

To Tommy, my constant inspiration!

A LESSON LEARNED

By E. King and Langdon Hues

1983, Honduras

“Do you think we’re prepared for everything?”

The question, uttered friend to friend in a rattly single-engine seaplane, was about the only thing that could cover every possibility of what they were about to do.

The pilot of the plane is the one who asked. His name is Eke – pronounced like his initials – E.K. Who knows how he got the name. Eke didn't. He just talked shit about it, made up stories to compensate for the odd name. "My parents drank heavily when they named me that," he told people. His parents, though, didn't drink. Eke did. Or at least he used to. But that's a long story and part of it has to do with him being here flying with his childhood friend, Bill, over the Patuca River next to the Sierra de Agatta mountain range deep in the Central American country of Honduras.

Honduras. It wasn't like their homeland, back in Massachusetts. It wasn't Massachusetts, sweet home Massachusetts. No. This was different, very different. This was actually Honduras. Look. There it is. They looked. Yes, Honduras.

They'd dreamt of it for years. And now they were flying.

Bill smiled at Eke and answered the question the best way he could: "There's only one way to find out." And then he pointed down.

“There it is. That’s the bend way up there in the river. Take her down.”

“Here we go,” said Eke, as he tilted the nose down towards the river. “Looking for adventure.”

“That’s right, brother,” said Bill. “Looking for adventure. Whatever comes our way.”

“Amen to that.”

And the plane lowered towards the river. As it did, Bill, the bigger of the two, looked at the mountain next to the river that was to become their new patch of land. Paradise is a journey. That’s the thought. That and more. This was going to be an adventure. For the first time in their lives this was going to be a true adventure. Not a rock concert, not a fishing trip. They were looking for life or death. They wanted to really experience life. Yeah, something like that.

Dreams are funny things, how they can gnaw at you. For Eke it was like that his whole life. This idea of adventure had pulled at him. Barely 120 pounds soaking wet, he wasn’t the biggest guy in the world. But he had big dreams. Yeah, dreams that in the past had somehow been derailed. Somehow? Well, sometimes he drank his dreams away. And sometimes he was unlucky. And sometimes both.

But now? Now, he was flying into the junction of land where tropical forests, mountains, and pine-laced savannahs meet.

Honduras.

What the hell? That's how dreams are, though. This one was the biggest one of all.

Bill was almost a foot taller with the blue eyes of a Swede.

Reminiscent of a young Nick Nolte, his long blond hair was feathered back wildly like a lion's mane. He was loud and boisterous, social and strong-minded and always willing to share an opinion.

They were an odd pair, the two of them. One was tall and loud. The other was short and quieter. The tall one still watched cancerous amounts of cartoons. The shorter one was a dreamer in a different way. He wrote. Yes, Eke was a romantic dreamer, while Bill's head was grounded in the realities of every day life.

Yet they hit it off right away. They'd met way back when they were 14 years old – that impressionable age when the roots of youth compete with the wings of growing up – and they found common ground in their quest for entertainment. They rode bikes together, played baseball, went fishing, and then when they were older they partied a lot together, but their friendship wasn't just about

entertainment. They were kindred spirits – always seeming to want, somehow, something that they couldn't get.

And now: Honduras.

They got what they wanted this time but they, especially Eke who was more reserved and introspective, wondered if the old adage of “Be careful what you wish for” was true.

With the flaps lowered and the throttle maintained, the plane glided down with the nose tilted up. Eke had flown before, but not under these circumstances. His palms were sweaty. The plane sunk into the river's natural tree corridor and then past a set of rapids while Eke played with the rudder pedals to adjust his lateral axis and center the craft. Just past the rapids, 50 feet from the water, he disengaged the clutch and the engine purred idly as the plane lowered to the water and sent a huge splash up each side as it slowed and then finally settled in the toiling river.

Honduras. This really was Honduras.

They each opened the side doors to the plane and climbed out on the side floats. “That's one small step for man,” said Eke, smiling.

“And one giant leap for us.” Bill smiled back. “We did it. Can you believe it, man? We did it. Check it out.”

Eke, in a sense, couldn't believe it. He scoped out the scenery. Lush. Different than back home, that's for sure. And that, Eke knew, was the whole idea. Different than back home. Honduras. Yes, pretty much different.

Just then, the water broke. A fish jumped.

It smelled different too. Rich. That's what Eke smelled. Earth. Rainforest. Lush.

Really rich, as Eke quickly learned. A mosquito landed on him. He flexed his muscle to try to get the bug caught helplessly in his arm, but all he really did was attract more mosquitoes. They were having a party and he was their keg. Welcome to the tropics. Great.

He swatted his friends away and then climbed back in and guided the plane towards shore. Then he cut the engine. It glided while Eke reached into a compartment in the back of the plane for a chainsaw. He then sprayed himself with mosquito repellent and lit a cigar. Bill, meanwhile, hopped onto the float and began using a pole to push the plane the final feet to shore.

Eke made the small jump to land, then started the chainsaw. As he did, he thought to himself, "Let the revolution begin." What a funny

thought. He laughed at himself. And then he began attacking the brush with the blade. Vrrrooom.

Soon, sweat poured down his body. This was a new kind of humidity. Thick. Whew. He looked around and everything was so...so green. Vrrrooom.

After a few minutes, he stopped and wiped his brow. Bill came over. "Hey, give me a hit of that cigar," he said. "Shit, I didn't know you brought cigars."

Eke handed him the blunt. "This stuff's thick, man," he said, pointing to the brush. "I don't know how we're going to get all the way up the hill to the clearing."

Ah, the clearing. The magic clearing at the top of the hill was the place of their destiny. A hillside cabin in the rainforest was to be the dream project.

But just getting there would be a bitch.

"Don't worry about it," said Bill. He smiled. He knew that was the phrase that Eke had grown up worrying about the most. Eke's mother had always believed that when someone said 'Don't worry about it', it was time for concern.

Eke smiled.

Back then, there was nothing really to worry about. But she worried. Led Zeppelin. She worried about Led Zeppelin. Why? Only because the two boys secluded themselves away for a playing of all nine albums – a Zeppelinathon of epic proportions. And she was worried that the boys were in there doing drugs or something. She had nothing to worry about. The boys were in there eating mass quantities of magic mushrooms that make your stomach quiver and your mind float effortlessly but that wasn't anything to worry about. Was it? All these years later, Eke wondered.

The jungle lay in front of him. Jimmy Page's magic guitar sang and then roared in his internal memory while he started up the chainsaw. He pretended, for just a moment, that it was an instrument, playing with the engine speed. Back in the day, he thought as he started carving at the trees, woods meant partying. They would go and party in the woods. What times they had. What times. Vrrrooom.

Now, they weren't talking about dreams and this wasn't a party. They were trying to carve out a campsite and a path up to the eventual site of their hilltop cabin – which they had to build from the forest around them.

Back in the day when Robert Plant was spinning a yarn about a stairway to a couple of young men on mushrooms, the stairway seemed like it could have been, well, right here in the heaven that is Honduras. Heaven? This jungle? Back then, who knew? It's how dreams happen – unreal visions. And John Paul Jones' driving bass backed by John Bonham's manic drumming all added up to something bigger than four men with instruments and microphones. The sum was greater than the parts. That's how it was and, listening to them, that's how it felt to Eke and Bill. Together, they could do great things. Vrrrooom.

Eke continued to clear and sweat and think all this through. They'd been running together since they were 14. Even during the decade that Bill was married and Eke was drinking, they still managed to get out fishing, hunting, partying and talking crazy dreams. And, as happens, eventually crazy Bill got divorced and the old friendship resumed, just like in the old days. Except by then, of course, Eke had to quit drinking.

That's when his dreaming became bigger. Instead of drinking, he'd write, and write, and write whatever came into his mind. Then one day he had this idea about evolution, past, present, and possible

future- he then wrote what came into his head. Though it was self-published, it was picked up one day by someone visiting his hometown bookstore (the owner was a friend and agreed to put five books on the shelf) who happened to write a science column for an academic magazine. The columnist hailed the book as written by a non-academic with an interesting academic idea. And though his fame didn't go much beyond the world of evolution fanatics, it made him enough money to finance this dream move to Honduras.

Evolution. Vrrrooom.

He and Bill remained friends and continued to talk about adventure. It had always been a common theme for them. When they were both in high school they were going to volunteer for the Marines but just then the Vietnam War ended. Unlike many of their generation, they wanted to go to war. But when the war ended the chance disappeared - the chance for real adventure seemed to have vanished forever. But now they were in Honduras.



The Rolling Stones once sang, “*You can’t always get what you want*” and maybe you can’t.

But what if you could?

The two sweaty friends were exhausted from yard work – because that’s what they called clearing the rainforest – so they rested up in the L-shaped clearing, a pasture, at the top of the hill where they planned to build their cabin. It was already open land because of its height, angle and a confluence of rocks. Perfect. Getting the way carved up here was the challenge, but still – now look. From up high they stared down at the moving river and at their plane resting against the shore, and then out at the green, green rainforest. You can’t always get what you want, but what if you could? Would you?

Eke and Bill came to Honduras to find out. Birds were singing, and these weren't robins. Amazing. For just a moment they had a chance to look and reflect. Of course, Bill didn't have much reflection in him so he just started singing cartoon songs – "We're going on a ship; we're going on a ship". Ah yes. It was a classic cartoon with both characters in the end, stranded on an island – each eyeing the other as food. The skinny one became a hallucinogenic hot dog while the chubby one morphed through the other's hunger into a hamburger.

Bill and Eke both had seen that cartoon a bunch of times. Back in the day, that was what they did, a Saturday morning ritual – they called it "Drugs with Bugs". Bugs Bunny and others provided a lot of entertainment for these two – back in the day.

The sun was beginning its slow descent. It was afternoon. Animals chattered. All of it was a feast for the senses. Civilization, and Massachusetts were very, very far away. The buzz, Eke realized, was intense. Yet he drank no alcohol; took no drugs. It just was.

And it was a good thing he took nothing at all. There was still a lot of work to do. A lot. They had already cleared a swath of land down by the river and a path up to a bigger swath of land a little ways up

the hill. That was where they planned to set up camp. So now they stood and gazed out at the grand view one more time, and then headed back down the hill to the plane. They needed to unload and set up camp. They needed to get back to the basic concept of doing whatever it takes to survive. They came here to challenge themselves.

Back at the plane, Bill pulled out a rifle. "Wonder what kinda eats are around here?" he said. Then he smiled at Eke. "This sure is a different kinda grocery story, eh?"

Eke smiled back at his friend. "At least checkout should be easy."

"Still, I get the feeling the meat might not volunteer to be cooked the way it does at Stop N Shop."

A bird flew overhead.

"See," said Bill.

"You expect it to just land here for you to shoot it?"

"Yes, Eke, I do."

Eke grinned. "I know you do, Bill. Now put the gun down and let's do some work. You know we brought hamburger in the cooler for tonight. There'll be plenty of time for shooting later." In fact, Eke had

never really wanted to hunt, never wanted to test himself against a defenseless animal.

“Just one shot,” said Bill.

“Grab the sled.” Eke could only take so much of Bill’s mischief.

Bill grabbed the sled. They brought along a toboggan to pull their gear uphill. Bill reached in and dragged it out of the top of the plane’s compartment. It was stacked upon everything else, which they would soon begin to stack on the toboggan so they could pull it towards the campsite.

First they packed the sled with their hiking packs filled with clothes, tents and the cooler with the hamburger in it. Although they were only here on this first trip for a couple of weeks before they planned to fly back for more supplies, they didn’t bring anything else except dry food, like pasta, plus some canned food – Spam – and also some energy bars. They both expected to be using their rifles soon. And their fishing poles. Spam, after all, is Spam.

Once the sled was loaded they both realized at the same moment the one bit of preparation they had skipped entirely – physical training. Though they were both carpenters and spent plenty of time

doing actual physical work; that was different than being in shape and especially being in shape to pull a toboggan up a rocky slope.

“This is going to be heavy,” said Eke.

“Hard work won’t kill you,” Bill spoke.

“Yeah, but why risk it?” Eke replied. Of course, he knew the answer for now- because he had to. There was no one else but the two of them. They came here to challenge themselves. And so they each grabbed a rope attached to the front eyehooks on the sled and nodded at each other.

“Ready?” asked Bill.

“Yeah.”

Bill continued as count man. “One, two three,” and then they budged the barge into movement. Getting started is often the hardest action of all. As the initial burst faded they both instinctively went towards the grassy edge on the right, up the steep and slippery rock towards the middle and all the land they cleared.

Up they pulled. Eke felt his muscles strain, especially in his legs. The rope dug into his shoulder. Up. Sweat rolled down his cheek. Up. The sled scraped against the rocks, making a grinding sound. His body already hurt. Up.

Back in Massachusetts – back home – doing mindless work was good for the mind, Eke decided. A long time ago he figured that out. It was during the mindless manual labor that thoughts appeared. Out of nowhere, thoughts that turned into words and thoughts that turned into dreams and thoughts that turned into...Honduras.

Up.

They wanted adventure. They wanted to believe in something all the way, the way people did in the old days. What they wanted was romantically fuzzy- but right now they wanted to get the sled up the hill.

And finally at the site, they stopped, settled the sled in a spot where it wouldn't slide and let go.

"I bet there are oxen on the other side of the hill laughing their asses off right now," said Eke, stretching.

"Do ya think?"

Eke wanted to just stretch his body out on the clearing. But Bill is hyper-competitive and this friendship has, in many ways, been based on competition and the desire to one up the other. *Rest? Pussy! I'll take another load myself.* Eke could hear Bill in his head. He stretched one more time and then started at the sled.

Of course, Bill was just as tired and was actually hoping Eke would suggest a rest but since he didn't, Bill knew he couldn't. It was these dumb circles that sometimes got them in trouble and sometimes got a lot accomplished. They unloaded the sled in 15 minutes and had both tents set up in another 15. Neither one would stop first.

But after another sled load, the natural five-minute rest turned into sitting, cooking fat sizzling burgers over propane and listening to the animals and watching the sun settle over the green of the jungle.

They'd been dreaming of this since they were teenagers. The smell of meat cooking on the grill made Eke's mouth water. He was tired.

III

Bill asked Eke if he wanted to set a tarp up over his tent, but Eke was feeling lazy and besides, he said, he wouldn't need it tonight. It wasn't going to rain. So Bill set up two tarps, one for his tent and one for their supply tent. Eke's tent, the third tent, was tarpless. It wasn't going to rain.

When the rain started, Eke was in a deep sore-muscle sleep and didn't notice the sound. But when the water started falling on his face, he noticed. He rolled over and hoped it would stop. It didn't stop. It just got wetter faster.

Tarp.

He thought about why he is such an idiot. He was so tired. How much effort would have it taken to be smart and put a tarp over his

tent? How much? Less than it would take to deal with this. Shit. He could hear Bill snoring.

Eke grabbed a flashlight just inside the door of his tent and turned it on, waiting for his vision to return to normal. He could hear Bill, in his mind, telling him to put a tarp over his head. He could hear his father too, telling him, "No tent is totally waterproof. You still need a tarp." Shit. Eke hated being wrong- he was wrong so often it just started feeling right.

The water was coming into the tent faster now. Middle of the night. Eke needed sleep in the worst way and he couldn't even get the worst sleep in this tent. Drip, drip.

What to do?

The plane! He would go sleep in the plane. Bad things happen to people all the time. The results all depended on how you approached the situation. This was no poor-me situation. Well, maybe it was. But so what? He took action. Walking downhill to the plane made him totally soaked. Drenched. He reached in his pocket and found the key. Unlocking the plane he climbed inside and looked around with the flashlight. Finding what he was looking for, a blanket that they used to wrap the rifles and fishing poles, Eke stripped to nothing. He

wondered while laughing at himself, who could possibly be watching, before finally falling into a slumber.

And as he drifted down into a nether world, it all swirled inside him – the heat, the work, the scenery, and the dream. He was so tired it felt like his skeleton was falling through his skin and as he began the rhythmic breathing his mind flew to a place where he met every challenge. He saw armies against him and he kept battling and winning. He slept and slept.

By the time he awoke with the near-equatorial sun shooting through the windshield of the plane, Eke had dreamt some exciting dreams but he couldn't recall details. Just being challenged and meeting the challenge. He opened the door to the plane and saw the path and the clearing that they had opened yesterday. And he saw Bill up by the campsite with a fire going.

As Eke walked up the path with the blanket wrapped around his naked body, carrying his wet clothes, Bill smiled.

“Not a word,” said Eke. He knew. And he knew that Bill knew he knew. Stupid, sometimes, is obvious.

Bill was kind, for now. “Coffee's ready.”

“Thanks,” said Eke. He grabbed a cup, went to the supply tent and dug out some clothes. He sipped the coffee. Caffeine was his last drug of choice, and it was wonderful. He felt it hit his taste buds, his stomach, and then his heart rate. He downed the cup and went back for more. “Good coffee,” he said, looking out at the forest. “I needed it.”

“So, you’d get wet?” asked Bill. Of course, he couldn’t resist. “Should have used a tarp.”

“I’m going to have more coffee,” said Eke. Complimenting Bill’s coffee seemed his best defense right now. He was just too tired to deal with the competitive shit right now.

Not Bill. “So where’d you sleep? Under a tree?”

“In the plane.”

“Oh, of course. Of course.”

Eke smiled. What could he say? He slept in the plane because he didn’t put a tarp over his tent as Bill suggested. He poured himself another cup.

As the second cup took hold, it came back to him again. The dream. The cabin. That and more. What funny thoughts the first rush

of caffeine gives. He stood and looked at all the greenery left to clear.

“Well, Bill, what do you say?”

“I say I’m cooking up some fried Spam,” said Bill.

And at that, the oddest phrase in the world made Eke’s mouth water. Fried Spam. It had only been a day since they’d left civilization, but the hung over feeling he had from all the work and wet was enough to make the sound of anything frying like heaven. Mmm – fried Spam!

By the time they finished eating, the sun was burning and Eke, dream refueled, was ready for the day. The plan was to cut a path up from the river to the L-shaped pasture where they would build the cabin, and then another “driveway” down from the pasture to the lone road that went by here a quarter mile away. Cutting all that timber should be enough to actually build a cabin. That was the plan.

He picked up the chainsaw but Bill reminded him that he had to siphon gas again from the plane.

“I’m so glad siphons have bellows,” said Eke. I hated sucking gas up with your mouth.” He thought about all times of getting a mouthful of gas back when they were kids and even a few years ago – stupidly needing to get gas from a car to a ... whatever. He did it a lot of

times. Never seemed to carry a gas can with him. And now? He walked to the plane.

Walking down, he realized again where exactly he was and what he was doing here. He looked at the plane. He could, of course, just fly back. Just like that. Pretend all this never happened. Instead, he siphoned gas.

And he thought. He looked around again. Bill came down the hill now carrying the other chainsaw.

When Bill arrived, Eke confessed, "I'm already feeling guilty about cutting the trees down. They've lived here a long time."

"I'm not," said Bill. "That tree will be great for our cabin, helping us live here."

"Good-for-nothing conscience- always getting me in trouble" Eke said.

"Serves no purpose," said Bill. He smiled.

Eke handed Bill the siphon and said, "It's a brand new day."

Vrrooom.

Eke reminisced as he started cutting the tree. He'd been working with wood for a long time. One of his first jobs when he was 17 was in a wood mill in an old abandoned chicken coop. He planed the faces

of rough lumber and then jointed the planks to get one straight edge. The idea is to be able to rip it on a table saw. That was the idea back then when he was inhaling oily dust that created brown liquid snot. The worst kind, worse even than the suffocating drywall dust he played with for a couple of years. Carpentry was better than drywall or lumber. Pounding nails helped vent frustration.

But this cutting, even with the sawdust flying, was better even than carpentry. This wasn't a factory after all or someone else's crew on someone else's house.

He was the boss.

"Come on, hurry up," yelled Bill.

Well, he was one of the bosses. Eke smiled at Bill, who was going faster than Eke even though Eke started first. Size is an advantage and Bill reminds Eke of this all the time. Even though they were competing, as they were always competing, they were also working together. They used a system of notching two trees and then falling them one at a time. And then after they fell, they would slice the bark lengthwise with a chainsaw.

Of course, before they did that, they had to trim the trees of the branches and that took time. For a while, even as the competition

heated up, it seemed like they were making no progress. Finally when they started making the trees fall, they were happier, high-fiving each other and even breaking into a spontaneous Stones' song – singing to the jungle their joy at progress.

And so they broke for lunch, boiling water and stirring in rice. Bill was making more Spam. The Spam master. Lunch in Honduras.

“You know,” said Eke, afraid to say it but feeling he had to, “it would work a lot better if...”

“It’s working fine the way it is. Just stop it, okay, Eke. Geez. Always something, some idea with you. This isn’t rocket science, we’re just cutting logs, dude. Okay?”

Eke hated when Bill got this way. But that’s how it is, how it has always been between these two. Friends who compete are friends who fight. And Bill, being bigger, stronger, better with woman was always riding Eke. And Eke, who never met a challenge he wouldn’t take, especially from Bill, was the perfect foil.

And they sure had themselves some fun along the way. Sometimes it was too much fun. And sometimes, it was just enough.

How do you end up in Honduras? Eke finished his feast of Spam and rice and packed a corncob pipe with loose tobacco. Bill, on the

other side of the fire, lit a Marlboro. To each his own. That's how you end up in Honduras. Eke lit his pipe. He thought about all the diseases they might catch here. He had studied for it before the trip – cures and preventions. He thought of other things. He looked over at Bill, smoking a cigarette and engrossed in his own thoughts, and Eke remembered. He remembered the dream. He remembered how it used to be. It used to be a game.

They used to blow things up. It started with firecrackers stuffed in things. There was something about explosions and destruction. So fast. So awesome. Yeah, the real meaning of the word kaboom! It was just so cool. They were vicious too. Horrible to think about now. But it happened and Eke, sitting in the jungle listening to, well, frogs, thought of the frog. "Remember the frog?" he asked.

"The frog?"

"The frog and the firecracker?"

"Oh shit, yeah, that was funny," said Bill.

"No," said Eke. "I always felt bad about that."

Pick on someone your own size, he thought to himself. He was a pretty small guy to feel like a bully but he thought of the frog and he

felt exactly like that. He yearned for something more. A fair fight. Test myself. That's always been the thing. Test myself.

And somehow Bill has almost always been there for the testing. It was dirt bikes. It was blowing things up. It was getting wasted. It was wasting a life. And now. Eke smiled. This was life. The ultimate test.

And it was going to get better, more interesting.

IV

A week later, they had cleared a long driveway to within 20 feet of the road. They had cut, shaved and notched all the timbers so they were ready to be stacked and made into their dream cabin. When finally they stopped, Eke said, “I think my hands are numb from holding the chainsaw.”

He contemplated what they’d finished so far. With his numb hands, he lit his corncob pipe. His body was a lot stronger now. Thinner too. He couldn’t wait to get back to the U.S. and eat some real food. That was the plan – fly back, spend a few days in Massachusetts and then drive their old truck full of supplies down to Miami where they would put it on a merchant ship and work on the boat to pay their way to Honduras. Then they would drive their

reconditioned 1973 Chevy truck to the driveway, clear out the last 20 feet and then build the cabin. And then see what happens.

His smoke floated into the air. Honduras. It was all so peaceful.

V

The eggs were spiced, scrambled and runny, while the toast was dry from sitting. Yeah, welcome to a merchant ship where it seems the cook is just learning to cook or, if he's not, he didn't have much to work with. Eggs? How can you mess up eggs?

Chue was his name. He was a towering Caribbean-looking fellow with a big smile and dirty white apron. They remembered him from the night before when he was wearing an officer's uniform and he was checking luggage. It was a ship where many duties were served. "Hello, did you enjoy?" he asked. His Creole accent was thick. Even the simple sentence required effort to decipher.

"Enjoy?" said Bill. "That doesn't even begin to say it. It was the best breakfast ever." Bill smiled at Chue.

Eke laughed to himself. Bill always cracked him up and now was no different. Playing to the cook.

And then Jose walked in. He was the waifish young man carrying a clipboard. Jose was the one who checked them on board last night and seemed to run things on the ship. "Hello. Bill and Eek, right?"

"It's pronounced E.K., like my initials," said Eke.

"Okay, Eek," said Jose, his accent was also thick but not as bad as Chue. And his was a completely different accent, South American perhaps.

Eke smiled. Bill laughed.

"Yeah, that's us," said Bill. "I'm Bill."

"Okay, Bill, Eek, when you are done eating just come on down and I'll show you around and set you up."

When Jose walked out of the room, Bill smiled and asked, "You done eating, Eek?"

"Shut up, rabbit," Eke growled while continuing to eat.

"Shut, shutting up," Bill answered. "Eek, I think I like sound of that," he pressed.

Eke, starting to become annoyed, just looked down and munched his last bite of dry toast. They sat this way for a few

moments, silently ignoring each other. With a dry sense of humor of their own, eek really is how his parents intended to pronounce his name- with his last name being King, it was better than their second choice of Joe.

Both were now finished eating. They just sat there, waiting for the other to move. Bill, meanwhile, was wondering about what kind of work he would have to do aboard this ship. "Hey Eke," Bill said his friend's name correctly. "Why did we have to take this ship anyway?"

"Because we had to take the truck. You know that."

Bill knew. They both knew, they both carried a gun and it would have been difficult to get aboard a plane.

Also, Eke thought, it was to keep busy and occupy his time and mind because Eke knew the old saying that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. This trip would help keep Eke from drinking. And that, he told himself, was part of the plan.

Bill, though, didn't quit drinking, didn't want to quit drinking, and didn't, in fact, think he had a drinking problem. Eke had the problem.

Eke said, "Come on, admit it, you like traveling first class like this."

“Yeah, right. First class. That’s funny,” Bill scoffed. “It’s too early. I should be sleeping.”

There were a couple dozen men of various nationalities working and traveling on the ship. Some would get off in Honduras like Eke and Bill. Others would stay on for the next leg, to South America. All worked menial jobs to keep the ship moving.

It was 6 a.m. “Some of those guys have been working since 4,” said Eke. “Comparatively, Bill, we got a lot of sleep.”

“Yeah, and now we’ve got to work.”

They both stood and headed out when immediately they saw Jose. It was like he had sixth sense and just showed up. “Done with breakfast?” he asked. He smiled. “Follow me, I’ll bring you downstairs.”

Jose led them through the containers towards the bow. Containers were five feet high and they were stacked 10 of them so that they rose 50 feet in the air to create aisles. The ship held 12 rows of boxes in its width, and 12 in the length. There were more than 700 of them. They looked like tin coffins. As they walked, Jose asked them about their trip and when they informed him that they were actually moving to Honduras, he smiled.

“You know about the troubles there, right?”

“Troubles?” asked Bill.

“Well, Nicaragua is next door,” said Jose.

“Oh that,” said Eke. “Yeah, yeah, that’s all over the news. But Honduras is stable. Right?”

Jose smiled and kept walking.

In fact, Jose knew what the Americans had read – that Honduras was a staging ground for the Contras to enter Nicaragua in their running war with the communist Sandinistas. There were, in fact, death squads running around the country in the cause of the pro-American government. It was all very nebulous and the difference between right and wrong was considerably murky.

It wasn’t exactly 1983 in the civil and organized United States of America. They were still figuring things out in Central America in some very violent ways.

“Honduras has a pro-American government,” said Jose. He stopped at a railed ladder. “But be careful. Two Americans are liable to attract some attention.”

“That’s cool,” said Bill. “A little adventure is exactly what we are looking for. That’s why we rode this ship,” he said. He smiled at Eke when he said it.

“Sometimes, you should be careful what you wish for,” said Jose. He stared out, like he saw something, some vision in the air. Like he was looking at a memory. And then he turned.

They watched Jose descend the steps. They waited a bit, neither wanting to stick their ass in his face. After all, some things are probably not right for people of any culture. “After you,” said Bill.

“No, after you,” said Eke.

“I insist,” said Bill.

Another stupid power struggle and this one really was silly, so Eke just gave in. “Fine,” he said. Down he went. And then he realized the humor of Bill following him.

“What the?” said Bill as he descended after his friend.

“Sorry man,” said Eke. “Damn eggs!”

“Oh man, that’s bad.”

“Thank you, thank you very much,” said Eke, mimicking a bad Elvis.

The everlasting “Frat game” thought Eke. There you go – we’re grownups. And yet here they were, doing this big grownup thing on this ship bound for Honduras.

The hull was a mixture of storage rooms and machinery and when Jose got to the biggest machine of all, he stopped and hollered over the loud noise, “This is the engine.” The engine rose two stories with grated steel platforms wrapped around the second floor to make working on it easier. Right now, the first mate was on the second story grate tinkering the engine’s noise. It roared like a dull thunder and it was magnified by reverberations off the metal hull.

They continued towards the rear. Back there was a room running in the center for the last 30 feet of the ship. Jose led them to a door on the left wall and opened it. In there was a 12-inch thick drive shaft spinning wildly in control.

“A whole room for that?” asked Eke. But as soon as he asked he realized the need for instant access to it as well as the need to stay away from it for safety’s sake.

Jose just smiled and said, “Yes, a whole room for that.” He stood a moment saying nothing and then finally he said, “Well, that’s the tour. It’s time to start your job.”

“And what would that be?” asked Bill.

Jose pointed at the walls. “We have temporary workers scrub these walls down here. As you can see they get dirty fast.” He smiled. “I cleaned them myself a month ago.”

“What do you use?” asked Eke.

“Mops. Bleach. Jose pointed to a closet. “Everything you need is in there.” He paused. “If you need anything else, just look for me. I’ll be around.” And then Jose walked away.

Eke looked at the walls. Everything had an engraved plate labeling it. Odd. (An international regulation, but if you don’t know, odd indeed.) Eke wondered if the urinals were labeled. He didn’t notice last time he used them. But he will, he’ll be looking for labels everywhere now.

He looked at the walls again. They really were gross – in need of cleaning for sure. If he were to use a color to describe it, he would call it grimy – somewhere between black, gray, purple and orange. Grimy. He looked at the length. It was at least a hundred meters; a football field in length. It was, to say the least, daunting.

And so he began. Sopping his mop in the bucket of bleach and detergent and slapping it on the walls. Slop and slap. Rub, rub, rub.

At one point he got frustrated and tried to imitate some movie, or maybe it was a cartoon. He picked up the bucket and threw all the water at the wall, somehow expecting a cleaning miracle.

“Good one,” said Bill.

“Jackass,” he said aloud to Bill. Then under his breath, “it never works like you picture it.”

Shit. They both scrubbed and scrubbed and seemed to be getting nowhere but after a couple of hours they actually had almost 50 meters cleaned. Just then, Jose showed up. “Looks good, looks good,” he said. “And in a week it will be dirty again.”

Eke smiled. “Then we really are contributing, eh?” As Jose turned to walk away, Eke asked, “Hey, when is coffee break? I’m hungry again.”

Jose laughed. “Whenever you want. We take our time here. Go on up and help yourself.”

Eke smiled. “Whenever I want?” He put down the mop. “Now is good.”

Bill smiled too. “Yeah, me too.”

“Good job so far,” said Jose again.

“Thanks,” they both said.

Upstairs, Chue was still in the kitchen. They sat down and Eke pulled out a couple cans of Chef-Boy-r-Dee. They opened them and ate them cold, with plastic spoons. Both were thinking similar versions of the same rap on luxury. It seemed so quiet up here compared to down below. Still, they could feel the boat rumbling, moving through the water. Moving through time. Moving through life for once. And it felt damn good – mopping or no mopping.

Eke finished his can first. “Hey, Bill.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see Jose’s face when he told us to be careful because two Americans could attract some attention.”

Bill smiled. “Yeah, I did.”

“Do you think that’s good?”

“Did we come here for adventure? Or not?”

Eke took a big breath and felt all of it hit him at once. “Yes,” he said. “Yes we did.”

“It’s going to be cool,” said Bill. “I bet there will be a bit of old west to it.”

“This boat has a Mayflower feel to it,” said Eke. “Going to a new world.” “Yeah, something like that,” Bill agreed while drifting away.

VI

Eke looked through his binoculars and tried to imagine what it was like for the original European explorers not knowing when or if they'd see land. The sun blazed off the sea. For a week now, he'd been on this ship scrubbing his way south and now, he knew, they were getting near.

Honduras.

He'd been thinking of this forever. He'd even been to Honduras and cut wood but soon, he'd be driving. They were moving in.

Off to the left, he noticed something. A couple of specks moving in the distance. He turned with the binoculars and he saw clearly that they were two boats, that they were together, and that they were moving towards the merchant ship.

He was standing on the port side of the bridge. Suddenly, he heard the noise of scampering feet.

"Hurry up," he heard Jose say. "They'll be here in a about ten minutes.

“Okay, okay,” he heard Chue’s thick accent.

Eke wondered what was going on. He slipped his binoculars into his pants pocket and walked to find Jose and Chue inside a container towards the back of the boat. The metal box was full of guns.

Jose and Chue were loading weapons, two being 50 calibers. Jose looked up, saw Eke, and kept doing what he was doing.

“Do you need any help,” asked Eke.

“Help? Help do what?” Jose tried to down play the fact they were arming themselves.

“What are you doing with all these guns,” Eke pried.

“Marauders are coming,” said Jose matter of factly. He looked up briefly to catch the visitor’s reaction, and when he saw confusion he clarified some more. “Pirates.”

“You’re shitting me,” said Eke. His heart jumped a bit. “What do they want?”

“They want what we’ve got,” said Jose. “And we’re not going to give it to them.” He stopped for just an instant and gave it some thought, “So, want to help?”

“Sure,” said Eke. “What do you want me to do.”

Just then, Bill walked up on them. He came down to ask Eke a

question about Spam but then he saw the guns and said, "Holy crap! Those are big guns. What's going on?"

"Pirates," said Eke. He was so in the know.

"Pirates?"

"Yeah, marauders. Tell him, Jose."

Jose stopped again. "We have to hurry. There are two boats coming up the port side and I believe they are thieves. We need to get these guns up on deck now."

And so they helped carry the gun pedestals and ammunition while the crewmen carried the big guns, and even two grenade launchers.

"We can deal with them safely as long as everyone else remains calm and stays in their rooms," said Jose as they hurried towards the bow. In fact, we don't need you getting in the way either. Just stay below and hand us ammo if we need it."

"Deal with them?" asked Eke.

"Yeah," said Chue. He smiled halfheartedly.

Eke couldn't believe any of this was real. Pirates? "What do they usually have for weapons?" he asked. He was stunned.

"Small machine guns," said Jose. "That's about it. Usually all we have to do is show that we are ready for them."

“Interesting,” said Bill.

“Happens all the time,” said Jose.

Bill and Eke carried the ammo boxes. One was long and rectangular and the other was square and the size of a small television. Both boxes had handles. Eke carried the smaller box.

As they hurried up the stairs to get to the bow, Eke wondered how close the boats were now. His heart was racing. Was this really happening? This was an adventure all right. He passed up the box to an awaiting Hose and then finished climbing the steps.

He looked out and saw they were within a mile. A first mate, an Asian looking fellow named Alex showed up out of seemingly nowhere and together the three of them efficiently assembled the guns while Bill and Eke watched gape-mouthed.

Unbelievable. Pirates. They looked at each other and each could see the excitement in the other’s face. Holy shit- in this day and age.

Eke wondered what would happen next. He was ready for action, ready to be involved in saving this ship.

Within a minute the two big guns were set up and Jose, Chue and Alex were holding other guns standing on deck, staring down the approaching boats. Eke held up his binoculars and he could see on

the boat on the left a big man holding binoculars. And then the man yelled something. And the boats kept coming. And then the big man held up the binoculars again and again he yelled something – something else.

And the boats turned. Just like that.

A little show of force and that was that. The three crewmen next to the big guns gave an audible sigh of relief. “Thank God,” said Chue in that thick way of his. They began clicking the safeties back on their weapons.

Eke was amazed. That’s that? Wait a minute.

And yet that WAS that – the entire extent of the confrontation lasted, well; there was no confrontation so it didn’t even last a second. Before Eke knew it, the gun was disassembled. Jose was telling a dirty joke to Chue and Alex.

They went quickly back down with all the equipment and ammunition. Bill and Eke naturally helped without being asked. They were fascinated. Finally, when they got into the locked gunroom, Bill couldn’t contain himself any longer. He looked around at all the guns. He looked at Jose and at Chue, both calmly putting the guns away

and he asked, "Okay, what the hell just happened. And why do you have so many guns?"

"The world is a dangerous place, my friend," said Jose. "And on this ship, we travel through that dangerous world."

Eke, also couldn't contain himself any longer. "That was pretty damn exciting, even if nothing happened," he said.

"Yeah," said Bill. "That was awesome."

Jose stopped what he was doing and looked at the two of them. He shook his head. "Funny Americans," he said. "You think it's fun because that was not real danger."

"We don't have a problem with danger," Eke said quickly. He nodded at Jose as if to say, you know. "Excitement," he said. "We came down here for some excitement. You know, doing something right, standing up for someone the way you just stood up for this ship."

"You are funny Americans," said Jose.

"Why is that?" asked Bill.

"You want a cause to believe in? A cause to fight for?"

“Yes!” said Eke, amazed that anyone could possibly get it. This foreigner on this merchant ship, though, he got it. “Exactly. A cause to fight for.”

“Interesting,” said Jose. And then he said no more. He just went back to putting guns away.

“What? What?” asked Bill in an insistent way.

“It’s just..., oh, never mind,” said Jose.

“What?” asked Bill and Eke together.

“Well, you see, I just know these people in Honduras, where you are going, and well, they could use some help from some smart, strong young Americans such as yourself.”

“Really?” asked Eke.

“Yeah,” said Jose. He stared Eke in the eyes. “It’s just that, well, it really is dangerous. Not like this. They are involved in things.”

“Things?” asked Bill.

“Look, I can’t say anymore here,” said Jose. He paused, then added, “They’re good people and they need help.”

“So what should we do?” asked Eke.

“All right, go to the Bar Tropical in the Gran Hotel Paris on Avendia San Isidro,” said Jose. “Ask for the bartender Juan and tell

him,” Jose paused and then continued, “Tell him that Sam from the docks sent you. He’ll know what that means.”

“Sam?” asked Eke.

Jose just stared at him.

“Okay,” said Eke. “Sam it is.”

“Sam,” repeated Bill. “Sam from the docks sent us.”

VII

The Bar Tropical and the Gran Hotel Paris in La Ceiba was a balmy kind of place on Avenue San Isidro, a main road.

When Bill and Eke walked in, it felt exotic with the syncopatic background music and colorful Honduran folk art on the walls. The big room was full of rich, older couples while the smaller bar had a more male clientele and the atmosphere in the smaller bar was somehow different. Eke couldn't put his finger on it. It was something he felt as soon as he walked into the bar.

Eyes turned and looked at the two Americans. Three men seated at a table started to laugh. Eke looked at them and looked away but Bill headed straight to the bar. In broken Spanish, Bill said he was looking for a bartender named Juan.

In English, the bartender with slicked back hair said that he was Juan. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Sam from the docks sent us," said Bill. "We're looking for work."

“Oh, Sam from the docks?” asked Juan rhetorically. “Interesting.”

He smiled. “Get you a drink?”

“Beer,” said Bill.

“Nothing,” said Eke.

“Nothing?” asked Juan. “A man should drink, you know.”

“No thanks,” said Eke.

Bill, trying to save his friend from explaining 12 steps to a Honduran bartender, decided to pursue their reason for being here.

“So, Juan, do you think you can get us some work. We were told there might be some, um, interesting work to be had.”

Juan eyed them cautiously. He poured Bill a beer and handed it to him. For a long time he said nothing and then finally he said, “It is dangerous work.”

Bill smiled. “That’s okay with us.” Dangerous sounded good, especially to Bill, who spent years when he was a young man studying the martial arts. He stayed a brown belt in several disciplines of self-defense because turning black belt would have meant he would have to register as a lethal weapon. He just wanted to be a lethal weapon, not register. Then later, while he was married, Bill spent a few weeks in a bodyguard camp learning to protect other

people as well as yourself. About 200 guys, each thinking he's the world's biggest badass, attended. Less than half completed the training. Bill did. Off and on for years, Bill had pursued some sort of danger. But this was real. He could tell by the look in Juan's eyes. This wasn't training.

"Is it?" Juan smiled now too. "Come back tomorrow," Juan said. "Noon tomorrow and meet a man named Carlos. I will introduce you."

And they did and Carlos, with a long handlebar mustache and evasive eyes stopped his eyes long enough to stare at Eke and tell him to meet Jacque and Maria near the old Catholic Church in a town called Catacamas. Meet in five days, they are told. And then Carlos chugged his drink and disappeared.

"Good luck," said Juan. He smiled. Big teeth. He looked at Eke and asked, "You sure you don't want a drink?"

VIII

Driving alone, Bill headed south-southeast out of La Ceiba. He was alone because Eke, after the meeting with Carlos, flew a commercial flight back to the States to pick up the plane again.

This time, he would be going back for “supplies” – stuff they had accumulated through the years and stored at their parents’ houses. Stuff? Well not vague stuff but weapons – remnants from their childhood and beyond. They liked to blow things up. They liked to shoot things. They’d been doing it all their lives.

And now Eke went back to load the plane with the weapons they were comfortable using, weapons they had used before. They didn’t know exactly what they were getting into but they had a good idea on the firepower they would want.

They had five days until they were to meet Jacque and Maria and in the meantime they decided to split up and while Eke was flying back from the States, Bill would travel back to where they planned to

build the cabin. He would cut out the final 20 feet of the driveway and maybe even start a little construction.

As Bill drove, he thought about the incident on the ship and therefore worried about thieves. Even though the back of the 1972 Chevy truck was covered with an old green tarp, it was obvious there was stuff back there. The truck had been modified back in Massachusetts to cover any circumstances they could imagine. For instance, against the cab in the back they welded a three-foot by three-foot metal box to protect a 100-gallon gas tank. The truck's tank held 80 gallons while the spare held 100. Bill didn't want to run out of gas in the jungle.

The precaution served him well as he drove a highway and then a single lane road than then down a bumpy unpaved road for hours. At least the shocks were new. On and on he went and then on way down that last unpaved road as the sun began to fall he saw the red and white sign that was his own little joke. It was hanging from a tree in the middle of nowhere. It said, "Help Wanted."

Fifty feet ahead he saw a tree with an obvious black dot of paint on it. That was it – the marker. The driveway would start right there. Bill pulled the truck over and stopped. He got out immediately. He

was exhausted. Physically exhausted. More than that. Completely exhausted. Mentally, spiritually. He needed to rest. He looked at the trees and he couldn't even see the clearing 20 feet back. In some ways, that was good. But it emphasized what he needed to do yet.

Bill was the mechanic. He could fix anything and that's why he was sent to drive while Eke was charged with flying back. Eke was a better pilot but Bill was by far a better mechanic. And what they brought down – an all-terrain motorbike for one – was the kind of stuff that always needed to be worked on. Not to mention the reconditioned 1972 Chevy truck.

Centered on the bed of the truck were 30 sheets of exterior half-inch plywood, and four rolls of tarpaper. The all-terrain vehicle was harnessed on top and there were two planks ready to move to create a ramp to get it down. Bill started to unharness the bike.

He checked the gas tank. It was half full. He tried to start the bike and on the third try, he succeeded in turning over the engine. Down the plank, he took the bike into the woods back to the site of the cut logs.

Everything, including the chainsaws, were untouched. Bill shut off the bike and stood there. He took a deep breath. He looked at all of it,

listened to the birds of the jungle singing. He couldn't believe it. The dream was true. It was true!

But what was the dream exactly? He wondered.

After a few moments of contemplation, Bill picked up a chainsaw and went to work. They wanted the entrance to the road to be as tight as possible – barely enough for the truck to fit through. They wanted to remain secluded as much as possible.

Bill cut down trees, dissected them into smaller logs and then used gravity to roll them out of the way. He worked at a steady pace until the sun was down.

IX

The plane circled overhead and Bill stopped his work to watch as Eke landed it into the river with a mighty splash rushing off of both sides of the plane. As Eke emerged from the plane, he spewed out the word, “Lar!” – a practiced bit of dialogue from the movie, “Caveman.”

Bill smiled and responded with the appropriate, “Atouk!” but his heart didn’t seem in it. He’d been here for three days working – cutting and clearing and at the end even managing to stack a couple of logs to start the cabin – and movie dialogue wasn’t exactly what he had in mind. Thankfully what he had in mind was exactly what Eke said next. “I brought meat,” he said. “Let’s cook.”

Bill smiled back. He was starving – not literally but he sure wanted something different. Something full of meat – like meat. He’s been working hard. “Cool,” he said.

Eke grabbed a rope hooked to the front and began to pull the plane to shore. "Let's get the plane secure on shore and then let's start a fire," he said.

"What did you bring?" asked Bill.

"Some steaks, five pounds of hamburger, fresh buns and all the fixings."

"Awesome," said Bill.

It was noon when Eke arrived and by the time the steaks were cooked to a perfectly pink and juicy medium rare, it was 1 p.m. Eke also was hungry from flying so long without eating but it was Bill who attacked his food like a hungry lion.

After they finished eating, Eke announced his other retrieved treasure – six cartons of cigarettes. Bill responded with a big smile and loud, "Atouk!" He pulled out a lighter and lit it as if call for an encore at a rock concert. "Smokes! Dude, very well done."

And so the two old friends sat and smoked and breathed in – not just nicotine, but also the full experience. Honduras.

What really were they doing here?

Eke finished his cigarette and looked at Bill and declared, "We've still got a lot to do. Let's take the wings off the plane."

“Yeah,” said Bill. He was nonchalant. Smoking slow. Doing nothing with deliberation. Take the wings off the plane? “Let’s see what else you brought back,” he said, changing the subject.

“What else? You know what else. I brought back a couple of boxes to load on the truck and show to Jacque and Maria.”

“Very well done,” said Bill again. He raised his chin and asked, “Did you bring everything?”

“Of course,” said Eke.

Satisfied with Eke’s answer, Bill said that he had an idea. “We’ve got a lot to do,” he said. “Let’s take the wings off the plane.”

Eke smiled. “Good idea,” he said. They walked to the plane. It was pushed up onto the land as far as it would go.

“We’ll just unfasten the wings and pull her in further,” said Eke. He dropped the cargo door in the rear and fished out one of two ratchets. He figured out the socket size by trial and error, needing only two tries to settle on 5/8ths. He cursed himself when he guessed wrong but soon he was ratcheting off the left wing while Bill was on the other side attacking the other wing.

When they finished, they stored the wings under the plane and then hid the bolts away. “Afraid of thieves?” asked Bill.

Eke nodded.

“Out here? Who’s gonna steal our plane.”

Eke smiled. “No one. I hid the bolts.”

Suddenly Bill smiled and said, “Hey, come on, let me show you what I’ve done so far.” He took Eke to the road, showed him the open driveway and then to the cabin site where, indeed, two levels of logs had been stacked notch to notch so that they fit snug.

“How did you...?”

Bill smiled. “Me strong like bull.”

They both stood looking at the cabin site for a moment. Eke pulled out cigarettes. “Smoke?”

“You bet.”

How many times do most people ever get to sit and contemplate the whole of their lives and what got them there? How many people ever take the time or make the effort or find their lives even worth contemplating. But here they were again thinking big thoughts because they were doing big things now. What is it they were doing?

Eke wondered. He sat on a log and took a puff. They were living a dream, he decided. He thought of the two boxes full of weapons. Boxes to be loaded into the truck for the meeting with Jacque and

Maria. He didn't know why he thought of the weapons, but he did. Firing the weapons in a good cause. He looked to the sky.

He thought of the under-construction cabin, the disassembled plane, and the juicy steaks they just ate. His mind was racing. He looked at his friend and suddenly a million memories poured in – some bad, most good. The things they'd done together. He could taste whiskey in his mouth even though it had been years since he'd had a drink. The taste still arose from time to time. Just like that. There it was. He took another puff on his cigarette, thought about fishing, and the taste and craving was gone. Easier now, he thought. Not easy, but easier.

What is it they were doing? Bill wondered too but not as much as Eke. Instead, he was simply psyched.

X

On the morning that they were to meet Jacque and Maria in Catacamas, Bill and Eke woke early. They were excited but they also wanted to tighten down their camp. They weren't sure how long they would be gone.

So they loaded up the plane with everything from the camp – the tools, their tents and cooking equipment and then they built a wall of broadleaf palms as best as they could to disguise the plane. They chained the ATV to a tree and they chained the plane to another tree. What else could they do? This was security, backwoods style.

They lit one final cigarette and smoked next to the truck. They had been talking about this moment – well, something like this, since they were 14. Adventure. That's what this was. Pure adventure. Wasn't it?

The truck was loaded.

“Do you think we’re prepared for everything?” asked Eke.

“As prepared as we’ll ever be,” replied. Bill. He stomped out his cigarette. “So what do you say?”

Eke said nothing. He climbed in the truck. Bill climbed in the driver’s side. He started the truck, put it into drive and then declared, simply, “Beautiful.”

Eke gritted his teeth. He had to agree. Something about this seemed perfect.

It was a three-hour drive to Catacamas. Three bouncy hours. The boxes of weapons were loaded on the truck and strapped in. Bill kept two handguns in the front of the truck. Both were loaded. They skirted the truck slowly down the long driveway and at the end, at the road, they turned right towards civilization. That’s what was out there, right?

It was hot in the truck. They both wished now that they had put in air conditioning but at the time the trip was planned, it seemed an unnecessary luxury. The idea, after all, was to test themselves. But fuck, it was hot!

Sweat poured down their faces. They drank from canteens. They tried singing old songs and sometimes they found a rhythm or a key

or a song they liked but mostly they rode in silence, looking, thinking, wondering. This was the moment that they waited for. And they drove on.

The road was erratic. Sometimes it was okay sometimes it was rough, and a couple times they had to stop the truck to move things. The road was barely present an hour in, through the frontier town of Dulce Nombre de Culmi. Frontier town indeed. Pistols, shotguns, and machine guns were all in style in that town. And the sombreros and mustaches gave off an old Mexico feel. Bill drove on, very aware that they were white Americans driving a covered truck through this old town. He was also very aware of his own two handguns.

They passed through town without incident and without, in fact, hardly being noticed. When they were reaching the outskirts, Bill pressed down the gas and Eke smiled and said with a guttural drawl, "Hey hombre. Gringo, we would like to dance with your dates."

Bill laughed. "They all seemed like very nice guys," he said. "I just wouldn't go ask to borrow a cup of sugar from them. I think I'd go without."

Eke laughed now too. They were out of the town, so it was all funny. They laughed for a mile and then the ride settled in again.

Long is long and hot is hot. They were almost thankful for the little scary interlude.

“It’s weird, huh?” asked Eke. “I can’t believe there are towns out here that size. This is the middle of nowhere.”

“I’ve been to the middle of nowhere,” said Bill. “That’s in Iowa. I believe this is the middle of nada. Spanish, you know.”

Eke smiled.

And on they drove for two hours, stopping once on the side of the road to piss. They saw traffic, but not a lot. It was a country road and then as Eke fell into a sleep from the ride, Bill turned into a town that had stucco adobe buildings with barrel tile roofs. Livestock wandered about. And so did people.

Bill drove into the center of town. There, next to an old Catholic Church with a huge white stone steeple was a militarized jeep. The church caught Bill and Eke’s eyes at first because of the huge cross on the hill and how it looked down towards the city. There were stairs leading up to the cross. They both instantly wondered how those stairs were exactly built. They didn’t at first notice the jeep.

In the jeep sat a man and a woman. Their faces moved together when the big truck pulled into town. The white faces of the men

driving the big truck made them sure. And then these two people, this man and this woman, saw the truck park and the men staring at the church. The man and the woman got out of the jeep and approached.

Bill noticed first, nudged Eke and then smiled. Eke smiled back. His heart was pounding. "It's them," said Eke. "It must be."

The man and woman were wearing camouflage, holding machineguns, and all business like as they approached the two Americans cautiously.

"Hello," said the woman. Her English was very good and her smile was quite pretty. She had big dark eyes, shoulder-length brown hair and a full bosom that managed to make camouflage look like the latest Parisian style. She was, simply, a magnet for the eyes. Her face was beautiful, her cheekbones were high and her smile lit not only her mouth but especially those big eyes. It was hard, though, to look away from her body. It was impolite, of course, to stare at her body. But how could they help it. Camouflage, soon sold by Victoria's secret. Holy shit.

"Hello," said Bill, taking her all in. Wow, he thought - mostly inside of his pants. Wow. What have we here? They had approached the driver's side door and so he answered their hello and then asked the

obvious question, “You’re not by any chance Maria and Jacque, are you?”

“Yes we are,” said the woman – Maria obviously. “And are you the two Americans sent to us by Sam from the docks.”

Bill was confused but Eke quickly answered, “Yes, Sam from the docks sent us.” He didn’t understand what all the subterfuge was about but he quickly deduced it was best to simply play along. Sam from the docks is an important character ‘round these parts, he thought to himself.

“Glad to see you,” said Maria. She grinned at them. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Bill smiled back. He was taken with this exotic woman in camouflage and he didn’t hardly notice the man wearing the same camouflage standing right next to her. Jacque. Bill didn’t much notice Jacque. He was staring at breasts. “I’ve been waiting for you all my life,” he said, managing to look up to her eyes for almost a moment. This was Bill’s way – always be more forward than you should be. “Maybe we should lose your friend here,” he said. And he smiled.

Eke was thinking Bill was insane.

But before Eke could tell Bill that he was insane, Maria told Bill that her friend was her brother and that what she really wanted was some help. “We need help, gringo,” she said. “And that’s all.”

“All right,” said Eke, interrupting the budding love spat. “What do we do now?”

“We go for a drive,” she answered.

“A drive?” asked Bill loudly. “We just drove three hours over these hellish roads.”

“Well, follow us,” said Maria. “There’s another two hours still to go.”

“And then what?” asked Eke.

“And then you meet the General,” she answered.

“The general?”

“The man who will save our country. He needs your help.”

“Why us?”

“He needs all of our help. This is no game. The fate of a country is at stake.” She smiled, but it was a sad smile and she didn’t seem so sexy now.

Eke wanted to protect her. He stared at her beautiful face, those big dark eyes. Now he knew he was doing the right thing.

XI

Two hours down a dirt road, after a gravel road and a long stretch of bad highway, they came upon a town of tents. Not so much a town, really. More like a camp – something obviously capable of moving quickly.

“Interesting,” said Bill, as the jeep in front of them slowed to a stop. There were three 20-foot by 40-foot tents on the left side of the road and two on the right. Further back on the right was a smaller tent, maybe 20 by 20.

Jacque and Maria emerged from their jeep and then Maria turned and signaled to the Americans. Get out.

Bill nodded to Maria and smiled, like he expected her to hop into bed with him.

She turned and started walking towards the smallest of the tents. Jacque, half a step behind, quickly caught up and went with her. Bill and Eke followed.

When they reached the tent, Bill and Eke smiled at the guards outside the tent. The guards stepped aside when they saw Jacque and Maria. They did not smile back at the Americans.

As they approached the door to the tent, Maria announced them. “General, they’re here.” And she pulled back the flap door to the tent.

Before they moved a step, they heard a loud, baritone voice, “Come in.” The voice resonated through the cloth. It wasn’t muffled hardly at all. As they walked through the door, a large man rose from behind a long, rectangular table. “Good evening gentleman,” he said. “My name is General Guillermo Sanchez. Won’t you please join me?” He motioned for them to sit. The general’s English had a pronounced South American accent, but it was clear and had singsong enunciation that was still somehow mechanical – especially because of his baritone. “Welcome to Honduras.”

Then the grizzled warrior turned to Jacque and Maria. “Well done,” he said. “The Americans will join you for diner later.” And Jacque and Maria left the tent, leaving Bill and Eke alone with the man.

As they took seats and Bill said, “It’s nice to meet you, General,” Eke noticed on the long table a bottle next to a stack of documents.

His heart jumped as he saw the general reach for the bottle. “Drink?” he asked.

Drink? Now there’s a question. This was, after all, Honduras and the man in front of him was a general and this was the most macho of places and maybe, just maybe he could have a fresh start. Right? And really, what’s one drink?

“Drink?” asked the general again.

Eke wavered. He didn’t answer yes and he didn’t answer no. Instead, he looked at the general like he didn’t understand the question.

“Sure, I’ll have one,” said Bill.

Eke finally asked, “How’s the water in these parts?”

“Water?” asked the general. His eyebrows went up. “The water is not the best.” He poured a drink for himself and for Bill and then held the bottle again for Eke. “Drink?”

He craved a drink, yet up until now he didn’t want to drink at all. What kind of a question was this to ask? What kind? Unfair, that’s what kind. Eke would have rather been asked anything else. The reality of his situation – thousands of miles away from Massachusetts in a tent in a jungle with a macho-looking and acting general was not

lost on him. It seemed so natural to drink here. Of course, to Eke it seemed natural to drink everywhere. And that's why finally, after what really were excruciating deliberations in his mind, he answered simply, "No thanks. I'll pass."

"Suit yourself," said the general.

Eke looked on the table and saw a large map of Honduras. He tried to forget about the thought of whiskey. He watched Bill and the general take a sip.

It's funny, thought Eke. Not funny as in ha ha. Funny as in strange, or something. They say it can always get worse if you drink. But, he wondered, does it ever get better?

Eke took a breath and thought again. He was in Honduras. Yes, it can get better.

There was a plastic film over the map. Eke noticed the film first and then he saw the reason for the film – notes written over the map in marker. Notes and arrows. Enlarged in a blow-up box bottom right hand corner of the map was a photograph of a house and then next to that was a floor plan – apparently for this particular house.

Bill pointed at the map. "What's this about?" he asked.

“This,” said the general, “is our plan to save Honduras. We are a small group, only 50 trained men but we are dedicated.”

“What about Maria?” asked Eke. He wanted to know as much as he could about her.

“She is trained as well.” The general stared at Eke, making his thoughts known without saying anything more than simply, “She is my daughter.”

Eke didn’t know what to say to that. He figured it meant she was off limits. So he changed the subject. “Who lives in that house?” he asked.

“The man who lives in that house,” said the general, “has evil plans for Honduras and is, in fact, planning a coup to take over the country.” The general paused, exhaled, and took a long sip of his whiskey. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a fat cigar, which he lit. Just as the Americans were hoping he would offer them a cigar too, he said, “We plan to stop him.”

Eke studied the map. It reminded him of a strategy game he used to play when he was younger. And so he said so.

“A strategy game?” asked the general.

“Yeah,” said Eke. “It’s interesting to see it played out for real.”

“Is that why you’re here?” asked the general. “A strategy game?”

Eke’s face twisted into a grin. “I’m afraid so.”

Bill smiled at his friend. “Not for me,” he said. It seemed like an attempt to clarify, and it was. “I had things to do on Friday night,” said Bill. Then he laughed. He shrugged his shoulders at Eke. “Hey, it’s true.”

The general smoked and watched the two of them. “You Americans are funny,” he said.

“Funny?” asked Bill.

“Yes, funny. I don’t understand men like you. You come down here from your land of opportunity seeking what – opportunity?”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Eke.

“You funny Americans. Stupid, funny Americans.”

“Why?” asked Bill.

The general shook his head. “We are fighting for what you already have.”

“Yeah,” said Eke. “We’re with you. We’re on your side.”

“But why?” asked the general. His eyebrows went up. “Did you grow tired of board games?”

“Actually,” said Eke, “we’ve grown tired of most everything to do with our boring lives.”

“Yeah,” said Bill. “We want some excitement.”

“Excitement? This is not a game or an adventure, my American friend. This is real. This is our country and we are trying to stop an evil man who is trying to take away the rights of my people. We’re not looking for excitement, you see. What we really want is peace.”

Bill laughed. He pointed at the map. “That doesn’t look like peace,” he said. “It looks, well, exciting.”

The general shook his head and took a sip of whiskey. “So you talk of excitement as if what we do down here is ballgame.” He stared at Bill and then at Eke, then he asked, “Have you ever killed a man?”

“I’m ready to,” said Bill quickly.

“Aren’t you afraid of dying?” asked the general.

“No disrespect sir, but I don’t intend on dying. I’m a good shot and I am ready.”

The general sighed. “No one intends on dying,” he said. Then he turned to Eke. “What about you? Are you ready to kill a man too?”

The truth, as Eke knew it, was that he couldn’t even kill a defenseless animal without remorse unless he caught it with his bare

hands. Or unless he taught the animal to shoot a gun. The thing, for Eke, was that it had to be fair. Shoot a man with a gun? Sure, that's fair. "I think I am," said Eke.

For a long time, the general just sat looking at them. Trying to assess them. Eke felt like he was at a job interview. Finally, the general said, "Very well. We can use the help."

XII

At first glance, the food appeared hopeless. It was mostly rice and old vegetables with some bits of chopped-up meat – maybe pork – and it was all smothered in brown tasteless gravy. Eke hated the taste.

He felt horrible about throwing out food here in the middle of nowhere, but after a few bites he didn't feel horrible enough to actually eat any more. The fact that the food didn't look or taste good was only part of the issue. Eke looked at the area where the food was prepared and there was nothing about the area that even gave a hint of cleanliness. In his restaurant-working days, in fact, Eke had seen better conditions inside of some dumpsters.

And to top off his reasons for not eating this food – they still had a week's worth of provisions in the truck. He looked at his plate. It was still mostly full. Bill was already finished eating, as were Jacque and Maria who were already up from the table. And handful of men sat at another table laughing and drinking. A couple of men were eating a second helping as if it was steak.

Eke stood. He was finished and decided to go wash off his plate at the spigot he had seen others use. As he began pumping the hand pump he laughed to himself that the United States had given up hand pumping water more than a century ago. This place was 100 years behind.

Then he remembered where he really was – at a camp for a militia. He guessed, on second thought, that a hand pump was actually good to find.

As he washed his plate, he watched Maria walk to one of the tents. Of the five main tents, two were bustling with activity. Maria walked to one of the other tents. She went into what appeared to be an empty tent. His eyes followed, like magnets.

She was a stunning woman and camouflage never looked so good. And what he really realized was that the thing he always had for South American woman – a thing that was until now imaginary or perhaps theoretical – had manifested itself in the body, mind, eyes, and spunk of this woman, Maria.

Maybe she wanted to be alone, he thought. What to do? Bill, he knew, had gone to one of the busy tents to drink with a group of men. What to do? Eke walked to Maria's tent.

Bill already tried this, he thought to himself. Bill, the guy who got his share of women back in the states, struck out with her. What made Eke think he could get anywhere? Eke smiled to himself and wondered. He was in Central America. Something about that fact made him confident.

So he walked into the tent. It was a big tent and in it were weapons on tables. Machine guns, rifles, pistols, and one table even had a few grenades on it. Amazing. So this is what a revolution looks like from the inside. Amazing.

“Hi,” said Eke.

Maria, who was cleaning a gun, looked up. “Oh great, another one,” she said.

“What?”

“Your friend has been trying to get me to kiss him since he arrived. And now you show up.”

“Hey,” said Eke, getting defensive. “What’d I do? Don’t get mad at me because my friend sometimes acts like a jerk.”

She put her head down and kept pushing a long brush through the barrel of a machine gun.

Eke sat down across from her. "Let me ask you something," he said.

She looked up, said nothing.

Eke wanted to ask her to sleep with him. It was the question that was really on his mind but he knew better than to ask such a thing, no matter how far away from home. Luck with women hadn't exactly been his strong suit through the years, he was often intimidated and almost always unsuccessful with women. Maybe it had to do with his fantasy of coming down to a place like this and actually landing a girl like Maria. Maybe he was unsuccessful before because he was supposed to be so that he could end up in a situation exactly like this with this particular stunning exotic woman. That's what he told himself as he was trying in his mind to figure out how to approach this woman. Now that Bill had failed, she seemed fair game and maybe, just maybe...

Of course, she was the general's daughter. That complicated things a bit, he imagined. Still, what if this was all meant to happen? That's how romance is, right? It's romantic.

"Why you doing this?" he asked.

“Doing what?” she said. She looked up at him and seemed to recognize him as a person for the first time since he arrived.

“Look at you. You’re cleaning a gun. You’re looking to go shoot people. And you’re beautiful.”

“Oh please.”

“It’s true!” Eke was worked up by her protest. “I don’t understand, Maria. You could be doing anything. Why this?” He stared at her.

She said nothing.

“I mean, come on, aren’t you too young to die?”

“Isn’t everyone too young to die?” She stared at him.

Her face was too young to die. Phew. He was a witness. He felt a stirring in his crotch. What eyes. Sad, beautiful, sexy, and wanting-but hard eyes.

He fell into those eyes.

“We grow up fast down here, my friend. We’re poor. Two of my sisters died before I was five years old. One was killed by a bullet.”

She shook her head. “I saw it.” She stared at him, intense. “Too young to die?” She said nothing more and she turned away. She would not look at him that way again.

But he didn't know. He felt a cosmic connection. Another misread. But he felt it. And it was real. More than anything, he knew for sure that he was doing the right thing. How do you know such a thing? You know. Eke knew. "Well, you're certainly too pretty to die," he said.

"You Americans are ridiculous," she said.

He couldn't help it. He knew, of course, that he was acting ridiculous and it wasn't even that he didn't care – he did. The truth was that he couldn't help himself. Pretty was an understatement.

And so she said he was ridiculous and he didn't care. He didn't think she really meant it. Maybe, just maybe, this was meant to be, just like all his vague dreams had led him to believe. So he started to talk - to say the things you say in movies, not in real life. His romantic talk was too romantic, his voice was too loud and most of all his eyes were too staring. He didn't know. He just kept talking, trying to make a connection. "We're not ridiculous. We're only here to help, my princess. That's right, I am your knight in shining armor and I have come to your country to help you and hopefully win your heart."

She looked at him like he was crazy and immediately asked, "Do you ever stop talking? You or your friend?"

He took her tone as that of someone in a relationship with him. He just kept talking.

Finally, she said, "If you're going to stay here, at least make yourself useful and help clean some of these."

"Good idea. But you know what? I'll be right back," he said. "I'm going to get a few weapons from my truck, they definitely need to be cleaned, and that way I can also keep you company."

"Whatever."

He stood and left the tent and walked quickly to his truck. He had to blink to actually believe any of this. That woman back there was fucking hot! He opened the door to his truck and went in back to a box. He pulled out a Winchester 70 extreme condition rifle. This should do, he thought to himself, although what he was really thinking was that he had to figure a way to get Maria to spend the rest of her life with him. She was the one. He knew. He was sure. Why else would he be here? This was the time, he assured himself, to play all his cards. The cosmos were in motion.

Ah, the cosmos. Eke walked into the tent not knowing what the cosmos really had in store but he was hopeful and he sat down with some sort of a game plan. He showed her the rifle, smiled and said,

as if he was a commercial announcer, "For whatever your hunt may encounter."

She looked at him as if she had never seen American television. "What?"

"Never mind." He was about to start again but before he started talking, she asked, "So what brought you down here really?" She looked at him. She wasn't smiling, but her tone had improved considerably. Maybe the cosmos really were in motion.

Eke checked his rifle to make sure it was unloaded. He eyed her as she continued to clean her machine gun. What an amazing woman. And she asked how he came down here. He looked down the barrel to assess its wear and then he began, "By the time I was 16, I had two dreams."

Her eyes went to his. She said nothing.

"They were very different dreams," he said. "One was conventional, something many American kids wanted." He took a deep, contemplative breath. He looked out into the tent and at an old memory only he could see. "I wanted to be in a rock and roll band."

"Such big concerns you Americans have," she said, scoffing.

“No wait, hear me out.” He pushed a cloth through the barrel and pulled out some gunk. He flipped the cloth over the clean side and pushed it through again. “It actually started when I was even younger. When I was seven years old, I used to jump around singing Beatles’ songs. When I realized I couldn’t sing I tried guitar and when I realized how complicated that was, I tried drums. I wasn’t very dedicated though. I just wanted to party and chase girls. So I failed.”

“And how does that have anything to do with you being down here.”

He took a deep breath. “Well, I’ve been failing a lot of times in America. That just happened to be the biggest dream except for my other dream.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Maria. “You have two dreams.”

Was she mocking him? He didn’t know. He just talked on from the heart. “You see, Maria,” he said (and it felt good to him to use her name), “Although America is the land of opportunity, it’s not that way for everyone. I seemed to fail at every turn but I kept plugging away.” He smiled.

She kept cleaning her gun.

“Anyway, I always had this other dream too,” he said. He reached over and grabbed her arm. “And this is it.”

She pulled her arm away. Quick. “What? What is it?”

“I dreamed of moving to the tropics, finding a good cause I’d be willing to die for, and picking up, well, chicks like you.”

Any resemblance of a smile disappeared from her face, “What the fuck is wrong with you crazy Americans, are you out of your mind? You dream of this? This!”

Eke grinned at her.

“You’re nuts! Don’t you understand? This is our reality down here. People I know have been slaughtered. Do you know how that feels?”

His grin faded.

“You come down here and this is your dream? Your entertainment? What are we, some game to you?”

Eke shrugged. In fact...

She continued, “That’s just what the world needs, another American cowboy- a rock and roll hoodlum. You’re no better than the terrorists who go around killing innocent people, or who killed your marines over in Beirut.”

“What?” Eke fell back in his chair. “What did you say?” He couldn’t even get his mind wrapped around that statement.

Terrorists? What?

“You know,” she said. “They justify their killing behind a cause, and look at you. Here, looking for a cause.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“This is my home,” she said.

Eke stared at her. He couldn’t believe she compared him to a terrorist. How grateful of her. He wasn’t going to let this drop. No way. “Look, I’m no terrorist killing innocent people. We’re nothing alike.” He stood up and stared in her eyes and said loudly, “NOTHING!”

She stared right back. Hard eyes.

“I want to fight honorably. I’d prefer pistols at ten paces and no one innocent gets hurt. I never understood those terrorist assholes. They use secrecy to hide behind because they are afraid to fight fair.” He was pacing now. Pacing circles, and pointing at her. “ANY TIME, ANY DAY, ANY YEAR, as long as I have a back they can stab at I’ll meet any of those snakes face to face, like a man. Not one of those mangy dogs would have the courage to meet me and you know it!

“You are too unreal,” said Maria. “Here you are, a big-talking American cowboy want-a-be. Some failed rock and roller down in Central America chasing adventure and you have the nerve to lecture me about the morals of others. Astonishing!” She stood now too. Stared him in the eyes, and it wasn’t love she was oozing. “You people are screwed in the head!” she shouted. Her tone lowered slightly. “Always meddling in everyone else’s business. You think you know better than everyone.”

“What? You don’t want us and our firepower? Isn’t your cause justifiable?” He sat back down. “Isn’t it?”

She sighed. There was disappointment in her eyes. “It is to me,” she said.

“But to us, it’s all a game, right?” He was angry now. “Amazing!” He was frazzled too. He couldn’t concentrate. This was his dream and she turned it into this. Terrorism? Fuck her. (Though the thought still crossed his mind) He stood up, shook his head and walked out of the tent.

Outside, the air helped calm him a bit. But he was still fuming. His heart was pounding. Terrorism. Jesus!

He knew what they were there for. Why couldn't she just accept his help with open arms? Yeah, he laughed to himself, with open arms. He wanted to do this job. The man trying to ruin her country was exactly the kind of men Eke hated – rich and powerful trying to stay that way at any cost.

He was pacing when he noticed Maria. She was standing in the door of her tent. He stopped pacing and then she approached him. She leaned against a tree.

“Look, don't get me wrong,” she said. “We appreciate the help. Really. It's just that, well, this is just some thrill to you. It's sad. Our lives are just a game to you.”

Eke looked down. “You're right,” he said. “I don't know what to say. You're right. It is sad. It's sad for all of us, I guess. Sad that it took this to make me feel alive, I guess.”

“Yeah,” she said. “That's pretty sad, especially considering you lived where many people who do anything to live.”

“But I live here now,” he said. He paused, and sat on the ground. “I understand what you're saying.”

She sat down too.

He continued. "I mean, you're right. Some dream I have, huh? I can't even get the girl. Can I?"

She shook her head, no. "I am engaged to be married."

"Where's your ring?"

"Ring? That's funny. This is Honduras."

"So who are you engaged to?"

"One of our group. He is not here right now. But he will be back by the time of the raid."

"Well, at least I can die an honorable death," he said.

"Is that what this is, a death wish?"

"No, it's actually a wish to feel alive. I'm alive and I want to keep it that way but I want to feel the great rush of adrenaline in fighting a real fight. I want to feel the pulse of a cause inside me." He scratched the side of his face. "Maybe it is crazy, but you know, I don't mind if I do die."

"And why is that?"

"I'd be happy for two reasons."

"Happy to die?"

"First, because I feel blessed that I got to play in this lottery we call life." He lit a cigarette, and offered her one. She accepted.

Eke took two long hits on his cigarette and exhaled. Then he continued. "And the second reason is because it'd would finally be over."

"Interesting," she said.

"Let me try to explain one more time. You see, Maria, I never really did anything with my life before this. I am here to challenge myself. This is my time."

"Your time for what?"

He looked at her. "I don't exactly know," he said. "Just to challenge myself," he said again. He was fumbling for words and said as much. "I have a hard time explaining myself sometimes," he said. "What I really want to do is let my actions speak for themselves." He stared at her. "So many times in my life, my good intentions are destroyed or misunderstood. I'm afraid this may be another one."

She stared back, trying to understand but the cultural differences made it impossible.

He kept trying. "There's a movie called, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, you ever seen it?"

Maria stared at him blankly.

"All right, there's a book too."

No recognition.

“Anyway, it’s about this confectioner named Willy Wonka who did all these amazing things with sugar. In fact, he had one giant room made up entirely of candy.”

Maria stared at him because this whole thing was becoming more and more bizarre to her and now the American was talking about a fictional candy maker. Meanwhile, she had an invasion to rest up for. She couldn’t imagine what his point was going to be.

“And in this giant room he had a chocolate stream and chocolate waterfalls and flowers and grass and it was the sweetest room ever.” Eke paused. His face looked off into the distance and then back at Maria. “Well, there’s this song he sings as he introduces his creation into the world.”

“And the first line goes, ‘If you want to view paradise, simply look around and view it.’”

She smiled.

“That’s how I understand life to be. Sometimes it’s heaven, and sometimes it’s hell. It’s whatever we create for ourselves.”

“And what are you creating?”

“I don’t know,” he paused. That’s what I am here to find out.”

XIII

Eke and Bill made it an even 50. Fifty men. They would launch the assault with 50 men split equally – half in front of the house and half waiting in the back.

They sat in the woods outside the compound. All of them.

Quiet.

They'd been here a while now, having crawled for about a half mile and then settled into a watching mode. Eke calmly went over the plan in his head. He and the others had been told it in detail early this morning before they headed off in a convoy of one jeep and several Toyota vans. Down the road they'd gone, an hour and a half more- and when they were dropped off in the woods outside the compound, everyone except Eke took a ceremonial tug off of one of the two bottles the general had brought along.

"No thanks," said Eke.

No one cared that he declined, they just passed the bottle and then when they were finished they split into two groups and began to crawl slowly to just outside the compound.

And now they watched. Quiet. That was their job for now, to watch and learn. They looked for patterns. Although this house had been scouted before and the patterns well established, they were waiting in order to be sure that what they knew was what was true.

The established pattern guarding this compound was a combination of dogs and guards – rotated on half hour tours of the perimeter. Thus, once every hour the guards toured the perimeter and once every hour the dogs did – split a half hour apart. Dogs, a half-hour later guards, and then half an hour later dogs again. The dogs, it was agreed, were more troublesome than the guards and should be avoided.

The compound itself comprised of three acres that was surrounded by an eight-foot concrete wall of Spanish design.

They waited. For two hours they sat and watched the rotation and even got to nickname the guards, Chubby and Limpy, because one was fat and the other one limped.

Information was that there were 20 men guarding this compound. That gave Eke and Bill's group a 2 to 1 advantage and the element of surprise. It seemed like it should be easy. And the plan, Eke had to admit, was a good plan. They had, of course, offered the sniper job to Bill and Eke because in their brief tour of the camp firing range when they first arrived, they proved to be great shots. But Eke would have none of it. "Only a fair fight," he said.

Of course, invading a compound with the element of surprise and a 2 to 1 advantage wasn't exactly fair. But neither was what the horrific man living in the compound was planning to do to the people of Honduras. This was war, or at least a lot like it. Thus it was as fair as could be, since all is fair in love and war.

He looked over at Maria. She was crouched down two trees over. He could see her hair, the outline of her curves and speaking of love; he wanted to be in love right now. Maybe he was. How can love be a one-way street? He hated that it was, but as he looked at her with her gun clutched in her hands, it all felt incredibly romantic and thrilling. His heart was pounding.

It was close to starting.

The general nodded and two of his best marksmen stood quietly next to their respective trees. And right on cue, Chubby and Limpy began their tour of the grounds. They all waited quietly and patiently as they saw them head away from them, around the perimeter in the other direction. And soon, they would be back this way. As they disappeared from view, Eke used the moment to sneak another glance at Maria. This time she turned and looked at him. She gave a thumbs-up.

He smiled.

She said, "Thank you." And then she turned away.

Chubby and Limpy came back into view. Eke knew the moment of truth was upon them. He could almost hear a clock ticking in his head. Each second, each moment, was vivid. He was alive. Alive!

The two guards were close now. Each step they took seemed to be accompanied by a loud drumbeat as the marksmen raised their rifles and took aim.

Eke held his rifle up now too, but he didn't aim. He was just ready in case the sniper missed.

The first loud shot echoed through the woods and as it did a large part of Chubby's round head disappeared. The body spun; there was

a flash of the color red. Blood. And then a second loud shot before Limpy had any time to react and he took it right in the chest. More red. Within an instant, both bodies were down. And the assault was launched.

Eke looked up to make sure the guardhouse was cleared and then he put down his Winchester. Bill did the same but Bill used his right hand to grab a Mach 10 that he had hanging around his neck.

Eke reached down for an AK 47 that he had stashed in the woods. Maria gave it to him and he liked it immediately because it was easy to use and he knew that it would last and not break down.

And they charged.

In their group, eight sets of three men attacked the compound with eight foot, wooden ladders. Two men hoisted a ladder while the third quickly climbed – making for eight men busting over the wall at once. The other two men in each group followed quickly after. Eke and Bill trailed behind and by the time they were to the ladder, all the men were over the wall and a canister had been sent over the other side, creating smoke for the intruders to hide in.

And they'd heard shots – lots of shots. The sniper shots had drawn attention, of course, and now the compound was coming to life and looking to defend itself.

The job of the first crew over the fence was to kill everything in their path. It was plain. This was not a job for pussies. This was the real thing.

Eke's heart was pounding as he climbed a ladder. Bill climbed one next to him.

As they got on top of the wall, they looked back to the unfortunate bodies of Limpy and Chubby, and then down on the other side of the wall two other guards for the compound lying in their own pools of blood. They looked around and saw none of their comrades were hurt. So far, so good.

The whole group was gathered, quiet, pointing, using American Sign Language. They'd all learned American Sign Language for the light and Morse code to use in the dark. Eke had to hand it to the general – he was prepared as were his men.

Eke surveyed the compound. It was immaculately landscaped and these plants stood as barriers for the intruders, although they were aware that the men on the inside knew these grounds better.

Still, Eke knew what to expect. He'd seen the floor plan, as did his comrades. Still, those on the inside had time to dig in and find a place.

As the group paused for a moment to gather themselves, Bill and Eke floated towards the front and the others let them. The group was now dividing to cover the entire compound and at the rear entrance to the master's quarters, the Americans took the lead.

Bill nodded at Eke. Eke acknowledged his friend and they took positions outside the door. Bill to the left and Eke to the right. Meanwhile, three of their comrades positioned themselves on their stomachs with their guns aimed at the entranceway.

Bill kicked in the door. He dove away and the men on the ground began firing. A few shots came back but they missed everyone and soon there was a loud cry and then another. Two of the enemy were hit. Just then, on a signal from Eke, the shooters on the ground stopped and Bill and Eke charged into the room with their guns blazing.

As Eke ran into the room and turned right while squeezing the trigger, he scanned the area as he fired, looking for bodies that may

not be dead yet. And when he found one, he pummeled it with bullets. Bill, on the left, was doing the same.

From further in the compound they could hear sporadic gunfire and there was no real way of knowing whether the shots were being fired by their comrades or by the men trying to protect this compound.

By the time Bill and Eke had finished firing, their three comrades on the ground had reloaded their weapons.

Smoke was in the air but this room was now quiet. Eke pointed to a door. That way.

He led while Bill, Jacque and Maria followed close behind along with the three shooters. They stepped quietly.

Meanwhile, the compound was awash in noise. Shouts, gunfire, screams and footsteps. It was a cacophony of random noise and Eke had to force himself to stay calm and think clear thoughts.

They crept into a hallway. Eke was in the lead and Bill was right behind. Slowly they went. Methodical. Following the plan. Eke went through it all again in his head. Room by room. A sweep.

As Eke approached a door on his left, his heart was pounding through his ears waiting for another confrontation. He pushed open the door and burst in! His finger was sweaty on the trigger and he

was about to start ripping this room to shreds but when he looked to his right something stopped him cold - huddled together on a couch were five young women in maid's uniforms. The hired help. Eke looked at them, these tender young faces, and his immediate thought was that this was no place for these girls. They needed someone to protect them.

All five women's eyes were huge and terrified.

Eke smiled and aimed his gun away. "Don't shoot!" he yelled to his comrades, who were rushing into the room behind him. "Look."

They looked. Bill looked. Bill looked at the girls and then at Eke and then at the girls again. Then back to Eke and he said, "I know what you're thinking."

Maria knew too. She shook her head. No.

"You're right," said Eke, reluctantly. "Not my type." His instinct was to stay back with these girls, protect them, and hope that one or all of them fell madly in love with him for his strength and braveness.

"We're not finished," said Maria.

Gunfire suddenly exploded from another part of the compound. The fight was still on. The good part of the scenario for Bill and Eke was that everyone in their group was still alive and unharmed. The

bad part was that reinforcements to this compound were only a half an hour away and that half hour was already ticking, as Eke was sure someone inside contacted their allies as soon as this began. Tick, tick, tick...it went along with the beating of his heart.

Eke told the girls, "Stay here, we'll be back."

They smiled meekly and then Eke and the others left the room and closed the door. With Eke in the lead, they began to worm their way down the corridor. At a staircase, Eke crawled slowly up while Bill, Maria and the others stood below with guns aimed at the next level of stairs.

Eke paused and listened. He heard nothing. He motioned for the others to follow and they did and then they all headed up to the next level. Out the door they went, into a hallway. As they first entered, they all jumped and spread out, aiming weapons every direction.

Nothing.

Eke was holding his breath; the air was tight in his lungs but he didn't even know he wasn't breathing. Tense, on edge, but alive – very, very alive. Finally, he exhaled. He looked around. Something about this felt too easy. It's not over. He could hear Maria's voice in his head.

And then, in a pause in the gunfire, they heard a creak in the house. It was near. Eke's eyes felt like they were coming out of his head, he was looking so hard. All of his energy was focused in his eyes. And his legs, his arms - all of his muscles were in on it. But it was his eyes that the focus was most tense.

As Eke looked around he noticed for the first time the interior of this house. The staircase was made of Ceiba tree; the very tree that the city (the third largest in Honduras) was named after. The walls, both American carpenters noticed, were made of rosewood paneling. And lighting the staircase was a chandelier.

They heard the creak again.

"My turn," said Bill. He took the lead and Eke stepped aside. Bill slowly led the group down the hall towards a door on the right. He waited. "Guess their not going to invite us in," he said to Eke.

"Nope. Don't imagine they are."

And so Bill pushed open the door, let out a five-second burst of bullets and then jumped back. Just as he jumped back a piece of rosewood paneling shattered into a hole. Someone shot back.

"He's hiding around the corner," whispered Bill.

"What was your first clue?" asked Eke sarcastically.

Bill smiled at his friend. This was, of course, the exact perfect time for two friends to laugh at each other – the tensest of moments. Eke was glad that Bill was here at this time. It felt, somehow, safer. Bill, it seemed, was always a step ahead, one beat better, and it was reassuring to know he was here. Bill, unlike Eke, quit drugs before being forced into rehab. Bill was always a little louder, a little faster.

Eke pondered life as he watched his friend kick in the door one more time and then the shooters rushed the room while screams echoed only a second before the voice inside went silent. It happened so fast that Eke was still thinking about all the things he'd been through together with Bill.

The room was clear. Bill gave the thumbs-up to Eke.

They went down the hall to a large living room that was divided by a wall running through the middle with an open doorway between. This, Eke had been told, was a luxurious house in Honduras. It was big, for sure. But luxurious? Maybe in Honduras but where Eke was from this would not be luxurious furnishings. Nice, sure. But that was it. Nothing special.

What was special was how amazingly exciting this felt at this moment. Everything had gone right, the bad guys had acted like bad

guys and Eke felt the most alive he'd ever felt in his entire life – a literal adrenaline pump.

And then, from further down, more gunfire. A scream. Eke recognized the voice as one of their comrades from the mess hall. They ran and when Maria came in she saw that a man named Chico had been hit in the leg. She ran to tend to him.

At that exact moment, Bill turned and saw a man on the ground. Bill had his gun aimed and Eke saw the whole thing, and just as Bill was about to shoot the man screamed “Viva Sanchez!” Then in English, “Don’t shoot!”

The muzzle to Bill’s gun went from aimed at the man’s face to up in the air. Eke could tell by looking, Bill almost shot the man. He saw his friend’s face change. Holy shit. Eke watched. The man’s hands were together, as if praying. Holy shit. Then the man’s hands were up, flashing all five fingers. “Viva Sanchez,” he said again, talking about the general, Maria’s father. He was one of us, thought Eke. And then Eke thought for only a second further but he realized as he did that he had no idea until now that this man was one of us. Eke would have shot the man. Imagine.

It was then that Eke realized that he just wanted this finished now. The excitement's been great, he thought, but it's time for the final play.

The man pointed. That way.

Bill gave the thumbs-up.

Maria said, "We're not finished."

"Then let's finish it," said Bill.

Eke followed. He followed as he'd been following Bill for ages now, into a danger, into an adventure and a rock and roll joyous shoot-bang affair. Let's go. Eke followed.

Joyous.

For a moment somewhere in slow motion, joy was exactly the feeling coursing through Eke's veins because he knew that he and his lifelong friend had accomplished something good – no, more than good – great. No, not great – great! Talking 'bout a revolution. No, not talking.

Cautious. Bill proceeded cautiously down the hall. Eke followed, as did Maria and the others. Eke saw Jacque now. They were all here, for the final assault. He could feel it upon them. Bill led the way.

It was time to flush out the rest of this floor – one room at a time. The first door Bill reached he began, “WHAT WE HAVE HEAR IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE,” the door was opened with a kick. Eke smiled when he heard it, it was one of his favorite movie lines. His muscles were tense.

As Bill jumped in and scanned the room with his gun waving, he saw nothing. Meanwhile, Maria quickly checked under the bed and behind the curtains. Finding nothing, they walked slowly out of the room, scanning it one more time.

Next door, next line. “SOME MEN YOU JUST CAN’T REACH,” Bill shouted this time as he again kicked the door. And again they filled in and found nothing.

And on they went, down to the end of the corridor. Bill continued with one door to go, “WHICH IS THE WAY HE WANTS IT- WELL.” That was the cue for the others outside.

This time as Bill kicked open the door he just grunted, and as soon as that particular door was kicked open, two men rappelled from the roof to the outside deck and shot out the windows to this room.

Bill signaled and they went in with guns blazing. Bill first with two guns, each waist high, firing away. Then Eke and Maria, same

stance. Maria went left, Eke went right. As they went in, they noticed this was a bigger room than other others. Fire was coming their way now, from all inside the room. It seemed like there were five in here.

Eke looked over into a closet mirror and saw a reflection that aimed him right to one of the members of this compound. Sweat was pouring down the man's stubbled face and Eke saw he had a machine gun and so Eke fired, hit the man, and then dove to the ground and rolled away. More fire was returned from over by the beds and Maria, seeing something by the beds out of the corner of her eye, turned and fired. Two down. And just then Bill turned and saw two men by the other bed and he hit them both with quick fire from his machine gun.

But there was one man left and Bill didn't see him. Maria didn't see him.

Eke didn't see him either, until he saw him shoot. And then he saw...

Bill.

No!

Bill stumbled back and fell slowly to the ground. He twisted. He landed on his knees. His right hand stayed right below his heart.

And Eke started shooting. And Maria started shooting. And the man took a dozen bullets in a couple of seconds. But it was too late.

Bill. Bill was hit. He was groaning. And somehow, quickly, it became the only noise as all the gunfire stopped. They heard footsteps and then Jacque's voice. "It's over. It's over. Hold your fire!"

Over? Bill was in agony. Eke rushed to him. "Bill, you okay?"

Straining to talk he said, "It's more than a flesh wound."

There wasn't a lot of blood, but the location of the wound was ominous. Right below the heart, maybe the lung. Bill was gasping.

"Hold on," Eke urged. He started to put pressure on the wound but he could feel his friend's heartbeat fading. Bill's eyes lost focus.

"Hold on!"

But it was too late.

"Hold on!" Eke screamed again. Bill was slouched. "Shit!" said Eke. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

Eke didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to think. He was panicked. He looked at Bill.

Bill! Nooooooooooooo!

Maria came to him. "We have to get going," she said.

"But..."

“We’re finished here,” she said. “We’ll bring your friend’s body with us. But we must leave.”

Eke’s mind was spinning. *We must leave. Bring your friend’s body, your friend’s body...* It was all foreign, so foreign. No! He could feel his mind as a muscle, straining. No! He wanted to do anything except think. Into his mind came a vision of Bill’s mother, hearing this news. He could see her face clear. Eke had talked Bill into this. He closed his eyes as tight as he could.

XIV

“Come on,” said Maria. “We must go.” Her words were forceful and she was grabbing Eke’s arm. Next to him, two men had lifted Bill’s body and were carrying it to the van.

Eke stood. He followed and it was a good ways through the woods to the vehicles. Everyone was silent. Maria walked next to Eke but there were no more feelings inside of him. He was numb. Numb to her; numb to everything.

When they finally reached the vans, they loaded Bills body into the back of one and Eke climbed in next to the body. Maria was in the van too, along with a couple of others. But this van was, out of respect, given to Eke and his dead friend.

Dead. Bill. No. Eke didn’t have any energy left to freak out. But he knew it would come again, like waves – a tsunami of anger. Now, he was numb.

He was alone. His best friend, who he had talked into this adventure, was gone. Eke was afraid to be alone. Even when Bill made him angry, he was still his friend. They'd been through so much together. Now this. Now Eke was alone.

On the long trip back to camp, Bill's body got colder, stiffer, bluer. Eke stared at nothing. They bounced along. The vans split up when they could. They didn't want anyone looking for them.

It was so weird. The others in this group were very happy at how the mission had gone. They only lost one man.

Only one.

It seemed to take 15 years but finally they arrived back at the camp and immediately Eke went to get the truck. He would be taking Bill away, back to the un-built cabin and then to the plane where he would fly his body back to Massachusetts and look Bill's mom in the eyes.

As he was about to leave, Maria came over to him, put her hand on Eke's arm and said, "I'm sorry."

He wanted to hit her. He didn't know what he wanted to do.

"Yeah, sure," he said.

"But thank you," she said. "You've helped save our country.

Thank you." She smiled.

Eke just hopped in and drove away without looking back. He realized then that he didn't really care about her country.

All he could think about was how angry he was at himself.

Suddenly in the middle of the road on the way to the cabin site, he started screaming, "Arrogant fuck! Arrogant fuck!" Every mistake he'd ever made came flashing before him. They all led to this. He kept driving.

XV

Eke stared at the television in his mother's house. He'd been numb since he arrived back here in Massachusetts with his best friend's dead body.

Now what?

He had to go back one more time to pick up some things. Maybe he'd go down and build the cabin. He didn't know. It was ready, after all. But then what? Find a girl? Ha, that's funny.

He didn't want to talk to anyone. Facing Bill's mother had been horrifying and dealing with authorities had been ridiculous and bureaucratic and accusatory. He stared, hardly listening when he heard a news report that brought him to full attention.

"Last week, in Central America, the newly elected leader of a free and Democratic Honduras was gunned down in a brutal ambush at his compound in rural Honduras. It is said that one of the guerrillas

that was killed was possibly American, and many are questioning whether he was a member of the CIA,” said the newscaster.

Eke heard no more. The newly elected leader was gunned down...?

But I thought...

Eke was stunned. Wait a minute, he thought to himself, that can't be right. A member of the CIA? Bill? No, no, no. But who cares about that now. *Are they saying that we fought for the wrong side? No, that can't be right.*

But it was. They weren't working to help Honduras. It was the opposite. They helped destroy a legitimate government. Oh my God! Could it get any worse? Could it? Could it get any fucking worse? Oh my God.

Why did we go down there? He wondered. Always, always... always – good intentions turn bad. And now Bill was dead. And for what?

For a thrill? That's why they came down here – for a thrill? No, it was more than that, right? Or was it? They came to be involved in

something bigger than themselves. So now Bill's dead. That's pretty big. How thrilling.

Shit, thought Eke. Shit! What was he thinking? Was he even thinking? Going down and getting involved in something he knew nothing about. Shit! It was now clear, way too clear that he really knew nothing about what he was doing.

Nothing.

He was never fighting for the good guys. He'd been fighting right alongside the bad guys. He thought of Maria. Unbelievable. He'd been deceived. But it was worse than that. He'd been stupid. And now he stared at a photograph on his mother's wall of his family from when he was young. That was a long, long time ago – back when dreams seemed like they could come true.

Just then his mother came in the room and offered him some food but he hardly heard her. She looked frail. He hardly noticed. He just stared and said nothing. So she left the room and he just kept staring at the walls. His heart was pounding, and his mind hurt.

And then suddenly...

Suddenly...

Eke had clarity. He knew what he had to do. There was nothing else left. Nothing. Not a thing. And so...

Yes.

He knew.

Knew, just knew. Yes, he knew all right.

He'd do the right thing. For once in his life – finally - with absolute clarity, he'd do the right thing. And he'd do it not because it was about him. No, this wasn't about him at all. That's' why this decision, this monumental decision felt right.

His heart pounded and his eyes felt grounded in his head. He had clarity.

He would fly back tomorrow.

XVI

Eke wore a blue Hawaiian shirt. He would start, he decided, as a tourist and he tried to appear wide-eyed. He was wide-eyed all right. He was back in Honduras now with a new mission. This time he was alone, all alone. Bob Dylan once sang, "There's no success like failure and failure is no success at all." Somehow, now, that seemed an appropriate attitude. The tourist walked.

Here he was, back in Honduras walking by the capital building. He'd hardly said a word to anyone in two weeks. He'd been quiet, it was all happening inside of his mind. No more talking. Talking to Bill's mom, and then saying goodbye to his own mother were both incredibly difficult. Just thinking about it forced painful tears to form behind his eyes. But he held them back and he'd held them back and stared at nothing for two weeks and now he was numb.

Numb and ready.

The wrought iron fence was eight feet tall. He walked by it nonchalant, like a tourist. And he noticed, looking around, that there were tourists here.

He felt a sudden twitch inside. He didn't want innocent people getting hurt. He just wanted to get everybody else, all of them.

He wanted revenge but that wasn't really even correct. He wanted to make things right - to right a wrong. Plus, he now had nothing to lose. He had explosives taped to his waist. He'd already lost.

As he walked, he looked all around to see if anyone was watching, picking his pace up slightly. His heart quickened as he nonchalantly reached into his travel bag he was carrying, looking just like a tourist, and tossed two packets into the air. They landed on the other side of the fence.

The air was calm. The air was dry. Dry air, he knew, was good for explosives. So as the packets landed and he fingered the button in his pocket (but didn't push it – yet), he approached a side road on the left and up ahead, on the right, he saw the main gate and quickly assessed the situation. If he was correct, this first part should work easily.

What a beautiful day. That's what he thought as turned down the side road and quickly ditched his blue Hawaiian shirt for the white Izod underneath.

The cargo pants he was wearing were special. These were expensive pants all right, but they were a bit different than those \$100 jeans that were just coming into vogue in 1983. In fact, Eke laughed to himself, these pants cost a lot more than \$100 and although he was looking to make an impression, he didn't have a lot of interest in fashion.

He was interested in action. These pants were baggy. He had modified them with Velcro openings on the inner calves for quick access to the big guns he had harnessed to his legs. He was dressed and ready. He ditched the travel bag on the ground. No need for that anymore.

So he smiled. He didn't know why, but he smiled and it seemed like it might be the last time. He stood on the side road and looked around, making sure that there were no tourists close enough to the packets to get hurt. Then, with adrenaline pumping, he slid the protective shield away from the ignition button on the remote and he pushed it.

The ground shook. He was frightened.

Immediately he played the part of a frightened visitor and everyone turned and looked as the three guards ran towards the explosion. And as they did he pushed the button twice while simultaneously pulling out his silenced nine millimeter to shoot the remaining guard. He grabbed that guard after putting away his firearm, and pulled his body into the guard post located on the fence exterior.

Meanwhile, the main door of the capital building opened and more guards poured out and ran towards the explosion on the left side of the building.

And that's when he took his chance, stepping out of the guardhouse, and moving onto the premises. Quietly, he dropped one of the explosives and moved on. The time to detonate would come later.

Frightened, still using fear as his ally, he looked frightened like everyone else. Chaos was his friend. He raised his arms, showing he was clearly unarmed. And then, frightened, he made a break for the cover of the building's interior. No one paid attention to him. He wasn't a threat. They wanted to know about the explosions. And he

dropped another packet off to the side to lessen the chance of anyone innocent getting hurt.

He kept the nine-millimeter hidden. He wished that he had floor plans to this complex, and he wished he knew where the guards were posted. Information is as important as weaponry but he would have to go on his instincts.

And he would have to figure out who is who in the grand scheme in here. Some men, he knew, would be here just because of circumstances. They needed a job. Others – well, they would get what they deserved.

There were two sets of stairs – one in the front by the main entrance and one in the rear of the building. He headed towards the back because he figured that most of the guards would be running towards the front. He was right.

He hoped he'd continue being correct. His plan would end in disaster one way or another, but he preferred it to be on his terms.

Around back, he found the stairs and started running up them but halfway up, he thought he heard something so he stopped and nonchalantly bent to tie his shoelaces. He kept his head down,

hoping to avoid eye contact but a set of eyes had made contact with him and now the hairs on his neck were standing on end.

“Que pasa?” A thin man with a long chin was staring at Eke, and a gun was pointing lazily at Eke’s head. The man didn’t seem suspicious enough to be really worried. More following protocol. And that was his last mistake.

Eke snapped his left arm upon the gun and then he set his feet and hit the man with a perfect uppercut. The gun came loose. Like that. Eke jumped for the gun, turned, and shot.

And that’s when the switch finished switching. Right then, there was no more turning back, no chance, no how, not even God himself was going to stop this now.

Suddenly, death became video game easy. It was like living in a movie. He could hear movie lines in his head and this whole final scene seemed to have a soundtrack of songs he somehow found thematic to his life. It was the final scene. He was sure.

Eke knew his death would come just the same as all the others. But not yet.

He would be careful. He was not committing a random act. This was the real thing somehow. He didn’t even know what that meant.

Real. This was real. His heart was pounding, so he slowed it by controlling his breathing. In, out. In through the nose... one, two, three... Seven counts. Out through the mouth for seven. In, out. He did it and it worked. He was back in control.

A little late to learn this trick, he thought to himself. Yet, it worked, and for the next half hour he knew he would be grateful. Yes, a half hour tops. What was he thinking? Everything in his life seemed so wrong. Always. Holes were dug and then when he realized he was digging a hole he usually dug faster. And here he was again. Digging, digging...

What was he thinking? He wondered a bit himself. After all, he had said he was against terrorists and their cowardly ways and here he was, a fucking mimic.

But not a complete mimic of terrorists. The ends, he began to realize, were justifying his means and that perhaps compromised his ideals. But – duh! – he'd compromised his ideals a lot more the last time he was here when he helped the bastards overthrow a legitimate government in an operation that got his best friend killed. Ideals? Fuck those. Somebody killed Bill.

Yes, Eke was angry. He tried to breath again. Get it under control. He dropped the last explosive and moved on. And he then he pushed the button three times and heard the charge in the front go off in a little confidence builder.

As soon as the explosion occurred, Eke heard the quick crackling of gunfire. Everyone was frightened. He knew he was at an advantage because of one reason only – he was the only one who knew he was the only one.

The illusion of many was being created by the explosions. Eke smiled. He held one of the Uzi's in his right hand. He heard gunfire from up here too, on the second floor.

So it was time to let them know he was here. He aimed the gun with his right arm and sprayed down the stairs. Then with his left arm, he reached into the Velcro of his pants and pulled out the second machine gun. He moved up the stairway in a crouch.

He felt gleeful. But that wasn't right. It was more like manic desperation. Suddenly, he heard footsteps flying down the hallway leading into the staircase on the second floor. Towards him, they were definitely coming towards him. He stayed crouched. He was maybe 20 feet from the corner and as they turned the corner he shot

them down before they even knew he was there. He took a deep breath, as they fell, gasping. He shot again.

And then he headed towards the corner. But behind him, he heard more footsteps, coming up the stairs. He turned and instinctively shot again and then watched as the first two men fell and then two others ran around the corner right into his line of fire. Ducks. Like ducks in a line.

But the fifth man stopped before Eke could hit him. He backed up into the stairwell for cover. Now Eke didn't have the right angle. And he had to get rid of this guy and move on before others had a chance to corner him.

He shot once, just to keep the guy honest and hidden in the stairwell. Then, he assessed his situation. The hallway seemed a key link through the building. Quickly, he shot again towards the stairwell.

And then after putting one gun down, Eke grabbed a grenade from one of the many pockets of his trousers. He pulled the pin, counted one...two... and he tossed it down the stairwell. One problem solved- he picked up his gun.

He made his way down the second floor corridor. He was bouncing back and forth, looking out ahead of him. With his head on

a swivel and each hand holding a gun, he kept his nine-millimeter in his waistband of his pants so he could get it fast. He looked into a room on the right and it looked empty. He looked around again. He thought he heard something. He waited and then he dashed for the doorway on the right. He leaned quickly with his back against the wall and, breathing heavily but quietly, he reloaded.

As Eke was reloading, he thought he heard some rustling in the room across the hall. Fuck! He turned his gun into the hallway and just sprayed it to let them know he was still here. Now, he focused on the moment at hand, and on the room in front of him.

He worried about grenades. And then he remembered that they should also be worried about grenades. He pulled one out. And then he took a moment to collect his thoughts. He knew that they were in that room and he was pretty sure that they knew he knew. That made it fair.

He pulled the pin to the grenade. Then he kicked open the door, let loose a spray of machine gun fire and then let the grenade fly into the room. "Cunt-sucking bitch," he thought. "Why are they making me kill them?"

Boom!

Another problem taken care of. The hallway was long and there were rooms on either side but he had to get down the hallway to get to the presidential suite. He hugged the walls of the hall. He knew that whoever might be in these other rooms were not going to be friendly and he knew that they knew he was up here. There was, after all, the matter of the loud explosion moments ago. His eyes shot all over the place. His hands were tense, sweating.

But he was confident. Beyond confident. He didn't care. And he was very aware – almost hyper aware. So he noticed a shadow of a man crouched just in view in one of the rooms on the right. Eke fired and he saw the shadow fall but then he heard shots and suddenly the wall behind him was being shredded. Shit!

A cartoon voice echoed in his head: "Run away! Run away!" He laughed for a brief second. But then he came up shooting, both guns blazing as he rushed the room where he saw the shadow. As he reached the door, he used the gun in his right hand to reach around the corner and shoot. Meanwhile, his eyes were on the hallway and the other doors. He went into the room where he'd just killed a man

and looked down at the corpse. “See what happens when you don’t evolve,” he said to himself. How else to deal with this absurdity?

Humor.

He still had someone to deal with – someone who had shot at him. Instead of chasing the man back out of the room, he decided to duck behind a table and wait for a moment. To hide and wait. As he lay back there, he realized how everything up until now had always been wrong. And here he was, in his final stand, wondering if two wrongs can possibly make a right. He waited long enough. He stood and headed towards the hallway.

So far, he thought, at least reinforcements hadn’t arrived. When he turned into the hall, he just let loose, letting the guns fire and fire. He saw a man take many bullets. His body was so stunned that it just twisted with the firepower before finally falling into the moist red spot it created on the floor. Eke moved forward.

There it was – the presidential suite. Pay dirt. Yes, this pay dirt means dirt nap. But fuck it. He didn’t care. He was living with burdens and he was going to get rid of them, even though it meant disposing of his own life too. It was funny logic. But his best friend died and he was responsible for bringing Bill to his death. All of it was horrible.

As he stepped into the door, every mistake in his life flashed through his eyes. Even this. It wasn't just Bill that had been killed. Many innocent people had died too.

If anyone deserved to go to hell, reasoned Eke, it was himself. Every decision he ever made was wrong. How is that possible? It can't be, but it seemed so. Even his favorite foods were bad for him. Wrong, wrong, and then wrong again.

And now, he was here to make one final right.

He pushed open the door.

"Well hello, we've been expecting you." The voice and face was that of General Guillermo Sanchez. The bastard. An evil bastard and he smiled as such. It was a beautiful smile. His eyes glowed.

Eke glared. Ugly. This was one ugly situation.

"I am happy to see you," said the general.

Eke said nothing.

"I mean it. I know what you just did. And those men were important to me, it's true. But you. You are special."

"Special, huh" Eke said sarcastically. He looked around the room. There was Jacque on the left and Maria on the right, standing behind the sitting general. She nodded her head at him. Bitch.

The general continued. "Why fight among ourselves. We are all on the same side."

"Don't be so sure about that," said Eke.

The general's eyebrows went up. "Comrade, you should listen to me."

Comrade?

Eke couldn't argue. And that, of course, was the problem.

The general waited and then said, "This is about freedom. You know that."

"That depends on your definition of freedom" Eke stared down the general. "Freedom for Hondurans, Nicaraguans, or you?"

"We can both of us have great lives," said the general. He seemed to be changing the subject. And then he tried to wander back. "The two of us can do many great things, you know. We can change the face of this little corner of the world. People seem to pay attention down here right now, have you noticed?"

"I have noticed," said Eke. He began to slide the wire in his left cuff up towards his wrist. He did it slowly, while talking. "You remind me of a boss I once had. He was a shiny and slick public person who

seemed to be able to scam everyone but underneath it all, he was a snake. A fucking snake.”

“I am sorry you feel that way,” said the general, “Because, really, yours is the waste of a good life.”

“Do you think?” asked Eke.

“Oh yes,” said the general. “That is exactly what I think.”

Maria smiled at Eke. She looked almost sad.

“So you are going to kill me?”

“I am afraid you give me no choice.”

“You know, that’s funny. Because I figured as such.” He smiled at Maria.

She looked confused.

He then looked to Jacque, whose gun was holstered by his side as if ready for a draw.

“Well, are you going to pull that pistol, or sit there looking stupid?” Eke said while ready to draw his own gun from his waistband. They both grabbed for their weapons and each man fired a shot, both falling back simultaneously. Eke was hit in his right shoulder, while Jacque was hit in the gut- both men dropped their guns. Instead of picking up his weapon, Eke slowly pulled himself up

and sat in the empty chair that faced the general. He acted like he was scratching his right wrist and pulled the second wire down as he spoke.

“I’ve always said,” Eke spouted in between gasps of pain, “If I died right now, I’d be happy for two reasons.” The general seemed poised in front of this unarmed intruder.

Maria stared at him. Her face registered something. Happy for two reasons...she had heard that from him before. She was caught catatonic, thinking.

“For one, because I got a chance to live in this lottery called life,” Maria’s face, in shock, began to register as he continued, “And two, because for men like us, it’ll finally be over!” His eyes lit up. “Hell ain’t so bad, you’ll see! Besides, someone’s got to be at the gates to greet ya’!” And with that, he clapped his hands together and made the connection between the two wires. And for an instant, just as his hands came together and he felt the explosion begin to tear apart his body, he knew for the first time ever that he did not fail...?

Continued below...

To Saad and Mohammad bin Laden,

I too have been a coward for most of my life, hiding from my fears and emotions behind alcohol and drugs, and here you two and your daddy physically hide from the rest of the world!

You are no generals or leaders of any kind, now or in any fanatical death realm, because there is no true leader who doesn't have the freedom or control to travel the globe as they so choose - You can't even openly travel in whatever land in which you hide. YOU AND YOUR DADDY ARE LIVING IN SPIDER HOLES! Where it takes weeks, even months for you to be heard!

OSAMA BIN LADEN, YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN ARE
IRRELEVANT!

And I am willing to face any consequences for these beliefs and words I hold by meeting you upon any "Field of Honor" you may choose!

E.K. (1/1/10)

THE RULES ARE SIMPLE: After the seconds check the opposing weapons both men shall face one another the equivalent of ten paces, keeping their feet firmly planted to the ground. On the count of three (In Latin), each man can begin firing- the first man to knock his opponent off his feet is the winner. If an opponent moves his feet prematurely, or is not found to be sober, he will be disqualified!

