

A N O T H E R C H A N C E



J A M E S W I L C O X

Forbidden to ascend here please. That was what the sign seemed to say in Spanish – and yet there they were, a hefty woman in a sombrero and two men, tramping up the mound of unexcavated ruins. Even from a distance Daniel could tell they weren't authorized personnel – the sombrero glittered too brightly, a brash halo, pink as Pepto-Bismol. But nothing happened to them – no fine for trespassing, not even a warning. Soon the trio was out of the restricted area and resting on the steps of a nearby pyramid, where the woman sprayed sunscreen on the men's white calves. Despite the heat, Daniel himself was not in shorts. He'd been told that shorts would be offensive to the indigenous people.

In the museum, burial urns and skulls were supplied with estimated dates, which he duly noted as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. The Mam might have sacrificed on the tallest pyramid, the one he hadn't climbed because of this – and his fear of heights. A rival highland tribe then conquered the Mam, who retook Zaculeu later, only to have the Spaniards starve the remaining Mam into submission in their besieged capital. Convert or else. In 1946 United Fruit plastered over the ruins to make them seem more authentic, how they supposedly would have looked to the . . .

“Don’t touch!”

Glancing over his shoulder, Daniel saw it wasn’t a child being scolded, but a grown woman, who protested she hadn’t touched anything. Barely larger than his neighborhood launderette, the modest museum offered no refuge from the squabbling. Every word intruded on the dates he was trying to keep straight.

Heading for the exit, he felt something brush against his leg.

“*Caballeros? Donde?*”

It was the woman. The pink sombrero he had spotted earlier, glittering blithely over the buried ruins, was hovering now beside her waist, the rim touching his khakis but not her hands, which were filled with brochures. Taking a step away from this enigma, he said, “The men’s room?”

“*Si. My ex-esposo . . .*” She gestured toward the only other person in the museum, a man hunched over a display case of ceramics, studiously ignoring her. “He’s too *embarazada* to ask.”

“Right outside, to your left.”

“*Muy gracias. Donald!*” she called out. “The *señor* says it’s right outside to your left. Go now or forever hold your peace. And while you’re at it, tell Harold he better go, too. Where is he, anyway?” she added, looking back at Daniel. “I thought he was right behind us.”

Daniel shrugged politely.

“In that case, would you mind keeping an eye on *eso?*” she said, lifting the festive sombrero to reveal a three-pronged metal cane, her impromptu hat rack. Gravity hadn’t been defied, after all. “It’s Harold’s cane, my *esposo*’s, only he’s too stubborn to use it. He broke his *pequeño* toe opening a jar of peanut butter just before we left. I told him to dry his hands before he tackled it, but no. Landed right on his bare foot, one of those jumbo jars from Sam’s, which I hate, buying in bulk like that. You always get so sick of it by the time you’re halfway through.”

“I’m sorry, but . . .”

“Don’t want to bring this into the *damas*, do we?” she added, giving the cane a little spank with the hat. “Never know what it might pick up. *Muy gracias, Señor.* I’ll just be a *segundo.*”

As she herded her too-pregnant ex outside to the restrooms, Daniel regarded the free-standing cane. His bus would be loading soon – and he didn’t dare miss it. Perhaps if he put the cane behind

the desk at the front entrance, where the young Mayan docent had been sitting . . .

This was what he was doing when the docent – or whatever she was – returned. It seemed very casual, this museum. She wore neither uniform nor badge, just a full-skirted dress with an infant swaddled to her back.

“Not mine,” he said, pointing to the cane. Although he was almost able to follow telenovelas with closed captioning in his apartment in Manhattan, he was at a loss to speak more than a phrase or two. He’d been hoping to pick up Spanish for this trip without any of the effort he’d expended on French and German at Yale. After all, that was how his barber had learned English, by watching *Days of Our Lives*. But all he could seem to remember from the soaps on Univision was the Spanish for “Don’t ever leave me!” “I’m pregnant!” and “Get out, you slut!”

“Belongs to a *mujer*,” he went on to the young Mayan. Limned in blinding sunlight by the glass door behind her, the docent’s face was an unreadable shadowy blur. “*Gorda americana mit* pink sombrero,” he added, pointing to his own brittle gray hair. For all he knew, this Mayan, who was holding out a brochure to him, might not even speak Spanish. “*Turista* – in the *toilette*.”

Without waiting for a reply, Daniel gave a slight bow and backed nimbly out the glass door with the brochure.

One of the single seats was still available on the mini bus, which had three seats per row, the aisle separating the singles. As he waited for the stragglers to board, Daniel jotted down in his journal “Early Classic” beside “A.D. 250–600” and “abandoned” next to “1525.” He also entered the cost of admission – 30 quetzales. The ancient Mayans had used the quetzal’s tail feathers as currency, Daniel had overheard a German say, when it seemed a specimen of the national bird – it turned out to be a crow – alit on one of the ruins’ neatly mown lawns. This was not a rainforest setting, as he had expected – more like a swath of Sheep Meadow in Central Park.

“New York,” he was saying a few moments later to the driver’s assistant, who had guided the bus into its parking space at the ruins. Looking to be in his forties with a touch of gray, the assis-

tant had stood the entire way to Zaculeu, leaning against the folding bus door. Wordlessly, Daniel had tried to offer him his seat outside Huehuetenango, but the man had just shrugged. It was a pleasant surprise, then, when he had asked Daniel, who'd been writing "feathers = money," where he had purchased his journal.

"New York," the assistant echoed, gazing out the folding door at the driver, who was buying a chicken kebob from a vendor in the parking lot. In profile the assistant's face was as noble as a Mam king's, the prominent nose as distinctive as any incised on an urn. "You reside there?"

Daniel nodded.

"Long Island?"

Slipping his journal into his knapsack, Daniel leaned forward. "No, Manhattan – East Twenties." He spoke softly, not wanting to be overheard by the German tourists who had already boarded. Although they were chatting in German, some of them were bound to know English. Not that he had anything to hide. It was just that he was naturally discreet, and in this day and age of identity theft, you might wonder why it wasn't a more widespread virtue. Indeed, while waiting at the gate at LaGuardia, he'd overheard a man on his cell asking his "snookums" to go to the medicine cabinet, top shelf, and snap a picture of the label on his Zoloft, with the doctor's name in the frame – and Facebook it pronto. This man would have made a fitting *esposo* for the woman in the pink sombrero, if she didn't already have a couple of her own.

"It's rent controlled," Daniel felt compelled to add. "Tiny – just one room."

"Excellent," the driver's assistant said. "Gramercy Park."

"Not really. They just call everything Gramercy to raise the rents. Twenty-fifth Street was iffy when I moved there, with a methadone clinic around the corner." Lowering his voice a notch, he confided, "I was mugged in the vestibule."

"Ah, but now it is very safe and excellent, thanks to Mr. Bloomberg. That judge, though. . ." The assistant shrugged.

Although Daniel didn't think the judge had cracked down hard enough on the mayor's racist stop-and-frisk policy, he smiled politely. Amazing how *au courant* this man was. On the way to the ruins, Daniel had assumed he didn't speak English, much less know who Bloomberg was, since he'd only spoken to the driver in

what must have been Mam or Awakatek. Strange how he'd known Daniel spoke English since he, Daniel, had only exchanged a few words in German with the other passengers. In any case, Daniel was flattered by the attention now. Here was a real person – indigenous, not a tourist – breaking the silence.

“Twenty-fifth Street – you are near my second-favorite building,” the assistant went on with only a trace of an accent. “The Flatiron. Number-one favorite is the Puck.”

Distracted by the sight of a cane in the parking lot, a bamboo stick propped against the chicken vendor's grill, Daniel said, “In Soho, right?” That other cane, the three-pronged one, he'd done the responsible thing with it, hadn't he? – even though it *wasn't* his responsibility.

“No, Nolita, on Lafayette. Look up and there you behold a statue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.”

“Pardon?”

“A golden Puck. And facing Mulberry, you'll find another Puck, also golden.”

“Yes, very nice,” Daniel said, humoring him. Forty years he had lived in Manhattan, ever since graduating from Yale, and he was almost positive the Puck building wasn't in NoHo – or NoNolita, as he'd garbled it. As for two golden statues from Shakespeare, this was indeed an imaginative touch, though somewhat heavy-handed. One would have been enough. Interesting how nomenclature could give rise to such fanciful literary embellishments, aide-memoire turned urban myth. The remarkable thing, though, was that he was associating the mythical statues with the *correct* Shakespeare play, this driver's assistant in the ruins, where he, Daniel, would have been stranded if he had waited for the woman in the pink sombrero to finish her business.

“You must go see it when you get back,” the assistant urged. “Then walk a few short blocks to admire St. Patrick's.”

“That's way uptown on Fifth, isn't it?”

“The original St. Patrick's is not far, also in Nolita. After I finish my shift in the basement of the rectory, waterproofing, I pass beneath the gold on the way to English at St. Francis. The nun who made us parse wore no habit, nothing on top but hair. Then it'd be the F, R, and N to the restaurant of his cousin.” The assistant nodded at the driver, who was standing outside gnawing

chicken in the blazing sun. The bamboo cane, it turned out, was actually a flyswatter, which the vendor was wielding now over the raw chicken beside her grill.

“Where was the restaurant?”

“It *is* in Brooklyn. Miss the express and it will take an hour to get there. Then a mountain of dishes is waiting.”

“I can imagine,” Daniel said, fingering his passport through the fabric of his money belt. One of the German tourists had had her passport stolen in Guatemala City, he’d overheard in the ruins. And she’d been carrying it in a money belt.

“Fifteenth Avenue, there you’ll find it, right on the corner of Ocean. Be sure to bring your wife there for a repast she won’t forget. Order the *pepian*, sir – the specialty of the house. It’s poultry, the most nutritious you’ll ever enjoy.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Daniel said, though he was a vegetarian and, despite his wedding ring, a widower. He’d been married not long after graduating magna cum laude from Yale. Anouk was twelve years older, an instructor in French who’d been very ill when they’d married – and was dead two years later. Of course, he’d known beforehand about the chemotherapy – it had been alluded to during office hours when he’d dropped by to discuss the subjunctive in St.-John Perse. Since then, Daniel had dated various women, all of them older, but found himself incapable of any lasting commitment. Something inside him was frozen, petrified by a love that bore no resemblance at all to that drivel more than one date had compared it to, that glorified soap opera with Ali McGraw.

“What is your calling in Manhattan?”

Daniel stared blankly at the assistant for a moment. “Oh, I do freelance,” he said, shifting his aching, stretched-out legs so the couple from Bremen could squeeze into their seats. They seemed to be farmers – if he hadn’t misunderstood the German he’d overheard on the way to the ruins, something about udder rash. Or perhaps they were professors who specialized in udder rash, which was more likely in a city the size of Bremen.

“You are a journalist?” the assistant said.

After exchanging a polite nod with the Bremen couple, now directly across the aisle with kabobs of their own, he said gently, “No, just editing, proofreading.”

Like scores of other editors, Daniel had been let go in the publishing meltdown a decade ago. Luckily, he had clung to his rent-controlled studio even when he could have afforded a larger, more congenial one-bedroom. Now he could eke out a living with freelance work since his rent was only \$632.76. With neither a car nor car insurance, he had only health insurance as a major headache, which he was hoping Affordable Care might alleviate. And of course he'd be eligible for Medicare in a couple of years.

"Excellent," the assistant said, looking him straight in the eye for the first time. "You have much education, yes?"

Daniel shrugged.

"Is it a special degree one must get?" the assistant prompted.

"To be an editor? No, just a regular education."

"And what please is the regular?"

"Hm?"

From a sack on his shoulder the driver's assistant dug out a worn paperback in English, a best seller praised to high heaven by authors whose own work was cited and admired in the book itself. On a dog-eared page, the assistant pointed to an underlined passage, which he stuck under Daniel's nose. "Why does it say, 'She gifted Winston and I with the insight that would remake history'? And here, 'That night I laid there filled with an awesome sense of mutability.' Have the rules in English changed?"

Something very much like caffeine – or was it joy? – coursed through Daniel's veins. Here was a man after his own heart. He was about to relate some of the indignities he had suffered in publishing, the losing battle he had waged against colleagues who shrugged off grammar and punctuation as the domain of uptight word fascists. But before he could erupt with all that was pent up inside him – let the Germans hear every word he had to say! – a glittering disk caught his eye. Yes, it was indeed the pink sombrero with her white-calved harem. Averting his face from the window, Daniel hoped she hadn't caught a glimpse of him. Their bus must be nearby.

" . . . and if you could put in a word for me with your providers . . ."

"What?" Daniel said as the paperback was thrust into his hands. "I can't –"

"Show them this. The nun with no habit and I have cleaned it

up. See how the comma is left out here, ‘Hi Mom’? And here ‘she’d swam’ is repaired. All the subjunctives, too, they now are in order. Tell your supervisor I am eager to return to Ocean Avenue. The storeroom behind the kitchen will be mine again – I can sleep there on the cot I purchased for myself. And do not worry – Sister Mary Perpetua will review every change I make. All work will be one-hundred percent guaranteed.”

Before Daniel had a chance to protest, the assistant was bounding out the door of the bus. Was he buying himself a kabob? No, there he was beside the vendor’s grill conferring with the driver and the woman in the pink sombrero. The next thing Daniel knew, the assistant was escorting her up the steps of the bus. Surely there was some mistake. This was not the bus she had come on. Besides, every seat was taken. There was no room!

In all the fuss of coming aboard with an armload of souvenirs, the woman didn’t seem to notice Daniel, who kept his head down, pretending to be engrossed in the assistant’s dog-eared paperback. As for her spouses, they were boarding a garishly painted mini-bus on the far side of the chicken vendor.

After stashing the woman’s souvenirs in various nooks and crannies, the assistant pulled down a folding seat Daniel hadn’t noticed before, something that blocked the aisle and made it impossible for him to stretch out his legs. Well, at least the woman was being seated in front of him. It was possible they could make it all the way to Lake Atitlan without her noticing him – not that he had anything to feel guilty about.

“No, don’t get up,” the woman was saying to the German she was squeezed next to in the row ahead of Daniel. “This little jump-seat will do. I’m lucky they let me on. If it hadn’t been for señor here” – she gave the assistant a pat on the arm – “my *esposo* would be in agony. I gave up my seat on that purple bus over there so he could stretch out his leg. He broke his toe, you see, his *pequeño*.”

“I rue it,” the German said, a lean younger man, bald as a hatchling, with a prominent Adam’s apple.

“Don’t rue it, dear. He brought it on himself. First I told him to dry his hands before he tackled the peanut butter, then he refused to use the cane I borrowed from my niece’s husband, who’s going to have a conniption when he finds out it’s been stolen. Yes, would

you believe, this man ran off with it in that little museum they got over there by the souvenir stands. I asked what looked like such a nice, harmless old fart to keep an eye on it while I used the you-know-what, and next thing you know, he's disappeared into thin air. You can never be too careful, can you?"

"No, never careful."

"Ten to one you're not from a regular part of the States, are you, young man? Don't tell me – the Bronx?"

"Bremen. *Jeder on den Autobus* from Bremen, in Germany."

"I knew it. My ear just picks up these things. When my niece was stationed in Frankfurt she said you could eat off the streets, that's how clean they kept them. People even scrub the curb outside their house. Do you mind opening your window, hon, I'm about to die," she added, fanning herself with the sombrero. "Oh, good, we're moving. I can feel a breeze – it's heavenly."

"Yes, we go," the young man said.

"You speak Spanish, dear? Let me warn you, I sometimes slip into Spanish, can't help it, just happens whenever I'm south of the border. I can be talking to Harold, my husband, and suddenly it's Spanish coming out and I don't even realize it till he tells me to stop showing off. He took shop instead of Spanish in high school. That's where we met. I was head cheerleader and he was captain of the football team – and my ex, Donald, didn't take Spanish either since it conflicted with the yearbook staff so that means I'm the only one left to translate for us here."

"Spanish, no."

"That's fine. Just don't start in on German with me. I pick things up so fast, you know, and Harold will feel even more left out. Just what do you do?"

"Sock," he said, holding up the knitting he'd been plying with olive-green needles.

"She means your *Arbeit*," the driver's assistant put in, hovering beside her. "*Welche Arbeit haben Sie in Bremen tun?*"

"It is the graduation of yolks."

"*Muy bueno*," the woman said. "My niece is a municipal judge in Louisiana with her own call-in show on WJBY, ten-forty on your dial. That's how we ended up here – me and my husband and my ex. I was the first person to call in on Mother's Day, which got me into the raffle the sponsor was holding. There was a choice

between a riding lawnmower and a Carnival tour of all the ruins with complimentary drinks, and since Donald, my ex, doesn't have enough grass to shake a stick at, I went for the ruins even though he doesn't drink and made a stink about all the shots he'd have to get. We're living with him now, you see, Harold and I, since our house got repossessed thanks to those socialists running the government now – and I wanted to gift him with something nice to make up for the rent he won't accept from *yo*."

By this time the bus had pulled out of the parking lot and was headed for Lake Atitlan, where Daniel was scheduled to meet Vera Crawley, an English author he had edited many years ago when he was fresh out of Yale. Perhaps because her mysteries featured a spinster sleuth, a drab grammarian of uncertain age, she'd been long out of print. An ardent admirer of her work, which had sold so poorly that it undermined his bottom line and thus contributed to his dismissal, Daniel was looking forward to meeting her in the flesh. It was the tipping point for him, what had made him accept the assignment in Guatemala from a literary agent who needed background material for a flashback in a client's romance novel. The client herself wasn't able to travel to Central America due to the fact that she was deceased. Her name, though, was still on the best sellers concocted by the agent's ghost-writers. At first Daniel had had qualms about being even a minor part of this charade, which included a Twitter account for the deceased, detailing all her most recent purchases at Victoria's Secret. But now he had the chance to convey to Vera Crawley, the author so passionate in her defense of human rights, what she meant to him. In the midst of all the hype and self-congratulation, Vera Crawley was the real thing, what had made the game not a total loss for him. For this chance, Daniel had compromised his own ethical standards and taken notes on the ruins for the heroine's regression to a former life as a virgin on a pyramid altar. Of course, it was probably boys who were actually sacrificed, but it was fiction, the agent had pointed out.

"Did she ever discover you were right behind her on the bus?" Miss Crawley asked.

Years ago Daniel had shipped the galleys of her first novel with a note saying, "Dear Vera, Please return the enclosed by October

15 . . .” By return post he had been summarily corrected: “It’s *Miss Crawley*.” Now almost forty years later, he found himself saying, “In one sense, no, Miss Crawley.”

How youthful this made him feel – Miss Crawley – like a schoolboy on the verge of committing a solecism. The small round table they were seated at wobbled slightly as he adjusted his long legs so they didn’t impinge on hers. Unlike the heroine of her mysteries, who drank in secret, Miss Crawley was already publicly on her second Bloody Mary – and it wasn’t even nine A.M. yet. Though she and her heroine, Miss Bede, both eschewed makeup, Miss Crawley could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as “bland,” the adjective most frequently applied to Miss Bede. In contrast, Miss Crawley had a forthright, almost masculine comeliness that took him by surprise when he’d first set eyes on her in the lobby of the lakeside hotel. (She had never supplied a dust-jacket photo in the past, a vulgar request, she’d informed him.) Indeed, from a distance, he had mistaken her for Jeanne Moreau, which caused such a pang. *Jules et Jim* had been the subject of his late wife’s dissertation, a Girardian analysis of the novel the film was based on.

“She did eventually turn around and see me,” Daniel explained. “Her sombrero got blown off and I had to hand it back to her. But she didn’t recognize me.”

“As the culprit, you mean?”

“I didn’t take her cane, Miss Crawley. As I said before, I left it in good faith with the docent, who was supposed to return it to her. In any case, the woman never associated me with ‘the old fart’ in the museum, as she put it.” Though he smiled, the term still rankled.

“How is that possible, Mr. Lever? Are you that bland and indistinguishable?”

He shrugged. “Evidently. But I noticed, too, when I was talking to the docent, I couldn’t make out her face because the sun was shining so brightly behind her – through the glass door. This might have happened to that woman, too.”

“In the museum?”

“Yes, I think I might have been standing in front of the glass door when she asked me to watch her cane – or rather, her husband’s cane.”

“Be that as it may, why didn’t you admit who you were on the bus – tell her you had left the cane with the docent?”

Daniel took a sip of coffee, which he assumed was safe. After all, the water had been boiled – or had it? He put the cup back down, wishing he had ordered bottled water instead. “Because I’m sure she would have made the driver turn the bus around and go back for it,” he said. “We were all broiling with no air conditioning, not to mention behind schedule and . . .”

“And you pretended to be German, didn’t you?”

His blush was tinged with admiration. Yes, in order to avoid conversation with the woman, he had handed back the pink sombrero with a mere word: *Bitte*.

“I was tempted,” he said, “but I’m afraid I was outed.”

She winced.

“Pardon, Miss Crawley. I meant someone told her I was from New York.”

“The driver’s assistant?”

She had nailed it. The assistant had told the woman how he, Daniel, was going to get him a job in publishing.

“You promised him a job?”

“I just said I’d be in touch if I heard anything.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Lever. You know you haven’t the slightest intention of helping that man find a job.”

“I beg your pardon. His grammar and punctuation are actually quite sound, far better than most of my colleagues’.” Daniel didn’t mention, though, that he’d returned the paperback to the assistant.

“And how would you get in touch with him?”

“The tour-bus company has an e-mail address he can check.” But Daniel hadn’t given the assistant his own e-mail address, much less the phone number he’d asked for.

Miss Crawley took a bite of her croissant, which didn’t crumble as Daniel’s had, strewing flakes on the table cloth, even his lap. Her technique was flawless.

“Next time, Mr. Lever, just say no. It would be better than raising false hopes for a man desperate to feed his family.”

Again he blushed, this time with a touch of pique.

“Which brings me to the case in point, Mr. Lever – why I asked

you to meet me here.” She regarded him steadily for a moment with steely-blue eyes that made him wonder if there was a crumb on his chin. “I would like to borrow your passport.”

An eyebrow cocked, Daniel waited for the punch line. Surely this had to be a joke of some sort.

“As I confided on the ninth of last month, I’ve been working with Human Dignity Appeal, covertly, for some time. The moment has come, sir, when your help is essential. Let me borrow your passport for a short while – five hours to be exact. That’s all I ask.”

“You can’t be serious, Miss Crawley. Why on earth would you want it for five hours?”

“I’m not at liberty to tell, Mr. Lever. You will simply have to trust me. I see you have the yellow band.”

On his wrist was the plastic band issued at check-in to all guests of the hotel.

“That will be sufficient for these five hours. No one will ask for further identification now that you’re registered.”

“But – ”

“I’ll return it to you in the northwest corner of the lobby at fourteen hundred hours.”

The wedding ring bit deeply into his flesh as he twisted it round and round, hoping to stall for time, bring her back to her senses if indeed there might have been a momentary lapse of some sort. “Miss Crawley, you know how much I admire you – your books. You’ve brought me more hope than any living author I’ve ever read. The way Miss Bede subverts violence, never resorting to it herself while tracing the crime back to the social order itself, well, it’s made me wonder if you’re familiar with René Girard, his theory about the primal murder that makes all human order ambiguous, as James Alison terms it. Those ruins I visited yesterday, aren’t we still sacrificing today to the god of war and consumerism, offering up – ”

“Such nonsense, Mr. Lever.”

“What? René Girard?”

“Your flattery. My books are quite rightly out of print. If they *were* successful, there would be something profoundly wrong with them, pandering to the basest idols of your consumerism.”

“No, you mustn’t say that, Miss Crawley. They deserve to be read and reread by every thoughtful Ameri – ”

“I say what is true. A man’s life is at stake, a man almost exactly your age, who was kidnapped by the junta thugs Reagan was supporting. Back then he was still young, idealistic, a voice for the rights of the oppressed, half-starved Mams. He was brutally tortured, Mr. Lever, and is still languishing in . . . Oh, never mind. I’ve said too much already.” Crunching down on the celery plucked from her unfinished Bloody Mary, she rose from the table. Not a flake of croissant speckled her perfectly tailored black vintage suit, which looked to be an original Chanel. Obviously, she’d never been dependent on royalties for income. It reminded him that he’d always addressed her galleys to Crawley House in Aylesbury, no number or street address – which had made him wonder if it could be a manor of some sort, not just a mere house.

“I must be off, Mr. Lever.”

“What would you do with it, my passport? Can you at least tell me that? Would I have trouble with Customs, getting out tomorrow? I’m leaving first thing, you know. What if you were delayed today and couldn’t return it? I’d be stranded here and it’s nonrefundable, the ticket. It’d cost a fortune to replace and the person who bought it for me with her frequent-flyer miles couldn’t – ”

“Enough, Mr. Lever. It’s obvious you have no intention of helping me out. Time is of the essence. I have so much to rearrange now.”

“But Miss Crawley, you can’t really expect me to, with no explanation, just – ”

“Yes, I do expect – or *did*. You’re not quite the man I was hoping to meet this morning. Nevertheless I have always admired your punctuation, Mr. Lever. Good day, sir.”

Sparkling like a semi-precious aquamarine, Lake Atitlan was indeed the perfect setting for the reincarnation flashback, much better than the ruins. One of the three volcanoes on the far shore added just the right touch of romance, too, with its plume of delicate, ominous skywriting. From the balcony of his room on the third floor (he’d asked to be reassigned from the fourteenth floor, much too high), Daniel fleshed out his notes for the agent with a

description that left out the jet skis skittering aimlessly about. Swimming, of course, was not encouraged, but those tourists not afraid of getting spray in their mouths could rent the jet skis.

A sudden cramp put an end to his neat cursive. His fountain pen seemed frozen to his hand.

Back in his room he swallowed a muscle relaxer without the benefit of water. Though the hotel supplied a complimentary bottle of *agua pura*, the literary agent had warned him against local brands, which might be just tap water in a bottle.

Phone in hand, he dialed the desk clerk, meaning to ask if it was possible to have a bottle of Evian sent up. Instead, he found himself asking for Miss Crawley's room.

No one registered by that name, he was told.

Not surprising, he thought, putting down the receiver. At least, if she was indeed on such a mission as she claimed. Of course, his other hypothesis was still in full gear – that his ex-author was suffering from a bout of dementia, spurred on by alcoholism. After all, despite the mane of pale blond hair, expertly tinted and coiffed, she must be in her late seventies, at the very least. Would Human Dignity Appeal work with someone that old? And if he remembered correctly, Miss Bede, her sleuth, had once rescued a Sandinista from the clutches of a decorated U.S. Army colonel who instructed Contras in torture techniques at Fort Bragg, a colonel who had also tried to cover up My Lai with a white-washed initial report. Nonetheless, Daniel did descend three floors to the lobby, where he spent a long hour fingering his passport through his money belt, hoping he might catch a glimpse of her, another chance to determine whether it was worth the risk.

“Oh, there you are,” she said. It wasn't Miss Crawley, but rather the woman with the pink sombrero, which was no longer in evidence. Instead, her considerable bulk was draped in a bright Mayan shawl, brimming with primary colors that should have clashed, but somehow didn't.

“I just wanted to say it's OK, dear.”

“What's OK?” he asked coldly.

“The cane. I'm actually relieved I don't have to tote it around anymore.”

“I didn't take your cane, Miss . . .”

“Betty, call me Betty, hon.”

“I left it with the docent in the museum.”

“Well, I wish you’d told me that on the bus. I had such a funny feeling about you, like I’d known you from way back, my coronation. It was a pink-diamante tiara, the queen’s crown at homecoming, and it kept slipping off my head, such a nightmare in front of all those people and there was this man I’d never seen before, about your height, same gray hair, leering at me from stage left. It really creeped me out as my niece, the judge, always says when she has to sentence someone who seems so respectable and all. Very big on law and order, that girl. It was her husband’s cane, by the way.”

Daniel’s frown didn’t quite cover his blush.

“In any case, that angel, the driver’s assistant, he told me you might be the answer to my prayers.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re in publishing, aren’t you? Well, I’ve got the greatest plot for a novel. It can’t miss. And what’s more, it’s all true, Danny Boy.”

“It’s Mr. Lever. And I’m sorry, I’m not a publisher, just a —”

“Yes, I know, hon, just freelance. Now listen up. This old lady Harold and I met in the hotel bar last night — Harold’s my husband, the tall one, the other one, my ex, doesn’t drink — well, just a while ago, Harold and I are paying for our jet skis — you really ought to try them out, Mr. Danny, they’re a blast — anyway, she offers us five hundred quetztes for Harold’s passport, just to borrow it. Harold didn’t want to give it to her because he was so hung-over — that old dame must have a wooden leg, the way she drank us under the table last night. But I slipped it to her anyway, his passport — and refused to take a single quetz from her. She’s one of those aristocrats they got over in England, like on PBS, only this baroness is way less of a pill and you don’t need closed captioning to figure out what the hell’s going on. She works undercover for Human Dignity Appeal, see, and is fixing to rescue a man who’s been tortured by CIA-trained thugs, those creeps who’ve been spying on all our e-mails and cell phones, trying to scare us into Obama Care. So what do you think? You help me with the grammar and punctuation, Danny Boy, and I’ll make sure my niece, the judge, puts you on her radio show with me. It goes all the way to Frankfurt now on the computer. Taylor, my niece, has friends from

her army days there – and she even gets calls on the show from girlfriends in Iraq and Afghanistan. I can just see it now, with free publicity like that it's bound to sell like hotcakes. What do you say? Do we have a deal?"

The sunburned hand she extended was as pink as the halo ascending so innocently the buried ruins.