The Rain on the Banana Leaves

By Sperry Hunt

Before it was destroyed by a kitchen fire in 1990, the Montaña Bonita was a restaurant of good quality. A white stucco building formed of gathered stones, it lay at the base of a pacific volcano whose forested foothills defined the eastern edge of the seventh largest city in Central America. In troubled times, the restaurant was frequently chosen as a meeting place by guerillas for its proximity to a finger of dense jungle that reached to within yards of its rear entrance.

The Montaña Bonita had only a few customers during the midmorning on March 22, 1984. The dining area of the restaurant was a large white room with iron grated windows and room enough for twenty-four tables around a central atrium open to the sky. Rain slapped on the fieldstones and banana leaves in the atrium. The local barber and his son were in one corner discussing baseball. At another table a civil attorney and his elderly client leaned their heads together inside coils of cigar smoke.

The only other customer was a thirty-two year old man wearing jeans and a green slicker. He sat at a corner table a few steps from the back door. His name was Jose Martin Guzman y Valenzuela. His ragged beard and the sharp odor of his clothes seemed at odds with the fine structure of his aristocratic face.

Guzman's right forearm lay crooked along the edge of the table inches from a Russian pistol slung beneath his slicker. His dark eyes swept along the line of windows, passed the doorway to the bar and into the pass-through where the staff eyed him nervously. A cold lager and a plate with the remains of a heavy breakfast sat before him. He had choked down his food like a street child. It tasted grand to him. He hadn't eaten bacon or toast for months. He thought it pathetic that his men had raised just enough pesos among them to pay for the meal.

As a young man, Guzman rejected his father's pleas to work with him in his men's clothing store. He read Marx, worshipped Che and Castro, studied philosophy at the university and worked with the poor during the summers. After graduation, he had been a history professor. He married the daughter of a coffee plantation owner. They had two

daughters of their own. Then, as the government hardened against the movement, he sent his wife to her parents' house and joined the revolution.

Promptly at ten-thirty, a broad man with a fat face entered through the bar, rain dripping from his overcoat and fedora. Spotting Guzman, he wended with surprising grace around the tables scattered between them.

"Señor Guzman?" he said quietly, removing his hat.

Guzman nodded.

"I am Ramirez," said the man pulling a folded piece of newsprint from his overcoat. He laid his coat and hat over an empty chair and took a seat across from Guzman. Finally he placed the newsprint on the table and smoothed it flat with his plump hand.

"Thank you for meeting me," Ramirez continued. He apologized for being late, which he wasn't. He rambled a bit about the rain and the national football team's chances in the Olympics in Los Angeles.

Guzman responded with grunts and tepid agreements. He judged from Ramirez's Spanish that the man was not a native.

Guzman observed a waiter watching him apprehensively from the kitchen doorway. The waiter tapped the point of his pencil on the pad he held in his palm. He started to move forward, but instead turned to his right to collect dishes from a table in the far corner.

"Your note spoke of the government's willingness to compromise its position on who it refers to as insurgents." His eyelids barely parted, Guzman spoke as though he had no interest in the matter.

"Indeed, Señor. There has been too much hot blood between the two sides. But let me say it is a pleasure to meet you at last."

"How so?"

"Because you are famous. You are the Robin Hood of the people."

"It is untrue," Guzman said.

"Perhaps, but you should be honored that people believe it."

"People believe what they want to believe."

Ramirez's face brightened. He leaned forward slightly and spoke with focus. "That is very true, Señor. The people want a Robin Hood. They find a Robin Hood. You are pleased by the comparison, no?"

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Guzman struggled to hide his pleasure at the thought. "I don't find it offensive if that's what you mean."

"It is a burden perhaps," Ramirez said.

"A burden?"

"Their belief that Robin Hood was a generous man who gave up everything for the common people. Well, that is a high bar. Besides that's not who Señor Hood really was."

Guzman grunted. No one but an American or a cartoon character would say, "Señor Hood." He concluded that the man was likely one of the mercantile rats that Castro had chased off Cuba. Guzman despised the exiles as lapdogs of the Americans. But there would be no advantage in tipping any of this to Ramirez.

"Then who was Robin Hood?" Guzman asked without apparent interest.

"He was a nobleman forced to live among the forest people after his father was murdered and his land stolen by the evil King John. You, however, chose the forest yourself, and your father is still alive." Ramirez paused before continuing. "Though sadly, he has suffered much, no?"

Guzman's eyes scanned the windows again before growling at Ramirez. "What is your business with me?"

"Only to ask you one question." Ramirez said. "Do you not imagine that the Prince of Thieves would have abandoned the forest if King John had spared his father and returned his land?"

Guzman's eyes locked onto Ramirez's. His fingertips drifted closer to the butt of the pistol. "What should I make of this talk of a father's life?"

Ramirez leaned back, tilted his palms up and wiggled his fingers. "I meant only that all great men must consider their own personal circumstances. You yourself have suffered financial ruin, your wife and children live over the border, and your father's clothing business is faltering." He locked the fingers of his hands over his paunch and continued in a soft voice. "The plain truth, señor, is that you cannot win. The Cubans have forsaken you, and each day brings your enemies more American weapons and money. If you continue, you will be shot as a traitor – once you have betrayed your friends, of course."

"You ask me to surrender?" Guzman said through his teeth.

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"I ask you to withdraw, prosper and return to your country after the war has run its course - when you can be of some use to her."

"Withdraw?"

"This is the year of the Olympics. A time of peaceful competition among peoples. Take your family to Los Angeles, attend the games, help your father with a new business there. My friends can help you."

"Your friends in the CIA?"

Ramirez nodded. "They are awash with dollars to end the war in whichever way you chose."

"And what of my people?"

"Who are you more afraid of? Those who will kill you if you stay in the forest, or those who will kill you if you leave?"

Guzman stared at Ramirez for a moment, then took a deep draft off the lager to conceal his eyes for a few seconds. He set the glass down and licked the froth from his lips.

Ramirez continued. "You are better than those people, and you know it, my friend."

"I am not your friend."

"And are they? Those who have pulled you down and made you live like them?"

Guzman started to say something, hesitated, then said. "We may yet win, you know."

Ramirez closed his eyes briefly and shook his head. "No one abroad considers that a possibility anymore. The worst thing is you don't know who to trust."

Guzman smiled. "We shot the two traitors your friends planted."

Ramirez wrinkled his mouth and shook his head again.

Guzman's eyes widened.

"I was briefed on the subterfuge on my arrival," Ramirez said. Cruz and Garcia were among your most loyal men. The traitors are the men who men who planted the suspicion among."

Guzman lowered his head, closed his eyes and exhaled. His heart ached for his dead comrades.

Ramirez unfolded the newsprint and pushed it toward Guzman. "Look at the circled item, please."

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Guzman pulled the paper toward him. It was a page of classified advertisements from a Los Angeles newspaper. Inside a blue circle was an advertisement for a clothing business on Hill Street for seven hundred thousand dollars. Fifteen percent down. Financing available.

Ramirez leaned forward slightly. "There are over three million Latinos in Los Angeles County. My friends will pay the money down and loan you more for stock. They will set you up in a two-story house. Your daughters will attend a good school with boys from good families."

"I know nothing of business and care less."

"Your father does," Ramirez said. "There is no war there. You can live with your family, watch your children grow, work with your father, and go to the beach on Sundays. You can even make love to your wife when she will have you."

"All I have to do is turn my back on the ones who trust me."

"They will have been overrun by now."

Guzman gasped and twisted his shoulders toward the door thinking soldiers would be there. But there were none. Not outside, or inside. Just the waiters, the patrons and Ramirez.

"You are a candle in a hurricane," Ramirez said after a moment. "Return when the storm has passed flush with capital. You will be a beacon of economic hope."

The Cuban's eyes were black cherries pressed in a clean, doughy face. The tips of his fingernails were white, not black like his own. He had a fresh handkerchief in the breast pocket where Guzman carried a gritty clip of shells that might jam in his pistol. A gold band nested among the dark hairs on one of Ramirez's fingers. He didn't sleep on the ground. He carried no sulfur for ticks or iodine to purify jungle water. His socks didn't rot against his feet. In his pockets Guzman carried nuts, raisins, two more magazines and a few pesos for the meal. Spread through Ramirez's clothing were most certainly an American passport, a couple of credit cards, photos of his family, a few hundred dollars, keys to a house and two cars.

Ramirez carefully reached inside in jacket, withdrew an envelope and pushed it across the table. Guzman opened it to find a fat pack of hundred dollar bills and a passport with another man's name and a photo of him taken some years before.

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Ramirez stretched his fingers out. “Cross the border and join your family. The US embassy there will provide you all with documents and plane tickets to Los Angeles where you will be met by someone who will help you get settled. Your father will join you soon.”

“Why not attack me along with my men? It would have been better for you, and surely cheaper, no?”

“You are a symbol of the future. Of reconciliation.”

“It will not be fair, what will happen if we lose. Not for the people.”

Ramirez leaned closer and said, “Life is a shipwreck. You must find a lifeboat, pull your friends in and forsake the rest. It has always been thus. In ancient Troy as it is here now.”

Jose Martin Guzman y Valenzuela knew he would take the envelope. In his heart of hearts it was what he had hoped would come from the meeting. War and ideology and fear and suspicion had exhausted to him. His hair was thinning, he was developing ulcers, his vision was poor.

He would find his way to his wife, and they would go to Los Angeles. He would do what he had said he would never do – sell clothing. He would send money to the families of his friends Cruz and Garcia. He would take his daughters to the beach. He would make love to his wife tenderly between clean sheets.

Guzman stared down at the newspaper, listened to the slap of the rain on the banana leaves, imagining himself selling suits to Latinos on Hill Street.

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