old habit of interrogating people. It comes with the job, you know, and I cannot seem to shake it up. I am sorry again.

“Don’t worry. But what *is* your job?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Jose Sarabia asked with a superior tone. He seemed truly surprised.

“I know you are Minister of something...”

“I’m the *Secretario de Gobernación*. Minister of Government, if you will.

“Nice.

“Yes, well, I was recently appointed. The one before me suddenly went cold...”

“He died?”

“...after the fiasco with the perredistas, you know...”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know much about it.

“Oh, yes, I forgot you are a gringo, right?”

“Right.

“Well, congratulations on your Spanish. It’s first rate. You have no accent at all.

“Thanks. I grew up in Texas, and there were a lot of Mexicans there.

“I know. Any way, the Minister of Government in México is good for two things.

“Which are?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“To give information to the President, and to keep peace in the country. My predecessor did neither. So he lost his head.

“You mean he got fired?”

“Of course. What else? Oh, I see. Well, Paul, you are going to have to leave all those preconceived notions you have in your head about México. We don’t kill people anymore, you know. We just fire them.” Jose Sarabia laughed at his own wit. Eugenia laughed too. She had a deliciously infectious laughter and Paul started to laugh too. This burst of laughter seemed to relax everyone at last. Jose Sarabia clapped his hands.

“But what kind of a lousy service do you offer in this joint?”

“I am sorry, sir, but we were waiting for the distinguished *Secretario de Gobernación* to give us the go ahead.” said the Maitre’d, with a sly smile and a slight bow of his head.

“Well, the *Secretario de Gobernación* is very thirsty. Bring in the champagne!”

“Yes sir! Right away, sir!”

“You’ll forgive my ignorance, Sebastian, but I would really like you to explain to me how politics work in México. I know so very little about it.

“Yes, I know. It’s the gringo malaise.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s how I call that special kind of ignorance about México which the average American citizen has. The most advanced society in the world, the one with so much technological knowledge that it doesn’t know what to do with it, has never been able to understand its next door neighbors. It’s amazing, if you think of it.

“Specially in my case, if you consider my birthplace. I have no excuse. Please, forgive me.

“It’s not your fault, *cuñado*; it’s the society you live in. Salud!”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Salud.

The *Secretario de Gobernación* seemed pleased by Paul’s humble attitude. Slowly, Paul would understand that Sebastian Sarabia was an arrogant man, full of himself and intolerant of anyone who disagreed with his words. Even in the way he talked, he seemed to be teaching kindergarten. He was a zealot of himself. Nobody but him had the answers, and when somebody else tried to give an opinion, it was promptly dismissed as if it had been an opinion uttered by a kid. Paul wandered if that was the way he talked to the President of the country.

“So you were about to explain to me how politics worked in México.

“Ah, yes. Of course. Well, is not that difficult, really. That’s why is so strange your country doesn’t understand us. We are a very uncomplicated country.” he said with a smirk in his face which seemed to deny his words.

“You see, our biggest historical problem has been the United States of America. Why? Because we are so independent. Washington doesn’t like that. But in the end, they have to deal with us, right? But they don’t understand us. So we spend an enormous amount of time dealing with the United States mistakes, and misconceptions. I’ll tell you, is tiresome.

“That is your foreign policy.

“Right.

“But I was wondering more on the national front. You know, how many parties you have, who’s got the power, who’s on the left and who’s on the right, that sort of thing.

“Oh, well. That’s very easy to answer. Hum let’s see... I’m going to have to give you a crash course on Mexican politics. Okay, let’s start with the century.

In 1900 we’d had thirty years of a single president; Porfirio Díaz. He had been a hero during the United States invasion of 1848, and during the war with the French and their emperor Maximilian.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Porfirio Díaz was an honest man, who dearly loved México and understood Mexicans like few politicians have in our history. Mexicans loved him also. He was always thinking of the bettering of the country, and he brought about one of the largest economical expansions in our history. But he had a big problem; he didn't know when to quit. So he just hanged on to his power for too many years. He became a dictator.

In 1910 a frail little man named Francisco I. Madero challenged Porfirio Díaz on the election ballots. Díaz declared himself the winner and Madero took up arms against Díaz. Díaz saw the entire country raising up, and, to avoid what he suspected would become a blood-bath, he exiled himself in Paris. He died there years later, after seeing his prediction come true; out of fourteen million Mexicans, two million died in that revolution," he said, and waited for his words to sink into Paul's consciousness.

"Two million out of fourteen." said Eugenia, as to underline the figures.

"Almost fifteen per cent of the entire population." said Jose Sebastian Sarabia pouring more champagne in everyone's glasses.

"That is a lot of people dead.

"Yes. We Mexicans have a special relationship with death, you see. We don't give a shit about it." said Jose Sarabia and smiled.

"Really?"

"No, of course not. But we like to think so. Anyway, Madero had won the first battle, but after a year in power as a president, he lost the war; he was killed in a Coup D'Eta lead by an alcoholic piece of trash influenced by the American ambassador in México at that time.

"After Madero died there was a huge power struggle. In the entire country there were uprisings left and right against Madero's killer; generals all over declared war on the spurious presidency; even people who had been Madero's bitter enemies could not stand by and watch a traitor take over. President Wilson, who had just come into power in the United States, took an ethical stand and disassociated

BLOOD RELATIVES

himself with the works of his ambassador in México. In a short time the drunken shit who had perpetuated the crime was kicked out of the presidential chair and out of the country. He died of cirrhosis in an American jail, by the way. But his departure left an even bigger hole in the power structure of the revolution. There were caudillos everywhere; in the north, there was Villa and Carranza, and Obregón and Calles; in the south there was Zapata and Felipe Angeles and many more. They were everywhere, and everyone had a valid reason to dispute the power for himself. During the next 15 years they fought with each other and with the successive governments. It was a mess. People kept on dying, and the country was unable to find peace.

The Minister made a pause.

“How about if we order now? I am getting hungry.

“Me too “said Eugenia.

“Would you like to share a *Chautaubriend*?” Jose Sarabia asked his wife. She smiled.

“What a wonderful idea, my love “ she said with a sweet, sweet smile.

“*Y Sopa de hongos*?”

“Oh, yes. How do you manage to guess what I want all the time?” she asked. Paul stared at her, surprised to no end. Paul couldn't recognize his sister. All of the energy, the intelligence, the warmth, the laughter that he had come to love in her, had been supplanted by a very openly passive, plaintive, manipulative attitude. It was as if she were a different woman. Even the way she looked at her husband was faked. Fake. That was the right word to define her entire attitude; she was faking all of the time. Ever since Jose Sabastian had arrived, she had adopted a role. He didn't find the reason for such a change in Eugenia. And he didn't like it.

“Y usted, señor?”

“I'll have the *Sabanita* “ Paul asked. “and *Sopa de Fideo*

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Good choice “ said Jose. “ Also, bring us a bottle of red wine.

“Rhine?

“No. Bring a Mexican wine. We have to show my wife’s brother’s the quality of our Mexican wines, don’t you agree?.

“Por supuesto, señor Secretario. Con su permiso.

The man withdrew with a slight bow.

“You like Mexican food, I hope?

“Are you kidding? I love it.

“Good, good. Not everything is lost, then.

“Not at all.

“Salud!

“Salud

“*Amorcito*, and then what happened? “ said Eugenia with a little girl voice.

“With what?

“With the revolution, *corazón*. You tell the story so well. I love to hear you telling it.

Jose Sarabia smiled, pleased with the compliment.

“Ah, yes! Well, there we were, with a country torn into many bloody fragments, uprisings left and right, with a central government so weak so as to be in danger of disappear every other week under the weight of hundredths of caudillos with their personal armies all over. Worst of all, the country didn’t have an ideology from which it could gather strength. Alvaro Obregón did an extraordinary job of getting rid of the most powerful of the caudillos, but when he was assassinated “ three blocks away from here, by the way... He was killed right after having been reelected for a second period in the presidency. Then it was evident that something had to be done to stop

the bloodshed. That's when Plutarco Elias Calles, who had been a key figure during the Obregón years and now was President himself, had an extraordinary idea. One that was to give birth to the most perfect political tool ever devised anywhere in the world."

Jose Sarabia made a theatrical pause.

"Which was?" asked Paul.

"El PRI. El Partido Revolucionario Institucional, of course. Under Calles was named differently, but the seed was planted. He gathered dozens of leaders and invited them to form a political party under a very simple premise; it didn't make sense to kill each other constantly, he told them, so why don't we all share power within a single structure? In that way we will all have the amount of power and glory we deserve. So in 1929 the PRI was born, with over a hundred regional leaders backing it. The country was divided in zones of influence and the supreme power, the presidency, was to be rotated among the different families, or groups. In that way everybody would be insured of their peace of bodies and minds.

The idea worked so well, that pretty soon in México came to be true the dictum declared by Fidel Castro many years later; within the revolution, everything; outside of the revolution, nothing. The party became the revolution. It brought about the major changes the country needed. Social and economical change was possible thanks to the stability which was made possible by the party. And in the process it perfected it's single most important asset; the non" ideology. The very fact that the party was originally composed by hundredths of leaders of all levels of society, and of many different types of ideas of what the country should be, made impossible the imposition of a single ideology. Exactly the contrary of what was happening in Russia at the time. Inside the PRI you find people from the extreme left, and the extreme right; people who believe in communism and people who believe in capitalism; socialists and democrats, Maoists and anarchists; you name it, we have it. And that non" ideology became

BLOOD RELATIVES

my party's most important weapon. That is the reason no opposition party can really beat us; because we are like a huge balloon, unbreakable; when they shoot at us, we swallow the bullet instead of puncturing. Nothing and nobody can beat us.

"Nothing?"

"Only from the inside you could change the party. But who would want to do that? It would be like committing suicide. We control every important aspect of the Mexican society, starting with the economy. Thanks to us the country has known almost seventy years of peaceful development. No other country can match that record."

Jose Sarabia stopped to allow the waiters to collect the plates. He had eaten while he talked, swallowing his food without stopping to breathe, in a mesmerizing performance. He was so very proud of himself, he seemed to shine.

Paul too finished his huge thin stake, and smiled.

"That is quite a story.

"And true. My party's development and innovative approach to politics is studied at the mayor universities in the world. Why? Because, as I said before, it is the most advanced political tool ever devised. You know what Felipe González "the Socialist Prime Minister of Spain" declared when he took power? That his biggest aspiration was to turn his Socialist Party into another PRI.

"What about the corruption charges brought about by the opposition?"

"They are right.

"They are?" said Paul, surprised. Eugenia looked up also, a fork halfway up her mouth.

"Yes, sure. We have corruption. Just as you have it in United Stated, and they have it in France, and in Spain, and everywhere in the world. Corruption is a universal problem, you see. Is not unique of México, nor of the members of the PRI.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Eugenia seemed relieved and finished eating with a sigh.

“So?”

“So we just have to make adjustments, that’s all. Make it harder for those who think that the party is a way to become rich. If you think of it, is a small problem. It’s just a problem of administration.

“I’ve heard somebody else express exactly the same opinion.

“You see? México will come out of its present problems and will continue to grow and to prosper thanks to my party. You’ll see.

“And maybe you’ll be the next president?”

“But of course.” said Eugenia. “Do you doubt it?”

“Not at all.”

Jose Sebastian smiled.

“Well, that is out of my hands of course. But with fans like my wife beside me, who’s to stop me?”

They all laughed.

“And remember that you have my father’s full support.

“Let’s drink to that.!”

They clicked their glasses.

16

Fourteen months later, Paul started to suspect something was not right.

During the last year he had worked day and night in his business and now, besides having more clients in Orlando and St. Petersburg than ever, he was doing a tremendous amount of printing jobs for don Octavio Terrazas. The printing orders from don Octavio's enterprises kept his machines busy 12 hours a day, and he had expanded by buying another 5 offset machines, a binding press, a stitching machine, two electronic paper cutters, and many other smaller equipment which helped to provide the services required by don Octavio's assorted companies in México.

The amount of work involved kept Paul very busy, and for the better part of the day he would be tending the needs of his company, which was growing nicely. He calculated that, if they kept the same rhythm, by the following year they would have revenues of 10 million dollars.

Not bad.

But then he started to get suspicious.

First it was the matter of the printing orders that came from don Octavio.

Much of it didn't make sense.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Although many of the printing orders were standard business forms, and related printed material, most other jobs didn't make sense and plenty of them seemed just plain dumb.

One of the small companies that don Octavio owned by the dozens, for example, had ordered half a million flyers, double letter size, and then folded in two. And it didn't have much printed on it.

Another one had a standing weekly order of 20 thousand booklets on how to bathe new born babies, which they gave away. As a promotional it would have been fine, except that the booklet didn't promote anything or anyone, which was strange.

Another one had ordered a monthly run of 100,000 magazines. That wasn't strange; except that the magazine didn't have any advertising, and very few people would actually buy it because it was badly distributed in México. Paul knew this because of his monthly trips to México and his everyday telephone contacts with Lorena. The magazine didn't seem to be making any money. On the contrary, it seemed to be losing a lot of money because Lorena had seen truckloads of the magazine being given away in the streets of México.

Don Octavio didn't seem to care.

Then it was the matter of having to send all of the printed material to a specific warehouse which don Octavio owed in Texas.

Paul had tried to explain to don Octavio "he never got around to call him anything else" that it would be cheaper and faster to send the orders directly from Tampa to Veracruz, and then from there by truck to México.

Don Octavio didn't refuse; he simply hung up the phone, which had become a reaction Paul had gotten used to. Whenever don Octavio didn't like something he would hang up the phone and Paul wouldn't be able to talk to him until a week or so had passed by. He had never seen his father again. He and don Octavio would talk occasionally on the phone, and aside from a few cold questions regarding each other's health, the talk would be confined to business.

BLOOD RELATIVES

So Paul didn't have anybody who could really answer his questions, or somebody he could voice his suspicions to.

In reality whatever happened outside his printing plant wasn't his business, and he was aware of it. Once the printed material left his own warehouse he was out of the hook, legally and otherwise.

Still, he felt uncomfortable.

There was something strange going on, and he didn't like it.

17

He talked this with Eugenia, the next time she stooped in Florida.

The reaction he got surprised him and intrigued him even more.

They had seen each other constantly, either in México or in the United States. Even though she never told him exactly what kind of business brought her sometimes weekly to United States, he knew that she seemed to have many interests in the states along the border. She would travel to California at least once a month, to Texas every other week, and now, to Florida, she would go every other month at least.

Many times when she was in Florida she would call him in advance and they would plot their dates as carefully as a military assault, because more often than not she would be bringing guests in her trips; friends and business associates which she would have to attend to. But she'd manage to find time off and the two of them would go out and have dinner, and every time they would go to a different place either in Orlando, or in Tampa, or in Miami, or in San Agustín or wherever he traveled to meet her. In México she would try to make time aside and have lunch with him always at the Cafetería del Parque, which had become sort of a ritual.

BLOOD RELATIVES

This time Eugenia and Paul met in Cedar Key, a tiny island off the coast near Gainesville, in the Gulf of México, where she said she was planning on buying a house. She had arrived by plane two days earlier, with a party of six people. They got the upper floor on the main hotel of Cedar Key, and when Paul arrived - having made the mistake of driving his own car- he called her from the reception desk.

“ Oh, am so glad you are here. I cannot stand this place one minute longer. I was about to have a valium to relax, but now that you are here I am much happier. But don't you ever buy a home in Cedar Key, darling, because they don't even have an airport. I mean, they have this tiny little airstrip, you know? My father's are longer and bigger. Made me very nervous to land in here. I much rather be in the Keys. The other keys. The original ones off Miami. You know?”

“You didn't like Cedar Key, obviously.

“On the contrary, dear. I loved it. As a matter of fact I just bought a house here.

“Really?”

“Yes. It's a gorgeous place, and the people it's delightful, but I am disappointed because it's not what I was hoping for, you know? I have a problem with Florida. I don't know what it is, but everywhere I go I see too many old people, you know?”

Paul laughed.

“ But of course you see old people everywhere. Florida is the retiree capital of the world, didn't you know that?”

“ Are you serious?”

“ Yes I am.

“ That explains it then.

“Why did you buy a house in here?”

Eugenia answered matter of fact.

“For investment. But I was hoping for something else. You know. Not a house, but a home.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“What kind of place are you looking for?”

Eugenia smiled.

“I don’t know. I’ll tell you when I find it.” she said. It was always like that when it came to her personal activities; she would always find a way to avoid the answers.

Paul told her about his suspicions about the business.

“I think somebody is stealing from your father” he said, and explained everything.

When he finished, she just smiled.

“I promise you I will talk to him as soon as I get back to Mexico, she said. And she did. Paul got a call from don Octavio secretary making an appointment for them to meet and talk in Mexico, but just two days later she called back to cancel.

No explanations given.

That same night Eugenia called him too with the tremendous news.

“He’s got it!” she screamed on the phone.

“What?”

“My husband! He’s got it!”

“He got what?”

“The nomination, dummy! He is going to be the next president of Mexico.! Turn on the news!” she screamed and hung up the phone.

For the next three months Paul wasn’t able to see either Eugenia or don Octavio. They both were too busy with the candidate to distract their attention even for a minute. So Paul stayed in Florida, and concentrated on the business.

18

During his visits to Mexico Paul got to know his father better. And the more he knew him, the less he liked him.

Not because he wasn't charming. On the contrary. His father had a tremendous capacity to charm people whenever he wanted to get something out of them. It was quite a performance which Paul saw several times, every time quite amazed by the enormous ease by which don Octavio would turn on the charm suddenly, as if flicking on the light, and like the light itself that charm would blind everyone subjected to its shine. It was overpowering. One minute don Octavio would be brooding and the bad mood would darken his face and his soul, and his entire being would send danger signals. In those occasions Paul had felt he was standing in front of a wounded animal, ready to lash out and strike at whatever that came close. It was like a special kind of odor his father emitted then, like an invisible radiation of hate and cruelty ready to be let out.

And the next minute he would turn on the charm and the darkness would disappear, the light would be warm and welcoming, the smart humor always ready, the wit endearing, the curiosity endless, and the capacity to make his object of attention feel like the most important person in the world. It was an extraordinary performance which was, by itself, fascinating to watch. Fascinating in the true sense of the word, because Paul always felt the attraction mixed with revulsion at don Octavio's manipulations.

BLOOD RELATIVES

On November Paul was invited to celebrate don Octavio's birthday. The party was to be held at his ranch, a beautiful spread out in a state up in the north part of the country, twelve hours away from the city by car. Roca del Toro, the ranch, was on the state of Sonora and very near the American border. It took them only one hour and fifteen minutes to get there since they flew in don Octavio's airplane.

"Spanish horses are the best animals in the history of the world," don Octavio told him aboard the plane on the fly over. "They are strong, smart, and extraordinarily beautiful. I bought ten mares from the Spanish King's stables three years away and by breeding them with Mexican horses I am breeding a new type of horse. It's called Azteca. It has the same advantages of the Spanish horse, but our animals have an added virtue; they are virtually tireless. They have a shorter span and height, it's true, but they make it up by their tenacity. You'll see."

"Are they for racing?"

"Good god, no. They are good for everything: they are strong enough to work on them, so fast you may race them, smart to learn *Pasofino*, and so brave you can teach them how to bullfight..."

"Bullfight? Like in a ring? With a bull?"

"*Ay, Dios mío*, you are really dumb. Yes. Bullfighting. *Rejoneo*, its called. Haven't you ever seen a *rejoneo*? No, I think not. You gringos are strange. You love to kill and maim people in football, but you all complain and cry like old ladies about killing bulls in the ring. *That's* really strange.

"Some people think it's unfair for the bull.

"Unfair my ass. I would like to see you standing there, in the middle of the bullring, with nothing but a cape to protect you from the wild brute force of an animal which weights as much as seven times your own weight, an animal which has a couple of razor sharp knives on his head, knows how to use them better than you know how to use your dick, and who moves faster than a well trained boxer. Now tell me who's got the advantage.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“But the bullfighter has a spade, and a cape, and his intelligence...

“The only one that counts is the last, my ignorant boy. The spade doesn't come to play until the end of the fiestá, the cape protects you nothing at all, since not even a metal shield would stand the force of half a ton of muscle hitting you head on. No. The only real difference is man's ability to reason, and to trick his enemy. That's what the fiestá is all about. The bull is smart too, you see. Very smart. That's why bulls are never used twice in a fiestá; because they learn fast. They learn that behind the cape there is a body and pretty soon they start searching for it with those knives of them. Those knives are so sensitive that the bull use them as a kind of antenna; they can measure how far away is the enemy and aim at a precise point of his body. No boy, you have a lot to learn.”don Octavio said in a dismissing way. He always seemed to be glad whenever there was something by which he could prove to Paul that he was a superior human being.

They arrived at the ranch a few minutes after that, and Paul walked with him through the spread while don Octavio asked questions of his servants and gave orders that were to be fulfilled immediately. A pretty white horse was ready for him, and a short fat man was holding him by the reins. It was a powerful looking and very nervous animal, moving constantly and kicking and trying to bite his handlers hand or face all the time.

While don Octavio changed his clothes and put on his boots and spurs, Paul walked around the ranch.

Roca del Toro did honor its name. It meant, literally, Bull's Rock, and that's exactly what it was: a huge rock with the shape of a bull raising against the ocean.

BLOOD RELATIVES

His father's *Cortijo*, huge and spectacular like all of his possessions, was built on the top of the highest cliff of Roca del Toro, near Puerto Peñazco, facing the Mar de Cortés. Mar the Cortés and Golfo de California were the two names used to name the same strip of ocean which separated Baja California from the mainland in México.

There were three ways to access the mansion on top of the cliff. One was by land, and that was used by the people who came from Puerto Peñazco. The second was by the ocean taking a boat across the Mar de Cortés -which was so peaceful that it looked more like a lake than a sea- then tie the boat to the small marine built on the base of the cliff, where don Octavio kept his yacht, and climb up one hundred meters straight up. Yes, don Octavio had built special lifts on the side of the cliff, but the salt kept corroding the machinery and they broke down all the time.

The other way, by air, was the best and the easiest. Don Octavio had bought enough of the land surrounding his house so as to build the airstrip. Paul and don Octavio had arrived from México City around five of the afternoon, so don Octavio had a chance to rest before the big party he was to hold that weekend.

The *Cortijo* was built with volcanic stone, with the main building around a ring. All the huge windows looked out on to the ring and the ocean, so the view from any part of the building was completely spectacular. There was a huge saloon by the front entrance, and then an archway with stairs which lead to the second floor and don Octavio's private quarters.

The way the building had been erected with volcanic stone gave it a look of ancient power, like a pyramid, which coupled with the most luxurious finishings money could buy made a very impressive *Cortijo*. Rich, deep carpets; thick planks of rare woods on the walls and on the furniture; paintings by Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, Pollack, a drawing of Picasso and a small Dalí, a Rodin's sculpture of a hand on a stand, and many other pieces of art from people Paul had never heard of. The furniture was large and very comfortable, and exquisitely tended for. Then there was a very large table, made out of

BLOOD RELATIVES

wood thick as a fist, were twenty guest could be seated easily, and a bar with cooper railings complete with fancy brass spittoons and a mirror which reflected the light of the spots buried on the roof. The walls were painted in bright earth colors, and the leather of the furniture shone mutely.

The end result was a saloon which was comfortable, warm, and at the same time overwhelming for all the richness it showed with pride.

The guests started to arrive around seven. The *Cortijo* was flooded with lights. By the time Paul came back from his tour, the saloon was already full with people.

Suddenly there were shouts from the ring. Don Octavio was inside it on his horse, and was making a show of how difficult and powerful and dangerous the animal was. He was shouting to the animal, and the horse was bucking, trying to get rid of his mount. Then the shouts of don Octavio subsided. The animal calmed down and it began to perform the *Pasofino* tricks his trainer had taught him; *passage, Paso doble*, backing, sidestepping...the animal performed all. To end the exhibition, don Octavio had his horse kneel down so he could dismount. It was a compelling show. Then he came into the saloon to have a drink and to receive the congratulations of his guests.

"How did you like the horse?"asked don Octavio seating beside Paul at the bar. Some other people surrounded them.

"Splendid"Paul admit it.

"He is one of the first *Aztecas*. Soon those horses will be famous worldwide, you'll see.

"Don Octavio, who could doubt it. A man like you could not produce a lesser horse"said one of the guests, a man wearing thick glasses. His desire to please don Octavio was embarrsing because it was so obvious.

Don Octavio ignored the complement. He drank his cuba libre like it was water. He was sweating now. With only a shirt and his riding clothes on he looked old, frail, small...

BLOOD RELATIVES

"I bet you would not step into the ring with a bull" don Octavio said.

Paul felt the dare and he could not refuse. It was a direct challenge to test his virility. It was a game don Octavio liked to play. Paul wasn't about to let *him* win it.

"Yes, I would.

"Really? Let's see." don Octavio turned, picked up a hand held radio and gave orders for the ranch hands to bring out a *novillo*.

"Don't you be scared, my boy. A *novillo* is a young bull, very small. He won't kill you.

"Don't I need a cape?" said Paul, disdainful.

"Of course" don Octavio smile was mischievous. "Here is one" he said, and reaching underneath the bar he threw Paul a folded cape.

Paul walked out into the ring and tried to display the cape as he had seen the bullfighters do. He felt ridiculously out of place and clumsy, but before he had more time to think about it the gate of the stables opened and a *novillo* came out. Immediately he ran after Paul, who barely had time to hide behind a *burladero*.

He was utterly surprised at the speed of the animal. And it didn't look small at all. Paul knew it was young and small, but it certainly didn't *look* it. He thought twice about leaving the protection of the *burladero*, but he could imagine the old man laughing his heart up there with the rest of his guests. He stepped out into the ring.

The bull immediately went for him. Paul was holding the cape in front of him, awkwardly, and the bull rammed him square. It had small horns, however, and it didn't wound him. Paul did fall on his ass, but jumped back to his feet immediately. The bull went for him again. Paul barely had time to move out of the way at the last second, and then he understood something; the bull lowered his head to charge ahead, and during fragments of a second it lost sight of its target. The animal programmed itself to hit the target he was looking at, and then

BLOOD RELATIVES

lowered its head, and for a second or two lost sight of the target. That's why the bullfighters were able to fool the animals, who followed the movement of the cape on the sand while the bullfighter stood still.

The bull came charging again, and again Paul moved out at the last moment.

It worked!

Encouraged, Paul threw the cape on the sand. He didn't know how to use it anyway. He faced the bull armed only with his new knowledge. And he had a great time. In two more occasions the bull was able to get him, but never fully again, and one time the bull moved the wrong way and Paul had to grab him by the horns. But the rest of the times the bull charged, Paul was able to jump out. He found the temptation to show off his new found ability irresistible. He placed his hands on his waist, raised his head, and called out to the bull, daring him, and waited until the bull lowered its head, and then moved out of its way. When he started to really have *fun*, don Octavio's voice came over a loud speaker.

"Get that *novillo* out, and bring in more horses."he said.

The ranch helpers jumped into the ring immediately. One of them slapped Paul's back.

"Well done"he said, and ran to the bull.

"How did you like that?"Paul asked his father, back in the saloon.

"It was disgraceful. You know nothing about bullfighting.

"I taught the idea was to fool the animal."

"Yeah, but with art, not clowning. A full grown bull would have turned you into a pulp.

Paul didn't argue that.

BLOOD RELATIVES

His father went into the ring, and got onto a different horse, and started trotting around the ring. One of the helpers came into the ring pushing a cart built like a bull. It even had a real bull's head, dissected. The helper pushed the cart to imitate the charging of a bull, and don Octavio lead his horse in such a way so as to avoid being hit at the last minute by the horns. Don Octavio was doing on a horse pretty much what Paul had done on foot a few minutes earlier. He was doing it, of course, with a lot of showmanship, but Paul knew he could do it too with a little bit of practice.

Then don Octavio started placing *rejones* on the back of the mechanic bull. The *rejones* were small lancets with a steel harpoon on their tip. The harpoon helped the *rejones* to stay in place, buried inside the bull's back. The helper pushed the cart faster and faster, and several times he did hit the horse. The battle reached a point were it seemed that the *bull* was actually winning. Then, in a terrifying moment that stopped all chatting and noise in the saloon, don Octavio nailed the *rejón* on the helpers shoulder, on the small near the neck.

The young man dropped to the floor, blood gushing up like a fountain. Paul ran out to help him.

"An accident, it was an accident. He moved the wrong way. It was an accident." don Octavio was screaming. "How is he, tell me how is he.!"

"We need to take him to a hospital. Now!" said somebody.

"Fast! Take him to the city! Fast! Go and call the chauffeur. Move!" don Octavio shouted to no one in particular, and several people ran to obey him.

Don Octavio stayed on his horse all the time. Finally he came down and Paul saw something like pleasure on his eyes, and a faint smile playing on his lips while four or five employees carried their wounded friend to the car.

"See that he gets the best care." don Octavio said, pulling out his wallet and taking a wad of bills out of it. "And if you need anything, call me. I'll be waiting here for you."

BLOOD RELATIVES

The car took off.

Walking on the way back to the saloon, don Octavio whispered to Paul.

“The son of a bitch deserved it. He was trying to show me off, to make me look like a ridiculous fool.”

Then Paul knew.

Don Octavio had done it on purpose.

“Come on! The party must go on!” said don Octavio with a huge smile on his face, calming his guests.

“Accidents happen all the time when you are dealing with the forces of nature, my friends, and don't ever forget that bulls and horses are a force of nature. *Salud a todos!*” he said, and raised his glass.

The party resumed, and pretty soon the employee's "*accident*" was forgotten.

The festivities could not be complete without a cock-fighting exhibition, the music from six marichi bands hired to play 24 hours straight, the enormous variety of food and drinks, and the dancing and singing traditional in Mexican parties.

All through the night Paul mingled with the guest, flirting here and there with good looking girls, fencing verbally with mustachioed men who resented his gringo name, and talking business briefly with one or two old friends of don Octavio, who knew him to be don Octavio's American partner. Eugenia and her husband never arrived because, as don Octavio explained, they were too busy with his presidential campaign.

The party never lost its vigor. It seemed to grow denser, heavier. When people lost control due to the amount of alcohol they'd taken, the security guards of don Octavio did restore order very fast and discreetly.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“We have a belief in this ranch” don Octavio was explaining to a distinguished couple. “And it is that our guests should have an *excess* of food and drink. Our bartenders have an specific order; whenever they see a man -or a woman, for that matter- already tipsy, they are to serve them even *more* generous drinks.

“Oh, really? And why is that?”said the woman, surprised at the information. “I do exactly the contrary in my own parties; if somebody is tipsy, do not serve them any more wine”

“Yes, madam, but you see, when you do that, you fail in your duty as a hostess. And you have a drunk in your hands. Me, on the other hand not only do not fail as a host; they drink until they drop. Literally. And I don't have to deal with stubborn drunks.

“Interesting idea.”said the husband. “Neutralize them with excessive wine, not excessive force.

“Exactly!” Don Octavio clapped his hand like a little boy to underline how glad he was that his idea had been understood.

“This man is really smart!”he said, and raised his glass. His childish enthusiasm made the couple smile.

At three o'clock in the morning, Don Octavio was chatting with yet another couple by the fireplace when one of the employees came to talk to him on the ear.

Don Octavio got up immediately, excused himself, and went out of the saloon.

Paul followed him.

Don Octavio moved fast in spite of his age, and Paul lost him in the labyrinthine twist and turns of the ranch.

He caught with him by the stables.

There was don Octavio, crying like a baby, surrounded by the ranch's hands.

In front of them, on the floor of the stable, laid the great white horse that don Octavio had ridden that very afternoon.

BLOOD RELATIVES

It was dead.

“What happened?” said Paul.

“The horse got a colic. And the doctor could not save it. “whispered an employee. “It died very fast.

Don Octavio cried hard and deep for his dead animal pretty much like if he were crying for a dead lover. For ten minutes he cried and sobbed for his horse, and then he retired to his private quarters without saying a word to anyone.

From there he issued the order that the party was over and that the horse should be buried deep in the middle of the ring.

The following day the ranch was totally silent. Don Octavio was distraught, and -uncustomary for him- he didn't shave. He was in mourning for his horse, and he wanted the entire world to see it.

On Monday don Octavio got up early and started moving his people around, insisting over and over how important was the people who was to arrive later in the day. The rest of the morning it had been very busy in and around the *Cortijo*.

The airstrip had seen its ground crew incremented over night, from 4 to 25. The other 21 were members of a platoon of soldiers sent over by the naval station at Baja. They had arrived at five in the morning, and by 0530 they had already taken over the operations and cleaned the field. They even carried and placed emergency lights in case of a power failure.

At noon the small airplanes started to come down from the intensely blue sky, and by 1300 there were seven plains on the ground, in sizes ranging from a 2 seats Cessna, to the splendid Mitsubishi which had been the last to arrive. It obviously carried somebody the soldiers recognized because they stood in attention when a man in a

BLOOD RELATIVES

uniform came down the stairs. Paul was watching all of this from one of the terraces in the ranch, and was curious to know who his father was meeting this afternoon, which required all of this elaboration. As always, his father had simply ignored his questions on the subject. Then, since Paul didn't truly care he had dropped the matter, and that in turn had bothered his father, who accused him of not paying enough attention. Jesus, thought Paul, we sure are complicated, aren't we?

Anyway, by the time the General had deplaned, the guests were shown the way to the dining room where a very opulent meal was ready for them, but whatever the matter that brought them together was, it made these men very anxious. They moved almost immediately beyond the food.

Don Octavio ordered everybody out. When Paul was leaving don Octavio grabbed him by the arm and told him to stay. When one of the guests murmured some objection, don Octavio simply said:

“Paul is my son.”

The man looked directly at Paul, very much surprised. Not as much as Paul himself, however, because it was the first time his father had recognized him in public. He tried very hard to act *blasé*, and not to move a single muscle of his face. He managed it fairly well and the other man -in his early fifties, powerful in demeanor and built like a small tank- shrugged and took his place at the table.

When the seven men -plus Paul- were alone in the room they sat around the large mahogany table. Placing his drink down, the General went straight to the point.

“Okay, what are we going to do with him?” he asked. He was looking directly at don Octavio, but the question was for everybody.

The other men around the table looked at each other and remained silent.

“So?” said the general, imperious “What are we going to do with him?” he asked again. He waited about five seconds before going on. “Because if you civilians don't have an answer, we certainly do know how to solve this kind of problems.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Oh, yeah? And how that might be?” asked in a high pitched voice a very small man, who wore thick glasses and had a very bad case of acne in a face scared by it. Paul recognized him immediately as the famous “*Frenchie*”, who's photo was in the newspapers constantly due to his position as the right hand of the President of México. This small, ugly man, was reputed to have a very high, and very twisted, IQ. According to his critics -which were legions- the man was a devious bastard. According to his supporters -which were very few- the man was a genius for manipulation. And politics, which was the same thing. What nobody had ever questioned was his unwavering loyalty to the President of the country, thanks to whom *Frenchie* had left his post as an obscure teacher of something called Transsexual Politics in a French university, and had come to México to become the right hand and the most trusted man of the President. As Chief of the Cabinet, everything going to the office of the President had to go through him first.

“In the military we have something called discipline.”

“Oh, general, please, we are not dealing with one of your little toy soldiers, *si'l vous plais*. We are dealing with the next President of this nation. Do you understand what I am saying?” said *Frenchie*. Paul understood immediately why he was so despised. His tiny voice, coming out from an ugly face in a tiny body, had the totally frozen power of authority. He was treating the General Espinoza, Minister of Defense, as a child. It was obvious that *Frenchie* returned the repugnance his physical presence inspired by treating everybody as an intellectual inferior. A man with those attributes was certainly to be hated, specially when he probed to be right.

“Do you understand who are we dealing with?” insisted *Frenchie*.

“Yes. A son of a bitch who wants to destroy us.” answered a very old man. He was a huge, both in stature and in years. He was close to a hundred years, sixty of which he had been at the head of the most powerful Mexican union. Don Miguel Alonso mumbled through the cigar he always kept in his mouth. He wasn't smoking now, but those cigars had become very famous in the Mexican political

BLOOD RELATIVES

anecdote records ever since Fidel Castro had taken over the power in Cuba in 1959; for awhile the old -even then- Mexican union man was without his favorite Habanos, a brand of cigars which had come to represent the best of the best in Cuban tobacco. After six months without his cigars the old man pronounced a scorching speech against Castro and, by the following evening, he had a box full of cigars in his desk. Ever since, every month he had received his monthly provision of Habanos. And ever since, he had never mentioned Castro's name again.

“He wants to destroy everything we ever built. Who the fuck does he thinks he is?” said the old man, mumbling loud enough to be heard all over the room. He kept his eyes semi-closed as if he were falling asleep, and spoke softly, but those words coming out of the mouth of a man who had managed to hold on to his power though 50 years of Mexican politics was the worst possible condemnation.

“Well, yes don Miguel. You are perfectly right.” said *Frenchie*. “But don't forget that *you* are the one who chose him. I mean, in public. What do you Mexicans call it? *Destápe. Oui. C'est ne pas?*”

Don Miguel chewed on his cigar and didn't answered.

“What is not clear to me,” said a fat man. “is why can't we just pay him off. I mean, he's got a price, right? Everybody does.”

“Except that his price is so high not even you could pay it.” said don Octavio.

“I 'm sure none of us are hurting for money. I mean, personally I made so much money last few years, I barely know what to do with it. So I am sure we can offer our man a very good deal. Right?” that's when Paul finally recognized the man talking. His name was Fernando Cisneros. He was the owner of the biggest corporation in México; his holdings included more than 500 different companies, ranging from television, radio, communications, transportation, banks, brokers houses, hospitals, cooper mining. steel, food and lately even satellite companies in the US. According to Forbes, he was the richest man in México, and the fourth richest man in the world.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Wrong.” said don Octavio.

“Why? I mean, how much is he asking for?”

“Is not the how much, but *what* he desires.”

“Well, all right. I mean, *what* does he want?”

Don Octavio looked out the glass wall that dominated the cliff. He waited. That was his favorite trick to get hold of a conversation and dominate it.

“What does he want, don Octavio?” the question was repeated calmly by the six man, a governor of a state next to México City. He was another legendary men in Mexican politics. He had been the most respected Minister of Interior in the 60 years of the dominant party reign. His sly use of the intelligence networks he'd created made him the equivalent of Edgar Hoover in the US, and like Hoover don Luis had never wanted anything else than keeping the country at peace at all costs. Like Hoover, he had been happy with his job in the law enforcement, and he never had other ambition. What he called the apparent glory of the presidency was not for him. He had been satisfied keeping a tight control over the intelligence apparatus, which in the end controlled the political activity in México. Hoover and him were very much alike, except that don Luis liked young women instead of young boys, and all along had been smarter because his fame was not public, like Hoover's; he was rarely photographed -only when he wanted to be- and the newspapers and the resof of the media treated him with a respect nearing adoration because it was up to him to approve their *legal* existence. It had been he -Paul later learned- and not the official head of Gobernación who right now was silently seating across the table from him, who had brought to the attention of everybody else the crucial information about the Presidential candidate.

“He wants Immortality.” said don Octavio with a twisted smile on his face.

“We all want that. Deep in our hearts”, said don Luis.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“But he will get it as the President of this country. He was chosen to fulfill a roll few men ever have, anywhere. He will be immortal. His name will be part of the history of México forever.” said Frenchie, leaning forward with his small body against the table. He was so small he looked like a child being punished.

“Being president is not enough for him. He wants to be loved too. He wants to be the remembered well. He wants to be another Benito Juárez. He wants to have the glory of *saving* this country. He wants to change the economic structures, and the political structures. He wants to transform México in such a way that whatever we were not able to do in the last seventy five years, he'll accomplish in six.”

“We were all young once. We all wanted that for México. I still do,” mumbled don Miguel, and this time he did lighted his cigar. A heavy, smelly cloud hid his face for a second.

“I mean, what the hell, yeah, we all want to have a better México, but turning on your friends is not the way to do it. I mean, has he forgotten who are we? I don't understand him. Sure, fine, let him work with the poor people, let him give them their free tortillas and whatever, but why does he want to destroy us?” said Fernando Cisneros.

“He doesn't want that, *specifically...*” said don Octavio.

“What the hell do you mean by that? Have you read his ideas on how to change the country? I mean, this man is insane! He wants to change the Constitution! He wants to take the power away from the people who have it now, and give it to people who have no idea about governing a country. He wants to redo the entire economic structure, doing away with all the mechanisms we have in place right now. He wants to give all the judicial and electoral power to the states, so that each can be totally independent from the capital. That would just kill our control in both houses. And, worst of all from my point of view, is that he wants to prosecute many of our friends who have been able to do business with the government for many years. *Retroactively*. That

BLOOD RELATIVES

includes all of us. Look, I mean, if he is able to do what he proposes in those writings of his, we are all lost. And our work of many years will go down the drain. I mean, we have to *talk* to this man.”said Fernando Cisneros.

“I am glad we all got a copy of this file.” said Frenchie.

“Of course,” said don Luis “we must remember that those files were taken from his personal computer. We cannot mention a word of them to him or anybody else because he would know instantly were and how we got them. Okay?”

“Have you consider that this writings might be nothing else than pure dreams? We all must remember that he is a young man, after all. Reality must set in, sooner or later.”said don Octavio, making a last effort. “We’ve had impetuous candidates in the past. Remember Echeverría? Don Gustavo regretted the rest of his life the day he chose him”

“This is different-, started to say don Luis, when *Frenchie* interrupted him.

“I agree with you, don Octavio. Reality always sets in. The problem, you see, is the timing. He is the official candidate. He will become the next president in about... 11 months and 10 days. I don't think we will have the time to change his mind, or to let reality set in, as you said. Those writings are too much well structured to be something new in his mind. This is something he has been thinking about for a long, long time. Many years. So many, in fact, that I am surprised he got where he is now in spite of all the filters the party is supposed to have. We are all surprised, *oui*, but we are also running out of time to make him face the realities of his position. You see, the President cannot allow his successor to investigate the President’s own family. I mean, that is a breach of all the rules that have been in place for the last sixty years. Am I right?”

Everybody, including don Octavio, nodded.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“And if he is willing to break all the rules, he is aware also that there is a price to pay. There are no unexpected developments for him on that front. He himself says it in page 277 of his project.”

Frenchie grabbed some sheets of paper from his briefcase. He placed his glasses well over his nose, and started reading”...let's be completely certain that all changes produce a reaction from those affected by them. The stronger the changes, the stronger the reactions. I will have to take measures to lessen the effects of those reactions, *immediately after receiving power...*”

Frenchie looked up around the table. Took off his glasses and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

“Do you gentlemen understand what I am saying? We don't have the time to wait for reality to set in. He is already planning on *taking measures* to avoid a reaction from us, *immediately* after taking power. I don't have to tell you that the President is very concerned about this development, especially since he is the one that, in the end, accepted your choice of candidate. The President feels that he has been cheated, and lied to, by Sebastian Sarabia.” Frenchie said this looking directly to don Octavio.

“We all feel the same” said don Octavio “and since we are talking about my son-in-law, and about the man in whom I placed all of my trust, and whatever small support I was able to offer him through you all, my good friends, I am particularly worried about all of this.”

“Worries won't fix the problem.”

“I am perfectly aware of that, General.”

“Then what?”

“I'll have to talk to him.”

“Just talk won't give us any guarantees...”

“I am offering you that he will have to change his plans.”

“And if he doesn't?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Then you shall have his immediate resignation as a candidate.” said don Octavio abruptly.

That brought a cold silence in the room.

“Are you sure?” said the General.

“Yes, I am.”

“*Bon*, then. That would take care of that problem.” said *Frenchie*.

“How would we handle his resignation? I mean, its not like firing a damn manager, is it?” said Cisneros.

“He will resign for health related problems. Don’t worry. He won’t say a word. He wouldn’t dare.”

“But he has to do it soon, don Octavio, or we will run into a different set of problems.” said don Luis.

“Which are?”

“The Constitution, for one. You see, legally speaking, to be able to place a different candidate in time for him to enter the race, it has to be done before the year is over. That leaves us with less than 40 days to replace the candidate.”

“That’s plenty of time, really.”

“Then we have to decide right now who will replace him, won’t we?” said *Frenchie*. “I mean, just in case.”

“Does the President have any ideas?”

“Yes he does. He would like to go back to his first choice”

“I still think he is too young, but whatever. Let him be.” said don Miguel, with his eyes still closed.

“Any objections?” asked don Luis. Nobody in the table said a word.

“All right, then. It’s settled. You can tell the President that we all agree with his choice.” said don Luis. “That only leaves the matters of implementation. I can take care of that.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

Everybody got up, and walked in group toward the airstrip. Don Octavio and don Luis were walking behind everybody else, arm in arm. The General was chatting with don Miguel about his new ranch in Tamaulipas. *Frenchie* had taken the lead and walking furiously fast he was already at the stairs of his plane when everybody was just leaving the house. Without turning around he went inside the plane, and the doors got closed.

“That midget is a regular pain in the ass, isn't he” said don Miguel aloud, walking with a cane.

“All midgets are. It's a personality thing” said the General, who was not very tall himself. He was walking as slowly as he could to keep the pace of don Miguel.

“I cannot wait to get rid of that son of a bitch.” said Fernando Cisneros.

“Easy, Fernando, easy. Remember that he'll be gone soon. We will prevail.” said don Luis, behind them.

“That's right.” said don Miguel. “You have to stand still to be in the picture.”

Everybody went aboard their respective planes, and half an hour later they all had left. Don Octavio stayed at the airfield until the last of his guest departed.

When don Octavio entered the house he let out a deep blood curling scream and started breaking everything in sight.

“*Ese hijo de puta....ese hijo de puta...ese gradisimo hijo de puta...*” he kept shouting while he broke furniture.

When he had released enough of his rage he went straight to the phone to call his daughter. Eugenia agreed to see him at twelve o'clock that same night. At that time, she said, Sebastian would be home.

Immediately he and Paul boarded the plane and flew back to México City.

BLOOD RELATIVES

As was usual during his rages, don Octavio didn't speak to Paul or to anybody, so the entire flight back was done in an ominous silence.

There was an helicopter at the airport in México City waiting to take don Octavio home. The old man went aboard still without saying word to Paul.

“I'll take a taxi from here” said Paul.

His father just shut the door closed and the helicopter took off immediately.

Paul himself flew back to Florida the next day.

19

Then, on the last days of December of that year, he got a phone call from Mexico.

“I’ve found her.” the man said.

“Found her? Who?”

“Your mother. I know where she is.”

Paul had almost forgotten that small matter. It was something he didn't want to think about. It bothered him too much. The news left him numb for a while and in a daze he heard the Mexican detective telling him where and how they had meet.

Paul mumbled something like sure, okay, he wrote down some names and numbers and hanged up the phone still dizzy.

It was certainly a welcomed news, but most unexpected. He had fantasized many times about finding his mother, and getting the answers to all the questions he had inside of him, but now that the possibility was a reality, he felt like running and hiding away. Suddenly, he was afraid. And he didn't know why.

The detective had told him she was in a village called Urique, which was deep inside the Barranca del Cobre. Or Cooper Canyon. He found the Cooper Canyon easily on a map of Mexico. It was on the state of Chihuahua, on the northwest side of Mexico. After some more

BLOOD RELATIVES

calls to travel agents he knew the rest: to get to Urique he had to fly into Chihuahua City, then take the Pacific Train, get off somewhere on the highest part of the Sierra, and from there straight down by horse or burro all the way to the bottom of the canyon.

It is a funny place to find your mother, he said to himself.

Next day he was on the plane.

When he arrived to Chihuahua, he called the detective who was staying in another room at the same hotel. He showed up an hour later with two tickets for the Pacific train which would be leaving the very next morning.

“The sooner we get there, the better” he said.

“I agree. I understand it in my case. But in yours, what’s the rush.?”

“You’ll find out.”

The trip on the Pacific Train was long and tedious, full of American tourist visiting the great Cañón del Cobre. The train climbed the mountains of the Sierra Madre which divided in two the country, and they arrived to Batopilas at five in the afternoon, in time to see the sunset. They would have to spend the night on a hotel built by the cliff overlooking the immense canyon. While the detective left to arrange for transportation for the following morning, Paul wandered out on the terrace to see the view.

It was awesome the way the canyon opened the mountains up and extended all the way into the horizon. The air was sweet and pure and very light, and Paul filled up his lungs enjoying the feeling. There was some snow on the mountain tops. Winter was approaching and the weather was getting colder. As it was, he would stand to be out on the terrace for a few minutes with just his shirt on. The sky seemed

BLOOD RELATIVES

smaller in comparison with that huge cut on the ground hundreds of feet below him. He felt immediately the presence of a greater power. Was it fear? Anxiety? What? He couldn't explain to himself what he felt, so he blamed it on the anticipation of meeting his mother. There were a couple of hawks flying on the canyon winds, lower than the terrace, and Paul watched them from above go down and down until he lost sight of them, but the image of those hawks flying effortlessly above the wounded earth would stay with him for a long time. They seemed to symbolize what he felt standing there against that awesome view. He himself was like a bird being drawn to earth by a power much greater than him.

"We got lucky. I've hired a ride in a truck." said suddenly the detective.

"Where are we going?"

"All the way to the bottom of the canyon."

"Is there where Urique is?." said Paul.

"Yes. It used to be a mining town.

"Used to?"

"Sure. You know, when the Spaniards were here."

"And now?"

"Now they, well, let's say that they are into growing things."

"You seem to know a lot about this place."

"I should. Five years ago " when I was right out of the academy" I was stationed right here in Batopilas."

"Really? What for?"

"Drugs. Narcos. Opium, Cocaine. Marihuana. You name it. There's a lot of puppies being grown in these mountains."

"Why did you leave?"

BLOOD RELATIVES

“I got tired. And I was getting crazy. We were getting nowhere. One day you destroy five fields, and the next morning they have twenty more in place, better and bigger. This, while a lot of my agency friends were getting killed. Good people. Honest and clean people. They were the first ones to go, you know? I can name you at least seven of my friends who died here. All for nothing.” the detective made a pause and nodded toward the canyon. “Out there in the mountains you have but one choice: to live or to die. If you choose to live you have to come to an understanding with the narcos, whether you like it or not. They have the power, and it works like this; they show up at your room one day very early in the morning with a suitcase full of money. Dollars, in cash, tens and twenties, old bills, untraceable. They let you see that enormous amount of money when you are barely waking up, then they show you their weapons, and then they let you choose. You keep the money and everybody is happy. You refuse it, and the minute you die. Period.”

“Tough”

“Yes. Especially when you are a fresh kid right out of school, full of ideals and hopes. Especially when you know that your superior is on the take, because he is the only one who could have given them the information of when and how to find you. And especially when you also know that his superiors are on it too, because they are the only ones who could give them times and movements of certain operations. And so on. The take reaches so high you cannot believe it. You find that you have nowhere to run to. So you have to come to an agreement. Or you die.”

“What was your agreement?”

“I would take half the money, and they would take some hits. They liked that deal because it wouldn’t mean much to them, and I would save face...”

“With your superiors?”

“Fuck, no! Save face with myself, you know? With my conscience. At least at thought so at the beginning. But after seven months of this chicken” shit work of destroying five fields a day and

BLOOD RELATIVES

seeing twenty crop up in front of your eyes, and not being able to go full force against them because I didn't have the people nor the authority nor the equipment, besides that small matter of the agreement, I said fuck it. I was going out of my mind, you know? The Indians are glad to grow puppies because it fits some of their religious beliefs, and the mestizos get the plants almost for free. The city boys buy them wholesale for a few dollars, process them and they in turn sell them to a bigger buyer who is the one that takes it across the border. By the time it reaches the retail buyer, the dope addict, the price of the dope has increased so much is mind boggling. And you see these enormous fortunes going back and forth, and at the same time you see your friends being killed for being honest, and all for what? For a bunch of sick assholes who can't keep themselves away from the dope. Fuck them, I say."

"So you left."

"Damn right. The best thing I ever did. Nobody cares anyway, so..."

They kept silent for a while, just listening to the cold wind softly blowing up from the canyon.

Then the detective let out a noise which could be either a laughter or a cunch, Paul wasn't sure what.

"Its funny, you know?" the detective said. "Look, as far as you can see all of this mountains and land belong to a tribe of Indians called Tarahumaras. Mines, forests, rivers, fantastic views, the works. A very rich piece of real state, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes."

"And you know who are starving to death?"

"They are?"

"Right. And you know why?"

"I don't have the slightest idea."

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Because they are fucking Indians, that’s why.” said the detective bitterly, and moved his massive bulk out of the terrace and into the hotel.

20

The detective got them in the back of an open truck which transported products and people down the canyon. The people were mainly Tarahumaras who kept themselves apart from the mestizos or the whites.

It was a long and hard ride on the open back of the truck. The climate changed rapidly. From the snow and the bitter cold they encountered on top of the canyon, to the very hot semi" tropical sun on the bottom of the canyon.

The sun was setting when they reached Urique, which was nothing more than a very small village by a river.

Paul and Beto hadn't said a word to each other on the way down. Paul didn't feel like asking anything, and he and the detective were too busy trying to hold on to the truck. Once they reached the small village, the detective went off to search for a *compadre* of his who lived in the village.

The small village was dusty and dirty. The little adobe houses were half" built, the streets crooked and full of holes, the outside walls crumbling and in need of paint, the children muddied and running naked through the streets, chasing after with very thin starving dogs...everything spoke of abandonment and despair. Everything looked old and decaying, as if things had been built centuries ago. Even the new buildings seemed wrong somehow, like a woman dressed for the wrong party.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Paul tried not to look too closely at this misery. It was painful because it made him recall his early childhood, the poverty in which he and his adopted mother lived before she got married to Mr. Chadwick. He too had played in the dirt. And he didn't like to watch those children do it now, especially because he knew they had no hope of ever getting out of the gutter, like he had been able to do.

“ What did you find?

“ We have to wait till tomorrow.

“ Why?

“ Because she is up in the mountains with the Indians. But they all are coming down tomorrow.

“ Coming down?

“ Yeah. Para la fiesta de navidad. Christmas celebrations. You see, that's why we had to come here so fast. The Tarahumaras leave their caves and come down the mountains only two or three times a year. Tomorrow is one of those days.

“ And how do you know she is with them?

“ Because I know, okay? Anyway, we'll find out soon enough, won't we?

The detective introduced him to his compadre Pedro, who took them to his home, where they were welcomed very solemnly by the rest of the family. Pedro's mother, an Indian woman short and strong, barely spoke to them but immediately ordered her daughters to fix food for the visitors. The way the women acted showed how important the male presence was for them: they kept their eyes lowered, they didn't talk back to the men in the house, and they didn't even eat until after every male had eaten.

“ Tortillas.” Pedro would say, and his mother and the two little girls would run to fetch them.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Do you like my house?” Pedro asked looking at Paul straight in the eye, daring him to tell the truth. Paul looked around the adobe house, examined the old coal stove where the women were busy fixing the meal, saw the earth floor and the battered wooden furniture, fixed his eyes on one of the hammocks hanging from the walls, and was as honest as possible.

“What I really like is your hammock.” he said.

“Really?” said Pedro, surprised.

“Really”

“It’s yours.

“No way.”

“Yes. Take it as a compliment of my family.

Paul didn’t argue any more. He saw in the detective and in Pedro’s eyes that he would be hurt if he didn’t accept the gift. But he felt guilty being the object of this unwarranted generosity so he took out his watch.

“I’ll accept it if you accept this from me.

Pedro’s eyes opened wide.

“That’s too much. That is a very expensive watch.

“No, it is not. But anyway, it’s not as pretty as the hammock.

Pedro looked at the detective, who nodded once. Pedro looked at Paul, took the watch carefully and then smiled.

“Salud, compadre.

“Salud.

“Chingao, I like to drink with people like you.

“What do you mean.?”

“You are not afraid of us.” Pedro said. “And you don’t come here to pity us. I like that. I don’t like those assholes from the city that come here and try to teach us how to be. Bola de Pendejos.!”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Pendejos!” echoed the Beto.

They drank again. Paul paid for a box of beers and for awhile they chatted like old friends. Paul learned many things, mainly about Pedro’s habit of fishing on the river with dynamite. In his broken Spanish, Pedro kept telling the same stories over and over while his eyes were getting glassier from the beer. The women had gone to the next room and from there kept a watch on the needs of the men.

Paul listened to Pedro until he got sleepy.

“Listen, I think I better go to sleep. It’s been a long day, and I am tired.

“Its early still.

“I know, but I am beat. Riding in that truck made me feel like a pebble inside a maraca.

“Okay, we’ll talk some more tomorrow, all right?

“Yeah, sure.

“Would you like to go fishing tomorrow?

“I can’t.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. Tomorrow is the party. Well, maybe after you talk with your mama...” Pedro said. He got up, stumbled out of the kitchen and into the dormitory. The detective took one of the hammocks, and fallen asleep almost immediately.

Paul did too, on the hammock “now his” which hanged near the stove.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Early next morning he awoke to the aroma of coffee and frijoles. He woke Beto up and after a quick bath in the river which ran on the back of the house, they went to look for Pedro. They found him asleep on the arms of a fat woman. The rest of the women were busy around the stove, cooking in silence so as not to awake Pedro.

“*Orale, compadre.* Get up quickly. We have to leave.” said the detective, shaking Pedro.

The three of them eat scrambled eggs, with tortillas and frijoles and coffee with cinnamon, and before he left the house, Paul tried to thank Pedro’s mother and sisters, but the women hide away their faces and didn’t answer.

“They are just women. Come on.” said Pedro. He was anxious for some reason.

They walked down the street by the river. Along the bank there were people swimming already, mostly children in their underwear or naked.

“Just follow the river.” Pedro told them. “You’ll see the place where the Tarahumara’s governors dance.”

“Will they be there already?”

“They usually arrive at night, so as to start dancing with the sunrise. They should be there already. Can’t miss them.”

And he was right.

About two miles up the river, there was a bend, then a low crossing point, and then something like an island, a big rock in the middle of the water. The rock was full of Indians, mostly dressed in their traditional garments.

“She should be there.” the detective said.

They started to cross the river, but they were stopped by two short, and very powerful looking Indians. They were slim, but their bodies looked hard and strong as a stone.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Where?” one of them asked in the curious way some Indians talked Spanish. Paul had heard them the day before while riding on the truck. Most of the Tarahumaras didn't speak Spanish correctly, so they talked exactly like a factory worker from Detroit visiting Mexico and trying to impress his girl with his *español*.

“We are looking for a woman.” said the detective.

“Woman? What woman?”

“Her name is Beatrice”

“Woman not here.” said the Indian immediately, so fast in fact that it could only mean that he was lying.

“Well, she is here. And I am a police officer, so you better tell us the truth.” Beto pulled out his credentials.

“Judicial?” said one of the Indians with fear and distrust.

“That's right, asshole.”

The two Indians talked to each other softly. Then one of them said.

“The woman, what you want for?”

“It's non of your fucking business”

“She is my mother.” said Paul, trying to ease their minds.

“Mother, yes, she is mother.”

“No, no. She is *my* mother.” he insisted. Then he saw one of the Indians opening his eyes wide.

“Tu mamacita?”

“Exactly. I am her son.

The Indians talked to each other again, very fast.

“Go back. Go back to town. Wait there.” said the first.

“Go back, now”, said the second encouragingly.

So they went back to the village to wait.

BLOOD RELATIVES

They walked around the village's main square, across from the church. At noon a wedding took place. The church got filled with attendants, while outside the kids were playing.

"Watch that." said the detective, pointing with his chin down the street.

There was a band playing while they followed on foot a man mounted on a horse. The man was leaning forward on the animal, and several times he seemed about to fall. He had a bottle in his right hand, and from time to time he would take a swig from it. Although he was absolutely drunk, every time the band stopped playing he would lift his head, shout for them to keep on playing, and he'd go on drinking.

This strange procession went up and down the main street of the village in front of the church until the newlyweds came out. They were preceded and followed by their families, who surrounded them and created a protective shield around the couple. Everybody was watching out for the drunk man on the horse. Inside of this cocoon of people the newlyweds marched down the street to the bride's house, where everybody went inside for the party. From time to time a child would come out to look at the drunk man, and the mother would pull him back inside the house grabbing him by the ear.

"Play it louder!" the man on the horse ordered again to his musicians, who played once more one of those Mexican songs of love, infidelity, and broken hearts. The drunk man didn't do anything else. He just kept on going up and down the street, balancing his stupefied body on the horse, singing the same songs again and again.

"What's going on?"

"*Se le fue viva la paloma.*" said the detective, smiling. "He lost the girl he loved. Asshole."

"Why is everybody so afraid of him?"

BLOOD RELATIVES

“They are afraid because he is a *bridge* for don Octavio”

Paul’s heart skipped a beat.

“A bridge for whom?”

“For don Octavio. That’s what everybody call him. His name is Octavio Terrazas, and he is the mother fucker of them all. The biggest narco in Mexico.”

Paul’s mind went into an overdrive. Beto had no way of knowing he was Octavio Terrazas son. Or did he?

“What’s a bridge?” he heard himself asking.

“Shit man, didn’t you understand nothing? A bridge is middle” man for the dealers. He buys from the small growers out in the mountains, and takes the shit to the big dealers.

“I see.”

“You see nothing. You are an asshole too”

“Fuck you.

“Gringo pendejo”

“Pinche chimuelo” said Paul, remembering what the kids in the barrio had called him when, as a child, he started losing his milk teeth. *Chimuelo* meant toothless. The insult disconcerted the detective so much, that he didn’t know what to answer and after a moment he started to laugh, showing his golden denture. Paul didn’t laugh. His mouth was dry and his heart felt very heavy.

One of the Indians from the river arrived at that moment and asked Paul to follow him.

Paul did.

21

They went across the river, up into the mountains.

Paul was lead into a cave. He went in alone.

There was a fire inside, and a woman in a long dress was walking around it, throwing branches and leaves into the flames while she murmured what sounded like prayers.

She stopped as soon as she came in, and turned to look at him.

“Come on in, *mi hijito*. It is time.” she said.

He came in closer. She made the sign of the cross on his face and then she embraced him firmly. She kissed him all over the face and he tried to respond to her, but he was numb with surprise and anger, and a tremendous desire to cry like a baby, everything at the same time. It was a mixture of emotions he had never felt before.

“Why...?”

“Why? Shush. We have many things to say to each other, and we will. Don't worry. Although I've been told that my time to leave this body is getting close, we will have time enough, for you and I. My son. My darling son.

“Let's seat by the fire. But before anything else happens, first let me clean you from any evil spirits.

“What do you mean?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Just sit there for a moment.” she said and she grabbed a bunch of dry flowers from a cardboard box in the floor, threw some into the fire and with the rest she started to rub Paul's entire body while murmuring her prayers.

The cleansing took about ten minutes, in which she threw more flowers and incense into the fire, and she prayed intensely. Paul could barely follow her words, but she seemed to talk to somebody right in the cave with them.

“That's it. Now you are clean. But you have to be careful of the man with the horses. He looms like a dark shadow in your life. He is death itself. He is going to try to harm you. He is an evil man” she said.

“The man with the horses?” Paul was surprised. The only man with horses he knew was, of course, his father.

“Yes. And my brother White Feather also told me you need to ask me many questions. He also said that you are a clean soul. I told him you would be. You are my son.” she said and she smiled for the first time. Her teeth were so white they seemed fake. Her smile flooded her face with light, and made her eyes sparkle with youth.

“Why, mother? Why?” was the only thing Paul could mutter. He felt he was being drown by emotions he had never experienced until that very moment.

“It is a long story, my child.

“I've come a long way to hear it.”

She looked into his eyes for a long time before she started to talk.

“When I met your father I was only 13 years old. I was a child, you see. One day he saw me walking by the street and he followed me. He began the courtship, but when he found that my own father was dead, he stole me away.

“He *stole* you?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Yes. That was and still is a custom in many parts of the country. Anyway, he took me to his house and he made me his woman. He treated me nice, and he bought me clothes, and he even brought me a birthday cake when I turned fifteen. I had a very poor childhood, but I was the only daughter of a diplomat who had lost all of his fortune and position in the thirties, after the revolution. So what your father gave me felt both like a present and like something due to me, you see? I was a descendant of the first viceroy that came from Spain; my father and his family had been prestigious members of society, and my own grandmother had been a debutante with Porfirio Diaz.

“And you were beautiful...

The old woman smiled again. You are still beautiful, thought Paul.

“Yes, I was. That was something your father could not stand. My beauty was always making him jealous, and he used to keep me inside the house. I rarely got out without him. He used to show me around to all of his friends, like a priced new toy. And I, being a child, thought that I was in love with him.

“I was, like he used to call me, his princess. And I used to feel like one, having servants and cooks and chauffeurs at my disposal. He bought for me anything I wanted and getting all those material possessions was to me, as I said, something the world owed me. What I failed to understand then was that those material things turned me too into another possession; his.

“One day I got pregnant. Your father was furious. He didn't want me to get pregnant because I would lose my figure. That's what he said. So he took me with a doctor friend of his, supposedly to be examined, and the good doctor performed an abortion on me.

“That was the first time this happened, and from that moment my life began to change. I started to see your father in a different way. I began to realize his true self.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“I had another two abortions performed. But I wanted to have children, I needed to be a mother, so I began to convince your father. It took me several years, but I finally did convince him, and that's when your sister Eugenia was born. He was happy to see she was a girl. Shortly after, you were born. And for some reason he was displeased you were a boy. From the start he disliked you. From then on your father couldn't bear to see me happy with you.

“Why?”

“No reason at all. He was just jealous of you.

“And Eugenia?”

“She wasn't a treat for him, I guess. Maybe because my love for you was out of his control. I don't know. He came to me one day and said that he was going to send you away. That your sister was fine, she was a girl and she could stay by me, but that you had to go as an intern in a place far away. I refused. When he insisted, I told him that he was evil, and for the first time I began to believe this to be true.

“From that day on I started rebelling to his commands. I wouldn't share his bed anymore. One day I found him giving you a loaded gun to play with. Then I understood he wanted you dead. Somehow you had come between him and me, and he couldn't stand that.

“The final confrontation came one night when he arrived to the house with another woman. The house was very large and he took her into his office. He'd brought other women into the house ever since I started getting pregnant. I pretended not to see, even when he would make plenty of noise to make sure I knew.

“That night he ordered me to come to his study and when I got there the two of them were naked and the fireplace was on and the woman was on her knees and had him in her mouth, and... and then he saw me with an ugly smile on his face and said: “Look, *puta*, this is how a real woman pleases her man.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“I went out of my mind and I tried to scratch his eyes out. He just laughed and hit me with his fists and then with his belt. The woman was helping him. Then he reaped my clothes off and forced himself on me. He hurt me badly. The woman was laughing. He said that he was going to turn me into a whore, and that he was going to bring men from the street to fuck me. I told him, very calmly, that I was going to kill him. He stopped laughing and said that he was going to teach me a lesson, and left the room saying he was going to kill *you*.

“I don't know how but I got hold of a fireplace rod, and I hit the woman in her head and I think I killed her. Then I reached him by the stairs. I hit him three times. Until he stopped moving. I grabbed you and I ran from that house. My main instinct was to save you. Somehow your sister didn't worry me. I still don't know why, but I always knew that she would be safe. Perhaps because she was a girl and he didn't feel any challenge from her. I don't know. I have recalled those awful seconds many times over the years and I still don't understand many of my reactions. In any case my worry at that moment was to get you out of there, into a safe place. So I just grabbed you.

“But I didn't have a place to go. My mother had died by then, and I didn't know the rest of the family. Besides, if I had stayed in the city he would have found me. So I took the bus to the farthest place I could think of.

“I tried to cross the border into United States, but the police caught me by the river twice. Before I could try for the third time I saw one of your father's employees watching me from across the street. He had found us! I had to do something urgently. The only place left to go was the mountains, but I couldn't take a baby with me. It would have killed you. So I made a deal with a woman who had become fond of you. I gave her all the money and jewels I had left on me if she would take care of you until I could reach you. Then I left for the mountains. Later, when I was able to go back, the woman was gone. Your father was still looking for us, so I came back to the mountains, and I've been here ever since. Never, for a second, I stopped loving you and missing you. “

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Did you tried to find me?”

“Many times, but I had to be very discreet because I wanted your father to believe we were dead already. And I knew that Eugenia was fine and healthy. When I couldn’t found you, I did let her know of your existence.”

“So it was you who send that letter.”

“Yes. And I thank God for granting me my most fervent wish. That I could be like this, able to be here with my son and to see him so good and strong and beautiful.”

Paul embraced his mother. She embraced him back and cried for a long time in his arms.

22

The talked and they cried and talked tirelessly during the rest of the night.

She told him how she had become a medicine” woman to treat the illnesses of the Tarahumaras, and he told her about his printing business; she told him how the Tarahumaras lived scattered on the mountains, in caves pretty much like the one they were now, and he told her about his computers and all the things he was able to do with them; she told him about planting, and seeds, and water, and poverty, and he told her about fast cars, and luxurious restáurants, and about his trips to Europe...

When the sun came up, she looked at him very seriously and lovingly, and said

“I want you to do me a favor.”

“Of course. Whatever you want.”

“Sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay. Come with me.”

About a kilometer up the river, on the other side, there was a recess on the mountains. About fifteen old men, some very old, were dancing around huge clay pots covered with branches and leaves. They were the governors of the Tarahumaras.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“What are they doing?”

“Curing the Tesguino

“What is the Tesguino?.

“You’ll see.

They crossed the river on a shallow and approached the governors. Some of the men greeted Beatrice with a respectful nod of the head, some others approached her and murmured softly in her ear. Some of them said halo to Paul, and when he extended his hand, they didn’t close their fingers around; they just graced the tips of his fingers with theirs. After the second or third time, Paul started doing the same.

His mother left him while she went to talk to the governors, so Paul went to look inside the clay pots.

The Tesguino was a beer they made out of maize. When Paul looked inside the clay pots he could see the maize water bubbling underneath the leaves. The fermentation was taking place.

Beatrice took him by the river bend where a lot of men were gathering. Many were naked already.

“Take your clothes off” she said.

Beatrice started taking his clothes off. Paul took his shirt off, and his pants, and stood in his underwear by his mother. He taught they were all going to swim, but then one of the Tarahumaras shouted something in Raramuri and they all flocked by the river. Two of them grabbed some dishes and started painting each other. Pretty soon everybody was painting somebody else.

“Come here.” Beatrice said to Paul, leading him inside the river.

Suddenly Beatrice grabbed one of the paint dishes and applied colored mud on Paul’s face.

“You’ll be an Indian too.” Beatrice said.

BLOOD RELATIVES

The colored mud the Indians used came in four colors: brown, red, white, and black. It was made with vegetables and minerals “ for the red they used radishes, and for the white the used chalk, for example. The texture of the paint was soft and fresh. Paul was surprised of how good it felt against his skin.

Beatrice left him in the hands of the Tarahumaras and soon he was entirely naked, standing on the river, and was getting painted all over by four Indian hands. He closed his eyes. At the beginning he felt awkward and defenseless, being naked, but soon the colored mud on his body was being dried by the sun and the wind, and the sensation was entirely new, like no other he had ever experienced. The cold water of the river on his feet and legs, the wind blowing down the mountains, the powerful bright sun on his eyes, the mud on his skin drying up...he felt at that moment like he was a unity with it all, that the river and the sun and the wind and the mud had become an extension of him, and he felt there was nothing strange at being covered with mud. It was as if all of the elements of nature were concentrated on him, on his skin and his eyes. It was both like becoming one with nature, and nature becoming him. He was part of it all, and he had never felt more alive than at that moment. He felt a new kind of ener surging through his body; pretty much like the sensation of being aroused, but in a sensual way, not sexual. His senses were all turned on at the maximum sensibility and were receiving thousands of new perceptions, which then became emotions. He felt slightly drunk, and joyously happy, and the tingling of the mud on his skin made him completely aware of every inch of his body, all of the inches at the same time, and every move he made he felt all along his skin. If he moved his right toe, the movement resonated up all the way to the base of his brain, as if it were an never ending echo. His face was covered with mud red and white, except for his eyes and mouth, and when he smiled the mud on his face seemed to sink even deeper into his skin, into his muscles, into his bones. Somehow his nakedness didn't seem important anymore: the mud became his protection, his shield, and he felt powerful, strong, invincible...

BLOOD RELATIVES

“*Orale, cuate*. Don’t get carried away.” the detective said, with a funny look in his eyes. Paul barely recognized him when he opened his eyes. The dry mud changed their appearances so much, that except for the voice Beto wasn’t there. Paul wondered if he had changed that much himself.

“You too?”

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.

“Now what?”

“Now you wait here. We have to fulfill a *manda*.” said the detective pointing to another painted man next to him. It was Pedro, recognizable only for his big, white smile.

A *manda*, Paul knew, was a religious promise, unbreakable. By a *manda* a man swore to the Virgen, or to God, or to any other of the saints in the church, to stop drinking for example; or not to beat his wife anymore; or to stop doing any of those thousands of small and big sins which men commit everyday. When a man was ‘sworn’ in a ‘*manda*’, nobody messed around with it.

“Can’t I come?”

The detective laughed

“No, you can’t. This is our punishment. You can wait here, or you can go ahead to the church. I’ll meet you there.”

“All right.

All the other painted men gathered by the side of the mountain and then they started running up the hill until they disappeared behind the rocks and the trees.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Paul remained there for awhile, standing in the river and enjoying the fresh water running around him. He waited for his mother to come back, but soon he got tired of seeing the old men dancing around the beer in the clay pots. He swam in the river until he came out totally clean. Then he dressed up and walked toward the church.

When he was close to the plaza, he heard shouts and screams and he turned to see the painted man running along the streets of the village, purposely scaring the animals, the children, the women, and everybody that came in their path.

The painted men ran into the church yard. All of a sudden dozens of men came out of the church armed with sticks, and started beating them up. The men coming from the church were dressed in customs and carried crosses to identify themselves as Christians, while the painted men represented the infidels. The fight was staged only in the sense that they all knew beforehand what was going to happen and who was going to win at the end, but the beating that the infidels took was for real; they were being punished for their sins against the tribe, and the beating with the sticks soon started to draw blood from faces and heads.

Finally the catholic priest came out of the church carrying a huge crucifix, and everybody stopped fighting. The painted men got up from the floor, and covered with dust and blood, embraced their enemies. Then they went into the church for the mass.

Very soon the yard in front of the church was filled with Tarahumaras who had come down from their caves in the sierra to participate in the party.

Paul found his mother out in the church yard, taking care of the Tarahumaras wounded by the fight, and he started helping her as much as he could applying bandages and cleaning open wounds. He found Beto seating by a stone wall, panting. His face was a mass of blood, but he, like everybody else, didn't seem to mind the beating; on the contrary, he seemed happy for the blood he was shedding, and proud for the pain he was enduring.

Paul thought they were all crazy.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Meanwhile the party started officially when the band begin to play. During this day the rules of the tribe were loosened and everything was allowed among the Tarahumaras. Soon the women were smashed from drinking the *Tesguino*, and the drunk men were arguing with each other, some were embracing, and some were crying while the band kept on playing. This lasted all night long.

23

The following morning the plaza was full of sleeping bodies lying on the ground.

In the midst of early morning Paul and Beatrice walked through the plaza among the bodies covered with heavy wool blankets.

“Go with me, please” said Paul to his mother.

“Go? Where?”

“To Florida. To live with me.”

“And what would I do there?”

“I would take care of you”

“You would be disappointed, darling. I don’t have much time left to live, you know.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been told I have a very short time left with this body.”

“More the reason for you to come with me.”

“Yes?”

“Yes! I can take you to the best doctors in United States.

“What for?”

“So they can cure you.

“I am not ill.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“But I thought you said...”

“That I have short time left in this body, but that doesn’t mean that I am ill.

“What does it mean, then?”

“That I am going to die soon. That’s all.”

Paul looked at his mother’s eyes. They were serene and calm, and not a hint of doubt was in them. She was serious.

“Death is nothing to be afraid of, darling. It is part of living. Life is a process that has a beginning and an end, like everything else. Our souls use these bodies as instruments, as tools, and those tools get old and broken, but the spirit doesn’t. The spirit is always young and new, as long as you let it be young and new. When you let your spirit get dirty, then your soul ages a little. But if you clean your soul you become one with the universe and you accept your self as part of everything else, and then you don’t fear death anymore. Many men are afraid of death because they have lived their lives against nature. Living against nature is to reject the knowledge that everything and everyone depends on everything else to live. The tree that produces oxygen cannot exist without the sun and the water, and the animal that we eat cannot exist without the oxygen, the tree, the sun and the water. We are a part of a chain of dependencies, and death is part of that chain.

“But just because death is inevitable doesn’t mean we have to accept dying. We live longer because we don’t.”

“You are right. But I am talking about the *purpose* of life, not just *extending* the time of living.

“I couldn’t go anywhere else. For too long my purpose of life has been here. I’ve lived among the Tarahumaras for almost thirty years, and I have earned their trust because I have tried to show them ways to take better care of themselves, much in the same way that you are trying to take care of me. And then I realized that they need to change some of their ways, yes, but change them for what? Change so they can live hoarding things? They wouldn’t be happy.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Are they happy now?”

“In a sense, yes. They have an inner strength that never ceases to amaze me. They derive that strength from being in touch with another level of knowledge.”

“Are you happy?”

“I am at peace” she said. Quickly, she added “Tell me, how did you feel yesterday, during your bath in the river? Didn’t you feel new, and powerful? Didn’t you feel like the universe itself was coming into your being? Didn’t you feel so strong that you could carry the world on your shoulders?”

“Yes I did. How did you know?”

“Because you were cleaning your soul, more than your body.”

“Is that the purpose of the ceremony?”

“One of them, yes. To clean your soul is one of the things what I have learned from them.” she said. “Another thing I have learned is that there are different levels of knowledge. One is the material one, but that one is limited. Another, the one they prefer, is the immaterial one. That one is higher if you will, because it is endless; it is not bound by physical realities.”

“That might be, but meanwhile they starve to death.”

“That is true. And believe me, I have tried for many years to change that. They live in misery their entire lives, and they see their children die of hunger and yet they have an inner strength I don’t have. Look at them. I despise them because they refuse to change their ways. And I love them for the same reason. It’s crazy, right? Their ways makes them noble and kind, and stupid and brutal at the same time. Their bodies are dirty, but their souls are clean. Can you understand that?”

“No.” said Paul.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“I have learned many things from them, and in the same way that I am now waiting for my physical death, so are they. They are all waiting to disappear. That’s why they do nothing to change their lives. What for? Their end is near anyway.”

“What about you? Don’t you want to live?”

“Of course I do. But my cycle is finished. I’ve lived my life, good or bad, and I tried to do the best of whatever choices I had. I’ve fulfilled my purpose. I’ve missed seeing my sons growing up, but that’s about the only pain I haven’t been able to digest. There are many things we cannot undo. For now I am finishing my time with this body, and soon there will be time to move on to another cycle.”

Paul looked into his mother’s eyes and he knew that there was nothing he could say to make her change her mind.

“I don’t want to lose you now.”

“You haven’t my darling, and you won’t. I’ll always be with you.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it”

They walked down to the river in silence. Then Paul thought of something. he pulled out his wallet.

“I want to help. Tell me what can I do.” he said, placing the bills into his mother’s hand.

“If you can send medicine. And food. Blankets, things like that. Oh, and toys for the children. Send many toys for the children.”

“I will. I promise you.”

“Well, now. We both have promises to keep, don’t we?”

“Yes. Yes we do.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

The water was running clean and cold in the river when Paul embraced his mother. Although he wished this moment to last forever, he knew it was too late for them to recapture the time which they had lost, and he felt a great sorrow because they hadn't found each other earlier.

In spite of what she said, he knew that she was a very strong woman. She was a noble lady who had suffered enough. Most importantly, she had gone beyond her suffering and had turned it into something greater than herself. For this he admired her very much and he felt proud to be her son.

On the ride back to Chihuahua, Beto was very happy in spite of his black eye, his swollen nose and his new scars. Paul, wrapped in his own thoughts, didn't ask him for the source of this happiness. But twenty-four hours later, when Beto took Paul to the airport in Chihuahua, Beto couldn't stand his secret any longer.

"Something heavy is coming down," he whispered in Paul's ear.

"What do you mean?"

"The Indians are arming themselves. We are going to have another revolution," Beto said, and happily embraced him the Mexican way, with lots of hard slaps in the back. Paul's was sore for two days afterwards.

24

When he came back from Chihuahua Paul was in frantic state, because by now he was totally convinced he was in trouble.

Having met his mother, he was happy to know that she was a lady. But his mother was a further proof to him that don Octavio had a knack to harm people. He seemed to enjoy it, like when he had driven the *rejón* into the worker's neck.

And Paul suspected his own neck was on the line now. He had a better picture of don Octavio's personality and activities, and he definitely began to despise the day he had met the man.

He already knew that Don Octavio was heavily involved in high level politics in Mexico and had been for a long time. He had made his enormous fortune by a simple route; his companies made sweet-heart deals with the Mexican government officials all the time. In México it was common knowledge he was behind many of the corrupt activities going on. Because of his influence, he was considered untouchable by everybody. According to the detective Roberto, his darling of a father was also behind some of the drugs being shipped into United States. To top it all, Paul had witnessed his ordering a hit on a man. And he had behaved like a crazy pervert to Paul's mother.

Delightful man.

BLOOD RELATIVES

All of those facts made Paul certain that there was something strange going on with the printing material he was sending to don Octavio's companies, but he couldn't place his finger on it. He wasn't sure of what it was, but he was sure of something; whatever it was, it was illegal as hell, and now he was involved in it whether he wanted it or not.

He didn't want it, of course.

Never had.

He had decided long ago that he didn't like breaking laws. He believed that a lawful society was a civilized society, and a civilized society was the greatest achievement of humankind. But beyond personal convictions and beliefs, the fact of the matter was that *if* he had to break a law, he wanted to do it fully aware of his actions. He didn't like the idea of becoming increasingly involved in something illegal without his consent.

For some reason he didn't fancy spending the rest of his life in prison, so he knew that if he wanted to avoid that promising future behind bars he better found out what was going on. And fast.

The first thing to do, he decided, was to take a look at the place he was sending all of those printing orders.

The warehouse in Houston was everything but hidden. It was on a main avenue, along one of the latest developments in the west part of the city. The building had been built recently, and it was brightly lit and painted.

BLOOD RELATIVES

The building itself had a common structure with many other warehouses all over the world; it was square, and it had no windows. Other than that it was painted blue and cream, and it had a large metal curtain on the side street. It looked so clean and peaceful that Paul even doubted he was at the right place.

He looked around. The place had no signs of any kind except for a small number above the curtain.

“1325”

That was the place all right. Paul inspected the building from inside his rental car. He had been sending hundredths of thousands of printed sheets to that building for the last year, and it was the first time he'd laid eyes on it.

After few minutes he left. He needed to find a way of getting access to that building so he could see what was going on inside.

He went back to his hotel, thinking about it.

He called Sharon in Florida, and gave her precise instructions; she was to call immediately the warehouse and warn them about a box being sent to them by mistake. Could they please have the delivery man immediately return the box? If there were any problems, please have the delivery man call Florida collect.

Then he went out and searched used car lots until he found the perfect vehicle. The van was a Volkswagen, and the paint was good, even though the van was almost twenty years old. He paid five hundredth and twenty five with his credit card.

He called the rental car agency, told them were they could find their car and then, aboard the van, he went to Sam's to buy a couple of plastic chairs and a box of bond paper sheets, five thousand to a box. He wrapped it in brown paper for delivery, and placed tags on it with the warehouse's address.

He stopped at K-Mart and bought himself a camera, five rolls of film, and the ugliest most colorful shirt he could find. He also got a pair of mirror eyeglasses, and a cap with OILERS printed on the front.

BLOOD RELATIVES

There was a small shopping center across the highway from the warehouse, and that's where Paul parked his observation van. He placed the van at the parking lot in such a way that he could watch the movement at the warehouse.

He watched the whole night in vain. Nothing happened, but he took plenty of pictures for future reference.

Next morning two people showed up around nine, and that was that. One was a slender, good looking blonde, who arrived driving a blue Mazda. The other was a heavy set man in his forties, with lots of hair, -beard, mustache, the works- who arrived on a brand new Miata.

Paul left at eleven, went to his hotel to sleep and shower and came back at four thirty in the afternoon.

At five the same two people came out of the warehouse, got into their cars and drove away. From afar they didn't seem very friendly to each other.

The second night he watched until he fell asleep, and the morning after that he watched the same coupe follow the same routine as the day before. No other employees, and no other workers.

Hum. That meant something, although Paul didn't know what.

He drove back to his room, he dressed up with his colorful shirt, the mirror glasses and the cap. When he looked at the mirror he felt confident enough that he looked just like any other illegal worker trying to blend in unnoticed.

He had lunch in a fast food restaurant across the highway from the warehouse. He waited until three before making his move.

He drove the van up to the large curtain at the warehouse, and just in case they were watching through a camera he made a big show of looking at the number. He carried the box of paper on his shoulder and rang.

He waited.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Nothing happened.

He rang again.

Nothing happened.

He was kicking at the curtain before a small window finally opened up.

“Yeah?”, said the blonde woman.

“I have a delivery for a...let’s see... International Trade Corporation. Is this the right place?”

“Yeah” she said. She stared at him.

“All right!” he said and got ready to deliver. But the blonde woman didn’t move.

“It is the right place, right? International Trade Corporation?” he asked her again.

“Yeah.” she said and didn’t move. Paul wandered what was wrong with her. Was she stoned or something?

“Okay, well, could you open the door? This box is heavy, you know?”

“Yeah.” she said. She closed the window. Then nothing happened.

Paul waited for about ten minutes under the burning Houston sun, until he got tired and started kicking at the curtain again.

The blonde came back.

“Yeah?” she said, acting as if she hadn’t seen him before.

What the...?

“The box, lady. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” she said. She started to raise the curtain by pushing on a button. She raised it enough so Paul could bend in. When he did, he found himself watching very closely at her legs and

BLOOD RELATIVES

was happily surprised by what he saw. She was wearing a micro skirt and now Paul was able to be a legal witness to the fact that she was wearing nothing more underneath that skirt. Her hard, delicious tights seemed to quiver in anticipation of...something.

“Oh, wow!” he said.

“Yeah.” she said, not paying any attention to him.

“Where do you want this?”

She pointed up.

“Up there?”

“Yeah”

Paul wandered if she was brain dead. Did she know any other word in English?

She went up the stairs on one side of the entrance. Paul followed those exquisite legs up, and when he was enjoying himself the best, the hairy big guy came out of the office. He had a dirty T-shirt on. The shirt said OUCH!

“What’s that?” he said, pointing at the box Paul was carrying.

“I have a delivery here for International Trade Corporation.

“From whom?”

Paul feigned ignorance.

“Beats me. Let me see... from Art in Printing Incorporated.”

“Oh, yeah, they called. They said there was a mix-up.

“Oh, yeah?” said Paul.

“Yeah. Any problem with that?”

“No. But what do you want me to do with the box?”

“Return it.”

“Are you going to pay for it?”

“I will not. They’ll pay you.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Oh, yeah?” Jesus. He was beginning to talk like the blonde.

“Yeah. Call them collect if you want.”

“Could I?”

“Sure. Go ahead.” said the man. Then he disappeared through another door.

Pretty Legs was in the office. She had the earplugs of a walkman on, which explained why it took her so long to answer the door earlier, and she was working at the computer. Her gorgeous legs were hidden under the desk.

“The man said I could use the phone?” he said.

The girl didn’t even raise her eyes from the computer screen.

Paul called Florida, and while he talked to Sharon he memorized everything he could think of. The offices were nicely furnished, and there was a glass wall overlooking down into the warehouse. It was a large place. High ceilings. There were at least twenty rows of cheap tables all the way to the back wall and each table had stacks of the printed matter Paul had send them.

“Yeah, ma’am? I got this box here at International Trade Corporation in Houston, Texas, and they tell me there was a mistake and to call you.” he said everything in a single breath, disguising his voice somewhat hoping that Sharon didn’t recognized him.

“Yes, indeed. We did send out the wrong box, so please send it back to us...” she said, and while she explained Paul kept on making his inspection of the building.

There were no skylights, and there were no other doors visible. It seemed that the only way to come into the warehouse was through that metal curtain. There was no activity anywhere inside the building, and Paul began to accept that his instincts, as always, were proving him right.

There was something fishy going on in paradise.

“Yeah,” he said in the phone.

BLOOD RELATIVES

The place was hard to break in. On the other hand, having just one difficult access into the building had made them careless; there was no alarm system anywhere to be seen, and no other forms of security.

“Yeah.” Paul said, even though Sharon had hung up her end since the first Yeah he uttered.

At that moment the big hairy guy came back into the office. He looked straight at Paul, like wandering what the hell are you still doing here. Paul decided he better move before the guy got suspicious.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll just charge you the full amount for this package, all right? Okay, now, you take care,” he said and hung up.

The big guy lifted the box of paper Paul had placed on the floor. He turned it around, inspecting it. When he was satisfied he gave it back to Paul.

“Everything okay?” he said.

“Yes, okay, thanks.” Paul answered.

Pretty Legs didn’t move, didn’t say a word, didn’t even breath harder, but somehow the air got very tense and Paul was made aware that there was some bad blood going on between those two.

The big guy walked him out of the warehouse, and Paul hurried back to his van.

He drove around for ten minutes and then went back and parked one block away.

At five-oh-five Pretty Legs came out of the warehouse, got into her car and drove away.

Paul left after her and got lucky: she stopped at a supermarket.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Following her legs, Paul got a pack of beer and a bag of tortilla chips before *accidentally* bumping into her by the ready-made frozen dinners.

“Sorry”, he said.

“Yeah” she said.

“Hey! I know you.” he said.

“Yeah?” she said, and for the first time looked straight at him. Paul had taken away his mirror glasses and his cap and she seemed to like what she saw.

“Yes, sure. You work over at the warehouse, right?”

“Yeah.

“Oh, great. What a small world, isn’t? This is great. I am new to Houston and I have no friends. I am Paul.” he said with his nicest smile.

“Hi.” she said. Bingo! She spoke more than one word! Paul felt relieved.

“Do you have a name?”

“I am Beth” she said in such a sultry voice that Paul felt it tickling his skin.

“That is a *very* nice name.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you a model?” he said.

“No. Why?” she answered with a pleased smile.

“I don’t remember seeing a more beautiful woman in the entire state of Texas. You should be a model. Or at least a Dallas cheerleader.” he tried the old line, trying to be *simpático*, but the surprise was his when she answered seriously.

“To tell you the truth I’ve *tried* for a cheerleader job, but there are so many gorgeous girls out there, it’s impossible.

“Really?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Yes. I mean, they are *dolls*. All of them.” she said.

Keep telling me mama, Paul thought.

She did. While they went up and down the aisles of the supermarket, she told him her long history of tryouts, hopes and deceptions with the Dallas Cowboys. By the time they reached the cashier Paul had her telephone number, her address, and a date to have dinner with her the following Friday, after work.

Friday she told him plenty.

It turns out Beth was a temporary secretary, who was replacing the regular one who was having her baby. The regular one was the wife of Ray, the big hairy guy. Beth had been in the job for less two weeks.

“But I’ll tell you, it already feels like two years.”

“Really? Why?”

“Ray.”

“What’s with Ray.”

“He cannot keep his hands to himself.

Who can blame him? thought Paul, but what he said was

“What a scumbag!”

“Yeah. I mean it’s disgusting. His wife is out having a baby, and all this guy wants is to grab my legs.”

“Have you reported him?”

“To whom? He is the boss, remember.”

“How about the authorities? There are laws against this kind of stuff, you know?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

"I know. If it gets worst I will, but for now I can handle him. And besides, I need the job.

"But what do you do, exactly? I saw today there doesn't seem to be a lot of work. I mean, its only the two of you, right?"

"Yeah. But Ray says that next Monday we'll be very busy because its delivery time.

"What is that?"

"Well, I am not sure. But Ray says that Monday there will be a bunch of guys helping us make the packages.

"Is that what you were doing today?"

"Oh, no. I was working on the database of the companies we send things to."

"Are there many?"

"No. Only about a hundredth companies, and all of them in México. So keeping the data base is easy. But Ray doesn't know the first thing about computers, you know." then she blinked. "But what about you?"

"What about me?"

"You don't talk like a delivery man, you know?"

"I am not." Paul answered, distracted, before realizing what was she asking.

"You are not?"

"What I mean is that I am starting my own delivery business, you see. I hire excess work from UPS, and Federal Express, and from all the big guys.

"Really. I didn't know you could do that."

Me neither, thought Paul.

"Enough of business. Do you like dancing?"

"I love to dance."

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Well, let’s go.

After dancing for awhile he took her home. She lived in a very luxurious apartment. Paul didn’t think she could afford it only with her work as a secretary, but didn’t say a word about it.

She invited him to come up and have a drink, but as soon as she closed the door she became serious.

“Look, Paul, I really like you and if you wish we can spend the entire weekend together. But either if we do, or we don’t, you have to promise me something.

“Sure.

“Promise me never to call me again.

“Really? Why?”

“It doesn’t concern you, but I am involved with another guy, and, you know, I just don’t want to have any emotional complications in my life. This weekend is the only time we could ever have. Know what I mean.?” She said. And she meant it.

Paul didn’t believe her fear of emotional complication. She seemed like the type of girl who *loved* to have emotional complications. Maybe the other guy was the one paying the rent. Nonetheless he agreed never to call her again after the weekend was over if she agreed to just one condition.

“Which is?”

“That you will let me see inside one of those boxes before it goes to México.

“What are you talking about? What boxes?”

“The boxes at the warehouse?”

“What is this?, she said. She looked carefully at him. “You are not a delivery man, are you?”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“No. The truth is that I am the son of the owner of the warehouse, and the business. Ray is just an employee.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.

“What’s your father’s name?”

“Octavio Terrazas. And my sister is Eugenia Terrazas, and she is married to Sebastian Sarabia.

She crossed her arms, mollified.

“Why don’t you just ask Ray?”

“Because I think he is involved in something crooked. But I need to have proof. That’s why I want to check the movement at the warehouse before I go to the police. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I do.

She seemed to think it over.

“What about me?”

“If you stay clear, nothing will happen to you.”

She thought fast.

“If Ray goes to jail, could you talk to you father? For me to get his job?”

“Certainly.”

She thought it over some more.

“Deal.

BLOOD RELATIVES

It wasn't until Thursday night that Paul received the call from Beth. She was certain that the following day the trucks from UPS were going to pick up the ninety- seven boxes they had packed.

"Have you been able to look into the boxes? Do you know what are they putting inside?"

"No way. Ray watches them like a hawk. The crew came at night, when I wasn't there. I never got to see anything or anyone. But those boxes are ready to go.

"Do you have keys for the warehouse?"

"Are you kidding? Anyway I thought of something.

"What?"

"Your best bet is to be nearby the warehouse tomorrow around noon. I think I can convince Ray to go get us a hamburger for lunch, you know? And at that time you can come in and take a look for yourself. I wouldn't know what to look for, anyway."

"Okay. What about UPS?"

"What about them?"

"At what time will they be arriving to pick up the boxes?"

"Oh, God. I have no idea.

"Well, just call them early in the morning and tell them to come after three.

"And Ray?"

"You tell Ray that UPS called *you*, to tell you they will be late.

"Hey, I like that.

Paul parked his van a block away from the warehouse five minutes before twelve. And two and a half hours later he finally saw Ray's car coming out of the warehouse.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Paul ran up to the building. Beth was already waiting for him and had the curtain up.

“Hurry! Go through that door.”

Paul did. The boxes were already sealed, so he had to search a moment for a knife. He used a screwdriver he found on the floor. He opened one of the boxes. It was full of printed material. There was enough space inside the box for him to run his hand through the paper and he did, making sure there was no empty spaces. There were none. But he was sure there had to be something else inside, so he emptied the entire contents on the floor quickly.

There was nothing but paper.

He checked the box. It was clean.

He ran his hand again through the paper, making sure it was the same printed material he'd sent.

It was.

He was about to give up, when something caught his eye. Later on he would think that If he hadn't been looking for something amiss, he wouldn't have caught it. A corner of a sheet of paper was folded like a dog ear. Out of habit he started to unfold the sheet, but then he thought about it and he separated all the sheets from than one on.

Finally, he found it.

Underneath of several sheets of paper were plain white envelopes glued with scotch tape. Paul opened one, aware that he was running out of time before Ray came back.

There was money inside.

Count the money, quick.!

Two thousand.

He really had to move fast. He repackaged the money, put the paper back in the box, sealed the box, and placed it at the bottom of a row of five.

BLOOD RELATIVES

He ran out of the warehouse just in time.

Ray's Miata turned the corner when Paul was reaching the other side of the street.

Back at his hotel, Paul worked all night long to try to make sense out of all of this.

He never expected to find money inside those boxes. In cash. In small bills. But he had and now he didn't need to be a genius to figure out it was dirty money, drug money, being shipped out of the country by UPS. Safe delivery to your door. Jesus.

It took him the rest of the night to figure the entire trick.

Don Octavio was buying drugs from local growers in the mountains of Chihuahua, and he was shipping them to organizations inside the United States of America. These organizations paid in cash. Those enormous amounts of small bills needed to be placed somewhere. To carry them back across the border into México was difficult and dangerous. Suitcases with those amounts of money were a big temptation to anyone.

This is where Paul came in.

His printed material was received in the warehouse and then distributed in those smaller boxes, each weighting less than 30 pounds. The money was then placed inside among the sheets of paper, in envelopes like the one Paul had opened.

If each envelope held the same amount he had counted on that one, each box carried around thirty thousand dollars each.

Thirty-thousand-times-ninety-seven boxes being shipped out made a grand total of... whatever. Almost three million dollars. Right there.

BLOOD RELATIVES

The boxes would be delivered individually to don Octavio's companies in México. If anyone at the border opened to check the boxes they would see only the legitimate part, which was the material Paul was printing. Unless they bothered to check sheet by sheet, they would never see the envelopes.

The people responsible for the companies in México would fish the money out of the boxes and they'd deposit the cash dollars into their bank accounts as part of their own daily transactions. Since there were relatively small amounts, nobody at the banks noticed. Then they would transfer the money from one company to another until it was totally clean, and by this time it would return to the United States via Eugenia and her grand shopping expeditions for real state. Minus the expenses of all this movements, don Octavio was recuperating probably between .60 to .70 cents per dollar. Totally clean. Wisely invested, they would double in ten years.

Beautiful.

According to the records kept in the data base Beth handled, in the last year Ray had shipped around a hundred boxes three times a month into México. That meant that don Octavio had cleared at least one hundred million dollars since.

And Paul was up to his neck in all of this.

25

The danger he was in was obvious, and the only way to get out of the trap he was in was to go to the police, but to do that he needed to arrive with something more than just words; he needed proof.

If he could find how the drugs Don Octavio was shipping got *into* the country, then the police could move against him and Paul would be out of the hook.

And there was only one way to find out. He had to do it entirely alone for several reasons; since he didn't know how high his father's connections reached in the government he couldn't risk being killed by a leak; and he didn't want to end up in a witness protection program, so he had to make sure the police acted on its own.

But how to do it?

Paul decided to start at his father's *Cortijo*. It was so close to the border, that Paul was sure it wasn't a coincidence.

He flew into Puerto Peñazco, rented a car, and checked himself into a medium size motel where he was able to park his car right by his room.

The following morning he drove out to Roca del Toro to inspect the access to the ranch.

BLOOD RELATIVES

He drove around as if he were just another tourist, and what he found out made him relax a little. From the road the place looked very easy to break into; it was so huge, that it had a thousand places where anyone could slip in unnoticed. The limits of the ranch were clearly marked by a tall stone wall which surrounded the entire compound. And the stone itself provided for excellent support, so he didn't even need a rope or any other kind of tools. He needed only a flashlight.

It was to be very easy, he thought.

With that in mind and whistling, he went to have lunch at the nearest beach. He ate at a rustic little restaurant which was on the ocean front. While he had a cold Corona beer, the owner's kids jumped into the waves and fished out his lunch. They used a small net which they handled it between the two of them with great dexterity and practice.

He ate, and had two or three more beers, and then watched the sunset from the beach. The sky turned violently red, and Paul recalled some of the stories his father had told him and the delightful way he behaved when he wanted. Then Paul remember also his charm, and his childish excitement when he was happy... If don Octavio had been only that man, Paul would have loved him dearly as a father. But he was not: don Octavio was also somebody else; somebody dangerous and mean and cruel.

It was a sad end for their short relationship.

Paul himself was saddened because long time ago he had learned to become a better man after meeting someone, anyone. He always tried to learn from their successes and from their failures so he could become just a little bit less ignorant, and improve himself wherever he could.

Having met don Octavio hadn't made him better. His own father had not given him even that small gift. On the contrary, Paul felt dirty and cheap and diminished for having met him.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Seating there on the old wooden chair facing the ocean, Paul realized that in his mind don Octavio had come to represent everything he despised. In a sense Don Octavio had become Evil itself.

Paul had always thought about evil as something in the abstract, as something not quite real that happened out there, to somebody else. Now every time he thought of Don Octavio he thought only of bad things and he realized that evil was so pervasive because it was so attractive and charming. Just like his father. Evil in the sense of the bad things that somebody committed on the innocent. In that sense don Octavio certainly fitted the description because Paul had seen him commit cruel acts against the innocent; over and over again. It was never accidental; with don Octavio the very act of doing it on purpose was like a dare for him, and he was always fully aware of the harm and the pain he was causing.

The bigger the awareness, the larger the evil committed.

But not like a sick psycho, one of those demented animals that went around destroying people. They didn't qualify as evil; they were just sick dregs of humanity. They didn't *know* what they were doing.

Don Octavio was something else. Whenever he set out to cause pain, he would do it with a tremendous amount of awareness. In fact he seemed almost sorrowful. But he did it nonetheless.

He always had the possibility of doing good, and he'd always choose to do wrong. The biggest difference between don Octavio and a crazed multikiller was that the multikiller was a sick animal unable to belong to society at large. Don Octavio, on the contrary, was a product of his society and he excelled at being a dominant part of that society.

"Yeah, - thought Paul more and more enraged.- He is an evil man. And I need to stop him."

BLOOD RELATIVES

Feeling good about himself and pretty much like a soldier going off to fight for a good cause, Paul drove out to his father's ranch.

He didn't bother hiding the car. He just parked it by the wall, climbed on it to reach the top part of the wall, pulled himself up and then jumped down onto the grass.

Piece of cake.

He didn't even need to take out his flashlight; the moon was so bright that he was able to see clearly his way. He moved fast, trying not to make too much noise.

When he approached the main building of the *cortijo*, he decided that his best bet would be on the other side of the building, towards the airstrip. He remembered that at the end of the runway, there were some buildings almost totally concealed by trees. There was nothing special about those buildings; they looked pretty much abandoned and in need of being taken care. The image he had in his mind was that of a ruined roof. If he remembered them was precisely because they were so unattractive. Although at the time it didn't register in his consciousness, those buildings were a direct discrepancy to everything else his father owned. So, he reasoned, if everything don Octavio owns is so well taken care of, almost to the point of obsession, why was that building treated with so much indifference?

Unless his father wanted everybody to think he didn't care for those buildings. Exactly the contrary to the truth, if Paul was right.

It took him almost ten minutes to reach the airstrip, and another five to walk all the way to the end.

He hadn't seen or heard anything but the wind and crickets and his own footsteps, but as he approached the building he began to hear voices, laughter, and he saw lights and smelled smoke.

Somebody was cooking.

Walking ever so much more carefully, he moved to the first building. It had been constructed with raw wooden planks, and he was able to see inside by an open window.

BLOOD RELATIVES

It was dark, and it seemed empty.

The voices and the laughter grew louder as he approached the second building. It was surrounded on three of its walls by packs of hay for the horses and the cows and other animals they kept at the ranch.

Paul climbed the grass and, finding a hole where the roof met the wall, he took a look inside.

There were about a dozen men spread around. One was cooking on a small electric hot-plate, four were playing cards on a table, and the rest were working on a plane which was being dismantled at the center of the hangar.

Paul watched more closely. They were *not* dismantling the plane. They were putting it together. And it wasn't a plane; it was a glider. They were building a glider out of wood and cloth. It was a large glider; about twice the size of the gliders Paul had seen before. And judging by the speed with which they the men were building it, they obviously had tremendous amount of experience.

Then Paul started to understand what was going on..

The men playing at the table were all armed; therefore they were *guarding* the guys building the glider. The cook could be either side. Of course, knowing this didn't mean anything; they were still the enemy. But Paul felt somehow better about having to outsmart only four armed guys, and not twelve.

He watched while the mechanics put together their giant puzzle. It seemed like everything had been made someplace else, and then brought here just to be assembled. This meant that the mechanics basically had to put pieces together, bolt nuts into place, glue and nail cloth already cut and fitted.

Three hours later the seven mechanics were giving the finishing touches to the glider. The only part that Paul didn't wait to see was the painting; when they started to apply black paint with a compressor, due to the infernal noise it made, Paul thought it was a good moment to move out of there.

BLOOD RELATIVES

He was wrong.

26

Paul had just jumped out of the hay, when one of the guards opened up a door. The guard had his hand inside his zipper, and he was reaching for his penis to take a leak, when Paul landed barely three feet away from him.

“*Hijo de la chingada!*” the guard screamed, and pissed off in his pants.

Paul ran as fast as he could toward the first building, while the guard ran back inside to get his gun and the rest of the guards.

But midway Paul stopped in his tracks and decided he was playing it wrong. After all, he was the *son* of don Octavio. And many people had seen him with the old man a few weeks before. So Paul turned back and walked very calmly *towards* the hangar.

When he reached the door the guards were about to burst out of there with their AK rifles and their .45’s in their hands.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Paul shouted. “Is this the way you watch over my father’s ranch? Playing cards and getting drunk” he said with so much authority as he could muster.

Three of the guards pointed their guns at him, but Paul dismissed them with a cold stare.

“*Y tú quién eres, cabrón?*” said one of them, wanting to know who he was.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“*Soy el hijo de don Octavio, pendejo*” said Paul with the same insolence he had seen his father use.

“*Ahh, sí es cierto. Ya me acordé.*” said one of them. “He came with don Octavio to his last birthday party. He came in the plane.” he smiled and lowered his gun.

Good, thought Paul. One less.

“Are you sure?” said another one.

“Of course. I remember because he came to the stables when the horse died.”

“*Exácto.* When my father was...upset.” Paul said.

The other men looked at each other, doubting. Paul saw their indecision and pressed them further.

“Put down your guns, immediately!” he ordered. The men obeyed him.

“Who’s in charge here?”

“I am.” Said one of them. He wasn’t very convinced, so Paul decided to concentrate on him.

“What is your name?”

“*Soy el Comandante Ramírez.*”

“So why were you doing playing cards, *Comandante?* Waiting for the police to come and get you all?” said Paul and walked into the hangar. The guards followed him.

“Nooo, *patrón. Qué pasó.* We were just waiting for those *cabrones* to finish, you know? So we can take them back to the airport.”

“Why didn’t you leave somebody outside?”

The man didn’t answer.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“I am asking you a question. Why didn’t you leave somebody outside to watch while you were inside here?” Paul shouted to his face. The Comandante’s skin turned red and blue, but still he didn’t answer. He just lowered his eyes.

The rest of the guards spread out through the hangar and one actually went outside to watch.

Paul walked over the glider. It was finished. The paint was still slightly wet, and that’s why it shone a little, but the paint was mate. When it dried, the glider would melt easily into the sky. And because of its size and the materials it was built with, it would be undetectable to any radar.

Paul looked at the mechanics. They all hide away their eyes, and nobody turned to look at him. Paul decided he should still be mad, so he looked closely at the glider, trying to find something to complain about. He found it in a small piece of cloth which had become unglued when they’d applied the paint.

“What is that?” he started to ask, when one of the mechanics rushed up to fix the cloth.

“What are you trying to do? Get the pilot killed?” Paul said, and immediately regretted because he saw the looks the mechanics exchanged with the guards. They didn’t say a word, but Paul realized he had made a mistake. But where? When he mentioned the pilot? Was that it?

“You!” he said, pointing his finger at the *Comandante* Ramírez.

“Yo?”

“Yeah, come over here.”

The *Comandante* moved towards Paul cautiously.

“My father didn’t have time to explain every little detail of how this operation works. He said you would tell me. So tell me.”

“Your father hasn’t order me to do it.” the *Comandante* said.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“He is not, but I am ordering you. Do you want to go against me?” Paul said looking down on the man. The *Comandante* shook his head silently.

“So tell me.”

“It is a glider”

“I can see that. Who’s the pilot?”

“That is the point. It doesn’t have a pilot.”

“How do you control it?”

“Radio. “

“Range?”

“Between 100, 150 kilometers. Sometimes more. Depends on the wind, of course.”

“Weight capacity?”

“About a ton. Almost.”

“A ton of kilos?”

“What else?” said the man, and smiled for the first time.

A ton of kilos meant almost two thousand pounds. That was a lot of pounds of white dust.

“Where is the cargo?”

“Didn’t your father tell you?” asked the man. He was becoming more and more suspicious, but Paul disregarded this as irrelevant. What were they going to do? Over their heads floated the threat of don Octavio.

“No, he didn’t. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No. It’s just that he is the only one who knows when the cargo comes.”

“So? .”

“Yeah. Ask the other guys if you don’t believe me.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

Paul filled in the blanks easily. After the glider was set loose by the airplane pulling it, it would be very easy to control its descent. A 100 to 150 kilometers was a long stretch by any standard. That's how they got the drugs across the border. Undetectable, perfectly silent and safe. Then, once on the ground, the glider could be dismantled in fifteen minutes. And the cargo and the glider would disappear without a trace.

Very efficient.

Paul needed to make time while he thought how to get how of there. Then he remembered the role he was playing; he was supposed to be making an inspection of the place. So he did.

Paul walked around the hangar, criticizing everything that was out of place, dirty or broken. The *Comandante* followed him like a dog, until another man came running into the hangar. When he saw Paul he stopped away from him, and immediately Paul knew he was in trouble.

The man who had just come in motioned for the *Comandante* to approach. Paul kept on walking, feigning ignorance and innocence. They spoke in murmurs, and Paul felt their eyes in his back.

Then he felt a gun.

“Guess what?”

“What?”

“Your father says he doesn't have any sons”, said the *Comandante*, and started to work on Paul.

27

“I don’t know you anymore.”, she said, and those were the first sounds Paul heard after regaining consciousness.

He thought she was talking to him, and tried to answer, but the gag in his mouth prevented him from making any sound. And the ropes which tied his hands and his feet together on his back stopped him from moving. He was lying on his side, and his arms tingled. His legs were numbed, and he was barely able to breath due to the blood running out of his broken nose. The *Comandante* sure had had fun beating him.

Paul didn’t remember feeling much pain while the beating was going on; it was only now that he was beginning to hurt. A lot. All over.

“I really don’t know who you are.”said the voice, and Paul concentrated in focusing his eyes.

Eugenia was confronting her father in the large saloon. In semidarkness, the huge room seemed even more imposing; every adjective became superlative: larger, loftier, emptier, richer, darker... even the sounds became louder and deeper, like in a stage, with a special resonance.

Paul was watching them from behind the fireplace. After the beating the guards had tied him there, trying to cover their asses in case don Octavio did changed his mind and recognized him as his son. He had fallen asleep and now the voices had awaken him.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“Sure you do. I am you, and you are me. We are one and the same, child.” don Octavio said. He didn’t seem different from the day before, or the day Paul had met him. He didn’t seem to be affected by his daughter’s pain, which was obvious in Eugenia’s eyes and face and entire body. She was hunched, and her face was pale, and her hair was out of place. But not don Octavio. He had not been bothered by Sebastian’s death, and he didn’t care about the way his guards had beaten Paul.

“You are me, my darling. Don’t you forget it”

“No. Not anymore.” she said.

“What did you say?”

“I said no more” Eugenia said and her eyes, puffy and reddened, seemed to have a tremendous emptiness, as if her purpose and direction in life had been taken away.

Don Octavio looked severely at his daughter.

“No more? You are wrong. There will be more. This was just an unfortunate incident. You shouldn’t let it affect you.

“Unfortunate incident you say? Having Sebastian killed wasn’t and unfortunate incident. It was murder. Cold blooded murder.

“He wouldn’t listen to reason. He would have destroyed us all. You know I tried to talk to him. But he wouldn’t listen.”

“So you took his life.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Yes, it was you.”

“No. It was a decision taken by all of the people who would have been ruined by him. He was a traitor.

“No, he wasn’t. He was a man trying to do his duty.

“His duty was with us! He had to respect and honor his friends. We placed him where he was, and he was planning on turning against us. That is treachery.”

BLOOD RELATIVES

“He would have allowed you to clean your businesses. He would have given you time to straighten everything. He told you so.”

“And then what? Go on living thanks to his mercy?”

“What more could you possibly want? You have more money and more power you could ever dispose off. Not even throwing it away you could lose it all. I’ve help you to guarantee that your wealth is secure, that nothing could truly harm you. We are beyond the reach of anyone. And you know it. Sebastian wasn’t a threat to you.

“Have you learned nothing from me? After all these years?”

“Tell me again”

“Power and wealth are as fragile as a rose. One day you have it, and the next is gone. The only way to preserve it is taking care of it. You need to keep fighting for it.

“Against anyone? Even your own family?”

“Yes! Anyone that might be a danger to your interests must be dealt with. Even your own family. Don’t you understand? The only way to survive is to remember that self-preservation is the most important thing you have. Without it, you are *no one*. Without it, you are nothing more than one of those Indians, begging for coins in the street. They don’t understand the importance of self-preservation. But you and I do.

“So, if someone acts against my own interests, I have to respond?”

“Yes! That’s my girl! Exactly. If someone acts against you, in any way, be it small or large, you have to stop him immediately. That is the only way you have to insure your well being.”

Paul saw Eugenia walking away from the bar. She went over the place where she had placed her handbag. Slowly, she picked it up.

“Are you going to bed?” don Octavio said, satisfied with himself.

“No” said Eugenia, as she pulled out a handgun, which calmly she pointed at don Octavio.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“What is this?”he said, suddenly ashen.

“You just said it. Anyone that might be a danger to you must be dealt with. Immediately.

Don Octavio dropped his glass, which just bounced off the carpet.

“I was protecting you!

“Oh, no. You were protecting yourself. Remember? Self-preservation?

“I am your father!”, don Octavio said, trying to hide behind the bar.

“So? That didn’t stopped you from seducing me when I was nineteen.

“That’s because I love you. You are the only one I have ever loved. Ever!

“As long as I was willing to play your game. But no more.

“You didn’t love Sebastian! You told me so yourself!”shouted don Octavio, kneeling and watching her out from behind the bar. Paul saw him picking up a bottle. He was acting. He was exaggerating his fear to make her overconfident. Paul tried to pry lose the gag in his mouth.

“It’s true. I didn’t love him. At first. Because I was sick and I thought love was what you had taught me it was. But that changed and I learned to love him when he showed me that life without a purpose is an empty life. He showed me the true meaning of love. And guess what? Love is exactly the opposite of what you taught me.”said Eugenia, while she walked around the bar looking for don Octavio. She was holding the gun with both hands, and she walked forward carefully.

Paul tried to warn her about the ambush don Octavio was preparing. His guttural noises succeeded in calling her attention to him. She stepped back in time to make the attack miss. The bottle passed by an inch or two from her head.

BLOOD RELATIVES

She shot.

The noise was deafening.

Don Octavio came out from behind the bar on his hands and knees and tried to make it to the massive wood door. He looked like a giant insect scurrying about for cover.

Eugenia kicked him and turned him on his back.

“Get up!”she said.

“Don’t kill me! Please, don’t kill me!”he said, pleading, and at the same time tried to grab the gun away from her.

She shot him. Four times.

And then there was silence. A deep, early, solid silence.

Paul saw Eugenia standing over don Octavio’s body. She watched him during long minutes, immovable, and kept on pointing the gun at him as if expecting him to get up and attack her again. When she was certain he wasn’t moving anymore, she dropped the gun and let herself fall on the couch.

She placed her head on her knees and seemed to be crying.

Paul tried again to loosen the rope, and the noise he made forced her sit up and pick up the gun.

She walked over behind the fireplace, and pointed her gun at Paul.

“You saw everything?”

He didn’t answered.

For a moment it seemed that she was going to shoot him to, but then she lowered her gun.

“Well, I’m glad. Somebody needs to tell the truth.”

Eugenia walked over the wall, took one of the knives, and came back to cut the rope.

“Get out of here”she said.

BLOOD RELATIVES

“And you...?”

“I need to stay here. I need to take care of everything.”

Paul embraced her. Eugenia was rigid as a board, but she seemed to soften a little after a few seconds.

“I love you, Eugenia.”

“I know. And I love you too, Paul. You will always be my little brother.

“Always.”he repeated.

“Here, take this”she said, placing the handgun in his hand.

“And you?”

“I don’t need it anymore”

Paul looked into her eyes, and saw nothing but emptiness. There was a big dark space behind her eyes, as if every thought, emotion, and feeling had being emptied out and couldn’t be replaced. There was something in there, but Paul couldn’t quite understand what it was.

“GO!”she screamed.

Paul walked away. On his way out of the *Cortijo* he disarmed a guard. From the distance, once in the desert, he saw the *Cortijo* go up in flames.

Then he understood what he had seen in Eugenia’s eyes.

Epilogue

When Paul finished with his story there was a long period during which neither felt like moving.

She didn't know what to say. What do you say to a man who had lived through something like that? That you are sorry? That things would get better?

Because they wouldn't. That's something she knew for sure. She knew that the wound of the flesh heal fast and they are fast forgotten. But the wounds of the soul never do. She knew that the scars produced by emotional pain never, ever, heal. They are always open, ready to fester at the slightest provocation.

She knew this because she had been damaged for too many years by John's suicide.

She still could not understand John's death, and after so many years it still hurt almost as much as the first day. How could it be? Why would a wonderful man, full of love and energy, plenty of smarts and strength, handsome and successful, decided one good day to end his life? For no purpose at all, for no reason that she, or anyone close to him could understand?

Why?

Oh, yes. The note he had left. A stupid little piece of paper in which he asks for forgiveness and then puts a bullet through his mouth.

BLOOD RELATIVES

Why?

She knew now that she could not answer her question, and she might be asking this to God everyday till the day she died and maybe even after and still would not get an answer.

It was one of those things that happen.

Just like what had happened to Paul.

For no reason at all.

Accepting this fact made her realize, truly for the first time, that she wasn't alone in this world. That there were other people like her, damaged emotional survivors of a world that didn't answer any questions.

That might be the reason she had felt attracted to Paul from the moment she had laid her eyes on him. Because her wounded soul had recognized his.

Maybe, just maybe, there was an answer to her silent prayers. It came not in the way she expected it, but in a totally different form.

She reached into her belt for her keys, and without a word she set Paul free.

THE END

BLOOD RELATIVES