The Merchant of Death

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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December 2014

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University of California, Riverside
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Chapter I

Benjamin Cieza returned to New York City to claim his father’s ashes and take them home. Standing in the vacant apartment he grew up in, he reconstructs childhood scenes that coalesced, except for their empty frigidity. They’re all gone now, and he’d been left behind. He let the call from the funeral home go to voicemail. The urn could wait. His father had been dead three days, two years since his mother vanished into the ocean, and five years since his brother, Lucas, blew his brains out after returning from Iraq. The apartment sat empty, and with a flick of the light switch, forty years vanished. He keyed the lock for the last time, dropped it through the Super’s mail slot and exited the building into a bright summer morning.

He carried his father’s worn leather satchel to the dumpster and unceremoniously tossed it in. He turned to walk away and a black alley cat paused to look at him. His mother had a cat story that always stuck with him. Growing up, she tossed her cat out of the third story window in order to verify if cats truly had nine lives. The cat survived, though it never ventured above the first floor of the house. Benjamin missed the mischievous glimmer in his mother’s eyes when she told the story. He wondered how many lives he had left in him. He’d been lucky. His brother Lucas had not.

Clean cut, introverted, bookish almost, the war had scrabbled Lucas up bad. He returned home carrying all the shit Benjamin had learned to push deep under. It was the Cieza way, shove it all down and never say a word. Don’t let anyone think you’re a punk. It was the strategy that allowed them to survive the ghettos of New York. Benjamin
kneeled and the cat cautiously approached him, rubbing up against his knee with one eye keenly watching him.

“You’re a clever little fucker, aren’t you?” he said, while the cat emitted a low purr.

When Lucas’ unit took Baghdad, he’d texted Benjamin – I just shot a fuckin tiger! A fuckin tiger in the middle of the street!

The bombings had torn apart the Baghdad zoo, its menagerie of animals running wild through the streets as if they’d escaped from a children’s fable. A fuckin’ turkey shoot, he heard the A-10 drivers say over the radio as they roared overhead and pounded the Republican Guard, lighting the desert on fire for miles. Benjamin’s unit had been in and out before the fighting stalled. They were never there, off the grid, marking targets, erasing their tracks. He was part of an invisible army. No insignias, no uniforms, no flag, they moved from one hot spot to another, taking their orders from Frank, an old school special operations Colonel who’d been run out of the Army after his team had gone rogue in Grenada. Frank gave him a week to clean up his family business, but with Frank there was no charity. He had orders to clean up a threat in New York and rendezvous with an extraction team in the jungles of Ecuador. “It’s a milk run,” said Frank, “take your father in, bring a package out.”

In the alley, sunlight filtered unevenly through the endless vertical grid of fire escapes. Threadbare dresses, worn jeans, and colorful blouses fluttered on clotheslines that stretched from one building to another. He continued to kneel, rubbing the cat while a trickle of tired immigrants exited illegal basement apartments.
“Buenas,” said Juan, the Super, who scanned the contents of the dumpster for anything of value.

“Good morning,” said Benjamin. He watched Juan pull out the satchel.

“Es tuyo, si?”

“My father’s.”

“Toma. Take it. It looks valuable”

Benjamin hesitated, and then took it from him, turned and began to walk away. Juan threw a crumpled beer can at the cat, crossing himself and saying a silent prayer to ward off the evil spirits.

“Que lastima con el veterano, pero esta con Dios,” Juan yelled out. Benjamin walked on, grinding his molars. With God was the last place he envisioned his father being. He quickened his step and exited the alley, turned the corner and headed for the E1. He was behind schedule. Frank would call any minute to bust his chops. He had a job to do and his father was now a distraction – a promise to a mother who walked into the ocean carrying Lucas’ ashes, leaving behind a note: *We should never have left.*

*Remember, take him home.*

He walked amongst the morning waves of brown people exiting buildings; all heading for the red serpent of a train that made its way to a place that remained foreign to them and to Benjamin. They watched him cautiously from the corner of their eyes, just as their kind had in the jungle villages of Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, where he’d spent the past fifteen years playing cat and mouse with the cartel and its army of narco-guerillas.
Like a miscued video, images of his mother came to him with an intensity that made him stop and lean against a parked car. The satchel fell to the ground and he put his hands on his knees while waves of nausea passed over him, and a cold sweat covered his body.

The VA doctors put a nice neutral label on his condition. PTSD. They continually asked him about his relationship with his mother. “I don’t have one – she’s fuckin dead,” he’d reply every time. They prescribed pills he threw out as soon as he left the hospital.

Two years, seven months, fourteen days. He kept a mental calendar that moved with him regardless of how much he tried to forget the day she walked out into the ocean. She left, just like his brother, and now his father. He was alone, the only string, a promise she extracted to take his bastard of a father home when he died.

“Promise me,” she’d said. “If you’ve ever loved your mother, promise me you’ll carry him home when the time comes.”

“He deserves to die in a ditch,” he’d said and before the final syllable exited his mouth, Carmen smacked him across the face. “Alright,” he said, “For you, and only for you.”

“You don’t understand him. Both of you – stubborn as mules,” she said. “Remember the beginning, that was your father. When the time comes, you’ll need to find your uncle Jaime. He has something you’ll need, something that will take away the pain. It was a mistake to come to this country. But you still have a choice to make.”

He straightened up. Stoic mothers passed him by with worried looks, fathers gave him a knowing nod, themselves still feeling the alcohol burn in their stomachs while they
trudged to work. He hadn’t seen Jaime in years, not since his team had dropped deep into
the Amazon and flushed out the narco submarine. He’d lingered a few days, playing
tourist in a world that until then had only come alive through the nostalgic family stories.
He found an endless array of family he’d never met, yet who seemed to know about him
and the perceived good life the Cieza’s of New York lived. More of his father’s lies.
What did Jaime, that goat smelling jibaro, have to do with him? He kicked at the satchel
but hit the car instead and ate the pain that immediately shot through his foot. He
remembered his mother telling him every time he stubbed his toe, he was breaking a tiny
set of bones. *Bones heal, mijo, while other breaks last forever,* she said to him after he
returned from a deployment in the God-forsaken jungles of Panama, having missed
Lucas’ funeral. All that remained of his brother lay inside a small wooden box. He didn’t
stay long, on a flight out to Turkey that night.

The rush of people increased. The El sucked the inhabitants of the neighborhood
every morning, only to spit them back out every evening. No one stopped to talk, few
walked counter to the flow, and no one smiled except for the children, who smiled and
stared at him before their mothers scolded them. They were the same faces he’d seen
across the Americas, crowds steady and unrelenting, driven north by fear, remaining
without hope. He looked down at the satchel, then up the street at the El. Another train
left the station, heading toward the city. He was late, and they would argue. He had four
voicemails from Chloe, two from the funeral home, and one from Frank, which he
immediately erased. Take care of Ramirez, drop the girl, pickup father’s remains, make
the flight, and find Jaime.
He walked past the Korean fruit vendor, glancing at the mangoes whose sickly sweet aroma flooded his nostrils. Going up the stairs, he felt out of place, his rhythm not matching the intensity of the workers moving with a sense of purpose and the small victory if they caught the earlier train. There was always an earlier train, a sucker’s game. The crowd nudged up to the turnstiles and the incoming roar of a train grew louder, causing an increased momentum. People bounded up the stairs two at a time. He pulled himself to the side and allowed others to pass. He watched them watching him with unease. They had seen him before, thousands of miles away, the hundreds of soldiers he’d trained at the School of the Americas, all with the same dead eyes. He’d taught them the art of counter-insurgency and they’d quickly turned it on their own mothers, devouring their own.

“Capitan,” said a man, giving him an uneasy and deferential nod. He hadn’t worn a uniform in years, but they smelled it on him, accustomed as they were to evading the secret police.

The train swallowed up the next wave of riders. He felt panicked, and decided he would walk to Ramirez’s. Frank had been clear – asses and terminate if he poses a security threat. Back on the street, he came upon the Korean fruit stand again, picked up a ripe mango and handed the grocer’s son a dollar. He walked on, took a deep bite, devouring it peel and all, sticky juice traveling down the tight tendons of his tattooed forearm, where a black panther snared.

He walked westward on Queens Boulevard, toward the 59th Street Bridge. Above, a train full of people made its way toward the tunnel that would take them under
the East River. Echoes of a lost childhood flashed across his mind. He had chased Lucas down these streets long ago, laughing and screaming past the ever swollen sidewalks full of people, on days so cold Lucas’ nose would bleed from the icy air. One particular echo called to him and he turned in on 46th street, and found himself standing in the neighborhood park. Once upon a time, his father brought them here during overheated summer nights so he and Lucas could cool off in the shallow park pools.

The pools were gone, replaced by sprinklers. He watched little black and brown kids chase each other through the mists, their grandmothers gathered under shaded benches. He found an empty bench and sat down, placed the satchel next to him, and passed his hands over the veiny cracks in the leather. Once, the satchel held his father’s collection of how-to-learn English tapes, bought from a traveling salesman, a Cuban, whose accent-less speech, he swore, was a result of using the tapes over the course of six months.

The phone buzzed. Frank again.

“I’m on it, Frank.”

“I know, Benny-boy. I’m just calling to chit-chat about the weather.”

“Fuck off. I need some time.”

“Can’t do that. We got a job to do and the Foggy boys are up my ass.”

“I said I’m on it.”

“I don’t get it. You never liked the bastard, so why not just flush him down the toilet.”

“Frank, you’re a real asshole.”
“It’s why you love me.”

Benjamin hung up.

He toyed with the brass latch, sliding the latch and letting the hinge flip up with a terrible impact. He removed his father’s journal, and just held it, rubbing his coarse fingers across the worn pages, many of which had been ripped out.

An old woman asked if she could sit. Benjamin moved the satchel onto his lap and stuffed the journal back in.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you from your work.”

“It wasn’t work.”

“That satchel looks older than you.”

“It belonged to my father.”

“I know,” she said.

“What?”

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” she said. “I saw you from my window and had to come over to make sure – you look exactly, I tell you, exactly like your father did sitting here thirty years ago. We could be back there right now! Just like then, men don’t sit here in the morning, unless they’re in between jobs. That’s why I noticed you. You’re like a rooster in a chicken coop. It’s like it was then - well, except that people spoke English back then, and everyone wasn’t walking around talking on their little fancy cell phones – what can be so important that they can’t wait to see the person?”

“Lady, I have no idea who you are.”
“Meg O’Reilly. I took care of you and your brother when you were just so high,” she said, motioning with her hands a height Benjamin could not even believe he’d ever been. “When times were tough and your mother couldn’t afford to pay me because your father was out of work, he’d watch over you two here in the park and he’d bring along that very briefcase. He’d listen to some tapes he said were teaching him perfect English.”

“Sorry. I just don’t remember,” said Benjamin.

“Young people,” she said, nodding toward a teenager walking by, “They like those fancy backpacks that carry everything, and walk around with their pants falling off their backsides. It wasn’t like that when I raised my boys.”

Her hair was dyed a red not seen in nature and she wore a dress that every woman over sixty bought at some woman-over-sixty-store with its endless array of pockets and floral patterns. He noticed the crucifix around her neck. The tortured Christ caused him to look away.

“You don’t live around here anymore, do you?” she asked.

“No,” Benjamin said. “Not for years, anyway.”

“We moved here back in 1961. I’m sure you weren’t even born. “I raised five boys in that apartment,” she said, pointing to one of the hive apartment buildings that surrounded the park in a neat rectangle of bricks. “See, that’s my window there – the one with the rose colored pillow. Personally, I like the heat. Air conditioning is a waste of money. I mean, who has that kind of money to burn?”

“Good boys, no doubt,” said Benjamin, getting ready to stand and leave.
“Devils, every single one of them,” laughed Meg. “You would get into fights with Paulie over the silliest things. You boys were really something.”

Like a flash grenade, the name Paulie triggered a series of memories for Benjamin. He remembered now, the holy little shit who relentlessly picked on Lucas, resulting in fights that had Benjamin coming home with swollen lips, bruises, and his mother receiving complaints from the old hag now in front of him.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love my boys, but they were a handful, especially the oldest. You must remember Paulie, don’t you? You two were pretty close playmates.”

“He was a bully and Lucas and I hated him – we hated you for always taking his side. You knew, but you did nothing,” said Benjamin.

“Well, I’m sorry, none of us are perfect. You have no idea what it’s like to raise five boys in this city. Not like I had any help from my Henry – when he wasn’t in the factory, he was at O’Rourke’s spending half of his paycheck. How is little Lucas? He was such a quiet one.”

Benjamin paused, catching the screeching sound of the little boys who bounded through the sprinklers. He could pick out the brothers, the way they managed to stay close, seemingly attached by rubber bands. He’d let Lucas down. He should have stopped him from signing up. He was suppose to take care of him, no matter what.

“He turned out OK.”

“Believe me, it can be worse,” she leaned in conspiratorially, and lightly touched him on the arm. Meg eyed the satchel on his lap, looked up at him and laughed.
“My youngest – you remember Neal, don’t you? He tells me I can’t mind my own business. That’s why they’ve abandoned me. They don’t invite me to their homes out in their fancy towns. One of them has a beach house in Connecticut and you’d think they’d invite their mother,” said Meg. She shook her head, and gestured absently with her hands, vaguely to the northeast.

His mother had disappeared there and after the Coast Guard called off the search, he spent the rest of the summer combing the beaches, chartering boats to search for her. Frank had been a royal pain that summer, never quite crossing the line, though Benjamin thought long and hard about killing him. Teams had to be diverted to pick up the slack, but “That’s what we do in the brotherhood,” Frank said. It was all bullshit.

“You look like you turned out to be a nice young man,” Meg said, breaking him from his thoughts. “Tell me you’re good to your poor mother.”

He thought of his empty San Diego beach house, how he lived just far enough away that they never asked to visit, not that he was ever home long enough.

“We disappoint, don’t we.”

She looked hard at his face and found the answer.

“I’m so sorry, dear. Crazy old woman that I am, I forgot you’d lost your mother.”

Lost her, how appropriate. When exactly had he lost her? Was it the day Lucas decided he’d had enough and checked out or the day she decided to walk out into the ocean? Lost, not to be found, and yet still out there, somewhere.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he said, about to stand and leave.
She reached over and placed her blotchy hand over his. Benjamin rested his eyes on the age spots. He tried desperately to remember his mother’s hands, unstained and lily white. Home after Lucas’s funeral, he found she had aged, like cracked concrete.

“After I lost Henry, everything stopped tasting like anything.”

He continued to focus on her hand, her green translucent veins. He remembered visiting his mother, and how each year since Lucas passed away, she seemed to have aged a decade. He wished he’d been kinder, stayed longer. Lucas was his fault. He was supposed to protect him, but they broke him over there in ways he could not fix. “The fuckin sand,” he would yell, coming out of a nightmare on Benjamin’s couch, “I can’t get the fuckin sand off me!”

Benjamin would sit outside the bathroom, as Lucas took long steaming showers, going through an entire bar of soap, trying desperately to wash away the sand. Through the thin wooden bathroom door, Benjamin could hear his brother crying.

"I have to get to work," he said, and took his hand back.

"Look at them. So young, so full of life,” she said, watching the children scream and jump through the rainbows forming through the watery mist. “It’s not fair.”

A light breeze brought the misting water toward them. She closed her eyes and Benjamin watched her drift off in her thoughts.

Benjamin hesitated. He needed to move on but found himself anchored in place, captivated by the old woman. Unable to raise the anger he remembered feeling for her every time his mother dropped him off at her apartment before heading off to work. He remembered when the family was still Catholic, she’d taken them to St. Patrick’s during
the scorching summer days, taking refuge in the cool shadows of what seemed a cavernous sanctuary from the chaos of the street. The pews were never full, and a constant stream of people moved about the edges, entering and exiting on bent knees, the smell of candle wax and flicker of candle light illuminating both the grief and joy of those that lit candles on their way out into the rumble of Fifth Avenue. He lingered on the memory, her iron grip on his hand and looking up at her while they walked up the center aisle to the very front pew, where on bended knee they’d recite a prayer Benjamin could no longer remember but whose melody remained with him all these years. A merciful and distant God with whom one spoke to in the sanctity of the Church, unlike the later day Protestant God that kept watch on their every step, and imposed a terrible price for sins committed.

"Goodbye," he said, standing up.

"Such a nice enough young man you’ve become, letting this old woman share a park bench and listen to her crazy talk," she said, her eyes again on the children playing, though Benjamin noted the cold, hollow look on her face. A predator’s gaze, a hunger he’d seen far too many times in the mothers, whose children had disappeared, picked up by death squads he helped to train. He had the sudden desire to choke the life out of her.

Benjamin walked away, moving along the perimeter of the park, passing close enough to the absent minded grandmothers and caretakers that they stopped gossiping and watched him with stern eyes.
“Watch them close. Kids disappear from this park, murdered everyday,” he said in Spanish, inciting a panic as they called their children to them and to the annoyance of the kids, quickly toweled them and yanked them away to their overheated apartments.

A text from Frank: Wheels up at 2200.

At the other end of the park, he could see the old woman had gotten up and left. She would return, he was sure of it. Boys would go missing.

He sat in the now deserted park, opened the satchel, and fingered the noisy vellum sheets full of sketched houses that would never be built. He remembered his father sitting at a desk constructed of a long thick piece of hardwood and two salvaged, paint speckled sawhorses. Benjamin watched him from the doorway, the room dark except for the spot of light a desk lamp cast. He watched his father work with pencil, compass, and protractor on sheets of vellum. Curious to see what he was doing, he'd attempt to make the slightest of noises, hoping to be invited in without exactly announcing his presence, having been forewarned by his mother to leave his father alone. It never worked.

Benjamin remembered his father as a young man, one whose energy over the years would wane, whose body would fatten, whose shoulders would sink deeper into a permanent slouch. The laughter in his eyes would fade soon enough.

Under the vellums he found his father's bible, its leather cover worn smooth from the years, discolored where his father's palms rested, collecting sweat from the endless summer sermons. Benjamin smelled the bible, recalled happier days, before hell, rapture, and sin worked their way into every conversation. Without the priests, the world became a terrible place.
He recalled early memories of his father, sitting in the parlor around a roughly hewn table with two priests, loud and aggressive men in black cassocks that defied the searing midday heat. They sat under the slow churn of the ceiling fan, smoked short, stout cigars, and raised squat glasses of scotch his father received from a German ship captain whose vice for poker found a willing benefactor in Benjamin’s father. Loud, smoky laughter, they touched on subjects that, while he could not comprehend at the time, Benjamin knew were inappropriate. His mother would walk into the room with a sour look and slam the tray carrying ice water and cut papayas. Benjamin remembered the metallic sound the ice cubes made when they crashed out of the aluminum pitcher, onto the table, and down to where he sat on the ceramic tiles playing with paper boats his father made from the morning paper.

"Calm down, mija," said Pedro, placing his hand lightly on the small of his wife's back.

"You could at least take that pestilence of a smell outside into the yard. It'll ruin what's left of the boy's lungs," said Carmen, her eyes locked on the Catalanian Jesuits, who momentarily stopped breathing, the rich smoke of the Cuban puros lingered in their lungs while they reached for their tumbler, exhaled into the glasses and drank, adding an earthy tone to the overly dry Scottish drink Benjamin would later grow overly fond of, the smells of that long ago memory wrapping itself around him long after the men around the table died.

"Carmensita, por favor," said Ramon, the older priest, while the younger edged his body away. On numerous occasions he’d had the door of his office nearly unhinged
by the less than pleasant visitations Carmen made to complain about, in one way or another, the lack of cojones, she said, the priests in this country had.

"Mira, padrecito," she started, in a slow and deliberate manner, her left hand on her hip and her right finger inches from the old Jesuit's face, his eyes quickly losing the cloudy fog the scotch produced.

"Mama, you're stepping on my fleet," said Benjamin. Carmen's red leather pumps inadvertently crushed the flagship of Benjamin's paper armada. They all looked down at the boy, Carmen, her anger set aside but not forgotten, gave the old priest a look and a raised eyebrow that said they weren't finished, not while they were in her house. She knelt down to gather the fleet and Benjamin in her arms, refusing Pedro's attempt to help carry the boy. She exited the room with Benjamin in tow, insisting he needed a bath to cool off and wipe the dusty grime of this misbegotten nowhere town of Carabuya, from his skin.

He removed the journal, closed the satchel, and waited for a moment before opening it, as maybe it would speak to him. He recalled the old man wrote at night under the sanctuary and solitude of a dim desk lamp. Benjamin, awakened by nightmares, would walk toward his parent's bedroom, halting in the dark hallway, having come upon the hunched over figure of his father at his desk writing intently. Now, Benjamin followed the delicate cursive, the lasting influence of the elementary Catholic education his father received. His thoughts raced across the years. Flipping pages, he found a note the summer it all began to fall apart.
July 4, 1977. Another son on the way. He’ll be bigger than Ben or Manolo, bigger than me. I could hear him tumbling around in Carmen’s stomach before I left. I’m worthless and God will punish me, I told the padrecito at confession today. Told him about Mari, about Manolo, about the miserable lies I have to go through to make it all right. It kills me to lie anymore.

He’d heard rumors of his father’s whoring over the years, but this confirmed there was another family. He had another brother, both a stranger and a bastard. Benjamin’s phone vibrated. Chloe again. He scrolled through her text messages. Manipulative, needy, weak; he grew tired of being there for her. Another lose-lose relationship, he’d allowed to linger. Pack and go, clean up loose ends. There was old Rameriz who needed to be taken care of. He’d started talking loosely at the local pub and word had gotten to Frank. Word always seemed to get to Frank. Clean it up, he’d told Benjamin. With Frank there was always an angle. It couldn’t just be that he was in New York to deal with his father’s death. For Frank, death was a commodity to be openly traded, sought after. Benjamin needed time. It would be his call, it always was with guys like Frank, who kept their hands clean.

He walked along the cracked sidewalks until he reached Aviation High School, where it all began. He walked the perimeter until he came upon the yard, where the majestic old warplanes he’d worked on twenty years ago stood like giant model airplanes. He gave the gate a tug and walked through and up to the old Texan AT-6, its yellow paint faded but otherwise like he remembered it. He knew he’d find Ramirez, his old teacher, inside; though he hoped he wouldn’t.
He jumped up on the wing, tugging at the cockpit hatch, it slid open, and he climbed in. The shadows cast by the hanger masked him and the aircraft from the summer sun. Benjamin smiled while he moved the control stick, activating the rudder behind him. He remembered having to replace the entire rudder linkage during sophomore year, with Ramirez, the old Korean War vet grimacing at him the entire semester until he finished. Ramirez gave him a gruff nod, and said "I've seen worse," before walking off.

Benjamin flipped open the journal. He read an early entry, the date catching him by surprise, January 21, 1968, a year before his father put him and his mother on a plane to New York, and traded one world for another. He closed the journal, unsure if he wanted to read on. Flipping rapidly through it, his father's elegant penmanship filled the pages. He focused on the dates of each entry, spotting years that passed by, linked with images he didn't care for, and finally reaching the end, where the back remained blank, the opposite page bearing a date three days after his mother's death.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing in there," said a voice. Benjamin looked up and saw Ramirez, sure enough. His hobbling walk as familiar as it had been years ago.

"Mr. Ramirez, it's me, Benjamin Cieza. I was one of your students twenty years ago."

"I don't give a rat’s ass if you're the Pope's son. You can't be in there and I'm calling the cops if you don't get the hell down and out of here," he said, and stood by the wing, his hands on his hips, wearing a blue faded shop coat.
Benjamin made his way out and down onto the wing and slid down to where Ramirez stood, the old man continued to scowl, though Benjamin could tell he was racking his brain to see if he could place him.

"You're the smart brother," he said. "I remember you. You did the half ass cable replacement on this old bird's rudder."

"That’s right."

"It was the worst rudder job I’d ever seen."

"It's good to see you too, Mr. Ramirez."

"Where’s your lazy log of a brother?"

"Dead."

"Dead? Well, shit, I'm sorry to hear that," he said, though he didn’t seem all that sorry. “He was a good kid. Lazy, except when it came to finding some way to get my blood pressure up, but a good kid." He stuck his hands deep into his coat pockets. Maybe he was sorry.

Silence filled the space between the two men. They avoided each other's eyes, and looked about the yard at the old war birds with their faded paintjobs.

"I thought you’d retired by now," Benjamin finally said.

"Yeah, I tried that. Didn't work out at home."

"I’m glad you're here," said Benjamin. He passed his hands over the smooth rivets on the fuselage of the Texan.

"This you're gonna love. Come with me."
He led Benjamin around the scattered array of WWII and Korean War aircraft positioned about the yard, toward the hanger. They entered the same door Benjamin ran through during freshman year, sent on a fool’s errand by another shop teacher to fetch a bucket of propwash. The seniors in the yard, who were gathered around Ramirez, broke into laughter at the time-honored tradition.

Immediately inside the hanger sat a silver Mustang P51, which made Benjamin freeze, his mouth ajar.

"Amazing," he said, his hands stretching out before him like a zombie, passing them along the gleaming cool aluminum fuselage.

"Like it, eh!"

"Love it. This is priceless. How did the school manage to get one?"

"School nothing, I got this baby. It was in the collection of Colonel Russell, 454th Fighter Wing out of Okinawa, my old C.O. When he passed away a number of years ago, his wife contacted me, said he had left something for me in his will. Now ain't she something," said Ramirez, rocking up and down on the balls of his feet. He looked to Benjamin like he would tear around the hanger at a full trot.

Growing up, Benjamin built model after model of P51’s, his shelf full and his bedroom ceiling covered with dangling models of the old warbird in various configurations. Emilio Ramirez had the real thing. Back in high school, the rumor was that Ramirez had survived the bloodiest Christmas on record at the battle at Chosin and took no shit from anyone. There were rumors about him, hand to hand after the ammo ran
out, after the bayonets fell away, and all that was left were men strangling each other to
death on frozen fields that were so far from God.

"Looked to me like you were reading something important out there in the
cockpit," said Ramirez. "Why don't you finish up what you were doing in this baby? I'm
over in the office so no rush. Just stop by before you leave."

Benjamin nodded. He thought to bring up Frank, but didn’t want to soil the
timelines. This place meant something. It was worth protecting. Frank was wrong about
Ramirez, dead wrong. He was no more a traitor than he was. Benjamin was sure of it. No
further invitation needed, he climbed up onto the wing, and slipped into the cockpit with
a fluid motion. He watched Ramirez shuffled off, his teacher looking old once again,
making his way toward the dimly lit office at the far end of the hanger. Ramirez had
planted the seeds. Go Rangers and be a man or go home and play with your pecker. Frank
knew Ramirez, gave an asshole’s smile and clammed up when probed about it. It hadn’t
been an accident he ended up where he did. They recruited him and groomed him from
the start.

Sitting in the cockpit, Benjamin played around with the instruments, moving the
rudder and ailerons and for a moment, he was over the skies of Germany, a Luftwaffe
aircraft in his sights. He thumbed through the book again, his eyes focused on the
feminine curve of his father's cursive, one of the few things his father was openly proud
of. He took time in the late evening to write to his brother, Jaime, back in Ecuador on the
old aerogramme stationary that he continued to use long after it went out of fashion.
Benjamin thought of his own sloppy handwriting, and how he tried to emulate his father's hand, though it never came close.

"You're lazy," his father would yell. "You need to practice and practice and practice until you think your hand is going to fall off, and then practice some more."

The fucker had been right. It had gotten him through Ranger School. Opening up to the inside front cover, he began the journey down a blind alley. He ignored his vibrating phone.

January 1, 1968. She won't let it go. Keeps coming around with the same boogie boogie story about blood oaths, panther cults and the boy. Carmen is actually listening to all this Montuvio mumbo jumbo. I need to get them out of here. I'd freeze my balls off in Quito if I thought she would stay away but she shows up like a ghost. Jaime is looking into the trip north. Crazy loon doesn't have a passport - see if her mumbo jumbo can make it all the way to the yanqui cities. The old man really left a giant fart for me to deal with here. I'll send them north while I wait for Jaime. Damn her and whatever curse she thinks she holds over us, I'm not giving up the boy to some demon cult. Where the hell is Jaime?

A curse? Benjamin leaned back into the tortured leather of the cockpit seat. Shit. There was talk early on, snippets he’d hear during hushed conversations his father had in the early days when he called Jaime, back when an international call was measured in dollars per minute. Something to do with panthers and demons caught his boyhood attention, but nothing that made sense.

He texted Frank: I need Jaime’s cell.
Frank responded: dossier waiting for you in Quito. 593-4-211-1111. Ramirez taken care of?

Benjamin dialed, about to hang up when he heard a man’s voice.

“Who is this?”

“Uncle Jaime, it’s Benjamin.”

A pause on the line. “Nephew, I got your telegram.”

“He passed away in his sleep, if that helps.”

“That brother of mine could always be found sleeping. I guess it’s better than other ways.”

“I fly out tonight.”

“Fly into Quito. I’ll text you the hotel where I’m staying.”

“I need to ask you about something I found in his journal. He mentions something about a curse.”

Benjamin waited, and repeated, “Uncle Jaime. A curse. He mentioned you. This is 1968. What the hell was he talking about?”

“My brother was a stubborn mule. He thought he could run away. Look, nephew, find me in Quito and we’ll talk. I tried to tell you when you came to see me – remember?

“You were drunk.”

“So were you, and we remember it anyway, si?”

“Quito. Stay put. I’ll find you,” said Benjamin, ending the call. A minute later, Jaime’s address in Quito appeared.
The colonized mind. Benjamin knew it well from his naive lefty professors at Berkeley. Distracted from the shame of being conquered, tribes made up myths about the return of a liberator – Ulysses, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Santa, Bolivar, Fidel - all meant to soothe over the pain of losing on the field of battle, having the women raped, the culture razed to the ground, the boys killed, the women made to carry poisoned, mongrel blood of empire. Rage with no balm, no exit. Suicide.

Benjamin remembered the visit with Jaime. They drank enough to make the rest of men around the fire, experienced alcoholics, fall off, stumbling home or laying out like corpses around the fire pit. Only Jaime and Benjamin remained sitting, still passing the pure cane liquor that sloshed around at the bottom of the recycled Coke bottle. The look on his uncle’s face made Benjamin think the old goat had been testing him all along. Men drink when words become unbearable to speak. And so Jaime began a story that held Benjamin’s attention, a story of a boy who would grow to unleash an old prophecy, one of a people who long ago made a deal with the devil disguised as a panther in order to hide the source of healing from Conquistadores who hunted the last of the healers relentlessly. Few remembered, even the fairytale, and even fewer were entrusted to guide the chosen back to the source when the time was right. Benjamin and Jaime laughed and finished off the last of the liquor, but before Benjamin blacked out, he remembered Jaime’s words: *That my long lost nephew, is the curse of the Cieza men. Find your way back, boy. Before it’s too late.*

The metallic tapping caught his attention. Ramirez stood by the leading edge of the wing with a small milled hammer he’d seen in his hands twenty years ago. He used
to get their attention during lectures on airframe repair by tapping it, sometimes on their heads. Benjamin slipped out of the cockpit and onto the wing, taking a knee.

“Lucas was a rock, but he would have made a good officer,” said Ramirez.

“You told me I was wasting my time applying to West Point.”

“It wasn’t in you. You didn’t have the polish. First borns never do. You grow up dreaming less and believing in nothing.”

“Jump School was a breeze.”

“My grandmother could make it through Jump School.”

“Frank says Hello.”

“You’re full of shit. Frank and I haven’t spoken since Chorwon. I should have put a bullet in him then. You’re still mixed up with him, aren’t you?”

“I guess.”

“You here to clean up for him?”

“Nothing like that. Random stop, is all.”

“Nothing is random.”

“That’s what he says.”

Benjamin leapt off the wing of the P51. He landed with noiseless, cat like precision next to Ramirez, who handed him a sheathed bayonet.

“Korean era. I thought you told us you lost yours during the battle?” said Benjamin.

“War is bullshit. You ought to know that.”

“We didn’t back then. We wanted to be like you.”
“Well, here we are then. Promise me you’ll give it to Frank when you’re done. He’ll know what it means.”

“Give it to him yourself,” said Benjamin, pressing the bayonet back into Ramirez’s hands.

They silently scanned each other’s faces, looking for the fatal twitch that would make one a liar and the other a dead man.

“Too bad she can’t fly,” said Benjamin, stroking the Mustang as if it were a dog.

“Those days are long gone.”

“You take care,” said Benjamin, extending his hand.

“Bah, get out of here. Get out of the business and go make some babies,” said Ramirez, giving him an iron-gripped shake.

“How do you know I haven’t already?”

“Fatherhood is a wound no man can hide.”

Benjamin glanced back at the Mustang.

“You leave some legacy here. You should think of heading down to the islands. There’s good fishing down there.”

“I can take care of myself, kid.”

“Then take good care, Mr. R,” said Benjamin, walking toward the hangar exit.

He’d head south soon enough; it was the last promise he made his mother, the last words they spoke. Meet up with Jaime, but first pick up the urn, pack, and make it quick with Chloe.

2200 wheels up. He had five hours to kill.
Chapter II

He’d gone to see Chloe and break it off, but she was out, so he borrowed her truck and drove to the funeral home to pick up his father’s ashes. His mother had burned it into him soon after Lucas killed himself, yet another unwritten rule and responsibility that came with being the firstborn, just like his father had brought him into the world, he now had the burden of carrying out the final steps.

“Promise me,” she’d said, “Promise me you’ll make things right between you and your father, that you’ll take care of him if something happens to me.”

Benjamin now realized she’d been planning on killing herself and he’d missed every sign. Walking inside the overly chilled air of Mission Funeral Home, Benjamin felt guilt at having mocked death, having sidestepped it so often that he patted himself on the back after every mission debrief. Frank told him he’d become a death junkie. Now, only he remained, along with a half brother, and a trace memory of a small boy wishing his father dead. What took you so long, he thought and immediately regretted it, feeling no sense of satisfaction.

The gray velvety walls absorbed most of the purposefully toned down light. A single green shaded desk lamp, like an island, gave off a serene, inviting glow, like the Berkley library desks where he’d fallen asleep many a night. He felt like walking out and getting some air, but a tall dapper man in a well-tailored suit walked in silently, seeming to float on air, neither his shoes nor body making a stir until he was next to Benjamin.

“You must be Benjamin. My deepest condolences,” said the man. Benjamin made an uneasy face.
“My name is Mr. Greensmith. If you’ll follow me,” he said, bowing slightly at the waist. He made way for Benjamin to pass, “we can take care of the final arrangements in my office.” The office was colder than the waiting area.

“Now here are your father’s papers, including his passport. At your request, I’ve packed the urn in a suitable travel container,” he said, handing Benjamin a manila envelope. Benjamin thought it insane that the ashes of a dead man required a passport to exit the country. It was to Benjamin, a laughable irony, to have his father’s final exit delayed because his papers, once more, were not in order. Frank had called in a favor at State and a passport had arrived overnight.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll be right back,” he said, heading out a door at the rear of his office. Benjamin imagined it led down a cobwebbed staircase into an ancient basement kept at such a low temperature, that even if the dead wanted to return, they would freeze to death.

About the office, clocks in every shape and form lay about, each, Benjamin noticed, synchronized. On the wall behind the man’s desk, a large bronze sculpture depicted the severed pleading hands of Jesus.

Mr. Greensmith returned carrying a small, well-packaged box with official looking stamps and a packing slip on top. He placed it on a burnished side table. Benjamin wondered how many souls the little table had supported. At least one more, he thought, turning his attention back to Mr. Greensmith’s monotone voice, who recited a scripted condolence, the words, like the place, empty of life.
Mr. Greensmith got up from his chair, walked around the desk, and stood before the side table. Benjamin got up, thinking he didn’t want to miss his cue, almost laughing at the ridiculous act he was taking part of. Mr. Greensmith lifted the remains of Pedro Cieza and handed them to Benjamin, and said, “Go in peace.”

Benjamin placed the manila envelope on top and walked out the door, trying to erase the image of the place. At a fast clip, he headed into the fading afternoon light. Waiting for the traffic light to change, Benjamin glanced down at the box lying on the passenger seat. He wondered if his father could breathe, tracing the outline of the tightly taped box, it seemed airtight. Behind him, the blaring sound of a car horn set off a spark of rage inside Benjamin. He pulled the emergency brake, opened the door, and walked in an overly calm manner back to the car of an extremely overweight middle-aged man driving a Lincoln. Benjamin could hear the man’s power locks clacking loudly, his wife screaming at him and warning off Benjamin, who approached the driver side window. He stood still and erect before the man’s window, looking down into the man’s glaring eyes but unable to release the rage that quickly extinguished itself. He thought it odd that he was standing outside this man’s car, not sure how he had gotten there.

Time, he thought, he had stepped outside of time. How else could he explain the rapid jump of events that his brain could not account for? The man in the Lincoln continued to curse at him from behind the window, Benjamin unable to make out anything beyond the grotesque masks the man’s face went through in slow motion. He walked back to the open door of the truck, got in, methodically buckled his seat belt, and put one of Chloe’s Goo Goo Dolls CDs into the deck before putting the truck in gear and
continuing through the light that had just turned green. Behind him, an eerie sense of quiet had settled in, though traffic had piled up, people back a dozen cars getting off the hoods of their cars and back inside. In the distance, a police siren approached, while the flow of traffic smoothed out. Benjamin merged onto the southbound lane of the Henry Hudson.

He looked at his watch, a present his father had given him when he got out of boot camp. No doubt it had cost the old man two weeks wages, an extravagant purchase he would never have thought to get for himself. Benjamin glanced at the hesitant pause of the second hand before it moved on to its next station. Four hours till his flight. He pulled over into an emergency lane, lulled by the lyrics. He watched the steady roll of the Hudson making its way to sea. He took in the sunshine and sweep of the wind that hushed the flow of traffic to his back. He closed his eyes and imagined all the waters he had ever looked upon, imagined them all connected, flowing endlessly into each other. She was out there somewhere.

Opening his eyes he saw the figure of a woman ahead, atop a small knoll. She wore a blue hoodie and dirty mismatched sneakers, her face weathered but firm, her hair ever so slightly brushed by a gentle breeze. Standing firm, her gaze reached far north into the belly of the Hudson. She looked regal, reminding Benjamin of the Statue of Liberty. Immobile, thought Benjamin, realizing she hadn’t moved a finger since he first noticed her. He got out of the truck, drawn to her by a strange compulsion. He took a few steps before he realized he was in New York and his father’s ashes remained in the car. Doubling back, he took the box under one arm, locked the truck and turned to face
the woman who was no longer there. Benjamin moved up the knoll, pausing to look out onto the infinite, slate colored water. He sighed, taken aback by the tremendous weight of the waters, the low rushing sound the river made if one stood perfectly still, letting its power surge above the urban cacophony. Benjamin took a seat on the blue-green grass, reminded of the natural New York that lay just one step outside the narrow blinders most people chose to put on to get by. An endless green carpet stretched far north, on both sides of the river, giving the impression the place was deserted rather than sustaining the largest metropolis in the world. He remembered the California forest and vegetation, how they were artificially planted and kept green by what, till a few years ago, everyone thought was an endless supply of water. They would be painting their lawns green again this year, thought Benjamin, who detested the decadence of lawns. Outdoor carpets, his father had once growled, nothing of value, nothing edible, though Benjamin still caught the lingering envy in his father’s stare as they walked past homes in neighborhoods that would never be theirs.

Benjamin leaned back against a tree, letting it absorb his weight. He looked at the cardboard box, wondering if he had it right side up. His father would have loved this spot, he thought, remembering how the old man had taken him to the edge of the Bronx River, back in a time when small fishing boats could still be found trolling the water’s edge selling their catch to regular customers who came to get a good deal on fresh fish rather than pay the markup at the market. Now all one could see out on the water were the bleached signature sails of leisure sailboats and powerful yachts motoring aimlessly up and down the river.
He flicked open a small pocket knife attached to Chloe’s keychain, at first only making small slits in the cardboard box, then cutting out circular windows, sure his father could not find it comfortable to breathe inside. He finally ran the blade along the top of the box, taking a deep breath before opening the flaps and gazing in at the polished mahogany box, its smooth surface cool to the touch. Benjamin gently lifted the urn out of the cardboard box, raising it to his face where he read the inscription.

For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

It was the same inscription he had read on his grandfather’s grave when he visited while deployed to Ecuador years ago during the drug wars. He was surprised at the weight of the urn, how light it seemed, how small in comparison to the man who he only outgrew in stature his last year of high school. Benjamin placed the urn next to him on the grass, leaning back again, his fingers absently glancing over the contours, as if he were afraid of waking his father from a long sleep. His breathing became erratic and he tried controlling it in an effort to stop the inevitable panic attack. Maybe he should take the damn pills. Frank told him to suck it up, but there was nothing left to suck up, just dry heaves and cold night sweats that had him waking with a fear he could not make sense of, and so he cried until sleep came to him again.

He took off his watch, placing it atop the urn and continued to pass his hands over the smooth Mahogany, remembering the subdued violence that seems to always be present in his father’s voice. Although in the past few years, reluctant as Benjamin was to admit it, his father had gone through a profound change. The last time he had spoken
to him had been six months ago. He was in New York on a layover, had thought of visiting him, but decided to call instead, saying little, listening to him go on about uncles and cousins in Ecuador he could no longer put faces to.

“Hola papa,” said Benjamin, closing his eyes, he sat with his father now, his thoughts taking them out further until they were upon the surface of the Hudson, letting it carry them out to sea where the rapid Atlantic currents carried them south, heading into the warmer waters of the Caribbean, passing further south, through the Tropic of Cancer before heading west, crossing the futile locks of the Canal, then picked up by the warm Pacific currents, taking them south still until they came upon the dead waters of the Doldrums, before riding the mighty Pacific waves that made shore along the beaches of Carabuya. “Gracias, mijo,” said his father, emerging from the water. Naked, his brown body gleaming in the equatorial light. He smiled with divine pleasure, at last arriving home. “Gracias, mijito,” he said, turned laughing and ran up the beach where crowds of people gathered around to greet him with cries of joy. “Papa, wait. Don’t go,” Benjamin cried out in a small child’s voice he could not recall was his own. Slowly the undertow took him further out, though he fought to make it to shore, his eyes never leaving the figure of his father who waved vigorously, his spirit now free, he called out to his son, his voice becoming a distant echo, “Adios hijito…”

Benjamin felt the warmth of the sun emerging from behind dark clouds that now stretched across the horizon. He got back inside the truck, keyed the ignition, and placed the watch on his wrist, suddenly aware of the time.
“Shit,” he said, realizing he needed to get back to Chloe’s, needed to pack, needed to close up shop, again. He spun the truck around and back onto the highway. Looking back in his rear view mirror he caught sight of the woman again. In the background, patches of sunlight passed through the clouds. God-light, he thought, accelerating into the fast lane and barreled down toward Alphabet City. He parked illegally, placing a $100 bill in the visor for her to cover the ticket. He was running out of time, but he couldn’t quite just walk away. Something inside made him want to stay and hide with her. Let it all go. But he knew it wouldn’t last. It hadn’t in the past, and Frank was always more than happy to welcome him back.

She found him sitting across the street from her apartment on a park bench, watching a brazen squirrel sitting atop the bench waiting for a handout. She walked over, sitting beside him, the squirrel scurrying up a nearby tree from where it kept an eye on the two.

“Ben, what the fuck is going on? I know this is hard, but you haven’t said more than five words in the last three days. When my father died, I thought the world had ended. That no one would ever love me again. Stop fighting him, Benny. He’s gone and no one is keeping score anymore.”

“Stay out of this. You have no idea,” he said.

“Let him go, so you can go on with your life. If not, then you already know how you’re going to turn out.”

“Staring out the window in my pjs eating Capt’n Crunch all day long?” said Benjamin.
“That actually sounds pretty good right now,” she said, hooking stray strands of her red hair behind her ear.

“Something’s come up,” said Benjamin.

“Yeah, something always does. This mean you’re leaving?”

“It’s not fair to you. I got enough to worry about with high travel season starting at work and now this last wishes guilt trip I need to take care of,” he said, remaining in character, Chloe only ever knowing him as a coffee importer who frequently traveled overseas. “It just seems it’s better if we make a clean break,” he said, the words nothing like the ones he rehearsed.

“Don’t you get it – I love you – as fucked up as you are. You don’t have to push me away, you don’t,” said Chloe, glancing up at the squirrel that hadn’t moved.

“I’m not gonna say something stupid like…”

“Then don’t. Just don’t. Just go. I hate you. No. I hate me for being so fuckin stupid, for thinking we had something,” said Chloe, standing abruptly to go, but turning.

“This was all bullshit, wasn’t it? Just tell me the truth – this once.”

“It was all bullshit,” he said, looking down at his scarred hands.

She let out a frustrated growl, threw her hands in the air and turned to go, shouldering past bored pedestrians that had slowed in hopes of witnessing sidewalk drama.

He watched her blend into the after-work crowd, dodging pass people, leaving a wake of sorrow that made him want to run to her, stop her before it was too late. She
turned the corner and was gone. Benjamin looked over and found the squirrel hadn’t moved and said, “You in the same boat?”

The phone rang, Frank again.

“You know, you have the worst timing,” said Benjamin.

“Sixth sense. I know when my people are in trouble,” said Frank.

“No trouble here, boss.”

“You’re full of shit. How’d it go with Rameriz?”

“He says Hello. Says he misses the fun days you guys spent in Chorwon.”

There was silence on the line. “That’s real funny. You’re leaving me a mess, Benny boy.”

“Leave him alone, Frank. He’s harmless.”

“I’ll have a local meet you at the gate in Quito with a care package. Don’t screw this one up.”

“It’s my last job, Frank. I’m done.”

“We’ve been down this road before. You just need some time off.”

“What are you not telling me Frank?”

“Look, Benny, just pick up the package and we’ll have a serious talk. Trust me.”

“Frank, I stopped trusting you on day two.”

“Always said you were a little slow on the uptake, but you learn fast,” said Frank, ending the call.

He glanced back up at the squirrel, but it had vanished up into the high leafy branches. He leaned back and began at the beginning, thumbing through the journal.
while the sun passed low into the western sky, elongating the shadows of the boxed
canyon of a city. Benjamin came to the last page, slowly closing the journal, remaining
still, even while the evening bustle of the city made for a new type of electrical energy
that animated the nightly denizens of the metropolis.

“That son of a bitch,” Benjamin said, thinking how completely well hidden his
father had managed to hide the double life he led. A parallel life, lived between the off
the grid boonies of some malaria drenched otherworld and this electrified neverland that
for Benjamin, at times, seemed alien. Uncle Jaime. His father kept referring to him
throughout his notes, and yet like a shadow, had always been there behind the scenes. It
was Jaime, his mother had said, whom he needed to find. She’d made him promise in a
way she recalled her doing when he first stepped out and went to elementary school on
his own, knowing full well, somewhere back in the crowd of morning New York
commuters, his mother was following and watching over him.

He needed to find Jaime, be done with this last job for Frank, and bury his old
man. He looked at his watch, and saw he’d just make the flight. He grabbed the satchel
and tossed it to a homeless man panhandling, then darted out into the street and slipped
into a cab whose doors had just opened and emptied itself of rookie financial brokers.
Chapter III

The sun crested over the tips of the snow capped Cordillera. Benjamin entered the Valley of Life, walking along the washed out road into Loja. He’d landed in Quito in order to find Jaime. At the gate, one of Frank’s couriers handed him a dossier on Jaime and an envelope with instructions and coordinates for the rendezvous where he was suppose to pick up the package. He took a taxi to the hotel Jaime had texted him. As he read the dossier, it became apparent that Jaime had been moving about the last few months, something to do with his health. The dossier noted probability of death as high. Benjamin had sent him emails and texted before departing New York but received no reply.

Benjamin entered a small courtyard, smelling ripe of morning jasmine. An old man sitting at a table smoking a home rolled cigarette smiled at him, showing a row of rotting teeth.

“You want breakfast?” said the old man. “Sit, have a coffee.”

“I’m looking for Jaime Cieza. He’s my uncle,” said Benjamin.

The old man laughed, stirring four teaspoons of gritty brown sugar into the cup of black coffee and offering it to him.

“You’ve come a long way for nothing,” said the old man, a smile crossing the edges of his tanned and wrinkled face. “He’s gone South. Said his gringo nephew would come looking for him,” said the old man.
Benjamin looked about the courtyard, taking in the miniature garden blooming all about him, roses clinging to the walls of the building, rising up toward the surrounding balconies on the second floor. He tried calling Jaime’s cell but there was no answer and the system denied him voice mail option. He immediately texted him.

“A boy who knows the road to Vilcabamba will take you,” said the old man.

“Your uncle arranged it before he left. If you ask me, he wasn’t too sure you’d come.”

“We all have duties.”

“Tell me,” said the old man, “And your father?”

“He’s dead,” said Benjamin, “I’ve come to bury him.”

The old man nodded pensively and said no more.

Benjamin checked his phone. No messages from Jaime. He and the boy left Loja, merging with a pilgrimage of people in varying conditions of ill health who shuffled slowly but methodically along with them. War refugees, he thought. They looked the same in every country. The byproduct of the drug wars that Benjamin knew would never end and always produced more casualties among the poor, the bastards, and the hungry. It’s why he got out, and why he ended up working for Frank, and believing what turned out to be lies about bypassing the Pentagon desk Generals and taking the fight to the real enemy. He found out too late that he’d traded one leash for another, all of them just dogs of war.

Benjamin turned to the boy, who looked to be no older than ten. "What's your name?"
"Spaki," said the boy, taking a moment to help a blind man move closer to the edge of the road so he wouldn't be run over by careless army jeeps speeding by, “but they call me Sapo.”

They took turns walking and hitching rides with the passing farm trucks heading back into the valley now that the market had closed. By late afternoon they made it to the crest of a ridge, where the Cordillera sloped downward before rising up again further south. Below they saw a valley beginning to fill under the shadow of the mountains, while he sun moved on, making its final stand along the coast. Benjamin felt the mountain's shadow weighed on him. He thought of the rejuvenating power of the sun and how it danced off the California horizon he had been pulled from by his father’s death.

His old man was tough, like thick weathered leather. Benjamin pulled the book out of his cargo pocket and thumbed through it. Benjamin recalled the last time he saw his father, six months ago and how feeble and worn he’d become. Given to bouts of forgetfulness, he took to rummaging through his room looking for some lost book he’d misplaced, but could not remember.

“What are you looking for?”

“It has to be here somewhere.”

“Let me help.”

“It’ll come to me. Your mother and her obsession with cleaning – she was always moving my things around. Call her in, will you.”

“She’s been gone 2 years.”

“What? I know it’s here somewhere. I want you to have it.”
Growing up, the briefcase was a part of Benjamin’s obsession. He would listen for the telltale sounds that his father was about to go through its contents. He would post Lucas as a sentry. Like a wraith, Lucas was able to move silently down the creaky hallway. His father would pace around the bedroom, Carmen ignoring him, while she read the Bible. Pedro would finally interrupt her, asking if she had seen a particular sheet of velum he was using last month. She would, on cue, respond, and “Have you looked in the briefcase” without looking up. Benjamin would creep down the hallway on his stomach, Lucas waving him down, like he had seen done in countless Channel 5 war movies. They would peek through the partially closed door, while their father headed to the closet, moving aside bundles of fabric, an assortment of shoeboxes, and the thick wool blankets he had brought from Ecuador years ago. The embroidered panther images always frightened Lucas. They would watch intensely while their father, kneeling, pulled the small leather briefcase out, snapping open its worn brass latches, carefully observing the contents in silence. Benjamin was sure his father had memorized every last detail of where he placed each and every scrap of paper within, something he would have to be more careful about next time he opened it. And then, just like it had materialized, it was gone once more, buried until another one of his father’s papers came up missing.

Years later, on the night before Benjamin left for the army, his father called him into his bedroom.

“I have something to show you,” said Pedro, an impish smile crossing his face. He pulled out his briefcase and removed a wax envelope, handing it to his son.
Benjamin carefully opened the envelope, removing the old photo. The face of a lean man in olive green fatigues stared back at Benjamin from the picture.

“Is this you?” asked Benjamin, surprised his father had never mentioned being in the army.

“I was a private there, just out of boot camp,” said his father, coming around Benjamin’s shoulder, gently laying a hand on his head. Glancing back, Benjamin noticed his father’s face seemed to have changed, years having washed away.

“That was two weeks before the war started,” he said, taking back the photo and placing it in the wax envelope again, his face once more showing deep uneven wrinkles in the glow of the bedroom light.

He watched his father carefully place the wax envelope back in the briefcase and slide it further back into the closet, next to the stack of Old Spice boxes that quietly gathered dust.

“Just be careful,” he said. The two Cieza men stood before each other, the son narrowly beating out the father in height. “Your life belongs to you now,” said Pedro, giving his son a lingering handshake before he turned and sat at his desk to work on drawing of a house that would never be built. Benjamin hesitated at the door, saying goodnight, as he closed the door.

Sapo pulled on Benjamin’s arm, motioning they should be heading down before it got dark.

“Why the rush?”
"The road’s not safe from here on," said Sapo, beginning to descend, but veering off the road.

"Where are you going?" asked Benjamin.

Sapo stopped and turned, waiting for Benjamin to catch up.

"You can't take that road into Vilcabamba," he said.

"Why not?"

"Only dummies take that road," said Sapo.

Before Benjamin could continue to question him, Sapo picked up the pace.

Benjamin grew frustrated, but chose to follow, disregarding all his father had said about nothing good coming from gypsies. He hurried along, staying close to the boy, who swiftly managed to veer and shift the little weight he carried through the maze of trees, their white trunks taking on a commanding hue in the diminishing light. In the highlands of Columbia, he’d danced through a minefield once, guided by a barefoot boy younger than Sapo. They continued on, the boy slowing down to let Benjamin catch up enough to follow but not enough to give him time to ask more questions. They reached the valley floor in less time than Benjamin thought it possible. A shallow river flowed past them, gurgling over a bed of oval rocks that made a soothing sound. Benjamin, thirsty from the journey, stooped down near the running waters and scooped up a mouthful. He reached into his backpack, pulling out a granola bar and offered one to Sapo who smelled it before putting it in his mouth.

"It taste like shit," said the boy.

“You should know,” said Benjamin.
Sapo said nothing and handed the bar back, turning away from Benjamin, before turning back and snatching the bar from Benjamin’s hand.

Benjamin laughed.

"If you take that road, the guardians of the valley will see you coming and hide the real Vilcabamba from you," said Sapo, "The ancient people are the only ones that can see the guardians. That’s what people say."

“What do you say?” said Benjamin.

“I say I’m hungry.”

A cool chill passed over Benjamin's nape. Benjamin had heard of guardians before, remembering a childhood story he heard while motoring out to the Galapagos with his father and uncle Jaime before leaving for the United States, where they showed Benjamin the manatees that had once drawn his father’s attention. They showed him the manner in which the leaves of a tree sway when there is no breeze. His father told him they were the guardians, ancient ones from a time long forgotten, sad spirits who roamed the jungle and the waters, waiting patiently. “What are they waiting for,” asked Benjamin, but his father simply smiled, and said, “They’re waiting for you.”

"Why are there so many people on the road?” asked Benjamin now.

The boy shrugged his shoulders, trying to work his teeth through the granola bar.

"They sit out by the edge of town, if they see you pass, they change what you see," said Sapo.

“You’re a little old to believe in fairytales,” said Benjamin.
"We wait until the sun goes down. We sleep and in the morning we wake up already part of the valley, no longer strangers," said Sapo.

Benjamin nodded, going back to the river's edge and taking another drink to wash the gritty taste from his mouth. Tribal lore, not unlike the sheepherders in soulless deserts a world away, with whom he’d spend endless winter nights under merciless Afghan skies.

"Where are you from?" asked Sapo.

"Manabi," said Benjamin, tired of having to explain what he was doing in the United States, preferring the instant distance afforded Manabistas.

"Where is your machete?"

"I left in a hurry. Besides, people start looking for trouble that way," said Benjamin, remembering his father's answer to the same question.

"You ran away too," said Sapo, all smiles at having cracked a riddle.

"What are you talking about, mocoso? That granola made your cholo brain melt," said Benjamin.

"I know," said Sapo, "I know because I left too."

The two were silent, until Benjamin couldn’t bear the heaviness of the air, and asked, "Why did you leave?"

Sapo licked the foil wrapper.

"My mother couldn’t afford to feed me so she sold me to the gypsies," said Sapo.
The sun dropped behind the Cordillera, bringing with it a purple tinted dusk. Benjamin couldn't tell if the boy was giving him a line. He looked at the boy’s matter of fact face, watched him attempt to will more from the wrapper.

"The old man?" asked Benjamin.

"No. She sold me to a bad man. Marpo, he's good to me, gets me work and pays me good. He even lets me go on the long trips the Gypsies go on when they pass through the Cordillera," said Sapo.

Drug mules, thought Benjamin, giving the boy a closer look.

Benjamin saw the look of hunger on the boy's face. He too was hungry, and hoping they could go into town to find a meal.

"What are you looking for?" said Sapo.

"I don’t know," said Benjamin, grabbing a fist full of the moist valley earth, rubbing it through his fingers while they stood by the river’s edge. “About time we went in, isn't it?"

The boy scanned the sky.

"We can start going in, but we still have to go some, and we have to come in from the mountain side," said the boy.

Benjamin walked ahead until he heard the boy's whistle.

"We have to cross here where the rocks can be seen, that way there are no tracks left on the riverbed," said Sapo.

Benjamin removed his boots, Sapo a pair of ragged sneakers.

“Those are soldiers boot?” said Sapo, hesitating and looking like he would run off.
“They might be,” said Benjamin.

They rolled up their pants, entering the icy mountain waters.

Once on the other side, they paralleled the river that ran along the edge of town. Finally, they came across a small stone bridge. On the other side they could see dim lanterns lighting the dirt street. They made their way across, Benjamin once more felt a chill run down his back. A small stone house sat on the far side of the bridge. In the front yard a Papaya tree blossomed out of season. They passed the house and a door creaked open. The two stopped, and turned to face a squat old woman. Dressed in black from head to toe, she walked out onto the road, removing her shawl to reveal a mane of silver-gray hair, shining in the early evening moonlight. She motioned them toward her. Benjamin looked at Sapo but he too seemed unsure, but the old woman continued to wave them toward her, her mouth showing a smile that had long ago lost most of its teeth. Benjamin walked toward her. He felt there was something familiar about her. Her smile grew and she whispered, "Come inside. There are no beds in town. Here you can sleep and eat for a small favor you can do an old woman, yes?"

Sapo stood next to Benjamin, he seemed unsure still, but offered no resistance to the offer. She led them inside, lighting a kerosene lamp at the entrance and slowly but methodically going about the room lighting two other lamps, while she mumbled something under her breath.

"Have you come far?" she asked, looking Benjamin in the eye, her small frame growing in the light of the room, now filled with the warm matted colors of the embroidered wool blankets hanging from the walls like tapestries.
“I’m looking for my uncle,” said Benjamin.

“He is well,” said the woman, her mouth widening into a smile.

“I haven’t given you a name or description, so how would you know?” asked Benjamin.

“When you get to be old like me, you’ll understand,” she said.

“More riddles. This country is full of them,” said Benjamin.

“It’s how we have survived so long,” she said. “You look at me with those eyes of a stranger and expect answers to a question you haven’t yet figured out how to ask.”

“More riddles,” said Benjamin.

“Your face is a piece of the puzzle and your uncle’s is another. I’m old but not blind to recognizing your tribe,” she said. “No magic potions, just using the eyes God gave you.”

Along the walls, intricate patterns emerged, llama and panthers he had seen the Serranos selling at market, like the blankets his parents used every winter when the heat went out. One image in particular drew his attention. It was bathed in smooth vibrant colors, oranges that made him think of mangoes, and greens that made his mouth water, thinking of the watermelon patch his father once showed him on paper he would grow in the back of the house. They would go to the uptown market, his father patiently handling each watermelon until he found the perfect one. They would ride the bus home to devour the watermelon down to the rinds, dropping them into a large pile on the kitchen table where Carmen said they looked like bones.

“You asked us to help you,” said Benjamin.
“It can wait till morning,” she said, waving him off.

The old woman motioned them to sit on the sofa. It too had depictions of immense herds of llama but near the edges, strange mixtures of colors appeared on fruit trees Benjamin had never seen, and creatures that resembled half human half birds, their plumage spreading like a sunburst. Sapo sat, his eyes quickly but methodically inventoried the room in a manner the gypsies had taught him.

The old woman returned from a darkened room carrying a tray of salted meats, stale bread, and overripe papayas. To Benjamin and the Sapo's hunger, the food looked delicious, and went down without a word, each resisting the gnawing questions and doubts they harbored, at least until they were satisfied. Poisoned, thought Benjamin, swallowing the salty pork, at least death comes with a smile and a meal.

The old woman stayed with them until they finished, then took their plates and handed them a hot bitterroot tea, which out of courtesy they gulped down. Before they had finished grimacing at the sour taste that made their ears ring, the old woman returned with a pile of blankets and pillows. Benjamin and the boy looked at each other, accepting the hospitality of an old montuvia. They thanked the woman, who never managed more than a smile, her words incomprehensible mumbles they interpreted and responded to by smiling and offering overly loud goodnights. The woman retired to her room at the rear of the house, while they made themselves comfortable on the sofa and floor. Sapo kept one of the kerosene lamps nearby on a low flame, in case it was needed suddenly.

“Do you live near the ocean?” said Sapo.
“I always have,” said Benjamin, “When I was your age, there was a beach I’d go to everyday. Black rocks stood like broken teeth along the point of Carabuya. My father would pretend not to watch me, sitting nearby eating ripe mangoes one after another. I hurried from rock to rock. When the tide came in, and I could feel the heavy drag of the water grab at me. My father would call out to me, while the waves crashed around me, reaching my waist, stripping the sand beneath my feet, while I dug my toes in to keep from getting pulled out to sea.”

“I’ve never seen the ocean,” said Sapo.

“Then you have a lot left to see in life.”

“Maybe you’ll take me with you.”

“Shut down the lantern and get some sleep,” said Benjamin.

Sapo brought the flame down low, hesitating to let it go dark.

Benjamin stayed awake, watching the flames dance and cast shadows on the wall. He closed his eyes for seemed a moment and realized it was dawn.

"It's morning, we should go," said Benjamin, shaking Sapo awake. He walked about the house, finding doors to rooms open but the house was empty.

“The old woman’s gone. We’ll leave a note and some money,” said Benjamin.

They headed toward the center of town. Benjamin looked around, overcome by the overwhelming sense of absence. It reminded him of the fake villages at the Army Training Center, until they reached the town square. The streets were laid in cobblestones, and all about the square, balconies spilled over with red and white gardenias. For all the care and upkeep, they had not seen anyone.
"They don’t like outsiders," said Sapo, reading the question on Benjamin's face.

"I thought your path was suppose to throw off their suspicions?"

"The guardian's, not the people who live here. They've been here so long they know the names of the rocks. They can smell you and know you're a stranger," said the boy.

"So where’s my uncle then?" asked Benjamin. They made their way back toward the Church where they ran into parts of the procession of lame and sickly they had passed on the road the day before. They were gathered about the church of Santa Maria, where they waited for the young priest to hear their tales of sorrow. The priest’s young acolyte offered them a glass of cool water, which he kept in a large earthen jar near the entrance. A rumbling spread through the crowd, Benjamin catching word the water the Church offered possessed curative powers. The crowd pressed in closer to the freshly washed steps of the Church. The acolyte, growing uneasy at the look of desperation in their eyes, began passing out wooden goblets filled with water, which the people greedily took up, drinking with a sense of relief, like sailors who have too long been accustomed to thirst.

"Can the Padrecito come out and say a few words over the waters," begged a woman, hesitating to take a goblet of water, while others approached, repeating her request, edging the acolyte back against the Church wall. Benjamin could see he was in fear the crowd would set upon him. He had seen it before, when the indios stormed the presidential palace one afternoon, after a guard had been too callous with their demands that the president put an end to the rising price of corn.
A man, his hands deformed into gnarled claws by a rapid onset of diabetes, made his way through the crowd to plead with the acolyte to bring out the Padre. The acolyte saw only the approaching gnarled hands and let out a small scream and fainted on the steps, causing a further commotion in the rear of the crowd about to the miracle being worked near the waters.

The Padre came out, his auburn hair tussled. A look of anguish turned to anger and he admonished the crowd for acting like heathens.

"The Lord's schedule," he said, "follows no man's whim. If you can not learn patience in the presence of God's House, then you are not ready to accept His Merciful Love."

A murmur passed through the crowd, their heads dropped, shamed by the Priest, though a few near the back cursed him under their breath.

The acolyte, having recovered, continued to pass out water from the shade of the entrance while the sun climbed, lighting the valley on fire. Benjamin and Sapo, sitting atop a shaded park bench in the square decided to move on, leaving the crowd which began to say various rosaries that grew into a low hum. They traveled down the four streets that made up the town grid, yet could find not a soul out until they reached one corner, where they saw an old woman smoking a puro, sitting in the shade of her home. When she saw them, she got up and went inside, locking the door behind her.

"Let's go back to the woman from last night. She said my uncle was well," said Benjamin.
Sapo hesitated but then agreed, though his limbs seemed to drag. Benjamin noticed his steps grew heavier.

“What if you don’t find him?” asked Sapo.

“Everyone is findable,” said Benjamin.

“But what if you don’t?”

“Look kid, you ever work on a jigsaw puzzle and find you’ve got one piece missing and it drives you crazy?” said Benjamin.

“In school, half the pieces were missing. Some kids ate them,” said Sapo.

“Yeah, well, my puzzle has lots of missing pieces too but my uncle is a piece I need to find.”

“Can’t you call him?”

“Sometimes when you want to find something, you have to come in sideways, and real slow – like this village of yours,” said Benjamin.

They reached the house, and Sapo called out to the old woman. There was no answer, so Benjamin opened the gate and approached the door. He stopped when he heard a man’s voice call out from the bridge.

"What do you want there, eh?" demanded the man. He walked toward them, in his hand a pair of river trout, their scales glistening, offering up a rainbow.

"We need to talk to the woman in the house. She gave us a place to sleep last night," said Benjamin.

"Hmmph. Want another hand out then," said the old man, looking them up and down.

"Neither one of you look in need, not for a long time."
"She offered us a place to sleep…"

"And gave you some tea to drink, is that right?" said the old man curtly.

"That's right," said Benjamin.

"Well consider yourselves blessed. You, little one, come here cholito," said the man, motioning Sapo to approach him.

"What do you want old man," said Sapo, refusing to move.

"I've seen you here before. You tell that dog who sent you here to sniff around that he better come himself next time," said the man,

The old man began walking away, but stopped at the edge of the yard, turning to the two. "You won't see her again. Consider yourselves lucky. Now get the hell out of here before you become old and can never leave. Go on, go," he said, mumbling "go," making a sweeping motion with his hand, then turned and continued on his way.

“Wait,” shouted Benjamin, “I’m looking for my uncle, Jaime Cieza.”

“You won’t find him around here anymore,” the old man shouted without turning back.

“Well, where is he?” asked Benjamin walking toward him, impressed by the speed with which the old timer seemed to be moving along.

“Gone. Back home. To your people. Thank him for the lures,” he said, holding up the trout. He laughed and kept walking.

They watched till he turned a corner and was gone, then approached the front door again, the shadow of the papaya tree offering them a temporary cool spot Benjamin hesitantly knocked on the door. No answer. The windows were shuttered tight.
They walked away, glancing up and down the deserted street.

Benjamin read the message from Frank asking for a situation report. He remembered the envelope the courier had given him at the airport and opened it.

Coordinates just inland of where he intended to bury his father, near the old family farm, and a rendezvous just two days away. Frank always said there are no coincidences in life, and here he was, walking into what every nerve in his body told him was an ambush.

"Let's get out of here," said Benjamin, “we’re loosing time.”

Benjamin stopped at the other side of the bridge, looking back at the stone house and the papaya tree that now seemed strangely at odds with the rest of the place. He realized how it was bloomed out of season, of the previous night's dreams, and thought of walking back, but Sapo tugged on his sleeve, motioning him to leave it alone.

“What the hell is this place?” he said, turning to Sapo.

“I told you,” said Sapo, the color slowly returning to his ashen face, “The guardians.”

Benjamin felt drawn back, finding himself crossing the bridge before Sapo pulled hard on his sleeve.

“No,” said Sapo, “Your uncle’s not here anymore. We must go. They know about us now. It isn’t safe.”

“Boy, you’re shaking with fear,” said Benjamin.

“I’ll never return. They know who I am now,” said Sapo.

“Let’s go,” said Benjamin, glancing back, “Strange damn place.”
Sapo didn’t look back, continuing to walk on. Back on the road to Loja, he occasionally slowed down to make sure Benjamin was with him. A car horn sounded behind them, warning them off the middle of the road. Benjamin hitched a ride, a small truck stopped and he climbed into the cabin, Sapo choosing to climb into the back, where small, neatly stacked wicker cages sat, filled with hens the driver proudly said were being taken to a resort village far up along the coast, where the chef insisted on serving only hens raised in the valley, a promise he made to the Virgin, after he felt the tightly stretched asthmatic ligaments surrounding his chest snap on his pilgrimage to find a cure for his poisoned lungs.

They reached Loja in no time, where Sapo jumped out and began walking away. The driver, a talkative man from the frontier, called out to Benjamin, who could not figure the boy's spooked mood.

"Oye, come on, let's eat. You look like you'll eat one of my chickens if I leave you out here," he said, waving Benjamin over repeatedly. Benjamin took one last look at Sapo, who continued to quickly walk down the street. He turned shaking his head, growing baffled at the whole mess, his uncle Jaime, the cuentos, the old gypsy, the whole lot.

He followed the driver into a kiosk where a woman set a steaming plate of sopa de maiz in front of him, the driver already feeding his beak, quiet for the first time the whole trip.

Benjamin sat down at the table and felt a sense of familiarity sweep over him. Though the food and crowd were not his own, there was something about the gathering,
chatter, and draw of hunger, with everyone getting a plate full and the promise of a nap afterwards somewhere under a shaded grassy patch that made him think of returning to base and the way warm rations tasted divine. The place overflowed with men eating milky soup, large pieces of white corn protruding from the bowls, and the smell of Serrano cheese. He ate with a hunger he had all but forgotten since yesterday. The driver, Fortunato, resumed his endless conversations, holding a half dozen arguments, requests, and opinionated remarks on the state of affairs along the Frontera while continuing to slurp down the thick noodles gathering at the bottom of the plate, the corn nibbled down to the cob while the woman passed steaming hot plates ever so closely over their heads to men who had just walked in, squeezing into spaces that moments ago had not existed along the benches flanking the four sides of the long table.

“Buen provecho,” each called out and sat. It wasn’t long before Fortunato veered the conversation toward the intoxicating home brew, chicha, provoking a heated debate regarding what region produced the most potent corn liquor.

Fortunato ventured that it was the Frontera that held the best supply, seeing how most of those gathered were from the northern part of the Cordillera. Immediately the debate turned to a challenge, Fortunato reluctantly producing what he claimed was his last batch of chicha, not wanting to let too much go to the waiting cups that materialized suddenly empty of the papaya juice they had held a moment ago. The men encouraged him, while a few threatened him with a good shaming.

“Bah, we’ll judge the quality. But don’t start crying when we tell you it sucks,” said another driver.
Fortunato quickly filled the cups of those nearest, and therefore least likely to have their own, leaving the others to speculate, and so began a contest. They pulled out small flasks, insisting Fortunato personally take a sip of each.

“Take a long pull, so you’ll shut your big southern mouth once and for all on Frontera liquor, which might be okay to swell the heads of chickens but not strong enough to give a man hairy nipples like the clear burn of Pichincha liquor,” said another man.

Benjamin watched, while the woman went about in a hurried fashion, a veteran of what was surely about to happen. She made haste to pick up her deep dishes, taking up the spoons and the many checks and tips she wrestled from their hands before Fortunato could push what would normally be a few afternoon drinks into a civil war. She caught Benjamin staring at her, and blew him a kiss.

It was then a policeman walked past the kiosk, sticking his head in to see what the commotion was all about. They could tell by the stiff press of his uniform that he was a Quiteño. The voices died off, and the flasks vanished into well-worn pouches inside their wool ponchos.

"What's going on here?" demanded the policeman, his hat brim reaching down and following his long sloping nose, leaving little of his eyes visible except for two narrow slits that marked the men. He went about the table cataloging faces and tabulating their potential guilt in unsolved crimes.

"Nada, jefe," said the woman, coming forth carrying an iced papaya shake she offered the policeman.
Benjamin sat silently, and watched the rising probability of violence. A metallic taste lingered in his mouth. These men, rather than grow timid, simply remained silent, waiting like stones by the side of the road.

The policeman finished his drink, Benjamin noting how he exposed his throat arrogantly for a long moment while he drained the glass of the last of its juice. Expressing his pleasure with the drink, he reached for a Sucre and insisted the woman accept it. He then turned and headed out, but not before scanning the room one last time. His eyes rested on Benjamin for a moment, and he tried to recall his face, which seemed familiar. The two men locked up in an unblinking stance before the policeman looked away.

“I’m looking for a smuggler in this area. If any of you monkeys have any information you would be smart to tell me now,” said the policeman.

The men remained silent.

The policeman exited and with what seemed a flip of a switch, the banter and liveliness returned.

These men had temporarily left and gone elsewhere, some place where they would be safe, impervious to whatever threat the immediate world posed for them. These men, thought Benjamin, were so different from the men from the coast, where the same situation would have ended with the policeman either bashing a few heads or finding himself bleeding like a slaughtered pig. But it wasn’t a submissive attitude, not like he had always heard his father talk about Serranos. These people were far from meek. They
were dangerous, because they became impenetrable in an all or nothing gambit that could
not be understood or reasoned with.

He’d seen it throughout the world. The endless times he entered a tribal village full
of guerillas, their hard silence a tell tale sign of their rage and guilt. He remembered the
ways he’d used to try to open up that silence and a sense of shame flushed over him.

Benjamin admired their sunburnt copper faces, the secrets they carried wrapped
tightly under the many layers of woolen ponchos, shawls, and sweaters. These were men
that had been thinking and plotting for centuries. Not the hot-blooded mestizos of the
coast, who flamed up at the slightest affront, risking everything for an honor they could
never carry further than their own skin. Benjamin sat, while the woman passed by him,
tussling his hair playfully, her smile familiar. By her looks, she was also from the coast,
somehow having arrived here and now a force of mediation in her small roadside kiosk.
For Benjamin the scene grew familiar and the men began to sing a few bars in between
shots of the chicha that was now being passed around. Some things, he thought, don’t
change, here or there. He got up before another round made it his way. He was on his
way out when a voice reached out and challenged him.

"Ahh, look and see what you've all done! The costeño has grown disgusted with all
your barbaric drinking and carrying on. Now he goes home to tell his compañeros what a
bunch of idiots you all act like in the middle of the day. Isn't that right muchacho?"

Benjamin turned towards the voice and saw a short, barrel-shaped man at the other
end of the table. The kiosk grew silent and everyone waited to see how he’d react.
Benjamin looked from one set of eyes to another, none offered the slightest hint of their
thoughts. Who were these people? He anguished inside, trying to respond but shook his head to the man's accusations, then turned and walked out, a deep silence following in his wake, until he was outside, where he heard the clatter of the cups being passed about again, and a laughter that spread among them. Although he couldn’t make out their words, strange chirp-like phrases they exchanged in Quechua, he felt they were not laughing or referring to him. He vanished from their world as soon as he walked out the door, in the same manner the policeman had. Force had no ability to bend their will. He’d seen the disastrous attempts to torture information out of them. Silence was a weapon perfected over five hundred years.

He pulled the satellite phone from his pocket, tempted to call Frank. He needed to find his uncle, and begin anew the burial he kept pushing off, the weight of the urn in his backpack growing comfortable. It seemed time had elongated, like a rubber band stretching him. Perhaps that was the trick of the old people of the valley, thought Benjamin, they managed time differently, locking out the intrusions of the outside world that forever threatened to compress time and life.

Down the street he saw the policeman standing half hidden in the shadows of a doorway, smoking a cigarette. He looked up at the street names painted on the adobe buildings, but they made no sense to him, making him sink further into the solitude that now wrapped him in the cooling grip of the changing weather. The policeman was now looking at him with suspicion, so he walked over to Fortunato's truck and got in the cab, where he found a blanket that he used for a pillow, and fell asleep.
Thick clouds stretched a gray carpet across the skies, while the temperature dropped and a drizzle began to come down, the slow melodic sounds of the rain quieting La Sierra, as Benjamin slipped into the nether world of dreams.

He climbed out of the ocean his limbs grew heavy and bloated at his sides. He walked onto the beach, where his aunt was standing, her majestic white garments gave him a sense of warmth and comfort, as if he could smell the bleaching rays that had dried them. He continued walking and yet was no closer. It was then he realized the tide was coming in again, and the faster he tried to move higher onto the beach, the faster the water came in, now reaching midway up his thighs. He felt the tremendous pull of the undertow forming beneath his feet once more. He looked up to shore to ask for help. Her look, patient but not frightened for him, gave him strength. A large wave rolled in silently, rising without warning and crashing into him, rolling him under the warm waters while he tried to regain his balance and come up for air.

The slam of the car door roused Benjamin. Sitting next to him, shivering and wet, sat Fortunato, smiling.

"So you came out to hide with the chickens!" laughed Fortunato, offering him a hot corn torta.

"The woman, Cari, she likes you," he said, smiling and pointing toward the entrance of the kiosk, where she stood watching the men who all made a dash for wherever they had come from, wherever they were going, till their stomachs and their solitude brought them to her once more.
Benjamin bit into the cake, letting the cheese flow out, its warm, salty juices running down his chin. He saw the woman and waved. Her image fluid like the torrent rain, waved back, then turned and was gone.

"Ah, I think she wants to jump your bones, muchacho," said Fortunato, laughing while he turned over the engine. "If you ask me, I'd say she baked these just for you," he said, taking out another one and handing it to him. Benjamin told him to have it for himself, but Fortunato said no, a large grin crossing his misguided teeth.

"You costeños have all the luck with women," said Fortunato, letting out a hoot as the engine coughed and finally kicked over. Benjamin finished the torta, putting the other one in his pocket.

Fortunato looked back into the bed of his truck, then lightly slapped Benjamin's shoulder, whose thoughts were with the warm feeling in his stomach.

"Thanks for covering them up. I would have come out here and found a bunch of dead chickens. This one," he said, pointing toward the kiosk, "would have been ecstatic - the special tomorrow would have been caldo de pollo," said Fortunato.

"Are you from Vilcabamba?" asked Benjamin.

"Anyone that tells you they're from there isn't," said Fortunato. He got the truck underway, the view ahead becoming vague shadows of grays and bleeding colors with the torrential rains overpowering the weak wipers. Fortunato instinctually knew where he was going, telling Benjamin he’d made this trip in worse weather, under a bigger load of alcohol, in the dead of night.
Ahead, the road vanishes temporarily while they pass into the immense shadows of the mountainside, and the world goes dark and silent.
Chapter IV

In Cuenca, Benjamin and Fortunato serve up a few rounds, lighting the tavern up with the tale of the landslide they had survived, confirmed by a few of the bus passengers who were having drinks with them. Benjamin felt a wave of nausea come over him. He realized he was hungry, the high-grade alcohol burning at his stomach lining. Large plates of potato, corn, and chicken soup, followed by plates of breaded steaks and white rice. Fortunato ordered another bottle and gave another rendition of the afternoon's misfortune.

Around them at the table sat a few Cuenceños, locals he had learned from Fortunato, by the style of hat and the design of their ponchos. Benjamin had come across them all his life; in childhood and along the mountain tours edging along the spine of the Cordillera, where he’d hunted narcotics. These people, whom everyone along the coast thought were stupid, were proving to be anything but. At the other tables, patrons pretended not to be listening, but kept a close ear to the details, mumbling Quechua phrases to themselves. Benjamin noticed that the old man next to him kept looking at him from the corner of his eye. He turned to him and offered him some of the food before him, which the man refused with very little acknowledgement. But then he cleared his throat, and asked in a heavily accentuated Spanish, the words seemingly causing him pain, "Where are you from?"

"Manabi," said Benjamin, still chewing on the meat that needed more seasoning. He wished he was back there now, sitting by a seaside kiosk his uncle would take him to,
where the meat went down smooth, ones plate filled with fried platanos, but best of all, the ocean breeze livening up his senses. Here, he felt like he had to eat just to stay alive, another daily chore.

"I was in Manabi when I was young like you," said the man, attempting a stern pose that came off humorous to Benjamin, who took the bottle away from Fortunato and poured the man a drink. The man drank, but said nothing. Benjamin hoped he could finish his food and board a bus back to Guayaquil, but now he felt the heaviness of the accident and the food bringing him down, while the adrenaline levels dropped.

"Manabi is a very big region," said the man.

"My people are from Carabuya, north of Manta, north of Bahia, sitting right on the water," said Benjamin, feeling weary and aged in how he spoke. This was one in a series of endless cantinas along the Cordillera he’s eaten and drank at, and yet only now did he feel the unbearable gravity pressing in on him. Certainly, it had aged his thoughts, as they came back to him with a thin coat of nostalgia.

"I know the place," said the man, the words coming out excited but his mouth almost stuttering the sentence. "My father once told me the navel of the world was located there…." But the words retreated back into his throat, and said no more.

Benjamin slowly looked up and down at the strange little man. He took a hard drink to steady his nerve, and keep from strangling the words from his throat, swallowed up by centuries of silence, he knew they trust no one. The man returned to his previous state of calm and silence. Benjamin found it hard to breathe through the smoke and Fortunato's loud cackling, the low murmur of whispers converging about him. He looked
into their eyes, but found no recognition - black pools that swallowed him without the slightest ripple. He got up, the room spinning, and staggered out, heading toward his hotel.

A knock at the door brought Benjamin back from a troubled sleep. He dressed quickly and walked out. The room exited out onto a second floor walkway, an open square in the center of the pension displayed the dangling purple hued flowers Cuenca was famous for. He walked down to the ground floor, letting his nose guide him to the kitchen, where Fortunato was already making his way through breakfast.

"You live," said Fortunato, motioning for another setting and plate to the woman that continued to move about, her eyes never rising from their focus a foot or two above floor. They sat and ate in silence, Benjamin grateful for the warm coffee that filled his stomach.

"I spoke to the chef. The puto was more concerned about his damn chickens than us. I told him there were two left on the side of the road if he wanted them. Gran puto. I'm not going for the truck, don’t think I can afford to fix it now with this fucker refusing to pay me. Anyway, I sold it to a mechanic. Let him and the engineers who clear the road piece it together."

Benjamin nodded.

“A man’s looking for you,” said Fortunato.

"What man?"

"Your friend from last night. I ran into him this morning, he said he would come by later. Said he had something to discuss with you."
Benjamin said nothing. Fortunato looked at him from the corner of his eye. They continued to eat in silence, until Fortunato finally got up with a big stretch.

"Bueno, compa, it's time for me to find a new way to earn a few Sucres. I have a cousin a little to the north who can help. You're welcome to come along. I can use a gringo business partner. The pay sucks, the food, well, you costeños never like the food up here, but the liquor is better than water, yes."

Benjamin smiled, thanked him and tried to offer him some money, but Fortunato wouldn’t have it.

"Next time it’s on you. Anyway, I'll be here till noon, if you change your mind," he said, patting him on the back on his way out.

The man from the bar appeared in the doorway.

"If I can have a few words with you?" said the man. Benjamin hoped it would be fewer than last night. He looked much younger than Benjamin remembered. They walked into the inner courtyard, where an old Serafin fountain stood.

"My name is Andrés Cuento. I only wish to tell you something. My people owe you a debt, since it was your grandfather that saved my father’s life many years ago."

Benjamin shook his head, not understanding and feeling the heavy pull of the lingering hangover.

“You’re mistaken,” said Benjamin.

"My father worked in Manta when he was young and strong like the mountain,” said Andres.

“OK. What’s that got to do with me?” said Benjamin.
A mob of men walking out of a cantina ran into him near the docks and beat him. They blamed him for losing their jobs at the airport the gringos were building, but my father had nothing to do with that,” said Andres.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about. Look, can I get you a coffee?” said Benjamin.

“He was in Manta buying goods to sell in our village. They didn’t listen to him. They didn’t want to hear anything but his bones breaking and his screams. A man rode up on a horse, he said nothing but the men suddenly stopped kicking my father's ribs and face. The man on the horse sat there, my father said, like a sentinel, his eyes taking the whole scene in. The drunks ran off, looking back nervously, trying to offer excuses, but the more they tried to speak the faster they stumbled off into the night,” said Andres.

Benjamin let the hot coffee drain down his throat, hoping to catch the next bus out.

“This man, he got off his horse, and helped my father up. He offered him water and some coca leaves,” said Andres.

"He was fortunate," said Benjamin, unsure what it all had to do with him.

"My father made me remember the man's features, every curve of his face, and where he was from, his name. He told me without him, his life would have ended that night, and I would have come into this world under another disguise. He told me that if later in life I found that what I had amounted to was something plentiful to me, that I should seek out this man, his offspring, and offer my gratitude," said Andres.

Andres looked over Benjamin’s face, like a jeweler gazing upon a familiar stone. Benjamin rose to go.
"Wait. Before I boarded the bus yesterday, I went to a woman who reads coca leaves," said Andres, turning his eyes down, feeling a sense of shame at a practice that coastal and city people found to be ignorant. "She said my life, like my father's, would be extended by a man who would offer himself in my place."

"Well, whatever she charge you, you paid too much. Beat it, go home," said Benjamin.

"Yesterday was my turn to die on that road, under the landslide. But you came by first. You made the guardian of the mountain come at you - like one of your people did for my father," said Andres, closing in on Benjamin, his eyes showing a brief glimmer.

Benjamin pulled back, throwing Andres against the wall, instinctively checking him for weapons.

"You have me mistaken with someone else. I don’t know anything about your father, and that landslide, I wouldn’t put myself in its way for anyone," he said. He began to walk away.

"You lie to yourself," said Andres, in a low laugh.

"No viejo, your bruja with the coca leaves lied to you. Go back and tell her to predict the sun rising tomorrow if you want to believe in something."

Benjamin reached his room, locked himself in, and let the doorframe support his weight. He slid down to the polished floor smelling mildly of ammonia. First the ghost woman, and now this. He rubbed his temple trying to keep the mild burn inside his head from growing.
Broken images flickered through his thoughts, like an old shoe box full of photos had been emptied out, images randomly tumbling and glimpses of another life passing by too quickly. He’d been here before, in front of men like Andres in a hundred mountain villages, they watched and called to him somehow through their silence. They told senseless stories, fantastical ones like his parents often did, that somehow Benjamin found, like a string, tempting enough to follow.

He pulls out the journal, flipping to a dog-eared page and a phrase that keeps repeating throughout: *La Sierra works on you in ways you can't unravel.*

Benjamin remembered distant nights when he would hear his father talking with uncle Jaime. The storerooms empty for the season, the corrals quiet, the calves already out with the rest of the herd, the fences mended and reinforced against the charge of the new bull. These were moments of tranquility, when his father would rock back and forth in the hammock, his mother nestled up with him, while he and his uncle would sit about the porch, listening to the rhythmic crash of waves. The night impenetrable beyond the reach of the porch light or the occasional kerosene lantern passing by, a man's voice calling out a friendly greeting they all returned.

Flipping to another page, he read: *The worst place to hide is in the dark, unless you're a mute, but even then, the stench of a man's body, the sound of his feet shuffling across the sands gives you away in no time.*

Benjamin closed his eyes, the slow melodic Montuvio songs from his childhood echoed in his head, remembering he and other boys gathered dry wood, gnarled limbs the sea spit out long ago, building a crackling fire that seemed to add to the cadence of the
songs. Their voices carried into the night, often meeting other voices until the entire area performed a melodic symphony and the fire burned down to glowing embers, while the children had to be carried up to their beds. But his father and uncle would remain outside, Benjamin listening to their conversations, desperately trying to fight off sleep.

His father seemed younger to him on nights like these, stirred by emotions other than the stern one he held in place most of the time. Now and again, he would answer Jaime's questions regarding the rest of the world about them, La Sierra, El Oriente, the bustling cities of Quito and Guayaquil.

His father's stories filled in the voids, the flat colored regions on the map he remembered from the geography lessons at school. On these nights, his father's tales of distant places, reckless men and the women who adored them, dangers that left gashes on one's heart, and one's nights filled with demons - these tales he knew he would never find in any book. Many years later he would inadvertently chase them through jungles and distant deserts, filling his own storybook, only with tales of horror that he'd often wake up screaming from. It was during these long ago nights that Benjamin grew to understand his father had lived and seen things he would never tell of. He hoped he would tell him later in life as Benjamin, quietly accompanied his father on journeys into the jungles of El Oriente. Benjamin realized these would always remain his father's secrets, while he stayed behind, years later, realizing he was unable to cross into another man’s place where sin and avarice came disguised in beauty. It was during these nights that Benjamin slowly began to hate his father for insisting every chance he could that the lands would some day fall on his shoulders, and if he was lucky enough to remember
what he was trying to get through his thick skull, he would one day pass them on to his sons, till on judgment day, a Cieza would be standing on this very porch waiting for all those that came before him, to guide them through the pastures and let them admire what had been fought for and willed out of the jungle.

Benjamin felt a long, distant pull, drawing him to consider a phrase from another dog-eared page: *La Sierra works on you in ways you can’t unravel*. He didn’t understand what his father meant by it, but never would if he headed back now. He knew he wasn’t ready to bury him, not yet. First he had to figure out what the old man from the bar, like his father, knew, what quiet men felt but never said, what they kept masked under their hard shells, like lobsters. His father possessed many of the Serrano’s qualities, not quite the coastal man driven by liquor, wild laughter and dance. But not the impenetrable Serrano either, though there was something all these Ecuadorian men he met possessed, a certain vault hidden deep within where they kept a secret, sacred artifact that could not be told, that escaped even the bounds of love.

Benjamin got up and walked out the door in search of the old man. This, he thought, was what he had been waiting for, a sign. That was what his aunt Consuelo had told him long ago, that the creatures of the jungle do nothing until they see a sign. It was only man, Consuelo had told him, in his infinite stupidity that exhausted his steps searching for answers in such a mad rush that in the end, led nowhere but the grave. The journal confirmed his father had walked these same streets years earlier searching for the same answers. He grabbed his backpack, his hands compressing the urn held within, and headed out.
Stepping out into the street, Benjamin nearly hit by a military jeep speeding by. He could hear the soldiers cursing at him while they continued in a hurry, bounding down the tight cobblestone streets, people leaping out of their way. People went about in a quickened step, their eyes averting those of all they passed, mothers hurrying their children in hushed voices. Benjamin stood there, watching what seemed again like an ant colony, each person moving about in steady rhythm, all knowing exactly what had to be done, working toward a common goal.

He walked toward the town square, following the tolling of the Church bells, coming upon the park whose lush trees shaded an array benches filled with the clutter of retired men talking in hushed voices. Scanning the crowd, he found Andrés walking down the steps of the Church.

He walked toward him. "I think we should talk."

"Yes, but not here. The streets are not safe," said Andrés.

"Well then, inside," said Benjamin turning back toward the Church, willing to wait till they were seated before asking him what he meant, not safe from what, whom? He felt a low-level strain developing across his temples that in the field acted like a six sense of pending violence.

"No. It's not safe there either. The walls have ears," said Andrés. "Come," he said, "My home is nearby. We can talk there. Come."

Andrés walked down the street, his black poncho covering his body except for his legs which were wrapped in thick black trousers. Benjamin followed. A siren could be heard approaching, people again scurrying into the doorways of buildings while another
jeep turned the corner, this time followed by another, each filled with soldiers in combat gear, bayonets attached to their rifles, their chin straps leaving deep creases across their high cheekbones, making them look severe, monolithic.

Benjamin watched them pass, the officer in the lead jeep making eye contact with him, his glare seeming to reach into him. He had trained men like this up and down the continent. He knew what would happen next, and so he counted off seconds in his head. The jeep went by but the officer could be heard barking out an order to the driver, who stopped. Benjamin quickly stepped around the corner and began to run. Ahead, Andrés waited for him in the now deserted street, his stance giving no hint of fear. When he reached him, Andrés took his arm and pulled him into a house, shutting the door on the turmoil outside.

Benjamin found himself facing a woman dressed in a multi-hued array of wool clothing, sporting a tight fitting black bowler hat with the tell tale colors of her people written on the band that served to hold up a condor feather. She maintained a tress of hair that went down the length of her spine. Outside, the police siren passed and faded. She and Andrés exchanged words in Quechua, while they both looked at him. Benjamin noticed the walls, barren except for a wooden crucifix that seemed to have been there from another age. She motioned him toward the simple table at the center of the room, the rest of the room empty. Benjamin sat, and Andrés disappeared into the back room, while Lupe served him a bowl of yucca soup, on top of which floated bits of Serrano cheese. She remained standing, her presence seeming to tower over him, though she stood less than five feet. He thanked her and she just turned and walked back to the stove.
where she served up another plate, setting it down and standing by it until Andrés returned.

Andres entered the room as though he had been away, on some distant journey. He sat and placed an object wrapped in oilcloth on the table, digging into his soup, breaking off pieces of hard bread to mop up the rim of the bowl. Lupe stood by the stove, not eating, but watching Benjamin with attentive eyes that betrayed nothing. Benjamin could not tolerate the oppressive silence any longer. It was a form of communicating, a way that was lost to him, a costeño, but which the Army had bred into him as he found himself on countless missions communicating through gestures and learning the art of silence. Here he could not figure out the mission and so felt apprehension, knowing Frank would call soon, reminding him to move toward the rendezvous.

"Artemonte was my grandfather’s name," said Benjamin, feeling his voice came out too loud, echoing about the room. There was no response, so he continued, preferring to have a conversation with himself than return to the solitude of silence. "My name is Cieza. I don’t know what happened between your father and my grandfather. He died before I was born."

Silence blanketed the room. Andrés finished his meal, Lupe at his side to take the bowl away just as the last spoonful vanished. She watched Benjamin though her eyes no longer set on him. She watched him like a giant bird of prey, circling about, casting no shadow, riding the thermals silently.

Andrés looked much older now. His face revealing the fine creases that seemed to be following some pattern Benjamin was unable to read, his eyes, like those of his
sister's, held a force that oscillated between submission and brutality. For all the time he’d spent humping rucksacks through the long spine of the Cordillera, and the many villages they passed through, Benjamin had never been this close to these indios. He had never entered their world though he felt he was always on the verge. Andrés slid the covered object toward Benjamin. It remained there, Benjamin unwilling to open it, yet feeling their eyes burning through him. They sat there for a few minutes, until like the silence, the immobility began to drive Benjamin mad.

What was it that gave them such patience, he thought. Everyone said they were stupid, dumb as mules - and as strong. But no one who worked a mule ever thought the beast stupid. They were fierce, demanding a show of proper authority before breaking their backs carrying supplies in and out of the dangerous slopes of the mountain and jungle passes. He looked at the two again, his hand reaching out and grasping the object, his fingers following its contours, trying to make out what it was. It felt hard and jagged, some piece of stone by its weight and feel. He opened the folds carefully, leaning back confused at what he saw.

A rock of no distinction, Benjamin picked it up, turning it carefully to see if he was missing something, looking at their faces in search of a clue, but finding nothing. It was then he realized the story being played out on their faces, saw for the first time the brown stains and realized it was dried blood. It was the rock their father must have been beaten with until his grandfather came along. The Serrano must have kept it, thought Benjamin, but why?
He placed the rock down again, carefully wrapping it, watching their eyes follow his hands, their thoughts far off in the streets of Manta long ago, though the times when indios were beaten to death with rocks was always the present somewhere along the Cordillera. Benjamin had come across it more than he wished to remember. The bloodied and methodically broken bodies along the highlands of Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, while his unit hunted Sendero and other narco terrorist up and down the mountain side in fruitless game of cat and mouse.

"Our father was a quiet man. He worked hard, until he could no longer," said Andrés. "He laid down, waiting for the mountain spirits to guide him to the next world, but he gave me this. He said his blood had fused with it, that he would always hear our voices so long as we talked through it. Now I want to tell him the blood of the man that saved his life that night is here. He bears witness, and we offer thanks."

Benjamin saw their eyes blistering with a tenderness he thought he’d never seen in people. He wanted to run out of the house but instead remained seated. Time slowed down, and Lupe stood before Benjamin with a steaming cup of anise tea. He had not seen her move. Benjamin felt strange, off center, and she sensed it, insisting he take the tea as hot as he could stand it, that it would clear his head, relieve the pressure accumulating in his lungs.

"You breath in too much dead air," she said attempting to explain the strange sense of discomfort he felt in his chest.

"Why have you returned?" said Lupe.
At once he saw the gap between them had returned, leaving them on opposite sides, each unable to penetrate the other's world for more than a brief spot of time.

"I would like to show you something," said Andrés. "More stones. Also washed in blood, but blood older than you can imagine. Older, larger stones that once guided rivers of blood."

Benjamin remained silent. He figured it must be one of the old ruins nearby, the ones his father had spoken about, where instead of songs and poems being sung in honor, with great dignity and piety, only sorrow followed the remembrance of these places, the last strongholds of an ancient people before they were torn apart by dogs, their bones buried far and wide or left to rot along ancient roads that like the entire civilization, was soon paved over, forgotten by the descendants of those that unleashed the dogs.

"Let's go," said Andrés, putting his poncho on, "before it gets dark and the police start asking too many questions."

"Here, put this on," said Lupe, handing Benjamin an almost threadbare poncho. He looked at it, about to say no, but Andrés interrupted, "It would be a good idea, they won't think twice about you. You'll be invisible."

"He could almost pass," said Lupe, making Benjamin smile, but then added, "If he keeps his mouth shut." Now she smiled, handing him a black blanket in which to place his backpack, tying it around his shoulders.

The sun had dropped, washing the cobblestone streets in a subdued yellow light that took its color from the tightly knit colonial buildings of the city. Andrés led the way,
Benjamin close behind him, his head low. A contract operative, it was a role he played too often.

They kept silent and navigated the narrow streets. The speeding cars kicked up a fine layer of dust which hung in the air, solidifying the afternoon light. They reached the Rio Tomebamba, on whose shores the washer women continued their never ending ritual of washing along the rocks, and laying out a multi-hued field of color on the grass to dry.

"They don’t move for anyone, not anymore,” said Andres. “No one bothers them anyhow, if they did, the generals and politicians would be walking around in dirty clothes."

"They are the ones that will bring this government to its knees. Dirt is our ally," said Andrés, giving a small, awkward smile. They continued on, following the sloping streets that slithered back into the curving urban maze until they reached the city limits. Ahead, an army jeep stood by the side of the road. Andrés gave Benjamin a reassuring look, then pressed on, motioning him to lower his head and not look at them directly. They passed the soldiers, still sitting in the jeep, their shirts open, hats tilted back.

"Coño, 'mano, nothing but indios sucios pass our way today," said one soldier.

"Y puro maricones. Mira! Indio, where are you hiding your sisters, eh?" said another.

"I had her last night, right after your mother left my bunk," said the third, slapping the hat off the head of the other soldier.

He sounded Quiteño to Benjamin, the other two definitely costeños, Guayaquileños. Benjamin felt an impotent rage inside, mixing with a sense of shame - at once shamed at
the behavior of his people but also ashamed at being thought an indio. They walked on, leaving the soldiers to fight and square off against each other. The two men, like bugs, vanished from their sights soon as they passed, invisible again to the world about them. Benjamin looked to Andrés who seemed unfazed by what happened. He imagined this was his daily routine, but felt no pity for him. Andrés turned his face toward him and smiled.

"You'll make a good indio someday, if you work at it," said Andrés, laughing and slapping Benjamin on the back. The two walked down a road that turned to asphalt soon after they left the city and its cobblestones. Benjamin knew they were going north and hoped they were going to Ingapirca, site of the last battle for control of the northern half of the Incan empire, where two brothers and 100,000 soldiers clashed and tore the heart of the empire apart.

The sound of a horn resonated throughout the valley. Ahead, a man sat by the roadside, facing out toward the deep chasm, toward the peaks on the other side. He blew into his wak'rapuku, an instrument of war fashioned out of the curvy horn of a bull. The mouthpiece was made of gold to soothe the tongue, the larger opening of silver, to waken the guardians. They passed and noticed below, along the ridge of the chasm, out of clear sight from the road, people gathered, in what Benjamin thought was a dance. He tried to stop and watch, but Andrés insisted they needed to move on, the road was not safe.

"Somethings are not for your eyes," said Andrés. They continued on, the sounds of the horn echoing through the valley. Its deep base sound, a call of some sort, thought Benjamin, like the morenos in Esmeraldas he spent time amongst while training the
Columbians to patrol for narcos along the border, when they took the giant conch and emptied their powerful lungs of a sound deep as the ocean, which spread like a giant wave throughout the jungle.

Benjamin slowed down, letting Andrés move on further. He felt the sting of Andrés’ words. Andrés sat on a flat rock by the side of the road, where he waited for him. Benjamin approached and Andrés motioned him over, offering him a place to sit. He removed a piece of rosca, offering some to Benjamin, who looked at it strangely, smelling its sugary smell before tasting it. It reminded him of the Esmeraldeño treat, made of coconut and raw sugar. He took a large piece in his mouth, before noticing Andrés was diligently nibbling on small pieces, letting the sugar enter through his mouth rather than his stomach.

"If you eat it slowly, in small pieces, your head won't ache when we climb the Cordillera," said Andrés.

Benjamin nodded, saying nothing, but followed his advice. He hated mountain duty, opting for jungle and desert tours whenever possible. Around them, the snow covered peaks lay silent except for the reverberating sounds of the horn that could still be heard echoing throughout the valley, a call to awaken, like the violent incoming sirens that frayed his nerves until they too became part of the white noise of the desert.

The countryside about them sloped and dipped, its fertile pastures broken up into a colorful patchwork from the yucca, patata, corn, and legumbre crops in various stages of development. They took an unmarked side road which opened up a new world. Before them, in the clearing lay the stone ruins of Ingapirca. Benjamin took a knee, looking
about circular citadel in ruins, covered in violet wild flowers dancing in the cooling afternoon breeze. On the side of the road, overlooking the vast expanse of the valley, someone had erected a cross, under which a shrine to the Virgen de los Valles stood. At her feet, a red waxen residue, from used up candles spread out, giving the impression she bled profusely. Benjamin looked out, feeling a deepening of his breathing as if something were pressing in on him from all directions.

The air was moist and carried the scent of wild herbs. It reminded him of the way the indios smell. The stench, costenos call it. At times Benjamin couldn’t tell whether 'indio sucio' referred to the Serrano’s sun burnt skin, from endless years of exposure to the burning high altitude sun while they labored in the fields, or the wet herb smell they carried. Andrés, Benjamin had noticed, smelled different, though still retaining that familiar smell of the region. He could make out the herbs, the wet grasses, the overly salted soups sweated out of their pores. There was a familiarity, an earth bound nature to it, which his nose found reassuring. Andrés knelt and crossed himself, Benjamin overhearing him whisper in Quechua. He noticed Andrés wearing black leather boots, the kind soldiers are issued. Andrés got up and with a refreshed look led him onto the remains of an ancient road. Here, they walked slowly, Andrés setting the pace with his hand on Benjamin's shoulder, there was sense of relief that took over Andrés’ countenance. He felt he had been carrying a tremendous load, only to dump it here, by the side of the road. His chest rose and fell with a sense of delight, a smile returning to his face.
"These were the roads of Atahualpa, El Inca," said Andrés, kneeling to touch the fine stonework that resisted the growth of weeds. Ahead lay the circular ruins, surrounded by what seemed to be walls of stone buried under green pastures. Benjamin looked at Andrés, his manner having returned to a subdued calm now that they came to the walls of the ruins. Andrés stretched his hands out across the giant stones, their seams interlocking symmetrically, leaving no room for gaps. He looked as if he were trying to stretch his arms around the entire structure, his cheek pressed up against the cool stone. Silence. Benjamin felt a sense of solitude, cast adrift from the world about him. He touched the stone, its sandy grain leaving a fine grit on his fingers.

"Come," said Andrés, walking through an entrance and up a set of stone stairs that led to the top of the structure. A smaller circular part of the building lay in ruin, its walls toppled.

"There was one more level. The one we can never climb to," said Andrés, confronted with an indelible truth for the first time.

"Was this a temple?" asked Benjamin.

Andrés smiled, then walked over to the edge of the wall, where he looked about the valley. "This is the temple of our father, the Sun," he said.

Benjamin looked down, staring at the riddle that was Andrés' combat boots.

"I was walking to my sister's house one day, along the main road, when an army patrol stopped. They asked for my papers, then told me to get in the back of the truck. I tried to argue with them, but a rifle butt to my stomach convinced me that the back of the truck was where I should go," said Andrés, taking a seat on a toppled stone. "That was
1941. I was young, your age. They put a load of years on me, these boots. I take them to a man I know, twice a year, and he makes them new again."

"1941. So were you…"

"In the war? I was there. The truck took us over the cordillera, to a camp in the jungle where they gave us a uniform, a rusted rifle, and a week of military training, before sending us into the jungle to die. Look here. Do you know why there is no third level?" said Andrés.

"The Spanish chased Rumiñauí here after he burned Quito to the ground. It was here where the last armies came to ask our father, the Sun, why the battle was going against them. A great deal of blood was shed here awaiting the answer that came with the sound of Spanish cannons firing from the ridge over there. It tore apart the third level, and the altar atop. A small group of warriors escorted the Inca's sister-wife and escaped over the Cordillera, and into the jungle, never to be heard from again. The Inca, well… he went to pieces," said Andrés.

"You’re old, like these rocks," said Benjamin, smiling.

"Look," said Andrés, pointing up, “you don’t see them flying over this place often. Look," he said.

Overhead, a Condor, its immense wings spread, tips twisting and adjusting to maximize the effects of the thermals cast a shadow while it silently rode the thermals.

"That's a good sign. I've come here often, but haven’t seen one of them near here since I was a child," said Andrés, shaking his head slowly to the beat of the giant wings
that maneuvered till it was circling overhead. "This is a very good sign. It's too bad Lupe isn't here to see this, she would know what to say, how to greet this Guardian."

"You really believe this stuff?" said Benjamin.

"And you don’t?" Andres laughed, slapping Benjamin on the back.

"The Cordillera was once full of them, but they've been disappearing, taking new forms, no longer flying high above, watching over us. They are the Guardians, the spirit of the mountains. The closer their peak is to the Sun, the larger their wings span to cover us. This is strange… so big a bird here now. This is strange."

"We lost a good deal of territory," said Benjamin, repeating what he had heard from his father and read about the war with Peru for control of the Amazon.

Andrés let out a short bitter sound. "Your kind lost a lot of territory, brothers fighting among each other like animals over a stolen bone. We lost all of it long ago. Perhaps someday you'll begin to understand us better," said Andrés, then added, "perhaps not though, eh?"

"You haven't removed that dirty poncho or filthy hat yet, you know you could catch something more than filth," said Andrés quietly. Benjamin laughed but Andrés' face remained hard.

"If you want your damn poncho and stupid hat back - here, take it," he said, pulling them off in a flurry, throwing them down at Andrés' feet.

Andrés stared down, reaching for and folding the poncho, gripping it tightly. He took up the hat, dusting off the dirt.
"They belonged to my father," said Andrés. "He would have offered them to you if he were still with the living." He held them out to Benjamin, who took a deep breath to cleanse the anger from his lungs, the way his mother had taught him, then reached out and took back the poncho and hat, though he didn’t put them on this time.

"Quien eres?" asked Andrés.

Benjamin forced out a tight smile "What a question to ask," he said. "Soy un caminante, a wanderer like you."

Andrés shook his head in agreement. "Can I ask you why you're so sad?" said Andrés.

Benjamin looked up to find the condor, but it was gone. He scanned the horizon looking for it, finding nothing but the violet hued skies of the Andes that were settling in. A cool, sweet mountain air was coming down the cordillera. Like an ocean thought Benjamin, far, wide, and dangerous. Holding onto its secrets below the surface.

"Your grandfather saw justice with a clear sight. I didn’t finish telling you the story. He took my father to his finca, had him bandaged up, and gave him fresh fish stewed in the meat of coconuts to eat three times a day. He had the men who beat my father brought to him. There he asked them to recall what had happened, if they remembered the man they almost beat to death. The men laughed a bit, thinking they were being put on, except that your grandfather's macheteros were about the place, seeming to not listen, but aware of every insect passing through the air at that moment. Do you know what your grandfather did?

Benjamin made a chopping motion with his hand.
“He told them that so they would never forget the beating they gave the indio, they were about to receive it back, with interest. The men didn’t laugh now. They looked hard at my father, squinting their eyes until they realized who he was, or more likely, that he was one of the many indios they had beaten over the years. My father took back what they had taken from him that afternoon. The men crying while he rained down blow after blow. The macheteros looking even more bored than before, still watched from where they leaned against the palms. After my father had taken back what belonged to our people, he turned to your grandfather, and said, ’Your generations are blessed, Aristides Artemonte. You picked me up a dying animal and gave me back what was stolen. We will not forget your name or the name of your people.’ And with that he took to the road, heading back to his beloved Cuenca, back to his family, his people. Now, you and I are people. We share common burdens of the past.”

"That’s crazy," said Benjamin.

"Suit yourself, we don’t want you either," said Andrés. "You're too damn ugly. Come. I would like to show you something else,” said Andrés, entering the tunnel.

Benjamin watched colorful panthers dance on the tunnel walls while the light bounced off them momentarily. The darkness soon gave way to diffused light as they approached the other side. He now saw that the walls were barren, like any tunnel walls. They exited under gray skies but Benjamin's eyes burned from the sudden shift in light. Andrés steadied him by guiding him by the arm, until Benjamin was able to regain his balance. The two men stood on a towering cliffside. Ahead lay the sprawling valley of the Incas, beyond, the oblivion of the jungle.
"They went in that direction," said Andrés, pointing out a carved out road that snaked its way deep into the valley below.

A narco road, thought Benjamin, “Who?”

"The old ones. The ones who resisted the Inca, then the Spanish, but were finally weary of this life and returned there," said Andrés, pointing out far into the horizon, beyond the secondary ridges of the Cordillera, where the immense fertile blanket of the jungle canopy swarmed over the earth, breeding new life as it devoured all life that entered into it.

"They were your people," said Andrés, turning now to Benjamin.

"Sure," said Benjamin, scanning the path, triangulating its end point deep in what was no doubt the deep coca fields under the canopy, hidden from surveillance flights.

"They were your people," insisted Andrés. "When the Inca could not break the spirit of the costeño indio, the Pasuas, they had them all moved here, to the surrounding valley, where they thought the bitter cold and loss of the sea would humble them, break their spirit. But they would not heel, and made alliances with the indios and gods exiled here already. They carried the spirit of the panther inside of them."

Benjamin smiled at Andrés, who let out a sigh of frustration. "Come," said Andrés, pulling on Benjamin's arm. "Since you only use your eyes to see and make the world, come and see this," he said, pointing up to the cliffside above them.

Benjamin’s smile slowly vanished. Where had it come from, he thought. Where there had been nothing but a jagged cliff wall earlier, now appeared an enormous carving of a face in profile. He stood still, letting his eyes map out the contours of the stone
chiseled face, the powerful brow, the sternness of the eyes. It seemed hauntingly familiar to Benjamin, yet at the same time, it seemed unreal. He wished to touch it, and began to walk toward it, focusing on where he was stepping along the jagged edges of the precipice. Having gone fifty meters, he looked up and remained frozen. He saw the face had vanished. Scanning the cliffside he found nothing but the same aged outcrops. He turned to make sure he hadn't veered too far from where he first saw the giant mask, and saw Andrés, a knowing smile on his face. Walking back, this time with less care than before, he reached Andrés, about to ask him what was going on, but turning once more to reassure himself the face had vanished, it appeared again.

"They were masters of the rock. They would sing to it, songs long forgotten by all, songs the rocks still ask for. They would sing to them and tell them of the eventual arrival of the Spanish, who were hunting them like animals, tracking their every escape. That is the face of your people, built by the hands of my kind, a tribute to them and a warning to the Spanish - the closer they came to reaching us, understanding us, killing us off, the quicker we would vanish into air," said Andrés, letting a laugh resonate from deep within.

"Your people were here, they lived in the caves first, made it their home during the winters, listened to the howl of the winds funneling through the passages and dreamt of the ocean. By day they were forced by the Inca to build what was above them, what now lays in ruins. When it seemed the Spanish would arrive any moment, a vote was taken and it was agreed that half would stay to keep the Spanish from following the other half - your people, the people of the sea, walked out of here one morning, and went that way,"
said Andrés, letting his eyes point the route taken silently by the tribes that escaped into
the jungle long ago. "The books in Quito will tell you lies about this place. They will tell
you that we are not alike, you and I, that we cannot work together except as master and
slave, but he," said Andrés, again motioning toward the granite face, "will prove them
wrong. You have managed to escape the jungle, managed to head far north, beyond the
dreams of your ancestors. But you are still hunted."

Benjamin walked toward it again, and again the face seemed to have disappeared.
He moved back just enough for it to reappear, gazing upon a face that held an intensity he
could not imagine on a man. He looked out where the figure gazed, his eyes crossing the
vast green canopy.

"I think we should go," said Benjamin, repressing images of the jungle patrols that
gone all wrong. It was easy to blame Frank, but there was no escaping he was the man
behind the trigger.

Andrés took the poncho and wrapped it about Benjamin, putting the hat stylishly on
his head. "You’re not an indio, but you’re not one of them either. Let's go, maybe Lupe
has made something warm and flavorful for our guest, eh?"

On the way back to Cuenca, they hitched a ride with a pig farmer who wouldn’t let
them ride up in the cab with him, instead telling them to get their indio butts in the back.
He was drunk, and Benjamin asked Andrés if it would be safe.

"Safer than walking along this road with bestias like him driving. This way, if we
all end up going off a cliff side, someone will at least come looking for the truck."
They rumbled along, the truck running on worn rubber, squealing more than the pigs in the rear. They weren’t the fat meaty pigs his father’s family raised, thought Benjamin. These were a different breed, short and hairy, coming in splotches of color, too small to stay still and gain weight, thought Benjamin, his mind traveling back to childhood scenes of Carabuya.

The truck lost its footing, letting the rear swing out beyond the asphalt road while the tires scrambled for traction. Andrés sat hunched over, his head resting on his propped up knees, asleep, or so it seemed to Benjamin, who could not keep still, being tossed about the bed of the truck, his thoughts attempting in vain to leave the present danger and find a comfortable resting spot elsewhere. Was that where Andrés was right now? Was he gliding along the edges of the cordillera, alongside the condor? Benjamin could still feel a sense of awe mixed with fear at first sight of the majestic bird. As a small boy, atop Montañita with his father, who was preparing to set fire to the hillside in order to drive out the snakes, he remembered the shadow of a giant condor crossing their path. His father remained still, the lit torch in his hand, watching the giant bird glide over the sea where it picked up a thermal, then circled about Montañita. His father didn’t set fire to Montañita that season.

"You see that," he said, extinguishing the torch and picking up Benjamin, resting him on his broad shoulders while he pointed up to the condor. "There were people here along the coast that would tell of a giant condor that lived among the highest peak of the cordillera, and once a year it would travel here, to Carabuya, where it would satisfy it’s craving for salt water fish. They would leave it offerings of fresh Corvina sprinkled with
aguardiente and ground honey, so the spirits that guided the giant bird would bless their homes, and remember them when times were bad."

"Are we going to leave an offering for it too, Papa?" asked Benjamin, following the bird with the tip of his finger, tracing circular patterns in the sky.

"Mijo, those were the customs of another time," replied his father, an echo of sadness in his voice.

"But we can make an offering too. Can we Papa? Can we please? That way we can be blessed, si Papa?"

"Si, mijo, that way we can be blessed too. Let’s go down and prepare something for our guest. It must be tiring, flying all the way from the cordillera, only to find an empty plate?"

"Si Papa, let’s go. Lets go," shouted out Benjamin while his father made his way down the steep hillside. Benjamin, still on his shoulders, followed the glide of the bird while he held onto his father's head loosely, enjoying the thrill of the rapid but assured steps as they raced down the hillside.

Further up the road, in a clearing near the cliffs overlooking the beach, Consuelo took a mouthful of aguardiente, then spit it out, showering the plump Corvina laying on an oddly adorned clay dish. The Corvina's heart still held a weak pulse, gills frantically opening and closing, its glossy eye reflecting the Condor overhead.
“I need to move on,” said Benjamin, the truck entering Cuenca, a pounding on the truck cab bringing the truck to a halt.

“I would say goodbye, but something tells me we’ll meet again, so until God grants us another time,” said Andres. The truck pulled away with Andres sitting in the back, swallowed up by the bustle of morning traffic.
Chapter V

The road to Guayaquil felt like a rollercoaster ride, the bus driver pushing the limits of the curves. Benjamin leaned against the glass, closing his eyes and trying to keep from having his head tossed. It reminded him of the endless hours on C-130s, crisscrossing the globe from one hot spot to another. He missed Andres, hoping he would see him again but knowing their paths would never cross again. They were sentinels, thought Benjamin, placeholders in a story that had been waiting for him all these years. Now that they had passed on their stories, they would begin to slowly decay and enter back into the mountainside. He wondered what they really thought of him. He wasn’t foolish enough to think they embraced him like a brother. He and his kind would forever remain outside of their inner hearts, kept far from the secrets that continued to be locked away.

Benjamin remembered an Army buddy, an Apache named Jim Deadpan. They had been tight, doing a tour in Korea along the DMZ, where Benjamin almost took a bullet from a sniper who had crossed the line. Deadman had pulled him down and away from the tree he was leaning against, exhausted by the endless night patrol, and the unmistakable whiz of a 7.62mm bullet passed ever so closely. A week later, in a Seoul bar, surrounded by pyramids of shot glasses and topless women, Benjamin finally felt the full impact of what had happened out in no man’s land.

“You saved my life, you crazy fuckin’ Indian,” said Benjamin, reaching over and pulling Deadman closer to him.
“Shhh. Not so loud or they’ll find out,” said Deadman.

“Who? The mamasans?” said Benjamin, brushing his hand across the dancer’s muscular calf while she gyrated and squatted, holding out her breast to the two soldiers.

“Other Indians,” said Deadman in a whisper.

Benjamin looked around the bar, seeing nothing but South Koreans. They routinely broke with restrictions about hanging out at Korean bars that were locals only. Seoul catered to American GIs, who soon found themselves in street fights with the jealous lovers or family members of the girls who danced to make a living, only a small fraction of whom provided services beyond the public dancing. By day, they returned to their lives; honorable college students, secretaries, and mothers. Benjamin hated GI bars, though he had a hard time convincing Deadman to come along, who always managed to get other GIs to buy him drinks just so they could watch an Indian get drunk, and the possibility of hearing an Apache war cry.

“Dude, you’re the only fuckin Indian in the bar!” said Benjamin. The waitress brought them another round. Benjamin always tipped her far more than he should have, far more than the dollars he hoisted into the unbreakable strings holding together the dancer’s bottoms. She never registered her thanks and he never asked for it. But he had seen her one night, while he leaned against the bar’s alley vomiting, her grandmother picking her up after her shift, and how she would wipe her granddaughter’s face with a moist handkerchief. Benjamin remembered the flip-flops they wore; torn, their toes spewing out onto the dank city streets, nothing like the club-issued stilettos they wore at
work. He felt all at once ashamed, and with the last of the dry heaves passing, he slunk down against the wall, sitting in what was more than likely urine.

Deadman looked over at Benjamin with a cryptic half smile. “We’re everywhere man. This place is full of Indians. You just can’t see us.”

“You crazy fuck. Listen, I don’t care that you’re a crazy fuckin Indian because you God damn saved my life. I owe you man, I owe you big time,” said Benjamin, knocking over a new pyramid they were in the midst of building.

“You don’t owe me. I did it because I love you. You’re OK for a fucked up Indian, but don’t tell anyone,” said Deadman.

“I’m not an Indian man. You’re the fuckin Indian,” said Benjamin.

“If you weren’t an Indian, I wouldn’t have pulled you away from that bullet,” said Deadman.

“What the fuck are talking about?” said Benjamin.

Deadman raised his glass, “To Indians,” he said.

“To the best fuckin’ Indian in the world,” said Benjamin, slamming back the shot, unable to feel much of anything anymore.

Deadman let out a cry that halted the rhythm of the bar. Benjamin had heard it before, but had never asked Deadman what it meant. Slowly, the dancers regained their gyrating motion and the hum of the place returned. Benjamin felt an unmistakable sadness come over him, turning to Deadman, who looked older, haggard, remaining perfectly still, staring at the ashtray, they drank the rest of the night in silence.

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Benjamin gazed out the window while the sun came up over the Cordillera, splashing the valleys and peaks with a harsh light. He fished around in his cargo pockets for his sunglasses but remembered he had left them with Andres. A small gift. He thought of his grandfather, a man he had never met, a man his father never mentioned. He remembered asking his mother about him once, for a school project that required him to place the names of his ancestors on the branches of a tree. Go ask your father, she said.

“He died a long time ago,” said his father, after mulling over the question while lying on his back under the front-end of the AMC Javelin he was working on.

“Papa, what was his name, I need to put it on the family tree,” said Benjamin, all too aware of the edge already creeping into his father’s voice.

“Can’t you see I’m busy right now? Just put ‘abuelo’, that’s all they need to know,” he said, sliding back under the car, leaving a definitive silence permeating in the garage while Benjamin walked back into the house.

Now, after listening to Andres’ story, he wondered why his father never told him anything about his grandfather. Old Artemonte was a man who wielded power in the rural backwaters of Manta, but he was also a man who administered justice, thought Benjamin. He jerked to one side then another while the bus made it through a hairpin turn, trying to pass a slower moving bus.

Benjamin lingered on the image of his grandfather and the scene on the beach, the cool detachment of his grandfather’s men, powerful forces of violence ready to be unleashed. He needed to know what happened between his father and grandfather. He
began to slip into the rocking rhythm of the torturous bus ride. Time was running out and Frank would be calling soon. He had to find Jaime immediately, he told himself as he clutched his backpack, the contour of the urn, and his father’s ashes seemingly pressing him deeper into the seat. The bus entered Guayaquil. The dossier listed Jaime’s home and work address, and Benjamin headed for the docks, where he was certain he’d find him.

The streets held onto the stagnant air that rolled over the city by day, and swarms of mosquitoes emerged from the swamps to feed. Diligent creatures, they waited for darkness to cover the city before feeding off its inhabitants. Benjamin reached the piers, the boisterous shuffle of men loading ships bound for places they could hardly pronounce, places they would never visit, were brought down to a hush as the day ended. Benjamin stood by the fence, watching his uncle Jaime, who made his rounds, whistling away the impenetrable darkness.

At the far end of the pier, fenced in and flooded with powerful lights Benjamin saw an enormous gray hulk of a warship. Benjamin watched while Jaime looked over in its direction, taking the last deep and sensual plume of smoke from his cigarette.

From outside the guard shack, Benjamin watched Jaime and the other customs guard, both swept up in the nostalgia of men overcome with memories of past escapades, retold tales of youth and bravado locked in the past, where old men eventually go to reside. He walked in silently, one of them reached for his revolver, while his uncle came up and gave him a strong hug.

“About time you got your ass here. Got lost?” asked Jaime.

“Almost got swallowed up by a mountain,” said Benjamin, smiling broadly.
“With you, I won’t ask. I still remember the time I almost had to explain to your father that you died in that avalanche on Chimborazo,” said Jaime. “You know, I still get a cold chill remembering the evening news and hearing eight foreigners were presumed dead attempting to reach the summit, and your name mistakenly given as part of the climbing party.

“Glad I decided to jump the cue and make a dash for the summit with the German crew,” said Benjamin.

“Why did you?”

“Don’t know. A feeling, I guess,” said Benjamin.

Jaime offered his nephew a chair, but Benjamin refused to sit after spending so many hours crammed inside a filthy bus.

He took Benjamin’s backpack, holding it at arms length, judging its weight, before saying, “Asi es la vida,” and placing it down carefully on his desk.

Benjamin stepped out into the cool night air, standing next to his uncle while the two men looked out onto the pier.

“Cancer. Six months ago the doctors told me I had three months to live,” said Jaime.

“You look good for a dead man,” said Benjamin.

“I always made too much fuss about my appearance. Family is looking for you,” said Jaime.

“I didn’t come here to listen to a bunch of two-faced crap,” said Benjamin.
“No, but they’re your father’s family too. And they have the right to mourn as well. You would agree, wouldn’t you, my stubborn nephew,” said Jaime.

Benjamin forced a grin.

“Stubborn like your old man,” said Jaime, slapping Benjamin on the back.

“Blood is blood,” said Benjamin, reaching around his uncle’s shoulder and tightening his grip, the two men laughing.

“You and I will head out in the morning, soon as my shift ends here, so don’t go disappearing on me.

“I won’t,” said Benjamin.

“You know what the family calls you?” said Jaime.

“I don’t want to know,” said Benjamin.

“A ghost,” said Jaime, “They pray for you all the time.”

“Prayer never helped me a damn,” said Benjamin, shaking the fence and catching the attention of the U.S. sentry.

“Let’s walk,” said Jaime. They headed out onto the pier. “My shift ends in an hour and then we’ll get going.”

Ahead, the warship sat giving off a gray sheen offset by precise white numbers on its bow. He had been aboard one of these frigates once, during the first Gulf War, when his chopper had been forced to make an emergency landing. They walked up along the fence, noting the signs all along its parameter: “Restricted Area.” They walked on, Benjamin lightly passing his fingers over the bilingual sign, feeling a sudden rush he could not explain, until he found himself standing in front of a lanky man in a white
uniform. Benjamin smiled, but the sailor remained stone faced, though Benjamin detected the nervous way his eyes danced about.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked the sailor.

“We’re just walking around. My uncle’s the customs agent,” said Benjamin.

“You can read can’t you?” he said, pointing to the signs.

“Look asshole, you’re a fuckin guest in this country, so act like one – if not, then go back to where you came from.”

A shocked look crossed the sailor’s face.

“You’re an American!” he said enthusiastically, as if Benjamin were a friend he’d just recognized.

“Estos gringos no respetan,” said Jaime, tapping Benjamin on the back and motioning them to return to the shack.

“You should have come back earlier,” said Jaime.

“There’s never enough time,” said Benjamin.

“That sounds a lot like your father,” said Jaime.

“You really cured, with all that mumbo jumbo?” said Benjamin.

“Faith is a powerful medicine, my young nephew. What do you believe in?” said Jaime.

“Yeah. See where it got my mother,” said Jaime.

“You’re not her. You have to find a way to let go,” said Jaime.

They came up to the shack, where the other customs guard was lost in a popular Jaramillo song, his voice drunk off the whiskey he had managed to trade with one of the
sailors in exchange for a tour of the red light district. They had an hour before Jaime’s relief arrived.

“You look like shit,” said Jaime.

“Thanks, at least one of us looks good,” said Benjamin

“You look a lot like him, you know that. I little too much if you ask me. We all thought that Spanish mother of yours was going to make you lighter, you know, more like them,” said Jaime, pinching and rising his nose, making Benjamin laugh.

“Hey, I’m just making jokes. I loved your mother, she was the best thing that could have happened to that father of yours. It’s too bad he didn’t change more,” said Jaime, unbuckling his gunbelt and placing it back in his locker and started changing into his civilian clothes.

“You stayed away too long. You know that?” said Jaime.

“This is your world, not mine,” said Benjamin.

“I heard you still work for the army,” said Jaime.

“You heard wrong. I left long ago,” said Benjamin.

“So you just look that part, is that it?”

“Old habits.”

Jaime quietly buttoned his shirt, tucking it in and cinching his belt so that it lined up with the edge of his shirt. Benjamin thought it odd, glanced down and realized his own gig line was aligned as well, an old Army habit that lingered. He tried to remember if his father had done the same thing, but drew a blank, instead remembering the
meticulous manner in which, on Sunday’s, his old man arranged and then rearranged his
tie until it looked like solid marble.

“You know, the world is a strange place. I never thought to see my brother again
when he went north. But he returned every year without fail,” said Jaime.

“I don’t get it. Sure, to visit his whore, but he could have done his whoring in
New York. Before she killed herself, my mother said to find you. She made me promise.
So whatever drew him down here now has me hooked,” said Benjamin.

Jaime quietly closed his locker and lingered for a moment with his back to
Benjamin.

“Tell me something, nephew. Are you so clean that you can stand there and judge
your father?”

Benjamin walked toward the open door that framed the enormous American
warship.

“He never told you, did he?” said Jaime.

“I already knew. We all did. My mother knew,” said Benjamin, feeling the
weight of the backpack cutting into his shoulders now.

“Don’t be a damn fool. You’re beginning to sound like you walked off that ship
out there,” said Jaime.

Benjamin turned, but said nothing.

“You’re still young. You have an entire lifetime to make up for all the crap
you’ve done. For all the crap your father, and your abuelo did. So listen up, because I’m
not some drooling senile old man remembering a fruity past. Remember, you’re talking
to a dead man,” said Jaime, pulling up a chair in front of Benjamin. “All this mierda started long before you arrived. So listen. You may not want to hear it, but listen. One day you’ll have children of your own, and they will ask you. Whether you tell them or not, that’s your business, but at least you know. And if you choose to let it die with you, then maybe your kids will come down here and visit my kids and ask questions. One way or another, the truth will get out. Now listen,” said Jaime.

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The plan called for the building of a white marble obelisk to crown the grand achievement of the French equatorial expedition at a time when the roads were no more than machete cut pathways, and cholera swept through the land clearing the region of vast numbers of farmers. It was during the consecrational ceremony for the monument, where the unimaginable cost was proudly declared, that the men, led by Fortunato Cieza fell upon the President of the Republic, his family, and the gathered French officials who had taken a scenic voyage along the coast, their ornate yacht anchored off the coast of Carabuya.

With machetes battling slow firing rifles, the entire operation vacated the beach with terror filled screams. The French, loosing their airs, dashed out into the water, preferring to trust their limbs to the sea than to the Presidential guard that was quickly being hacked to pieces on shore. Fortunato died of a gunshot to the chest. His wife, who had tried vainly to stop the madness, was mortally wounded by the French Embassy Secretary, who in his mad panic to swim out to the safety of the yacht, stabbed the
screaming woman with his gold embossed Laguiole, splitting open her jugular, the life ebbing out of her while she held her swollen belly reciting a prayer.

Two decades later, like locust, they returned. This time, they wore costumes that attempted to hide their wealth and privilege. Unarmed, they displayed meek grins and gestures of conciliation that they spread like donuts to trauma victims. Aristides Artemonte, bearing an apostolic magnanimity was sent out into the surrounding coastal villages to look for those who, it was hoped, no longer remembered, or at least did not care what their business was so long as pieces of silver were handed out. The first person who stopped long enough to speak to him was Evangelina Cieza. By the river, she was having trouble loading the last of the earthen jugs containing the day’s supply of water, when Aristides came by, offering his help, a smile, and showing a knack for making her laugh with comical stories. It was Consuelo, concerned her sister had not returned, who found them by the river’s edge, speaking to each other no longer as strangers. Consuelo took one look at the leather boots and the posture of this man speaking with her sister, and knew there would be trouble.

“I was imagining the river had dried up and you were waiting for the rains,” said Consuelo, quickly cutting off Aristides’ smile with a look.

“Ay perdon, Concha. You know these jugs always give me trouble, and this gentleman came by. He was just helping me lift them,” said Eva, her eyes avoiding her sisters, a crimson hue flushing her cheeks.

“Bueno, it looks like the soldier has done his duty. Let’s go. The morning won't wait for us any longer.”
“Forgive me señorita, but I am no soldier,” said Aristides, removing the wide brim hat he wore slightly cocked to the right.

“Ah, very well, you’re not a soldier, just a man who wears their boots,” she replied, growing angry with the polite arrogance his body exuded.

“Of course, of course. You’re right. They are soldier’s boots, but I am no soldier. They were given to me by my employers, a group of very distinguished scientists here to put the Republic on its rightful place on the map,” said Aristides, wishing Consuelo would leave in peace so he could have a final word with Eva.

“Mercenary,” said Consuelo, then waving her sister to follow, turned and started back toward the house.

Aristides held his tongue, thinking it wise to put on the best show possible, like the scientist had briefed him: find a friendly one among them, the rest will at the very least, ignore us.

Eva hurried after her sister, dragging the stubborn, burdened down mule.

Aristides gave the mule an expert slap on its hind leg, causing the animal to scurry up the embankment. Eva turned to him, offering a cautious but nevertheless, friendly smile.

The scientist handed out enough money to ward off the disdainful eyes of the people, although they never achieved the welcoming hospitality of food that was not paid for, information that was not bought, most of it erroneous to the point where they thought they were being deliberately led astray. Consuelo would watch over them, from the high plateau of La Punta. She would look down upon them, never hiding the displeasure of her tightly crossed arms.
The foreigners gathered meticulous readings, extensive journal entries and trekked through the outskirts of the jungle, led in circles by a man they thought was an expert guide, who was in fact an idiot versed in the gift of gab and the telling of wondrous tales the foreigners wrote down and later deciphered meticulously for possible clues. They went so far to take notes of the idiot’s manner of posture, his nervous tics, and the direction and locations he stopped to urinate. After a month, they packed their tents and cyclopic instruments onto their train of mules, then vanished as quietly as they arrived.

The people thought they were still in the area because they continued to see Aristides walking about. He had in fact remained behind, with a good size amount of money he procured from the foreigners for the promise to loyally remain and collect further details from these superstitious coastal people. An orphan, he decided that here was as good as any other area to sink roots. His thoughts were already on the finca he would construct by the water, and one of the two Cieza sisters would fill his home with laughter and children. He gathered information and attempted to build relations with the locals for the foreigners, while taking his own notes and developing his own plans based on calculations and schematics he worked out in his head while his heart flapped about like a fish at the bottom of a canoe.

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“I ran into someone in Quito, someone who knew about abuelo, and between what you’re saying and what I heard, it doesn’t make sense why my father would keep quiet about him.”
“Life is messy, Benjamin. You still have time to make sense of it all before you grow old and getting out of bed becomes the biggest accomplishment of the day,” said Jaime.

“You said my grandmother’s name was Eva Cieza. That can’t be,” said Benjamin.

“Todo es possible, muchacho,” said Jaime with a laugh. “So you are listening, that’s good, real good.”

“I saw his birth certificate. It had his family name down as Artemonte. And there was what the indio in Quito told me. So your story. Aristides. He was an Artemonte, wasn’t he?” said Benjamin.

“You really want to know?” said Jaime.

“Coño! Uncle, I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” said Benjamin.

“Bueno. We need to make a stop along the way then. You’ll have to speak to someone. Someone who knew your father better than I did. You look surprised. You think you knew your own brother’s darker side?” said Jaime. They climbed aboard Jaime’s Jeep and skidded out of the parking lot, heading north.

“I don’t want to know,” said Benjamin, looking away, focusing on the road that swept past them. With the top of the Willys Jeep off, Benjamin found the sweet spot in the bucket seats and let the hum of the tires black out his thoughts. His phone vibrated. He knew it was Frank, the devil ringing him up to ask for his due. He was behind schedule and Frank would start acting irrationally if he didn’t check in soon.

“But you’re going to anyway. You’re just like your old man,” said Jaime.
“I went looking for you in that strange town. Years ago, mama told me to find you, that you were in trouble.”

Jaime smiled. “That mother of yours had a gift.”

Benjamin had grown up hearing stories of his mother’s early abilities to divine, having experienced her uncanny ability to know certain occurrences in his life that could not be simply explained by ‘all mothers know.’

“I met an old man who said to thank you for the lures,” said Benjamin.

“Ah, yes,” said Jaime, an awakened energy seemingly passing through his body, the morning sun creeping higher into the sky, burning into the landscape.

“You know what I’m getting at. They said you had something. That you went there to find a cure,” said Benjamin.

“Look, my young nephew, we all have something. We all need a cure. That something just waits and waits, feeding off the little pieces of us we neglect until it erupts with a life of it’s own, fighting off the life we are. Don’t worry about your old uncle. I’ve still got plenty of time. Your father was different. That something grew inside him since he was a boy. No one should have to carry so much,” said Jaime, looking over to his nephew, staring into dark, silent eyes. “This road is long and only getting hotter. We’ll stop ahead, fill up, and get something to drink.”

Benjamin leaned back into the already sticky vinyl seats. It would get hotter, and the days ahead would only grow longer, so why rush ahead, he thought, taking a moment to recall the events of the past few days, and how unmanageable life seemed down here. He felt a part of him had been left behind when they migrated to New York, a part of
themselves they had all left behind, which had taken root in the thick black soil, growing and leading parallel lives.

He pulled out the journal, the warm winds catching the sheets of paper and making them crackle. On the blank pages between chapters he found longer passages.

_July 4, 1977. Another son on the way. He’ll be bigger than Ben, bigger than me._

_I could hear him tumbling around in Carmen’s stomach before I left. I’m worthless, I told the padrecito that at confession today. Told him about Mari, about Manolo, about the miserable lies I have to go through to make it all right. He told me there is no way to make it right without confessing to Carmen, exposing all the lies and praying that God grants her the ability to forgive me. Ask God for me padre, I begged him, but he said God is too busy with real problems to intervene on the stupid mess I got myself into. She must know already. I wanted to tell her years ago, but lost my courage. The padrecito says it has nothing to do with courage; it has to do with faith. The bastard’s right. I don’t have faith. Not anymore. I left this place to find I was a dog fighting for scraps. Invisible. That’s what I am, invisible up there. Down here I’m somebody. People think I’m rich down here! How else can I afford to come down here every year and with suitcases full of gifts and items to sell. Trash is gold down here. Suitcases full of trash and sell for gold. That’s how Ruminaui lost the empire. Trading gold for trash. Mari’s not to blame. Even now, Manolo looks at me with those cold black eyes. This is madness._

“Tell me about Mari and Manolo,” said Benjamin.
“What did I tell you about digging up the past? You open those doors and there’s no turning back, you here me,” said Jaime, looking squarely at his nephew with a hard look.

“I need to meet them,” said Benjamin, making Jaime veer off the road, grinding the jeep to a halt amongst a cloud of dust.

“Estas loco,” said Jaime. “Why would you want that?”

“They know all about me. I’m sure they know I’m here and that my father’s dead. So why not just bring it all out. What better time than his funeral, where they’ll probably be anyway, hiding in the shadows. I’m tired of seeing ghosts hiding in the shadows of my life, uncle,” said Benjamin.

Jaime rubbed his eyes, looking out to the dense rising hillsides the road passed through, the air seeming to fill with cackling noises they hadn’t been aware of until now.

“You’re as stubborn as your abuelo, you know that,” said Jaime.

“He was a bad man, that one was. Had to be to survive out here. That’s why we all left Carabuya – we didn’t want to be like him, not on that cursed place. Too much blood was spilled there, and the ghost of the dead drive men mad. Your father especially; that’s why he ran away north, heading as far from the jungle as he could go.”

"I need to meet them. Out in the open, not have them, crossed out of conversations whenever I enter the room," said Benjamin.

Jaime put the Jeep back in gear, saying nothing until they reached a river whose bridge had collapsed.
"Figures," he said, shaking his head. "Less than a year. They had all this fanfare about the great bridges they built so that the Pan American Highway would once again bring commerce and the sister nations together. I guess it all ends here. Tell me, do the Americans put up with bridges that fall down every year?"

"What happened? U.S. Army engineers put these up not long ago," said Benjamin.

"No. We don’t know how to do a fuckin thing in this country - it's better to be an ignorant and proud peasant like our presidente - keep our national pride and all that bullshit, than actually learn from the yanqui engineers. That bastard Lizaro kicked them all off the job - made a big stink about putting an end to yanqui colonialism and letting the great engineers of our country do the job," said Jaime.

“I thought we were building bridges since before the Romans?” said Benjamin, stepping out of the Jeep with Jaime. They walked up to the edge of the bridge, surveying the buckled structure that looked like a giant had stepped on it, the low river waters edging around its fallen slabs of concrete.

"Yes, and the fuckin Inca’s built roads and cities that still stand, but these fuckers are so greedy that each one of them took a little more than the next, until there wasn't anything but sand and water in the mix. I bet if you visit one of Lizaro's mansions, you'll find where all the concrete disappeared to," said Jaime, shuffling down the embankment to the side where cars had made an alternate crossing. Coming back up the muddy embankment, he slipped in the muddy tracks, but Benjamin caught his hand and pulled him up.
"Gracias, hombre," he said, "The water is low. We can make it across. I'll wade over and you drive."

"Not a chance," said Benjamin, already heading down with an easy side shuffle.

"Just like your father - you know you're just like him, stubborn like that mule that should have killed you when you were a boy," said Jaime.

"It would seem we have mule in our blood," said Benjamin, wading across the slow moving waters. He walked zig zags along the path the jeep would take, surveying the bottom of the river with his feet while the water came up to his thighs. "Watch it over here," he called out, Jaime, waved back and edged the Jeep into the river.

Benjamin waited for him on the other side. The Jeep took on water over the side of its doorless frame and then emptied it like a giant washtub as it crawled out of the river, his uncle smiling.

"You make for a good river guide. They teach you that at La Escuelita?" said Jaime.

Benjamin gave him a hard grin. "They closed that place down years ago."

"Sure, and they used concrete and rebar in that wreck of a bridge you see behind us," said Jaime.

“I left that life a long time ago,” said Benjamin, recalling the School of the Americas, a name that only came up in old timer’s bars outside infantry bases. He didn't want any part of that past.
"First, you have to meet your great aunt, Consuelo," said Jaime. He moved the Jeep through rutted out remains of what was once asphalt, but had now reverted to dirt, run offs from the surrounding hills tearing up what was not looked after.

"La bruja?"

"Ah, you better watch that tongue around her, muchacho - she's libel to turn you into a fish - or worse," said Jaime, laughing deeply while he took a curve too wide, nearly wrecking.

"These roads look like fun. How about letting me drive for a while," said Benjamin.

"No chance. You think your old uncle doesn't know these roads? I've been driving up and down this patch long before you were born. Back when the only cars coming down this way were those giant army trucks los yanquis dropped off after the war," said Jaime, a grin creeping across his face while he maneuvered the switchback up the hill.

Benjamin found the seatbelt and clicked in. "I wonder what the priest will charge me for two burials," said Benjamin.

Jaime looked at him hard and long, both men driven by the distance the years had bred between them. He finally laughed, looking forward just in time to see the rickety bus coming around the bend, overloaded with Montuvios, its roof a menagerie of chickens, pigs, goats, and the whaling of children dangling barefoot over every square inch. Jaime returned the blast of the horn with his own, waving at the driver, they inched past each other, and talked about the washed out bridges ahead and behind. Children
tried to sell them hot corn bread, Benjamin tossing them crumpled bills in exchange for still warm hockey puck size biscuits.

"That stuff will kill you," said Jaime, taking a bite of one of the biscuits he intercepted.

"Iron stomach," said Benjamin, tapping his gut, and sinking his teeth into the warm, dense corn that released burst of salty cheese into his mouth.

The two men ate and smiled while the jeep crept up and down the valley. About them, the jungle opened and closed around them, and at the peaks, they would catch sight of the ocean not more than a half-mile off.

"Where do I find her?" asked Benjamin.

"Don't worry. She'll find you when she's good and ready," said Jaime, wiping the crumbs from his mustache, his lips savoring a beer that was still miles away.

"Tell me about the curse," said Benjamin.

Jaime glanced at him from his peripheral vision, pretending not to hear. He took the curve faster than he intended, the rear wheel spinning out over empty space for a brief moment before grabbing dirt.

"He wrote about it," said Benjamin, pulling out the journal and turning to a page he had nearly passed over, his father having glued it to the adjoining page. It was only the strange addition of Bible passages written along the entire perimeter of the page that caught Benjamin's curiosity and made him inspect the page a little closer.

January 1, 1968. She won't let it go. Keeps coming around with the same boogie story about blood oaths, panther cults, shape shifters, and the boy. Carmen is
actually listening to all this Montuvio crap. I need to get them out of here. Manta’s too close, she’ll find us there. She’ll find us in Guayas. I’d freeze my balls off in Quito if I thought she would stay away but she shows up like a ghost. Jaime’s looking into the trip north. Crazy bruja doesn’t have a passport - see if her mumbo jumbo can make it all the way to the yanqui cities. The old man really left a giant fart for me to deal with. Jaime won’t tell me where he’s gone to so I have to stick around and wait. I’ll send them north while I wait. Damn her and whatever curse she thinks she holds over us, I’m not giving up the boy to some demon cult. Where the hell is Jaime?

Benjamin closed the book.

The jeep ambled on, coming to a stop where the road opened up suddenly, leaving them with the sight the sun edging past the horizon, casting up a red filter across the horizon.

"I need to stretch my legs. Let’s walk for a little bit," said Jaime, climbing out of the Jeep, he looked like he’d suddenly aged a dozen years.

They came across an old fisherman sitting by his weathered canoe, its red and blue paint faded, the hollowed out tree having seen better days. He looked up at them and smiled a toothless smile, Benjamin noting the knotted fingers that still retained sufficient agility to mend the fishing net.

"Catch anything?" asked Jaime.

"Hunger," said the old man, cackling at his own joke.
"Nothing wrong with a little hunger. Makes for a better catch," said Jaime, waving at the old man. He walked along to the edge of the water where the waves crashed with the incoming tide.

Benjamin lingered, fascinated by the old man's bark black hands that reminded him of his father's hands. He looked down at his own, the old man catching him lost in thought.

"Strong hands you have, boy, but you're no fisherman. You have the look of a hunter," said the old man.

Benjamin took a knee by his side, taking up the netting in one hand and admiring the old man's detailed patchwork.

"Viejo, what do you know about the hunt," said Benjamin, catching the old man's eyes, the two silent for a beat, before a spark of recognition and fear crept into the old man's eyes. He snatched back the part of the net Benjamin held.

"You hunt men," said the old man.

"Don't we all," said Benjamin, offering a smile and following Jaime to the water's edge.

"Thinking about taking up fishing?" asked Jaime.

"Unfair to use nets," said Benjamin.

"Unfair to watch your family starve," said Jaime, motioning up along the beach, near the tree line where bamboo huts stood like staggering sentinels. All about, migrant fishermen sat about mending shrimp larvae nets. Little boys and girls ran about, their skin already pitched a shade of blue black from years in the burning forge of the equatorial sun.
"He mentioned you in that entry. What about this curse? His talk of demonic cults?" asked Benjamin.

"No demons. Worse. Men that have lost their way and move between us and them," said Jaime, his face draining of color while the falling sun painted the world crimson.

Benjamin’s phone vibrated again. He ignored it.

"I need more than a children's fable," said Benjamin.

"Tell me something, you've been out there, traveling over the world. Have you seen things that give you chills? Even worse, have you ever felt something, a presence your body was telling you was there, telling you to run, but your mind kept you planted, kept you from loosing your nerve?" asked Jaime. He looked back into the treeline, Benjamin noticing a glazing over of his eyes he'd seen countless times in war zones around the world.

"Tell me what happened, uncle" said Benjamin.

"Ghosts. Demons. Creatures of the night. I don't know. But they walk among us in daylight unseen, covering their tracks. Children's fables, like you say, are the only thing your old uncle can offer. You need to see her. She may be one of them. In fact, I know she is, but your destiny is tied to her somehow. Your father's was too but he ran away. I don't think you're back here to run away, are you?" said Jaime.

"I've been running all my life," said Benjamin. “There's nothing left to run away from, so here’s as good a place as any."
"Good. You'll need that and a lot of iron in your spine in the days ahead. We better get going before it gets dark. There's a bar up ahead that rents rooms. I don't like driving through here at night - el cuco might jump out at us from the jungle," said Jaime, forcing a laugh. He put a hand around his nephew's shoulder and the two men headed back to the Jeep, the old man nowhere to be seen.

The sun's light completely extinguished itself in the ocean, a damp, cool darkness emanated from the jungle like a rolling fog. Fires sprang up bright, and electricity crackled through power lines along the shore, communities huddling around the light of televisions and radios turned up loud to drown out the sudden increase in the volume of sound emanating from deep within the jungle. Men began drinking hard from recently distilled backyard liquor, fighting back in loud voices the creeping darkness with tales of bravado at sea. Silently amidst the symphony of noise, a solitary panther moved through the tree line, its velvet-like coat glistening with perspiration.

It looked for a cool pool of water to drink from, having traveled most of the day deep within the safety of the denser paths, where the sun trapped a level of heat unbearable to most large mammals. It crotched low and approached the beach clearing, moving with a delicacy that was only given away by the increasing noise level of panic going out throughout the immediate jungle as smaller creatures gave out distress signal to their own high above in the thinning canopy. It lay still, not daring to go further, though the lure of the fire and the men huddled, laughing, and drunkenly moving about pulled it closer. It knew better, and so it turned quietly and headed back into the deeper folds of the jungle, continuing to glide north catching the scent of the man it sought, its shadow
moving effortlessly though a pack of Howler's caught wind of it too late, losing an older and aged monkey, which it devoured in haste while a torrent of howls rained down upon it from the pack high above it in the trees, rage and fear loosely translated, reaching the ears of the men by the fire who went silent, the alcohol not enough to steady their hearts as they drew quiet and closer to the fire they added far too much wood to, sparks and flames dancing up toward a starry sky, unable to shake a chill that had entered the valley.

"Your father ever tell you about the time they thought you'd been dragged away and eaten by a panther?" asked Jaime.

"No, but is sounds like a story he wouldn't have hesitated to tell," said Benjamin. He rolled to his side on the hammock swinging lightly, like the breeze that came off the ocean, their bellies filled of marisco soup, the rich fish stew chased by one too many beers making it hard for them to get up and head to their rooms at the seaside inn.

"No, I guess he wouldn't have brought it up," said Jaime, blowing out jagged ringlets of smoke from the stubby cigar.

"OK, I'll bite. What is it that would have kept him from bringing it up? Mama certainly would have, but nothing from her either," said Benjamin.

Jaime remained silent and blew out a large ring that expanded ever so slowly, lingering before vanishing into the passing breeze.

"Your mother had recently lost her father. You remember the old bull?" said Jaime.
"Shadows of him," said Benjamin, remembering the larger than life laugh his grandfather had, and the stout body, but with the passing of time, his face had disappeared, and the timber of his voice had lost all but the boom.

"She went down to Guayas with her mother to take care of the estate issues with the lawyers and left you with your father," said Jaime. "He left you one night in the care of the hired man's wife. You were fond of her because she slipped you candy when your mother wasn't looking."

"You were there?" asked Benjamin.

"There was nothing to worry about. They were good people that had worked for your grandfather since they were a pair of mocosos and before then, their parents worked the finca since anyone could remember," said Jaime, inhaling deeply. The puro's head burned a bright orange and the jungle’s putrid humidity was kept at bay by the breeze coming off the water.

"So what happened?"

"It was pay day around here and afraid her husband was going to drink away the weeks wages, she left to go find him, leaving you in the charge of her oldest girl who was almost a señorita," said Jaime. "Well, you were always one to bring anxiety to anyone that didn't know how travieso you were, getting into anything and everything." Jaime laughed. "She put you to sleep, or thought she had, but you were a sneaky one, and when she went to use the outhouse you took the opportunity to go hide. So she comes back and el niño is nowhere to be found and she looks and looks and no niño. So she panics and runs up the road to fetch her aunt and before long there is a gaggle of women with torches
and lanterns going up and down the beach, along the water and the edge of the jungle calling out your name."

"Was I hiding in the coffee sacks again?" asked Benjamin, recalling the story his mother told again and again about finding him hiding in the giant sacks of raw coffee beans that had been harvested and awaited dispatch to the capitol.

"That's the first place they looked," said Jaime, "The old toothless viejo sent word that he'd seen a panther stalking about the Punta del Diablo a few days ago but no one would listen to him. He started filling their heads with panic, recalling his childhood and how it was common that each year, small children went missing, taken silently from their beds by the giant panthers that roamed the jungle."

"To eat them?" asked Benjamin, curious about the recurring cycle of panther stories since he'd arrived.

"Perhaps. Who can say. Something about a debt the beasts required since the men of Carabuya failed to do their duty back to the time when the Spaniards landed here," said Jaime, taking a long, deep pull from the puro.

"You're not telling me everything, are you," said Benjamin.

"There is too much to tell, muchacho. We carry too much inside," said Jaime, with a smile at the smoke rings that echoed out into the momentarily still night air.

"Tell me about the condors," said Benjamin.

Jaime turned sharply to look at Benjamin, finding him smiling at the trap he'd walked into.
"You're good," said Jaime, laughing nervously. "They taught you well at la escuelita."

"Enough with the distractions. Growing up, I'd ask about you and the rest of my uncles and aunts. Mama always had kind words about all of them, but when I reminded her of you, she'd go silent and look over to my father, who sat at the kitchen table pretending not to listen while he read El Dario," said Benjamin.

"Your mother was a lovely woman, but she wasn't from here, didn't understand us, didn't understand the old ways," said Jaime. "Boy, you sure you want to go down this road? There is something to be said for leaving the dead buried - not just the people, but the old ways."

"I wouldn't be down here wasting my time listening to fairytales if I wasn't sure," said Benjamin. "I wouldn't be walking around with the damn ashes of my father on my back - nearly getting killed by landslides and chasing ghosts and people stuck in a time warp if I wasn't sure."

"Esta bien. But understand something, these fairytales, as you call them, there is nothing childish about them. You want to see but you have to learn to look again at what everyone around you has taught themselves to go blind about. Fairytales? No, mijo, these are nightmares you're about to walk into. You ready?" said Jaime, moving to a seated position on the hammock, the white smoke from the puro whirling about him while the wind picked up.

"I didn't just disappear that night, nor did magical panthers carry me off, did they?" said Benjamin, getting out of his hammock, looking down the beachfront, where
the electric glow of television sets emanated from the fisherman huts that lay scattered about.

"You wouldn't understand. You left this place before you could be taught and now you come back looking for answers you can't possibly understand because you can't feel them in your heart and your gringo brain is going to vomit all over what I tell you," said Jaime.

"Try me," said Benjamin. "This gringo brain has been getting software adjustments so it may just surprise you."

"Very well. I warned you," said Jaime, getting up and grinding the puro's burn against the porch post.

"That stuff will kill you," said Benjamin, the pungent smell of a moist harsh tobacco lingering.

"I've died and come back before," said Jaime, a boyish smile crossing his face.

"Basta, enough dancing then. The boy who would be king returns to the jungle in search of what was lost. Only she can tell you the full story, your story and that of our people. You can't listen to it with your ears. A poison has to be drawn from you and then you have to take a leap of faith into a black hole where your darkest fears will be waiting for you. To bed. Tomorrow we leave with the rising sun and before another night falls, you'll meet your great aunt and she'll determine if you're ready to listen."

Benjamin followed the fleeting meteors that flashed bright against the night sky, a sky filled with an endless array of stars far brighter than any he’d seen back home. The same stars that had kept him company as he lay under desert skies, and distant shores
much like this one, before moving under cover the great canopies, where the rule of light ceased and a kingdom of sounds that made one's blood curdle made for pathways into the interiors. A metallic taste lingered in his mouth, a sign he'd learned long ago came to him as a death approached.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" asked Benjamin.

"Be careful what you ask, muchacho. Nothing is what it seems in this world you're about to go into. Your father knew that, and strangely enough, so did your mother. But you, you were the one that was meant to stay. The gods don't like to played for fools, so now is your last chance. Bury him and go home to your McDonalds or stay and probably die here. Your choice," said Jaime, placing a hand on Benjamin's shoulder to steady him, his gnarled fingers gripping the solid muscle under the sweated through shirt.

"I have a nightmare I can't shake. I've had it since I was a boy. It comes fast and hard, shadows and light, and sounds I can't place, moving through jungles and the rush of water, always there's the rush of water. There are faces, my father, a woman's voice I can't place and another man whose face I never see," said Benjamin. "I didn't disappear that night. I was taken someplace by my father, and you were there, weren't you, uncle," said Benjamin, moving Jaime's hand off his shoulder and turning in toward him abruptly, the two men tensing up.

"Tomorrow, at sunrise we ride. You'll know everything before the moon rises again," said Jaime, turning and heading inside the inn.