



The Oxen-Less Cart

PD Collar
Art: Inara Padilla Salas

From the Collection:
Costa Gothika



The Crucible

September 15, 1839

San Ramón, Costa Rica

When the sun peaked for a moment through the settling dark clouds that promised rain, it glimmered off the polished bowl inside which a barker spun sugar. Two blocks away the Independence Day parade approached in a slow procession of ox-drawn carts, marching school children, a four-piece brass band replete with tuba, town patriarchs perched stiffly on shiny saddles, braided mains dancing to the rhythm of the hooves of their finest dressage mounts, and all of it festooned in red, white and blue. The smell of *chicharrones* and *chorreadas* mingled, and the happy sizzle of beef *pinchos* rose from a grill the next stall down as the vendor dabbed *chimichurri* and lifted flames from the coals. Antonio Montes Carvajal and his sticky-lipped four-year old son at his side stared intently at the miraculous spinning of the molten sugar in the whirling copper bowl into little clouds of candy as the artisan pumped his legs on wooden paddles that made it spin and the miraculous delicacy take form. From her father's shoulders, three-year old Cristina focused instead on the brightly colored column of people marching down the middle of the street and the sound of music like she had never heard before. She could see her mommy talking with other grownups down the street when an ugly man with heavy whiskers and a mean face caught her eye and glared at her. The man began to approach and pulled a machete from the scabbard tied around his waist. "Papi, Papi," she warned, slapping the top of his head with her little hands.

"Put your spoiled brats aside, Tonio Montes," the man roared in a drunken slur. "It's time to meet your maker."

Tonio stepped back and swung Cristina off his shoulder by the arm and into the hands of a wide-eyed bystander and edged Toñito back with his other arm to step away from the crowd and into the street to face the assailant empty-handed. He recognized him as the husband of a newly-hired dairy maid with whom Tonio had indulged a spate of indiscretions. That woman now tore through the crowd and ran up behind her husband to throw herself at him.

"No, no no! Oscar, No! Don't do it," she screamed.

Tonio lunged to avoid a strike made wild by her interference, the iron sinking into his upper arm. He grabbed the blade but could not hold on, and as the man drew back for a second blow, shots rang out. He looked up to find Evaristo Campos strolling up with a grim look on his face, his two flintlock pistols smoking. On the ground writhing lay both the assailant and his wife.

"You didn't have to kill *her*," Tonio gasped, clenching his shoulder. His own wife tripped over the hem of her dress in a panicked run to throw herself around her husband and keen as the quivering of the gunshot victims slowed. The parade came unglued to circle around the dying couple as a thunderclap sounded to the northwest to roll toward them along the flanks of the western mountains.

"It was an accident, Sir."

"You almost didn't make it in time. There, there, honey."

"Won't happen again, Sir."

"Magda," he pushed at his wife. "Step back at once: you'll get blood all over your new dress!"

"We must see to this wound immediately," she narrowed her eyes to scold.

He appraised the cut for the first time and allowed a brief frown to drift across his steely visage.

"They have a child, Eva," he looked down at the now completely still bodies heaped together, limbs akimbo on the rutted track, moisture from a puddle stealing its way up the dead woman's dress. "A baby boy, if I am not mistaken . . ."

"That they do, Sir."

"Something will have to be done," he turned to his wife and arched his bushy eyebrows.

Disquiet on the Northern Front

March 6, 1856

Finca Montes, San Ramón

"Can't you move any faster, Marco? We can't be late!" Eladio Silpancha was all spiffy with polished boots and a clean white shirt, a red sash about his waist; even the scabbard of his machete was scrubbed and preening. The saddle gleamed on Tornado, the second finest of the Silpancha mounts. She was a paint mare of Arabian stock that stood fourteen hands at the withers and grazed from her tether to a corral post beside the gate.

Marco Montes Albízar strolled around the yoked team to slowly unfasten the couplings.

"You can't hurry oxen," he said.

The yoke was sculpted from mango before Marco was born by Hector Villalobos, under whom Marco had apprenticed in cart-building for three years before being reassigned for *boyero* training. At seventeen he was made to report directly to Don Evaristo Campos, to be trained up in the training of the oxen themselves, the commercial sinecure for which Finca Montes enjoyed renown from the Guayaquil highlands to the outskirts of the capital itself. Job and Hito were three-year-olds, gelded as strong young bulls in their second year and coming up well. The *finca* had 26 teams in training, seven in addition to Job and Hito due for June delivery to the Alajuela coffee consortium that was their best customer. With San Jose growing larger by the day, there was a

brisk business in the delivery of foodstuffs from regional farms to the hungry urban market. And while the business of getting rice, beans, tubers, fruits, beef, pork, and *guaro* to the hungry city was certainly profitable, the plantations of coffee and sugarcane and export of beans and raw sugar to Sarapiquí for shipping down the San Juan River and on to England and to Puntarenas for the San Francisco market remained the industry's lynchpin, making the ox quintessential to the ambition of the nation's popular President, Juan Rafael Mora Porras, to put Costa Rica on the world's map. The team stood gently, the mid-afternoon sun dancing upon their nose rings. Six weeks away yet from the first rains of the season, the summer breeze set the leaves of the *manzana de agua* beneath which Tornado grazed a-flutter and lifted the evening's hem with the yellow fingers of falling afternoon.

Meet me thirty minutes before dusk at the old Chilamate. The perfumed note in immaculate hand-writing had been secreted by a young servant girl in the taloned thrall of his beloved.

"You go on," he told Eladio. "There is work yet to be done. They won't get started till late anyway."

"Marqui," his pal clucked. "Nonsense. The firewater will be flowing like *coyol* sap at *menguante, mae*. Put these beasts to pasture and clean up and let's go! We have to get soused early, before the Colonel's speech!"

Marco put on a frown and planted his hands on his hips to sigh. "Can't you see I'm working? We can't all ride our fathers' best horse off to get drunk on a whim!"

Silpancha stared slack-jawed at his friend. "But we had this planned, *huevoón*." He shielded his eyes to glance theatrically around. "Looks like you're the only one doing any work around here: everybody else is already in town loosening up for the assembly. What planet are you on, *mae*?"

"Well, Don Tonio is not here to grant permission. I can't leave until I'm finished with my shift."

"Don Tonio is in the capital. We already went through all this. Why are you changing the plan? The Don would insist you be in the front lines tonight! Come on, Marco. What's up with you?"

"Come," Marco said. He led Ladi outside of the corral and around to where Tornado swept the sides of its body with its long tail and ruminated. He untied the lead and encircled the beast's neck and tied it into a loose knot that rested on its withers. "You go," he frowned darkly around the lump in his throat. "I stay!"

Eladio's eyes swelled. His shoulders slumped and he looked at his friend, an unspoken "but why" pantomimed in mute stupefaction.

“Just go, Eladio. I will find you later. I’m serious.”

His best friend did not look back as he cantered nobly across the pasture, the afternoon sun brilliant against the scrubbed-white back of his Sunday dress shirt, the spur on his right boot twinkling in the sun. Marco squeezed between Job and Hito, breathed deeply, and hoisted the yoke up and off their withers and above his head to walk it forward over their horns to set one end on the ground and find a fulcrum in his shoulder to hump it into the *galerón* to put it away. He strode back out with his rod now in hand.

“*Andaaa*,” he summoned the beasts into a stroll with three gentle taps on Job’s withers. “*Derecho*,” he commanded them in the direction of the gate. They plodded slowly forward as if still yoked. Ten meters beyond the gate he said “altooooo” and strolled beyond them to turn and plant the rod butt on the ground and appraise the halted team face to face. “*Libre*,” he commanded them, and the animals broke ranks and began to graze as they ambled off toward the south fence where they preferred to keep one another’s company in the shade of the *Ceibo*. The Brahmin breed of cattle had proven superior to all others, though Don Evaristo spoke of the Cape Buffalo as an untested species with potential for even greater achievements. Finca Montes had divested itself of other cattle breeds to focus through husbandry on optimizing the Brahmin traits to the climate on this far side of the world from whence it came.

Marco Montes had grown up till the age of fourteen in the manor just like any other of the Don’s six children, though it was no secret that he was adopted, the only sibling that was not biologically linked. Upon his graduation from primary school at thirteen, Marco was ushered off to the bunkhouse where his apprenticeship in the crafts was arranged. At 18 years of age, Marco was now conversant in most practical aspects, if not yet in the business itself, and was both curious and hard-working. Though he did not suspect as much, Marco was a regular topic of conversation between the foreman and the dour Don, his adoptive father, whom Marco had learned to no longer call Dad.

“He is too young,” Tonio would retort in his famous mimicry of indignation. “The men will not yet respect him!”

Eva tapped his chest three times. “I should not have to remind you, Tonio . . .”

“Oh, nonsense, *huevo*n, you’ll outlive me by a decade.”

“It’s time to train up my successor, Tonio. The boy is key to our future.”

“He’s a fucking child, Eva!”

Evaristo chuckled. “As you say, Sir.”

“Don’t you Sir me, *huevo*n. You’re just washing by balls.”

Evaristo clucked and rolled his eyes at the presumption, apparently an intentional slip of the boss's tongue. The Don smiled. "I mean my ball," he chuckled.

"Yes Sir."

The bunkhouse was deserted, and the cold water on Marco's head was invigorating. His phallus rose at an unbidden association, the furtive glance, a parting of thighs, her musk filling his senses . . . He scrubbed his body clean and ignored the timber. He would save his milk for Cristina.

With the raiding slavers coming to yoke the nation, what red-blooded Tico would not stand for his young Republic against the Yankee *filibustero* and his foreign mercenaries? The time was yet unripe to reveal their secret, and like dissembling to Ladi, he would have to find plausible reasons to sidestep conscription and remain close to his beloved and their unborn child.

Cristina Montes Albízar rode up on Princesa, prim in her tailored riding outfit, her green eyes hidden by the brim of her hat, an afternoon horseback outing around the *finca* the apparent excuse for her absence at the manor. He stood up from the buttress root of the tree as she swung her leg gracefully across the horn of the silver mare's saddle to tear off her *sombrero* and rush into his arms. They pulled one another tight to kiss and then draw back in the last glimmer of dusk's fading light to drink in one another's eyes. Belly to belly, Marco could discern a swelling in her as he pushed the one in him against her. His brain floated in a soup of chemicals produced by glands in his body that in her proximity clouded reality in a manner much more pleasant than did *guaro* or *mecha* or anything else for that matter.

She tore away from him and burst into tears.

"Marco, you must run," she looked up. "He is coming to kill you!"

"Who is coming to kill me?"

She stared at him. "Why, Papa, of course!"

"Don Tonio is coming to kill me?"

"He knows, baby, he knows!"

"You told him?"

"Of course I did not tell him!"

"Then how can he know?"

"I don't know, but he does."

“Don Tonio would surely not kill me?”

“Marqui, my love, San Ramón is about to become a *cantón*. It’s all but settled in the National Assembly, and Papa is a shoe-in for mayor. You know this.”

“And what of it?”

“It’s not ordained. He has powers, but it will still be settled by popular vote. Papa can’t be shackled with scandals and shocks to his honor! He might lose out to Figueres or even Silpancha.”

“But we have a baby on the way, Cris. We must be married and raise this child. Your father will see this is necessary and just.”

Cristina chuckled morbidly. “You’re my brother, Marco! Father will not sit idly by and allow us to marry.”

“It’s not incest,” he scowled. “We have different biology.”

“Baby, it doesn’t matter. We were raised together under our father’s roof. We have the same surnames. Now I am carrying your child. He is coming from San José to kill you. If he rides through the night, then he should be here before noon. If they lay up in Grecia or Alajuela, he’ll be back by dusk.”

The fallen light no longer allowed Marco to see her clearly and he drew his face near hers to look into her evasive eyes.

“Marco, baby,” she said. “You can’t talk your way out of it. You have to run! I will settle this down in time, and we can marry when you come back from the war with your medals.”

“But our baby, Cristina: I must remain for our child and for you.”

“You will be no good to either of us buried in the back forty, Marco.”

*

I was born in Vara de Roble, a mountain hamlet a hard day’s walk from Cartago. I volunteered at the age of 15 and fought for the Imperialist side in the Civil War. I was lightly wounded at Ochomogo and taken prisoner by the Republicans. Perhaps I am using the term “wounded” generously. Upon being ordered to charge, I tripped over a stone and felt my foot wedged, then a shock through my body and heard a snap inside myself, and my ankle bone was broken. It was not a grave injury, certainly not a compound fracture, but I was unable to stand, much less fight and settled back against the rocks in shock until I was found and carried away by the victors and tended by a *curandero* at a make-shift holding pen in Tres Ríos. Thirty of us were killed on the

Imperialist side that day, fewer on the Republican, and fifty or so wounded, and many more captured. It would turn out that the Mexican Empire of Agustín de Itúrbide, with whom we Imperialists were purportedly in league, had fallen seventeen days before our fateful encounter at Ochomogo and word of the empire's collapse had not yet found its way to Costa Rica. So we fought for a cause that was lost before we even took up arms.

But nobody was executed or for that matter even exiled, and after the Republican forces sallied forth the next day to liberate Alajuela and then to tame the lingering imperialists in Heredia, I was allowed to turn my loyalty over to the Republican side. When my wound healed I trained as a bombardier in the garrison of Cartago and achieved the rank of Sergeant before being decommissioned in 1838 to return to my frigid mountain home where I settled into the trade of milling wood and lumberjacking the enormous oaks of my land's boundless forest. I must have made a good impression all those years ago, for I was astounded when a uniformed rider asked for me by name at the mill and handed me a letter sealed in wax asking that I return to the capital to report for military duty and a new commission. That was just three months ago, and in the Central Valley the townspeople were abuzz with the far-flung news that waves of filibuster privateers scourged Central American nations to our north and had become a growing peril to our own. Colonel Lázaro Salazar received me with grace and more respect than I was perhaps due from such an august personage. The North American proclamation of Manifest Destiny three decades before, he explained, had evolved into a wave of adventurism by that nation's southern states and mercenary hangers-on from Europe that sought to re-instate slavery throughout the isthmus. Though Costa Rica was not the main target, it was nevertheless in the cross-hairs of this *Yanqui* movement, precisely due to the Tico's telluric bonds with liberty, sovereignty, and identity. Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua had none of these qualities, Salazar pointed out, and for our national bona fides we were correctly delegated as a nativist threat to the blue-eyes' ignoble ambition.

My name is Mateo Marín Córdoba, and at 48 years of age, I am an improbable conscript. Yet here I am and honored to don the uniform again and to my promotion to Captain. I worship the two cannon assigned to me and love even more the platoon of forty men and six mules under my command. By the time our column filed forth before dawn from the Cartago garrison on March 4th, I was confident from our exercises that I could drop a fifty-pound ball inside a 20-meter diameter at a distance of 500 meters. Yet, this odd tale has very little to do with the war itself, least of all with my artillery company and our minor little contributions. Instead, it arises from the curious circumstances that came—at least in my mind—to surround Private Marco Montes Albízar, whom I met on March 6th as the Third broke camp on the outskirts of San Ramón to push into the Tilarán Mountains and onward to Liberia, and about whom later happenstances would make the recounting of this tale a moral obligation for me, given that it sheds light on so much more than the simple events recounted.

Marco Montes had been of a good mind to repay Don Tonio's murderous ambitions by stealing a horse from the *finca* off to war, but when Tornado was taken away their first morning as inductees and re-assigned to a senior officer, whose lesser mount was then handed down to a horseless junior officer, Marco was relieved that he had not taken such an extreme step. The lads were divided up, Eladio assigned to the mess and Montes to the transport brigade. There he discovered six of his own teams mulling about and lowing gently in confusion amid vast numbers of men both uniformed and irregular in frenetic motion. There was Juan and Obo, Tan and Ingo, Gil and Boyo, Mas and Menos, Meng and Macho, and sure enough, Job and Hito rounded out the stock of Finca Montes's donation to the National Campaign.

"Marqui," came the familiar voice of a *finca* wrangler. "Glad to see you were given the nod for our glorious adventure."

"Zurdo," Montes acknowledged in surprise. "How many of us are here?"

"Twenty or more in all, but only five with the Third: Pansa, Rigo, Mechas, Juancho and me. Well, six counting you. Good thing you are here; these *boyeros* they look a little green—town pansies all of them if you ask me—but with you here, things are now right and proper!"

An officer in a stiff coat with brass buttons strolled up, and a passing irregular said "*Atención*," and the two boys snapped themselves straight and delivered an unpracticed salute to the senior officer now crowding them.

"At ease, privates," Captain Marín commanded. "Who is in charge here?"

The boys looked at one another. "Why, Marco is," Zurdo said, jerking his thumb.

"I'm not in charge of anything," Montes protested.

"My mules were re-assigned for speedy delivery of munitions," the Captain told Marco. "I require teams of oxen to shuttle the two ten-*quintal* cannon in tow and the balls and powder."

"Ten *quintales*?" Marco frowned. "A single team will do; let's rig." He attached leads to the nose rings of Job and Hito, leaving the strongest of the assembled teams to weightier burdens, and followed the Captain to the other side of the camp to secure the load and get underway.

It was pure summer, the road hard-baked, and we made good progress up out of San Ramón to the pass at Guayaquil. I was mounted, and the remainder of my company marched in sandals beneath packs and arms. The column stretched across 5 km between the fastest and slowest as the day wore on, and the carts drew up the rear under the lumbering of the oxen, so I lagged there, close to my guns and men. A squad of scouts scoured the land ahead for the night's camp site and raised food from farms

along the way. An hour into the march, I drew alongside Private Montes as he grunted gentle commands and walked beside his team. "What can we do to quiet these carts?" I said. "It's a terrible racket!"

"It is the way they are made, Captain," he replied. "They are supposed to sing, each with its own song."

"In peacetime, perhaps," I frowned, guarded in a subject beyond my expertise. "This is war. How can we quiet them?"

"With a greater load, Captain."

"A greater load?"

"The louder the cart, the less loud its song." He shrugged. "Everybody knows this."

"This is the load we have. Surely there is another way."

"I suppose we could remove the iron fitting that makes them sing," he pointed out the piece on the cart. "But that would be a heresy, Sir."

"A heresy, Private?"

"Like confiscating the drum sticks from a drummer boy or pulling the cross from the neck of a priest," he smiled. "Like stripping an officer of his commission . . ."

I grew accustomed to the sing-song and indeed found in each set of wheels a tune of its own, and by the time we bivouacked in Esparza the next day, I had grown fond myself of the melody that played in our transit down the western slope of Tilarán Mountains. The town was expecting us and a feast readied. A handful of professional women had ventured out from Puntarenas, and with four kegs of guaro carted in by the local still-master, it was quite a party. The harlots earned a month's wages in a single night and hired a mule and a boy to carry their plunder back to the port after resting the next day. When we broke camp the daybreak after the debauch the smell of runny shit and vomit rose in a miasmic steam raised from the bucolic pasture where we camped from the searing morning sun. We restored our water stocks from a nearby stream in which our men plunged and dipped heads and splashed themselves to shake off hangovers and sharpen up. The sage villagers, anticipating our travail, had pots of *menudo* burbling at dawn and we slurped the soup with hand-molded tortillas hot from the griddle. This settled our stomachs and quieted our heads, and by mid-morning the column was singing, our drummer boys flailing their skins as we settled onto the long road to Cañas, spirits high against challenge ahead.

None of us had ever seen a filibusterer before, and we had to conjure his image from the reserves of our imagination. What we did know was that they were not Nicas but foreign mercenaries invited in by the losing side of our neighbor's civil war. The gold

fields of California were legendary to anyone that knew anything at all about the world beyond our shores, and we were told that many of the filibuster fighters were gold-seekers that stopped in transit from steamships plying *Vía de Tránsito* for a well-paid turn at adventuring in the Nicaragua interior, all well-equipped with modern firearms and lots of ammo. The officer class included French commanders from the Napoleonic wars and Prussian militarists that General Mora referred to as *Jesianos*. They were led by the American slaver William Walker, who had recalled Hernan Cortes's derring-do the year before with a lead force of sixty men that sailed from San Francisco to take up arms from the rebellious Democratic stronghold of León and within the year to rise to the apex of Nicaraguan power through privateer salaries that few of us would earn in a lifetime. Now Commander of the Army, Walker was reputed to command ten thousand men, half of them mercenaries. Yet as fearsome as Walker sounded, the United Kingdom, France, and the New York industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt colluded to oppose Walker's plan. There were a handful of Prussian military engineers of our own already settled in recently annexed Moracia, and all of us banded together against the Filibuster invasion, lending international support to our just and moral cause.

Our regiment boasted nearly 1000 Minié rifled muskets, all with newly sharpened shiny bayonets hewn from French steel. We had one hundred thousand rounds of ammunition that had been built up in the preceding months by our President's brother, General José Joaquín Mora Porras, who commanded the national army. A handful of militia men brought their own smoothbore muskets and home loads, and there were even a handful of blunderbusses a hundred or more years old. Any that did not carry a firearm at least slung a machete from his waist. Our nation boasted 22 cannon and 300 or more barrels of powder, and I commanded ten percent of that force and had 45 50-pound factory-made balls to fire before having to forge hand-mades were that to become necessary. With the command structure rounded out by the Porras's brother-in-law, General José María Cañas, our standing force of 9000 in national service was well trained and disciplined, perhaps the finest fighting force between Mexico and Colombia, and the recruits, though green and mostly simple-minded, numbered another 4000 men and relished nothing more than the opportunity to bayonet the unwashed horde back to their lands of snow and ice to lick their festering wounds. It was indeed a glorious National Campaign, and the entire countryside was with us, Ticos and Nicas alike, grievances over the Partido de Nicoya's secession from Nicaragua to conform our new province of Moracia now stowed in this moment of collective peril. Though I was privately circumspect at our prospects against the military force of unknown size and likely military superiority on the march against us, I knew that we had the force of arms and collective will to give at least as good as we got.

Great Expectations

March 10, 1856

Finca Montes

“So you wish to marry my daughter,” Don Tonio said. He leaned back in the leather chair behind his desk and appraised the young dandy standing before him.

Licenciado Fulgencio Villarreal Uribe had been made to wait in the foyer for three hours and given *fresco de maracuyá*, and by the time he was finally ushered into the Don’s office it was after dark, and the room was lit not with candles but with lamps. Villarreal had heard of whale oil, though tallow was used in his own household, and he speculated that the odd scent in the room carried the vestige essence of a bested leviathan from the Southern Ocean.

“I love Cristina with all my heart and shall protect and honor her till my dying day, Your Excellency.”

Tonio snorted. “As you may have heard,” he grumbled, “there is a war going on.”

“It has been building for a number of years, Sir.”

“In fact, I am surprised given your lineage and shiny new law license that you have not turned over your talents in our nation’s greatest hour of need. As you are surely aware, I have sent off half of my staff to the fighting.”

“One must focus one’s efforts where one’s talents lay, Don Tonio. Our nation suffers many challenges and my efforts to ensure a rail route to the Pacific is nearly as important to our nation’s progress as victory in the gathering war.”

“Why, my own son ran away to join the fighting without even telling me.”

“Surely he worried that you would not allow it, Sir. Marco is not, as I understand from Cristina, a military man, and those without military skills and training are clearly more vulnerable against the formidable adversary; he surely thought you would have put down your foot.”

“He would have been right, young man. I needed him here to release even more hands to the militia. Alas,” he smiled. He turned to his consigliere, who sat in an easy chair to the left of where the young man still stood awkwardly at attention before the polished desk top. “What the hell was he thinking, Eva?”

“The *Licenciado*’s take is probably not far from the mark,” Don Evaristo replied. “A young man overcome with patriotic ardor . . . ? Eager to bring pride to his family that marches off to fight an existential threat . . . ? It is not an unlikely thesis.”

“How poetic,” the Don smirked.

“Naturally, I would wish to postpone nuptials until after the return of our victorious forces,” the young man plodded onward. “Certainly not while fighting is underway; that would be indecorous. In fact, I thought it might be proper, if you will forgive my temerity, Sir, to schedule the event in the days following the announcement of the San Ramon *Cantón* and your acclamation to the mayoralty.”

“He may dress poorly,” Don Evaristo spoke up. “But he speaks well, and with his influence to make sure the Pacific line passes through San Ramón, why, there are advantages to the match.”

“Hm,” grunted the Don. “Doesn’t hurt that his father is the Alajuela magistrate,” he allowed. “Sit down, son,” he said.

“The impending victory will fill Porras’s coffers with political capital,” Evaristo continued. “He will be able to strike deals quickly; Conservatives will fall in line. What choice do we have beneath the acclaim and accolades to come?”

“With all due respect, Don Tonio,” the emboldened youth spoke up. “Your fortune is hewed from oxen, and no man is more perfectly placed in time to make the jump to the next technology in getting goods to market. Oxen have been a key to our rise as a nation. But the steam engine is here and rail to be lain. In coming decades, there will be a canal between the oceans that will sideline even the rail industry. That’s why the filibusterers are here in the first place. When that canal is opened, your heirs will have to make a strategic decision not unlike what you are now yourself facing, Sir. Imagine the fifty-year legacy from ox-drawn carts to railcars to steamships that bridge oceans . . .”

“Perhaps,” Don Tonio acknowledged before turning back to Evaristo. “I always hoped that Cristina might marry a doctor. Lord knows we could use more doctors in this country, and fewer lawyers.”

The suppliant chuckled.

“You know how things are,” Evaristo lamented. “There is some chemistry involved in this whole dynamic. I think there is value to be found that your daughter has found that chemistry with such a distinguished young gentleman from a good family and without discernible vices . . . even though he is just a lawyer and not a doctor.”

Villarreal looked down and shook his head, unable to contain a smirk.

“The heart is a free agent,” Don Evaristo further opined. “Why, imagine if Señorita Cristina, forgive my presumption, had fallen in love instead with a stock boy or ranch foreman or a *boyero* or someone like that.”

“I concede the point.”

"I am not intimidated by this sophistry," Villarreal interrupted. "I ask for your daughter's hand in marriage because I love her and want to spend the rest of my days with her, and the proper path in so doing is through this somewhat humorous meeting with you two esteemed gentlemen. So here I am! You are not going to scare me away."

The Don warmed to the young man's fire and inhaled to flare his nostrils at the effrontery of his words.

"In marital union with your daughter, your interests will be my interests, Don Antonio. I have my own fortune and will not require your financial support to provide for Cristina in the manner to which you have accustomed her. I will bring your progeny into this world and defend her honor and nurture our assets and bring this nation out of the backwaters and into the world mainstream and up to the brink of the twentieth century. Your daughter loves me and I her, and we shall be married. If we can enjoy your blessing, it shall make our start all the more sweet and secure."

"I will let you know my decision within the week."

The Naked and the Damned

March 20, 1856

Hacienda Santa Rosa

We butchered the last of our beef on the sixth day and by the time we marched through the garrison portals of Liberia two days later were delighted after too many *cuadrados*, green mangos, *jobos* and cold rice along the way with the grilled *bistec* and steaming rice and beans and *picadillo* awaiting us and the rations of *aguardiente* doled out. The command and officers convened to learn from General Cañas that the enemy had penetrated national soil and executed nine unarmed civilians at Hacienda Sapoá a few days earlier. Their ranking officer was a Hungarian named Schlessinger, and he commanded as many as 500 troops that included four companies, one each of Prussians and French, two North American. As the smoke of cigars began to fill the tent, the enemy was ensconced somewhere upon the Santa Rosa Plain less than 30 km away, Liberia apparently in his cross-hairs. We were divided into four squads totaling a thousand men under the command of General Mora. The rest of the expeditionary force, two thousand or so strong, hovered around General Cañas to reinforce battlements and defend Liberia should the head of our lance not prevail. Two thousand troops were stationed at Puntarenas to defend our most vital port, and a regiment marched from Alajuela to repel any enemy pretensions up the Sarapiquí River.

There was no sound in the air as Eladio Silpancha ran toward the stone wall of the corral among Colonel Salazar's front line. Time slipped out of its normal order of passage, and the blitz seemed to last an eternity, though the mad dash across the two hundred meters from the cover of scrubby trees to the outer corral wall took only a couple minutes to cross at full sprint. Eladio could hear only his organs, the pumping of his heart and the action of his lungs, all outside sounds muted in his adrenaline-filled

moment of rushing truth. He ran faster than most and when bullets failed to fly realized that he was beyond his first-line companions in the forefront of the charge, his weapon light in his hands, his sandals flying across the dusty scrub littered with dried cattle dung and thorny shrubs. The sounds of the world returned thirty meters away from the battlements with the first volley of the filibuster infantry. He heard the screams of pain and fury as compatriots fell—including seasoned veterans—and his returning senses awakened to the howls of the second line of rabid confederates in a hell-bound charge. He leapt the shoulder-high rock wall in a single bound and coming to ground impaled a wide-eyed yellow-hair busy reloading to plant the sole of his right foot against that man's chest to jerk his bayonet out to whip the barrel around and discharge squarely into the naked gut of a second foreigner arrested in bare-chested assault that dropped his weapon and sank to his knees to grip his oozing abdomen. As the enemy rushed forward with drawn blades he missed with a second bayonet thrust and sunk its tip instead into a corral post as his opponent dodged his lunge. Eladio abandoned the rifle to put his unsheathed and outgunned machete up against the Pennsylvanian steel of the enemy's saber. But confederates now boiled over the corral wall, and the enemy faltered, their blue eyes wide, their white faces even paler against the onslaught. A cannon ball fell on their left flank, filling the air with dirt, and they broke ranks to flee to the fort itself as the ball from Captain Marin's second gun blew three men like rag dolls into the air to fall crumpled and disfigured into the dirt of the yard to wet it with their pooling blood and release the smell of bowel to mingle with cordite as the Ticos pressed with ball and bayonet. Others among the adversary opted to join their officers in flight rather than face the vulpine foe.

The cavalry boiled onto the grounds from the west, sabers swinging, and Captain Gutiérrez's company burst upon the scene from the east, and our numbers were too great for me to risk another cannonball. As I watched from the rise, my men gathering now beside me to admire the mesmerizing scene, the ostrich plume of Schlessinger's helmet fluttered timorously as he broke out the front gate in frenzied retreat, chased by dozens of his fleeing cohorts in full rout, many more half-dressed and unarmed men running after them. Drawing up their rear I observed through my glass a ridiculous and magnified man wearing nothing but sandals high-tailing it into the scrub, the skinny white cheeks of his ass flapping in ignominious flight. From within the stronghold the detonations and volleys continued for no more than five minutes before all went silent, leaving me to cherish my stunned exhilaration. In a mere quarter hours' time we had rubbed the unwashed horde's nose in its own excrement and sent it packing like a slinking coyote back across the bitter land from whence it came.

Eladio stood inside the dimly lit *casona*. He held his reclaimed rifle and joined a phalanx of companions that corralled at bayonet point the prisoners into a corner where they were made to kneel. General Mora interrogated the men, wide-eyed and dirty, some wearing only underwear. They answered quickly and truthfully all of his questions. Their force had numbered 300 men. A reserve of 2000 remained garrisoned in Rivas. Their mission had been to sack Sapoá and then besiege Liberia to await reinforcements to eventually move on Puntarenas and from there to close the invader's grip around the Central Valley. A prisoner vomited, and the smell of shit rose up in the

crowded space. Prisoners edged away from the man as much as the bayonets allowed, and Eladio smirked at the nakedness of their fear, which he smelled in the air, an acrid and fetid stench that competed with the smell of runny excrement for the predominant aromatic note. Mora ordered Salazar to have the prisoners taken outside and shot, all but for one man, who was forgiven and sent scurrying off to his cohorts to tell the tale. A runner was dispatched to report the news to General Cañas and summon the greater army onward for the gathering march on Rivas.

It did not take long for the vultures to take note of the banquet. Festive irregulars shoed the birds from the bodies of our fallen as Marco called upon Eladio to lend a hand. Between the two of them they shuttled in the two ox-drawn carts the cadavers to a burial plot fifty meters beyond the perimeter. Each of our fallen was buried in a grave of his own a full meter and a half deep, each prayed over briefly by Father Francisco Calvo as drummer boys beat out a requisite dirge and our troops doffed caps to stare somberly over the proceedings. Left to their devices with the enemy, the vultures made sport of their fallen, and by early afternoon when the two pals turned the teams of Job and Hito and Meng and Macho over to the task of hauling off the enemy cadavers strewn inside the corral grounds and those executed against the wall, the eyeballs of the swelling dead were long plucked out, and many body cavities had been ravaged by the filthy animals, which some among our contingent now referred to as our “black-headed rear guard.” The enemy dead was piled together in a common pit, thrown in without any order or respect—but for a brief visit and words by Father Calvo—and when the task was accomplished as dusk gathered—dirt shoveled mostly over—General Mora, disappointed in the larder’s meager few bushels of rice and beans in the face of his famished battalion, consigned two of the oxen to the stewpot and smokehouse. There was also jerky and tack that the raiders had carried, but this treasure the general husbanded for the morrow’s march. Beneath Montes’s withering stare, I defended his beloved Job and Hito to Colonel Salazar as essential to our assault on Rivas since they hauled my guns, and that night, Montes repaired to the pasture to whisper words of encouragement and to then sleep in the open alongside the doomed animals as the rest of us ate Meng and Macho with great relish and delectation.

We were joined that afternoon by our Liberia force, and nearing the border after two days on the march divided into three contingents, our stomachs stuck to our backs in famished anguish. One column sallied forth for La Virgen to guard against a filibuster assault from Granada by water on the great lake of volcanoes, a second to defend the coast at San Juan del Sur from a hypothetical maritime assault from León. The remainder of us marched under Mora and occupied Rivas, which the filibuster force had remarkably abandoned and where we were greeted by the townspeople as liberators. Yet many locals sported veiled brows that we suspected harbored a conspiracy, treason perhaps lodged in their hearts. It became quickly evident, however, that the mantle of fear that settled over the town was not from the hostilities but due to a disease working its way around. It had claimed a smattering of lives across the preceding year but now billowed to settle in full pestilence among the townsfolk of

Rivas, assaulting its citizenry in wanton disrespect to gender, class, nationality and political allegiance.

The Postman Always Rings Twice

April 5, 1856

San José

"It's nothing," Cristina Montes glanced downward and fanned herself.

"It is never nothing," Jorge Montealegre Espinoza retorted, crossing his legs the other way, free to admire the plunge of her neckline when she looked down to concede him the permission to do so. "Speaking," he reprised the great Tico idiom, "we understand one another."

"The female brain cannot possibly grasp the full complexities," she demurred.

"Oh please, Señorita Montes, do not be coy."

"It's just that with the president and his brother-general off on foreign soil and sure to be slain, it would seem an opportune moment for your august father to stoke allegiances in the capital. You know," she said. "To plant the seeds of a coming harvest."

Coque hated his nicknamed, bestowed by a baby sister that could not pronounce "Jorge." He was the nephew by marriage of the President of the Republic and Commander of the Army and the son of Costa Rica's foremost surgeon, his old man a political vanguard to the left even of Coque's famously liberal uncles. Coming up on his 29th birthday it was now a trope at home that the time had come that he be decently married. Arrangements made to spark courtship were a weekly intrusion upon his life, and he suffered the parade of virgins from the finest families gamely, rebuffing them gently, but firmly as need be with the more aggressive, and with the matchmakers, more often than not the lasses' ambitious mothers. The bevy of beauties mostly broke down into quiet and shy provincial types on one hand and the more self-possessed matriarchal urban maidens on the other that seemed to more keenly understand the power of the womb. Few, but always fun, were the really pushy ones that sidled up to test the boundaries of propriety. Such a one was Cristina Montes Albízar, an improbable candidate from the very edge of the known universe. Her father, a swarthy caudillo to the west, was a gun-slinging trailblazer in the old mold. He was an ultra-conservative, his daughter here to play footsie with the presumptive scion of the ultra-liberal wing, flashing cleavage for form and feigning innocence.

"I try to stay out of the old man's business," Coque smiled at his visitor.

"You probably write poems," she said.

"Indeed I do."

"I prefer to live them," she said.

"Palace intrigues aside; does your father know you are here?"

"Oh dear," she giggled. "I hope you won't tell him."

"I'm sure you have your cover."

"Voice lessons," she beamed.

"So what's your real angle?"

"Sometimes only a girl can make a girl feel like a real girl," she replied, wiping the silly grin from her face.

"Go on."

"But even milkmaids need husbands."

"Do they?"

"They do. Not as much as fairies need wives. But close."

"You don't say."

"The great Montes and Montealegre families are balanced across a fulcrum of which our families are not even aware. You and I are the likely architects of a cosmic balance in store for this nation," she said. "If you can garner your father's sycophants in the capital while I gather up Alajuela, Grecia and San Marcos, we just need a confederate from either Cartago or Heredia to round up the herd and put it all to pasture." She smiled primly.

"Smacks of treason to me," he said.

"Perhaps you have lost your imagination to your poetry."

"What's your timeline?"

"A few years . . . There will be a patriotic fervor and acclaim for our victorious force."

"It is unlikely that the *filibusteros* will prevail," he agreed.

"The *Moristas* will have their day in the sun; they are entitled to it."

"Nothing like this has ever happened here," he reminded her. "Many will long sing praises over how the war is being handled."

"We are a young nation," she sighed. "We tire of old things quickly, and after a honeymoon the clouds will come. They always do. We'll need a man like your father to help us through the rough patches ahead."

Coque laughed. "Pops is a surgeon, not a president."

"My father always preferred I choose a doctor over a common lawyer."

"Perhaps it is my father you should be courting."

"I hear he is already married."

"So was Marc Antony. It did little to deter Cleopatra."

This raised a smile from the plump lips of his ravishing supplicant.

"I will give you my reply within the week," he told her by way of dismissal.

The Power and the Glory

April 11, 1856

Rivas, Nicaragua

We had three days to prepare for the coming assault, and the nervous energy distracted our force from the meager rations of rice and beans doled cautiously out twice a day. I arrayed the guns to defend our garrison but acceded to General Mora's last-minute order to move one of the guns before daybreak to position in the street to cover the main road's northern approach. The filibusterers had occupied Rivas for over a year and were intimate with the terrain, while we were the outsiders. So it is not surprising that their blitz came from an unexpected direction. The disheveled force that we dispatched at Santa Rosa was now replaced by a fearsome well-armed battalion that threw our troops into disarray as dawn broke to the sound of rifle reports in the streets. We had the gun well-positioned for an assault from the north, not so ideal for the assault that came, from the east. But we only had the single gun in place, Private Montes still securing the powder and balls into the cart at the garrison when hostilities erupted.

The enemy stormed the cathedral and took up sniper positions in the bell towers and overran light defenses in the town buildings to position rifles with commanding positional superiority. Our troops were caught in a withering crossfire that left our dead littered on the streets. Among the first to fall were four of my men waiting for balls and powder, and I was shot in the shoulder and stumbled to cover and then helped through back streets to stagger to the garrison and laid on a pallet. The field hospital was overseen by the German-born Doctor Karl Hoffman. His apron covered with blood, he busied himself with tourniquets, compresses, saws and morphine and barked orders in bad Spanish as he cauterized and sewed, hissing words of encouragement through his tortured accent amid the groans and wails of the wounded.

The battle raged all morning long, with an assault by the Ticos repelled by the enemy followed by an assault by the enemy repelled by the Ticos, and the number of bodies grew in the streets and town square. Our infantry was not able to kill the bell-tower snipers, and they had a field day picking us off, our only salvation the time it took for their assistants to reload and stage rifles. Despite the fact that the loads and power for the cannon remained under our control—and without them the abandoned gun was useless—General Mora launched three waves to reclaim the gun that sat in the middle of the street. The General clearly worried that they might have ammo of their own and that our forces would be sorely tested were our own gun turned against us, and this strategic gamble cost a great many lives. But they did not have ammo, as it turned out, and the cannon was left in full view on the sunny street, cheese on a mousetrap, and the squads sent to recover it were decimated by the impenetrable crossfire. By noon it was a stalemate, a hundred of our men lying dead around the cannon, hundreds more in the entrenchments and inside buildings. But with the locations and proximate numbers of Walker's forces now known to Mora, it was clear that we would ultimately prevail and must therefore press even harder to bring it to an end. After the third assault to recover the gun was repelled, a volunteer was called up for a suicide mission and ran into the *Mesón* courtyard under our blister of suppressing fire with a lit faggot, only to be shot dead. A second soldier rushed unbidden to take his place, but the torch he picked up from the ground to hurl caught the edge of the roof and fell off before igniting the thatch, and he too was killed by sniper fire. A drummer boy barely sporting peach fuzz ran forward to claim two more faggots and rushed into the *parque*. He was shot as he threw the first torch, and it fell short, but he found the reserves to throw the second one, and it lodged onto the *Mesón* thatch high up and held, and the flames lifted, and he was shot again stumbling back toward cover and died in the street. The enemy fire from encircling battlements began to subside and the flames roared into the afternoon sky. Portions of the roof began to collapse inward, and we traded fire until dark. That night, the surviving enemy broke from the back of the stronghold to flee, and at dawn we burst in on the *Mesón* to bayonet the forty or so wounded enemy that had been left by their fellows, and we were finally able to walk the streets without a single round being fired.

Things Fall Apart

That day the first of our soldiers to take sick began to vomit and was taken to the hospital where Doctor Hoffman appraised him grimly and ordered the confection of a quarantine ward before sedating me with chloroform and prepping to extract the ball wedged in my shoulder. The stricken man died the next day and three more were sent to the quarantine ward, and as the next two men died, four more men arrived to take the evacuated pallets. Marco and Eladio resumed their turn as corpse bearers and collected the dead to haul to the cemetery. Yet as quickly as the killed soldiers could be removed from the streets and houses where they had fallen, the bodies of civilians killed by the *peste* appeared at night on the streets, dragged out and left there by the townsfolk. As the gravity of the situation became evident, burial orders were changed. Hoffman identified the disease as cholera and explained to the high command that the same disease had killed thousands of combatants in the Crimean

conflict in the past two years. He reported that the contagion was spread from the corpses of the afflicted itself and that contact with those bodies carried a near certainty of infection. Yet failure to dispose of the bodies immediately was just as bad; the miasma of putrefaction carried the disease into the air wherever a *peste* victim lay unburied. This explosive intelligence was not possible to keep under wraps, and soldiers balked at orders to gather and dispose of the bodies. Threatened with summary execution instead, the cemetery was abandoned, and pits were dug on the very edge of town to expedite the process, and the bodies were taken hurriedly there without distinction between friend and foe or whether death was from war wounds or the *peste*. The plan to march on Granada was scuttled. Reports filtered in from lead scouts summoned back that the bodies of succumbed filibusterers had been dumped in wells along the road north, a tactic of Walker's—who was himself a medical doctor—that recalled battles recorded from the annals of antiquity when opportunistic disease and pestilence was first known to have been employed as a weapon of war.

In the quarantine ward the sick were given a place to decently vomit, shit and await their deaths. Two Nicaraguan doctors and an orderly assisted Hoffman, with two and then three fusiliers pulled from the lines to serve as interns until falling sick to take their place beside the dying. We quickly learned that fearsome though it was, it was not a certain death sentence, and some of the men survived, very few at first, but later more, and the garrison talk centered not on the filibuster enemy and what might happen next but on the things that survivors did differently that allowed them to survive, with much stock being placed on the local advice to drink water copiously, others relying on Hoffman's insistence that it rose in vapors from the dead. We all feared and loathed the corpses remaining on the streets, perhaps less than the new ones accruing, and fear begat fear, all of us unified in the singular conviction that we were next.

Yet in all fairness, despite the horrors for those of us yet uninfected, it is, for the dying and dead, not a particularly painful death, arguably not even a bad way to die, as far as means of death go. It comes on with a sudden sinking realization of a bodily revolt. Then, you experience a nausea that in waves turns to vomiting. Unlike in healthy men, when profuse vomiting in a hangover empties the stomach down to the lining of bile, the stomach of a stricken man never fully empties, and you continue to expel a white viscous nappy fluid, not in appearance unlike a watery *atol*. Unlike regular dysentery, with which we were all passingly familiar, there is no abdominal pain to presage the diarrhea that follows in short order. The fluid expelled from your rear is not too dissimilar from that disgorged from your mouth, viscous and twangy, only with a different color and smell more diagnostic of its origin. After a spell of spewing at both ends, you will be okay for a while, too exhausted to clean yourself, never in too much pain, other than the muscle cramps that presage death's approach, and then the spewing resumes and within as few as five hours, you are dead. But there is little actual pain involved and not so much moaning except among the more theatrical and least resigned to your fate. Sometimes it takes a full day to die, sometimes two. But if you survive into your third day, chances are about even you'll pull through, though too weakened nearly to raise so much as a cup to your lips, less a musket to your shoulder.

I remained delirious following removal of the ball in my shoulder, but after a few days the fever broke, and I was able to stand and move around, my right arm bound in a sling to my chest, and it was at that point that I was able to appreciate firsthand the gravity of our predicament. The quarantine ward held fifty men and daily had another twenty that either came in sick or were carried out dead, a few that emerged on their own feet cured, and it was one week or later that in an unguarded moment as Montes snatched a couple hours of sleep that one of the oxen was brazenly shot by a soldier rebelling against the constancy of hunger. He was assigned to the squad of body carriers as punishment, but that night we all tucked into a welcome bit of beef.

“They killed Hito,” Eladio reported when I drew alongside the two lads as they continued to haul bodies in a cart pulled by the single remaining ox.

“Job will never be the same,” Marco pointed out. “You see how sad he is?”

I studied the animal but could not distinguish anything different about it as I felt a wave of nausea come across me and had to sit down. I told myself that it was a lingering effect of the gunshot, but within the hour began to vomit and Silpancha helped me to stumble my way to the sick tent to take my place beside the dying.

*

It was to be their final load of the day, and Marco and Eladio strolled beside lumbering Job and a cart with ten cadavers just sixty meters from the newest pit, Marco eager to put Job to pasture and camp beside to protect him when the animal stopped in its tracks, bellowed loudly, and collapsed to its knees to keel over dead.

“Go let them know at the mess,” Marco told Ladi softly. “The regiment must not be denied its supper.” Eladio lingered in shock as Marco unbuckled the couplings of the yoke from the fallen animal and detached the cart. In the stillness that followed the arrest in motion, the smell from the cart surrounded them, and Eladio backed away to turn on his heels and trot back. Marco and Eladio sat and watched as the men butchered the fallen animal quickly with nervous glances at the cart itself to send porters back with meat on their shoulders to the mess. Within two hours the darkness was dispelled by a rising moon, and Eladio stayed with his stoic pal to lend him succor in this latest calamity.

“There is nothing more we can do,” he told Marco. “Our mission is over; let’s head back to camp.”

After another half hour passed Marco at last rose. “Come,” he said, and walked back over to the cart and the stain of blood that had been Job, a pile of entrails buzzing with blue-bottled flies, and took in the moonlit scene, his staff planted in the ground.

“What are you doing, Marqui?”

Marco Montes extended the business end of his rod and tapped the yoke three times gently to raise it from the ground, and Eladio drew back and stared in shock as his pal tapped it a fourth time to set the spoked wheels gradually into motion, the cart's song stirring in the moonlit night.

"There is work yet to be done," he said. Marco walked beside the macabre cart and its load that moved slowly through the night, propelled forward by nothing more, apparently, than his will.

"It is unnatural," Eladio cried, stepping away from the diabolic invocation. "What has become of you, Marco?"

"Come," he urged. "These cadavers are not going to bury themselves."

But Eladio burst into tears and ran from the scene back to the garrison to collapse against a stone wall and sob, refusing entreaties from his fellows to explain his anguish.

"*Aaaltooo*," Marco said, the cart backed up to the edge as the grave-diggers edged up from where they shoveled soil beneath candle lanterns.

"Too bad about Job," one of the men said. "Say how did you get the cart the rest of the way? Did you and Silpancha hump it over yourselves?"

"Where is Ladi," asked another, grabbing the bare feet of a corpse to haul it out onto the ground as his fellow came around to pick up the arms and between them swing it twice to propel it beyond the caving walls into the gaping mouth of the pit itself.

*

Eladio Silpancha was carried in during my second day and put beside me. At first I did not recognize him as his hair had turned shock white. Toward the end, however, the delirium is treacherous, perceptions not to be trusted, and I did not think much about the change come over him. Anyway, where we were bound nothing much mattered. The more devout among us continued to place stock in the last rites the longsuffering Father Calvo made the rounds to deliver, rotating between the burial pits and a garrison alcove where by candle light he meticulously recorded the names and particulars of the dead. I, for one, felt a sense of peace beneath the doleful words when he administered them to me.

I drank as much water as I was brought and could ingest, though it seemed in part to fuel my nausea. But by the time they brought Silpancha in the waves had grown farther apart and that night amid the sounds and smells in the darkness I sensed that I might pull through after all. In the moments closest to his own death the next day I forced water upon Silpancha and muttered words of encouragement. By the fourth day I was able finally to hold down broth and bits of bread and detected a hopeful glimmer in

Eladio's eye and walked around the camp amazed at each new revelation of life, death hovering still like a tempest over everything but me.

In the collapse of morale and discipline, we were divided into three groups, one that included me and Silpancha and the sick and wounded able to walk to return by sea from San Juan to Puntarenas, the rest of the standing force ordered to return on the march. The peace suit obtained by Mora included assurance that the sick left behind would be humanely cared for by the Filibuster force, and this agreement was honored by Walker, who was, after all, a medical doctor himself. No trivial number of those abandoned to their fates indeed returned overland in the coming weeks and months, though many others succumbed to their wounds or the *peste* and were buried perfunctorily far from home.

Had more been known at the time, Costa Rica may have been saved the ten thousand civilian deaths that followed our heralded return home as national heroes. Though little did we know at the time, our group of injured and sick that sailed from San Juan del Sur the 29th of April was to prove the most decisive vector in spreading the ensuing contagion across the Central Valley and thence to all corners of Costa Rica. Within a few days we had all been transferred to San Jose for further medical attention, and of course the contagion spread like wildfire in the capital and everywhere else. Yet for the 500 troops ordered to return by land under Salazar's command the mental burdens were practically insuperable. They marched through lands in which they left the *peste* entrenched wherever they went yet also arrived to find that the disease had its own lead force out to soften up the land. In short, cholera surrounded the column from all sides and welled up among their numbers. And of course they fell along the way as well, so that these men, no matter how fast they marched away from the plague simply spread it around and lived within its tentacled grip throughout their ordeal. Very quickly our miseries were to be visited the whole of our nation and claim its dead from all strata of our society, rich and poor, old and young, man and woman alike. By August one tenth of our population would be killed by the disease we brought home in April and May. The only ones spared in notable numbers were infants and drunks—who ordinarily died in greater numbers than the population as a whole—and for this irony, there were no small number in our nation that came to question the wisdom and benevolence of God.

Marco Montes was unable to find fault in the men that in Liberia broke away from the column without permission to try their luck in small parties or alone, and all along the road from Rivas to Esparza the bodies of the fallen were taken care of by the vultures that seemed to converge from all corners of the nation to indulge the gluttony. Marco had long come to the realization that for whatever reason, he was immune to the disease. Amid the vacant stares of the Liberia townsfolk and the nervous confusion of military leaders unsure given the circumstances how to properly respond to the mass defections, Marco found his mission in the tending of the dead. He advised on the depth of the burial pits and the layers of soil cover and summoned a cart and team and made sure the requisitioned beasts were not overloaded nor constrained beyond the

limits of their endurance and reassured the nervous assistants pushed forward for the duty.

“You can’t fall sick twice,” he told the town elders. “It should be survivors that dispose of the bodies.”

Within a week, Liberia was managing its calamity as well as could be hoped for, and he walked alone to Bagaces where he lent succor to the stricken town in his example and moved from there to Cañas and then to the Juntas crossroads. He detoured into Puntarenas to find the port in good shape from the instructions of Rivas veterans that had passed through weeks earlier by sea. He lingered in Esparza to exercise his grim trade. Everywhere he was taken in and given food and accorded a deference and awe disproportionate to his station, his reputation preceding him along his grim march home. He spent two days in Guayaquil and continued down from the pass and into the land of his birth.

The Oxen-Less Cart

June 15, 1856

Finca Montes

Marco Montes was ushered from the landing into the foyer and quietly told of the Don’s fate. Doña Magda, he was told, was presently off to Alajuela to lend a hand as Toñito battled the disease, his young wife bereft at the death of their child—Marco’s niece Alejandra—and unable to manage the cratering household. Marco genuflected at the news and was made to wait while Cristina prepared herself to receive him.

She registered no surprise as she took his hands in greeting and embraced him. She kissed him on both cheeks and drew him into the parlor to sit with her and ordered *fresco de tamarindo* for the two of them.

“Oh Marqui,” she said, a tear running down her cheek.

“When did he die?”

“Last week.”

“I’m sorry, Cristina. I wish that I had arrived in time to make my peace with him.”

“He loved you very deeply, Marco.”

“Were you with him?”

“Till the very end, when he called out your name.”

“The incubation period is past,” he calculated. “So you’re surely safe.”

"I am to be married, Marco."

"It is probably for the best," he replied. "I will see Don Evaristo about a spot in the bunkhouse."

She glanced up distantly. "He had a stroke three weeks ago and is bedridden," she shook her head. "He is invalided, certain to die soon."

"I am so sorry, Cris."

"We thought from Eladio that you had surely perished."

"Ladi made it back?"

"Vastly changed, his hair as white as flour. And with a wife in tow." She finally allowed herself to smile. "He refuses to talk about the war. But he brightens up when he talks of the restaurant he plans to open in Alajuela to operate with his blushing bride."

"I have something for you," he remembered, and opened his shoulder bag and withdrew a scrap of cloth and unwrapped it to present its contents to her.

"Your medal," she said.

"My medal, yes."

"I was only late, Marco. My period came a week after we last spoke."

"It is for the best," he smiled. "I was very naïve," he said as though the elapsed time had been years rather than weeks, "a child still."

"Me too," she said.

"Who will run the farm?"

She shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

*

Zurdo had also made it home from his Puntarenas posting where he had grown sexually precocious through his regular visits to the brothel during his otherwise undistinguished turn at military service. He set Marco up with a coveted private room and along with the remaining cowboys tried without success that afternoon around coffee to elicit Marco's stories of the battles, the war, and the *peste*. That night, Zurdo was awakened by the sound of a wayward cart singing its way along the road out front at the blackest hour of night. He turned on his pillow to go back to sleep but as the song of the cart grew louder he could no longer suppress his duty and put on pants and lit a candle to wander

out to the road and offer aid and succor to whatever unfortunate soul found himself at that ungodly hour yet road-bound and weary. He arrived at the gatehouse to observe a cart passing of its own volition, slowly and noisily, an enormous *zopilote* perched on its front board as if gaging the progress through the inky depths of night. Zurdo dropped his candle lamp in shock and ran back to the bunkhouse yelling to rouse the fellows, and all but Marco rushed out onto the landing and then down to the road to see for themselves. By the time they gathered at the road, nothing remained to be seen, though the faint song of a cart could still be heard fading distantly off in the direction of Alajuela.

"I'm telling you, there was a huge black vulture perched on top of the cart and the yoke hovered in midair, pulled along by nothing! By nothing at all!!!"

"Have you been eating those mushrooms again, Zurdo," one of them rubbed his eyes to joke. They all laughed and punched his arm and headed back to their beds.

"It is a premonition of evil, I tell you," Zurdo shouted after them. In later years as his hair thinned and his children had children of their own, he would dismiss it as a dream, that he had been sleep walking right up to the time he had roused the boys and then awakened into real life, and in this manner dissuaded himself of the veracity of what had seemed so real at the time.

*

Rebuffed by Jorge Montealegre, Cristina Montes had reconciled herself to marriage with her skinny young dandy and his non-trivial prospects after all, but Villareal fell ill the morning following Marco's return, and before she could arrive that evening to Alajuela to nurse him his body had already been carted off for burial. It was settled that Marco would manage the farm, and Cristina wielded the facsimile of her grief with such thespian flair that she was widely admired for the martyrdom with which she publicly forswore marriage in order to take the cloth instead. She moved to Escazú where she bought an estate on the edge of town that she referred to as her convent. She surrounded herself with a troop of spinsters that behind the tall walls of the compound was rumored by the townspeople to conjure the devil in naked dances and incantations around bonfires during favorable astronomical alignments. With Tonio Montes's influence evaporated in death—though Evaristo Campos would live another ten years before expiring scandalously at the age of 79 in a San Jose cathouse—Villareal's railroad mission was subverted by a rival—a Montealegre crony—with financial interests in Orotina and Caldera, and successfully lobbied for a route down the Tárcoles valley rather than through San Ramón and across the Guayaquil pass. Conflicted though he may have been, President José María Montealegre had no recourse but to order the fusillade of his brothers-in-law; it was out of his hands and beyond the scope of mercy. He had granted them exile upon their first defeat but could hardly be granted similar lenience when they returned with an invading armed force. Justice—real justice—was always poetic. It was its Aristotelian nature.

The epidemic raged for two months unabated but once the winter rains set in it lifted from the land overnight. Within days of my arrival in San José in early May over 100 people per day across the Central Valley died. I wavered at Cartago over whether I should perhaps linger to volunteer my services in some civil capacity. But I had no medical skills and was beyond the temperament for shovel duty. With my strengths restored, I returned to my homeland to find that Vara de Roble had so far been spared the *peste*'s visitation. I married a woman widowed by an accident in the mill a few months before my commission and took her children as my own and was the toast of my little town for my military service. My father broke off a dozen *manzanas* he was too old to properly manage, upon which I started a little dairy operation. When he died a few years later, my brothers, who all preferred to make their lives in the Central Valley, worked out agreements with me, and I worked the farm and paid them modest cuts and in 1870 sold the operation to a young German immigrant and paid off my siblings their shares and bought a house in El Guarco where the kids completed high school and where in financial comfort I might live out my days in retired bliss and welcome the coming grandchildren for Sunday afternoon visits to bounce on my knee and spoil with sweetcakes and candies.

It was a few years after the kids had left home and settled into university studies to launch careers of their own that I grew nostalgic and set out on horseback at the urging of my wife to revisit the scenes of my military career and in that manner assimilate the meaning of my life and dispel emotional discomforts that had risen through the years but that in my retirement now beset me with troubling frequency. Ochomogo was a half hour on horseback from my home, and as I walked the field where I had broken my leg my memories did not rush back over me with any deep new feelings. Rather, it was just a place that I recognized from my youth that had changed little in the passage of years. It was instead the people living in its vicinity—like the larger citizenry of the nation itself—that had changed, vastly and irreversibly. I was 68 years old and felt like a being from another time trapped in a confusing new one in which the old rules, the real rules, no longer applied, and were no longer real.

June 18, 1876

Alajuela

Though my war ended with the First Battle of Rivas, the National Campaign continued, of course, uniting eventually all the Central American nations to ensure William Walker's final defeat, culminating with his execution by firing squad in Honduras in 1860. With the figurehead of the movement feeding the worm and the American secessionist movement on the verge of inaugurating the North American Civil War, the filibuster movement vanished from the land, its slavery aspirations rebuffed with an appropriate and firm finality. The surviving filibuster militants either returned to their country—in the case of many of the North Americans—to fight on the side of the secessionists, or as in the case of most of the Prussians, French and Cubans took wives to settle down as provincials around the countryside or in capitals the length and breadth of the isthmus to found commercial enterprises, farm, drift into civil service, and undertake like careers that swelled our region with the seeds of an intelligent and aspirational middle class. The more coarse and restless of the "unwashed horde" turned to banditry and for

the most part migrated toward the chaotic promise of lawless Mexico to ply their trade and succumb in successive years to the risks inherent to that particular line of work. Though Vanderbilt and the British Empire expanded fortunes along the Route of Transit once the Filibusterers were defeated, the sinking of the Golden Spike in Utah Territory and the completion of the Suez Canal, both in 1869, marked the beginning of the end of the glory years for Rivas, San Juan del Sur, La Virgen, and other place names along the trans-oceanic trade route. With their global accolades from Suez and the vast capital of European speculators under its ascendant engineering sway, France is looking now to the Colombian territory of Panama to replicate the feat with a new interoceanic canal likely to cast the Nicaraguan Route of Transit to a subordinate position in world affairs, a development sure to stoke the resentment and brooding of our restless neighbor. For my part, I doubt our boundary disputes will ever be put finally to bed.

In my restlessness I made my way as far as Puntarenas but stopped along the way in Alajuela where I learned that Eladio Silpancha operated the finest restaurant in town and catered to the coffee-baron and political classes with imported wines, cured beef, smoked sausage and extravagant delicacies like lamb with mint sauce, veal parmesan and beef wellington. Haunted by his harrowing tale of how his hair had gone white on our passage from San Juan to Puntarenas all those years ago, I sought him out to catch up on old times, intrigued by how the passing years had treated my old friend and fellow National Campaign hero.

Silpancha was greatly thickened at 41 years of age, his wavy ropes of pomaded hair as white as a sun-bleached skull, and he sported a handle-bar mustache of the same hue. He paraded his wife and adolescent children out from the kitchen and reception for introductions beneath my sincere admiration and compliments, their curtsies, bows, and the firmness of handshakes testimony to the stolidity of Silpancha's paternal example. A quarter bottle of Bombay Gin and a half-liter of tonic water were ordered up for a table outside, and he ushered me onto a private veranda that overlooked the bustling dusk of downtown Alajuela below from our cantilevered vantage. Elbows on damask table-cloths, our comradery lit warmly by an oil lamp in the center of the table, he and I smoked and tippled and relived old times as an endless dinner was orchestrated to celebrate our re-encounter, its symphony of courses unified through the major chord of gastronomic profligacy. We drank two bottles of European wine, a crisp white Rhineland blend with preliminary dishes and a French Bordeaux with the main course, all rounded up with dollops of old tawny port, then *digestifs* and cigars. I was pleased to find that the twinkle in his eye had only grown more mischievous and lively in the passage of years and admired the deep creases in his face that bespoke his jollity of nature, a quality that is always pleasing to men like myself that are more brooding and less socially adept.

He looked at me with vacant curiosity when I finally brought up the subject of Marco Montes Albízar and parsed his words to skillfully focus in his political acumen on all that was complimentary and to stray away from controversial memories.

“He returned to a gold mine,” Eladio smiled as we sipped Cointreau, the aftertaste of Tournedos Rossini lingering pleasantly on my overwhelmed palate. “Marco Montes is today richer than Midas!” He drew the attention of the bow-tied maître d to order up coconut flan and espresso. “His old man—you may not have known—held a thousand or more hectares and was the most powerful man in the region. Well, Don Tonio was not Marco’s biological father, but still raised him up. The old man died of the *peste* shortly before Marco’s return. This would have been a full month, perhaps six weeks after you and I disembarked at Puntarenas. You see,” he frowned at the now distant memory and how heavily the events had impacted the region at the time, “Marco’s older brother died shortly afterwards, and his younger brothers weren’t cut out for the work and favored professional futures. There was a sister who would have been a most-qualified successor to the Don, a cunning beauty of considerable social skill and whip smart, but she dropped everything when her fiancée died to move off to a life of seclusion in Escazú, and other than whispers throughout the years has not been heard from since. Long story short, Marco wound up with it all. It’s no longer Finca Montes,” Eladio twirled his finger in the air to wiggle his eyebrows, “but Montes Enterprises. He married a Figueres and has three children, the oldest now studying medicine in London. You’re not from around here, so you may not know the Figuereses . . .”

“A Catalan family,” I replied. “Up and coming politically in these parts.”

“Yes,” Eladio chuckled. “Politically active and powerful. One of the sons and an in-law are *diputados* in the National Assembly even.”

“I don’t see Marco often,” he frowned. “He’s very serious and rarely strays beyond the ranch. He still breeds and trains oxen and manages transport operations to and from Sarapiquí and Puntarenas. But he also began breeding horses not long after taking over, and today has the finest dressage lines anywhere around. He expanded the little dairy operation his old man had launched in a half-assed way back in the forties, and now has the local cheese market locked up. Why, the cream for our coffee,” he lifted his hands to invoke our surroundings, “comes from his outlets, our cheese and butter as well. As if that that were not enough,” Silpancha continued, “he imported two breeding pair of Cape Buffalo fifteen years ago or more, and now has a whole line of gelded buffalo oxen that he supplies to timber operations spreading south along the coast from Orotina and is rumored to have a stake in those lumber mills as well. Why,” Eladio shook his head in begrudged amazement, “I understand he recently got mixed up in a furniture manufacturing operation there and moves that product to market with his oxen and was instrumental in the nation’s commission to that gringo, Keith Minor, to oversee the Atlantic railroad underway.”

“There is something I must ask,” I said as a lull punctuated our conversation. The dining guests had mostly left and only a few parties of well-dressed men remained scattered inside the dining hall, pipes smoking over snifters of liqueur and the steam of coffee rising from gaily painted porcelain.

"I never discussed it with him afterwards," Silpancha looked down and grew serious, knowing what I was about to broach. "And of course he never mentioned it either."

"It is a widespread belief," I pointed out, "that the apparition often shows up late at night to presage the death of misers and aging libertines. I hear that the sounds of the oxenless cart liven the darkest hours of night from Puriscal to Goicoechea." I raised my eyebrows. "From Turrialba to Puntarenas."

"Folklore," Silpancha dismissed it. "You know how country people are."

"But the tales mirror closely the one you told us on the boat."

"Look," he chuckled, running his fingers through his thick white hair. "I was surely delirious with the *peste* and imagined everything I saw and later reported. It was a hallucination, Captain Marín, a vision. It had to be! And if I am the seed of a little country legend that has spread across the land," he chuckled, humor dancing in his eyes, "then I suppose it is my modest turn at immortality."

I looked at him and raised my hands in the unspoken question.

"No," he refused flatly. "I will never talk to him about that day."

"He could settle your doubts," I argued, "and push the whole thing from your mind. Surely it would be welcome to free yourself from lingering suspicions about your memories of that day."

"Yes," Eladio agreed. "Then again, he might confirm my worst fears instead." He looked at me very seriously.

"It's a chance I am not prepared to take."

GLOSSARY

Alto: Halt

Anda: Go

Atención: Attention, in this case: Ten-hut.

Atol: A thin white corn soup commonly served for breakfast. It is a Mayan tradition and very common in Guatemala, less in other countries.

Boyero: A driver of oxen.

Cantón: County

Casona: large house, as in lodge

Chilamate:

Chimichurri:

Chorreada: A pancake made from corn meal. They can be either salty or sweet and are served with sour cream and coffee

Coyol: a type of palm from which a wine is made.

Cuadrado: a type of plantain

Curandero: Witch doctor, faith healer, unschooled medic.

Derecho: right

Filibustero: A Filibusterer, or foreign mercenary or privateer that was sent to harass Central America in the 1840's and 1850's. These groups were financed largely by slave-owning US states and their primary mission was to subvert Central American governments and to re-institute slavery and to assume political control as colonies subservient to the Confederate States of America.

Finca: farm, ranch, or any rural acreage of a few hectares and more.

Fresco de maracuyá: *Passion fruit juice*

Fresco de tamarindo: tamarind juice

Galerón: a roofed work area, like a stable, shop, or mil. It has a roof and may not have a floor or walls and it is self-standing and used for a variety of work related purposes

Guaro: booze in general. In particular it is a spirit distilled from sugar cane and is typically only 30 proof, that is with a lower alcohol content than most spirits, including rum.

Huevón: vulgar phrase of familiarity used only among men to refer to one another. It derives from "*huevo*" for testicle, and in Mexico means "lazy," and in other countries is offensive. In Costa Rica the term is bawdy but not an insult.

Jesianos: *Hessians*

Jobo: Yellow Mombin, a type of fruit that is widespread and prolific but not of high quality.

Libre: free

Licenciado: *Esquire*

Mae: “man” or “dude.” Informal slang but widely prevalent. The word is a contraction of “mage” which derives from magus or magi, i.e. wizard or witch doctor.

Manzana de agua: Water Apple. A common fruit tree in Costa Rica

Manzana: a unit of area used to measure land, equal to 0.7 hectares, or 1.7 acres.

Marqui: diminutive for Marco

Mecha: “weed” or “pot.” The term means a braid or lock, as in hair, but it is the most common slang term for marijuana.

Menguante: One quarter moon, rising. It is the moon stage that is considered best for planting, harvesting, collecting thatch and many other agricultural processes or activities.

Menudo: tripe soup, reputed to be a sure cure for hangovers.

Mesón (de Guerra): The Mesón was a large house in Rivas owned by the prominent Guerra family. Guerra is the Spanish word for war, so the Meson de Guerra, where the battle of Rivas was won, is often misinterpreted as the “War House,” when really it was simply the “House of the Guerra family.”

Moristas: supporters of President Mora Porras

Parque: town square. In other countries, plaza means town square. In Costa Rica, plaza means soccer field and Parque mean town square.

Partido de: Territory of, as in Nicoya. Nicoya seceded from broader Nicaragua in 192X to join Costa Rica, and prior to this, the region was known as the Partido de Nicoya. Curiously, the capital Nicoya is the second only to Puntarenas (then Villa Brucelas) in antiquity among colonial Costa Rican settlements. The name no longer applies to a political subdivision, though it is the name of a city, and of course is the name of the Peninsula that comprises most of Guanacaste—then Moracia—as well.

Peste: pestilence, plague, epidemic

Picadillo: fricassee

Quintal: a unit of weight equal during the time of this story to 100 pounds, or 46.08 kilograms. In contemporary times, it is normally understood to be equivalent to 100 kilograms.

Sombrero: hat

Tico: Costa Rican. Derived from the uniquely Costa Rican diminutive “*ico*” as in “*poquitico*,” i.e. just a little bit, instead of “*poquitito*,” as used in other Latin American countries. Hence Costa Rican men and women are Ticos and Ticas, and Costa Rica itself is informally known as Tiquicia.

Vía de Tránsito: Route of Transit, literally, this is the name given to the trans-oceanic trade route that followed the San Juan River from the Caribbean to Lake Nicaragua, and from La Virgen on the Lake’s western shore through Rivas to the Pacific coastal town of San Juan del Sur.

Zopilote: vulture

Zurdo: Left-handed; commonly a nickname, as in “Lefty.”