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Three By Cain

SERENADE
LOVE'S LOVELY COUNTERFEIT
THE BUTTERFLY

JAMES M. CAIN

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VINTAGE CRIME

VINTAGE BOOKS

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THE BUTTERFLY

PREFACE TO *THE BUTTERFLY*

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Serenad

I was in the Tupinamba, having a *bizcocho* and coffee, when this girl came in. Everything about her said Indian, from the maroon *rebozo* to the black dress with purple flowers on it, to the swaying way she walked, that no woman ever got without carrying pots, bundles, and baskets on her head from the time she could crawl. But she wasn't any of the colors the Indians come in. She was almost white, with just the least dip of *café con leche*. Her shape was Indian, but not ugly. Most Indian women have a rope of muscle over their hips that gives them a high-waisted, mis-shapen look, thin, bunchy legs, and too much breast-works. She had plenty in that line, but her hips were round, and her legs had a soft line to them. She was slim, but there was something voluptuous about her, like in three or four years she would go fat. All that, though, I only half saw. What I noticed was her face. It was flat, like an Indian, but the nose broke high, so it kind of went with the way she held her head, and the eyes weren't dumb, with that shiny, shoe-button look. They were pretty big, and black, but they leveled out straight, and had kind of a sleepy, impudent look to them. Her lips were thick but pretty, and of course had plenty of lipstick on them.

It was about nine o'clock at night, and the place was pretty full, with bullfight manager agents, newspaper men, pimps, cops and almost everybody you can think of, except somebody you would trust with your watch. She went to the bar and ordered a drink, then went to a table and sat down, and I had a stifled feeling I had had before, from the thin air up there, but that wasn't it this time. There hadn't been any woman in my life for quite some while, and I knew what this meant. Her drink came, and it was Coca-Cola and Scotch, and I thought that over. It might mean that she was just starting the evening, and it might mean she was just working up an appetite, and if it meant that I was sunk. The Tupinamba is more of a café than a restaurant, but plenty of people eat there, and if that was what she expected to do, my last three pesos wouldn't go very far.

I had about decided to take a chance and go over there when she moved. She slipped over to a place about two tables away, and then she moved again, and I saw what she was up to. She was closing in on a bullfighter named Triesca, a kid I had seen a couple of times in the ring, once when he was on the card with Solorzano, that seemed to be their main ace at the time, and once after the main season was over, when he killed two bulls in a novillada that had one Sunday in the rain. He was a wow with the cape, and just moving up into the money. He had on the striped suit a Mexican thinks is pretty nifty, and a cream-colored hat. He was alone, but the managers, agents, and writers kept dropping by his table. She didn't have much of a chance, but every time three or four or five of them would shove off she would slip nearer. Pretty soon she dropped down beside him. He didn't take off his hat. That ought to have told me something, but it didn't. All I saw was a cluck too stuck on himself to know how to act. She spoke, and he nodded, and they talked a little bit, and it didn't look like she had ever seen him before. She drank out, and he let it ride for a minute, then he ordered another.

When I got it, what she was in there for, I tried to lose interest in her, but my eyes kept coming back to her. After a few minutes, I knew she felt me there, and I knew some of the other tables had tumbled to what was going on. She kept pulling her *rebozo* around her, like she was cold, and hunching one shoulder up, so she half had her back to me. All that did was throw her head up still higher, and I couldn't take my eyes off her at all. So of course a bullfighter is like any other ham, he's watching every table but his own, and he had no more sense than to see these looks that were going round. You understand, it's a dead-pan place, a big café with a lot of mugs sitting around with their hats on the back of their heads, eating, drinking, smoking, reading, and jabbering Spanish, and there wasn't any nudging, pointing, hey-get-a-load-of-this. They strictly minded their business. Just the same, there would be a pair of eyes behind a newspaper that weren't on the newspaper, or maybe a waitress would stop by somebody, and say something, and there'd be a laugh just a little louder than the waitress's gag is generally worth. He sat there, with a kind of a foolish look on his face, snapping his fingernail against his glass, and then I felt a prickle go up my spine. He was getting up, he was coming over.

A guy with three pesos in his pocket doesn't want any trouble, and when the room froze like a stop-camera shot, I tried to tell myself to play it friendly, to get out of it without starting something I couldn't stop. But when he stood there in front of me he still had on that hat.

"My table, he interest you, ha?"

"Your—what?"

"My table. You look, you seem interest, Señor."

"Oh, now I understand."

I wasn't playing it friendly, I was playing it mean. I got up, with the best smile I could paste on my face, and waved at a chair. "Of course. I shall explain. I shall gladly explain. Down there you make it simple, because spig reception isn't any too good. "Please sit down."

He looked at me and he looked at the chair, but it looked like he had me on the run, so he sat down. I sat down. Then I did something I wanted to do for fifteen minutes. I lifted the cream hat off his head, like it was the nicest thing I knew to do for him, slipped a menu card under it, and put it on a chair. If he had moved I was going to let him have it, if they shot me for it. He didn't. It caught him by surprise. A buzz went over the room. The first round was mine.

"May I order you something, Señor?"

He blinked, and I don't think he even heard me. Then he began looking around for help. He was used to having a gallery yell *Olé* every time he wiped his nose, but it had walked out of him this time. It was all deadpan, what he saw, and so far as they were concerned, we weren't even there. There wasn't anything he could do but face me, and try to remember what he had come for.

"The explain. Begin, please."

I had caught him with one he wasn't looking for, and I decided to let him have another right between the eyes. "Certainly. I did look, that is true. But not at you. Believe me, Señor, not at you. And not at the table. At the lady."

"... You—tell me this? You tell me this thing?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Well, what was he going to do? He could challenge me to a duel, but they never heard of a duel in Mexico. He could take a poke at me, but I outweighed him by about fifty pounds. He could shoot me, but he didn't have any gun. I had broken all the rules. You're not supposed to talk like that in Mexico, and once you hand a Mexican something he never heard of, it takes him about a year to figure out the answer. He sat there blinking at me, and the red kept creeping over his ears and cheeks, and I gave him plenty of time to think of something, if he could, before I went on. "I tell you what, Señor. I have examined this lady with care, and I find her very lovely. I admire your taste. I envy your fortune. So let us put her in a lottery and the lucky man wins. We'll each buy her a ticket, and the one holding the highest number buys her next drink. Yes?"

Another buzz went around, a long one this time. Not over half of them in there could speak any English, and it had to be translated around before they could get it. He took about forty beats to think it through, and then he began to feel better. "Why I do this, please? The lady she is with me, no? I put lady in *lotería*, what you put in, Señor? You tell me that?"

"I hope you're not afraid, Señor?"

He didn't like that so well. The red began to creep up again, but then I felt something behind me, and I didn't like that so well either. In the U.S., you feel something behind you it's probably a waiter with a plate of soup, but in Mexico it could be anything, and the last thing you want is exactly the best bet. About half the population of the country go around with pearl-handled automatics on their hips, and the bad part about those guns is that they shoot, and after they shoot nothing is ever done about it. This guy had a lot of friends. He was a popular idol, but I didn't know of anybody that would miss me. I sat looking straight at him, afraid even to turn around.

He felt it too, and a funny look came over his face. I leaned over to brush cigarette ash off my coat, and out of the tail of my eye I peeped. There had been a couple of lottery peddlers in there, and when he came over they must have stopped in their tracks like everybody else. They were back there now, wigwagging him to say yes, that it was in the bag. I didn't let on. I acted impatient, and sharpened up a bit when I jogged him. "Well, Señor? Yes?"

"Sí, sí. We make *lotería*!"

They broke pan then, and crowded around us, forty or fifty of them. So long as we meant business, it had to be hands off, but now that it was a kind of a game, anybody could get in, and most of them did. But even before the crowd, the two lottery peddlers were in, one shoving pink tickets at me, the other green tickets at him. You understand; there's hundreds of lotteries in Mexico, some pink, some green, some yellow, and some blue, and not many of them pay anything. Both of them went through a hocus-pocus of holding napkins over the sheets of tickets, so we couldn't see the numbers, but my man kept whispering to me, and winking, meaning that his numbers were awful high. He was an Indian, with gray hair and a face like a chocolate saint, and you would have thought he couldn't possibly tell a lie. I thought of Cortés, and how easy he had seen through their tricks, and how lousy the tricks probably were.

But I was different from Cortés, because I wanted to be taken. Through the crowd I could see the girl, sitting there as though she had no idea what was going on, and it was still her turn was after, not getting the best of a dumb bullfighter. And something told me the last thing

ought to do was to win her in a lottery. So I made up my mind I was going to lose, and so what happened then.

I waved at him, meaning pick whatever one he wanted, and there wasn't much he could do but wave back. I picked the pink, and it was a peso, and I laid it down. When they tore open the ticket, they went through some more hocus-pocus of laying it down on the table, and covering it with my hat. He took the green, and it was half a peso. That was a big laugh, for some reason. They put his hat over it, and then we lifted the hats. I had No. 7. He had No. 100,000 and something. That was an *Olé*. I still don't get the chemistry of a Mexican. Out of the ring, when the bull comes in, they know that in exactly fifteen minutes that bull is going to be dead. Yet when the sword goes in, they yell like hell. And mind you, there's nothing so much like one dead bull as another dead bull. In that café that night there wasn't one man there that didn't know I was framed, and yet when the hats were lifted they gave him a hand and clapped him on the shoulder, and laughed, just like Lady Luck had handed him a big victory.

"So. And now. You still look, ha?"

"Absolutely not. You've won, and I congratulate you, *de todo corazón*. Please give the lady her ticket, with my compliments, and tell her I hope she wins the Bank of Mexico."

"*Sí, sí, sí*. And so, Señor, *adiós*."

He went back with the tickets, and I put a little more hot *leche* into my coffee, and waited. I didn't look. But there was a mirror back of the bar, so I could see if I wanted to, and just once, after he had handed her the tickets, and they had a long jibber-jabber, she looked.

■ ■

It was quite a while before they started out. I was between them and the door, but I never turned my head. Then I felt them stop, and she whispered to him, and he whispered back and laughed. What the hell? He had licked me, hadn't he? He could afford to be generous. A whiff of her smell hit me in the face, and I knew she was standing right beside me, but I didn't move till she spoke.

"Señor."

I got up and bowed. I was looking down at her, almost touching her. She was smaller than I had thought. The voluptuous lines, or maybe it was the way she held her head, fooled you.

"Señorita."

"*Gracias*, thanks, for the *billete*."

"It was nothing, Señorita. I hope it wins for you as much as it lost for me. You'll be rich—*muy rico*."

She liked that one. She laughed a little, and looked down, and looked up. "So. *Muchas gracias*."

"*De nada*."

But she laughed again before she turned away, and when I sat down my head was pounding, because that laugh, it sounded as though she had started to say something and then she didn't, and I had this feeling there would be more. When I could trust myself to look around, he was still standing there near the door, looking a little sore. From the way he kept looking at the *damas*, I knew she must have gone in there, and he wasn't any too pleased about it.

In a minute, my waitress came and laid down my check. It was for sixty centavos. She had waited on me before, and she was a pretty little *mestiza*, about forty, with a wedding ring showing.

kept flashing every time she got the chance. A wedding ring is big news in Mexico, but it still doesn't mean there's been a wedding. She pressed her belly against the table, and then she heard her voice, though her lips didn't move and she was looking off to one side: "The lady, do you like her *dirección*, yes? Where she live?"

"You sure you know this *dirección*?"

"A *paraquito* have told me—just now."

"In that case, yes."

I laid a peso on the check. Her little black eyes crinkled up into a nice friendly smile, but she didn't move. I put the other peso on top of it. She took out her pencil, pulled the menu card over, and started to write. She hadn't got three letters on paper before the pencil was jerked out of her hand, and he was standing there, purple with fury. He had tumbled, and all the things he had wanted to say to me, and never got the chance, he spit at her, and she spit back. I couldn't get all of it, but you couldn't miss the main points. He said she was delivering a message to me, she said she was only writing the address of a hotel I had asked for, a hotel for *Americanos*. They must like to see a guy framed in Mexico. About six of them chimed in and swore they had heard me ask her the address of a hotel, and that that was all she was giving me. They didn't fool him for a second. He was up his own alley now, and speaking his own language. He told them all where to get off, and in the middle of it, here she came, out of the *damas*. He let her have the last of it, and then he crumpled the menu card up and threw it in her face, and walked out. She hardly bothered to watch him go. She smiled at me as though it was a pretty good joke, and I got up, "Señorita. Permit me to see you home."

That got a buzz, a laugh, and an *Olé*.

I don't think there's ever been a man so moony that a little bit of chill didn't come over him as soon as a woman said yes, and plenty of things were going through my head when she took my arm and we headed for the door of that café. One thing that was going through my head was that my last peso was gone at last, that I was flat broke in Mexico City with no idea what I was going to do or how I was going to do it. Another thing was that I didn't thank them for their *Olé*, that I hated Mexicans and their tricks, and hated them all the more because their tricks were all so bad you could always see through them. A Frenchman's tricks cost you three francs, but a Mexican is just dumb. But the main thing was a queer echo in that *Olé*, like they were laughing at me all the time, and I wondered, all of a sudden, which way we were going to turn when we got out that door. A girl on the make for a bullfighter, you don't exactly expect that she came out of a convent. Just the same, it hadn't occurred to me up to that second that she could be a downright piece of trade goods. I was hoping, when we reached the main street, that we would turn right. To the right lay the main part of town, and if we headed that way, she could be taking me almost anywhere. But to our left lay the *Guauhtemolzin*, and that's nothing but trade.

We turned left.

We turned left, but she walked so nice and talked so sweet I started hoping again. Nothing about an Indian makes any sense. He can live in a hut made of sticks and mud, and sticks and mud are sticks and mud, aren't they? You can't make anything else out of them. But he'll talk to you in there with the nicest manners in the world, more dignity than you'd ever get from a dozen dentists in the U.S., with stucco bungalows that cost ten thousand dollars apiece, kid-

in a private school, and stock in the building and loan. She went along, her hand on my arm and if she had been a duchess she couldn't have stepped cleaner. She made a little gag out of falling in step, looked up once or twice and smiled, and then asked me if I had been long in Mexico.

"Only three or four months."

"Oh. You like?"

"Very much." I didn't, but I wanted anyway to be as polite as she was. "It's very pretty."

"Yes." She had a funny way of saying yes, like the rest of them have. She drew it out, so it was "yayse." "Many flowers."

"And birds."

"And señoritas."

"I wouldn't know about them."

"No? Just a little bit?"

"No."

An American girl would have mauled it to death, but when she saw I didn't want to go on with it, she smiled and began talking about Xochimilco, where the best flowers grew. She asked me if I had been there. I said no, but maybe some day she would take me. She looked away at that, and I wondered why. I figured I had been a little previous. Tonight was tonight, and after that it would be time to talk about Xochimilco. We got to the Guauhtemolzin. I was hoping she would cross. She turned, and we hadn't gone twenty yards before she stopped at a crib.

I don't know if you know how it works in Mexico. There's no houses, with a madame, parlor, and an electric piano, anyway not in that part of town. There's a row of adobe huts, one story high, and washed blue, or pink, or green, or whatever it happens to be. Each hut is one room deep, and jammed up against each other in the way they are, they look like barracks. In each hut is a door, with a half window in it, like a hat-check booth. Under the law they've got to keep that door shut, and drum up trade by leaning out the window, but they know the cop they can get away with an open door. This door was wide open, with three girls in there, two of them around fourteen, and looking like children, the other big and fat, maybe twenty-five. She brought me right in, but then I was alone, because she and the other three went out in the street to have a palaver, and I could partly catch what it was. They all four rented the room together, so three of them had to wait outside when one of them had a customer, but I seemed to be a special case, and if I was going to spend the night, her friends had to flop somewhere else. Most of the street got in it before long, the cop, the café woman on the corner, and a flock of girls from the other cribs. Nobody sounded sore, or surprised, or made dirty cracks. A street like that is supposed to be tough, but from the way they talked, you would have thought it was the junior section of the Ladies' Aid figuring out where to bunk the minister's brother-in-law that had blown in town kind of sudden. They acted like it was the most natural thing in the world.

After a while they got it straightened out to suit them, who was to go where, and she came back and closed the door and closed the window. There was a bed in there, and a chest of drawers in the early Grand Rapids style, and a washstand with a mirror over it, and some grass mats rolled up in a corner, for sleeping purposes. Then there were a couple of chairs. One was tilted back on one, and as soon as she had given me a cigarette, she took the other. The

we were. There was no use kidding myself any longer why Triesca hadn't taken off his hat.
My lady love was a three-peso whore.

She lit my cigarette for me, and then her own, and inhaled, and let the smoke blow out the match. We smoked, and it was about as electric as a stalled car. Across the street in front of the café, a *mariachi* was playing, and she nodded her head once or twice, in time with the music. "Flowers, and birds—and *mariachis*."

"Yes, plenty of them."

"You like *mariachi*? We have them. We have them here."

"Señorita."

"Yes?"

"... I haven't got the fifty centavos. To pay the *mariachi*. I'm—"

I pulled my pockets inside out, to show her. I thought I might as well get it over with. No use having her think she'd hooked a nice American sugar papa, and then letting her be disappointed. "Oh. How sweet."

"I'm trying to tell you I'm broke. *Todo flat*. I haven't got a centavo. I think I'd better be going."

"No money, but buy me *billete*."

"And that was the last of it."

"I have money. Little bit. Fifty centavos for *mariachi*. Now—you look so."

She turned around, lifted the black skirt, and fished in her stocking. Listen, I didn't want any *mariachi* outside the window, serenading us. Of all things I hated in Mexico, I think I hated the *mariachis* the worst, and they had come to make a kind of picture for me of the whole country and what was wrong with it. They're a bunch of bums, generally five of them, that would be a lot better off if they went to work, but instead of that they don't do a thing their whole life, from the time they're kids to the time they're old men, but go around plunking out music for anybody that'll pay them. The rate is fifty centavos a selection, which breaks down to ten centavos, or about three cents a man. Three play the violin, one the guitar, and one a kind of bass guitar they've got down there. As if that wasn't bad enough they sing. Well, never mind how they sing. They gargle a bass falsetto that's enough to set your teeth on edge, but all music gets sung the way it deserves, and it was what they sang that got me down. You hear Mexico is musical. It's not. They do nothing but screech from morning till night, but their music is the dullest, feeblest stuff that ever went down on paper and not one decent bar was ever written there. Yeah, I know all about Chavez. Their music is Spanish music that went through the head of an Indian and came out again, and if you think that sounds the same after that, you made a mistake. An Indian, he's about eight thousand years behind the rest of us in the race towards whatever we're headed for, and it turns out the primitive man is not any fine, noble brute at all. He's just a poor fish. Modern man, in spite of all this talk about his being effete, can run faster, shoot straighter, eat more, live longer, and have a better time than all the primitive men that ever lived. And that difference, how it comes out in music. An Indian, even when he plays a regular tune, sounds like a seal playing "My-Country-'Tis-of-Thee at a circus, but when he makes up a tune of his own, it just makes you sick.

Well, maybe you think I'm getting all steamed up over something that didn't amount

anything, but Mexico had done plenty to me, and all I'm trying to say is that if I had to listen to those five simple-looking mopes outside the window, there was going to be trouble. But I wanted to please her. I don't know if it was the way she took the news of my being broke, or the way her eyes lit up at the idea of hearing some music, or the flash I got of that pretty leg when I was supposed to be looking the other way, or what. Whatever it was, her trade didn't seem to make much difference any more. I felt about her the way I had in the café, and I wanted her to smile at me some more and lean toward me when I spoke.

"Señorita."

"Yes?"

"I don't like the *mariachi*. They play very bad."

"Oh, yes. But they only poor boy. No estoddy, no take lessons. But play—very pretty."

"Well—never mind about that. You want some music that's the main thing. Let me be your *mariachi*."

"Oh—you sing?"

"Just a little bit."

"Yes, yes. I like—very much."

I went out, slipped across the street, and took the guitar from No. 4. He put up a squawk, but she was right after me, and he didn't squawk long. Then we went back. There's not many instruments I can't play, some kind of way, but I can really knock hell out of a guitar. He had it tuned cockeyed, but I brought it to E, A, D, G, B, and E without snapping any of his strings, and then I began to go to town on it. The first thing I played her was the prelude to the last act of *Carmen*. For my money, it's one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, and I had once made an arrangement of it. You may think that's impossible, but if you play the woodwind stuff up near the bridge, and the rest over the hole, the guitar will give you almost as much of what the music is trying to say as the whole orchestra will.

She was like a child while I was tuning, leaning over and watching everything I did, but when I started to play, she sat up and began to study me. She knew she had never heard anything like that, and I thought I saw the least bit of suspicion of me, as to who I was and what the hell I was doing there. So when I went down on the low E string, on the phrase that the bassoon has in the orchestra, I looked at her and smiled. "The voice of the bull."

"Yes, yes!"

"Am I a good *mariachi*?"

"Oh, fine *mariachi*. What is the *música*?"

"*Carmen*."

"Oh. Oh yes, of course. The voice of the bull."

She laughed, and clapped her hands, and that seemed to do it. I went into the bullring music of the last act and kept stepping the key up, so I could make kind of a number out of it without slowing down for the vocal stuff. There came a knock on the door. She opened, and the *mariachi* was out there, and most of the ladies of the Street. "They ask door open. So they hear too."

"All right, so they don't sing."

So we left the door open, and I got a hand after the bullring selection, and played the intermezzo, then the prelude to the opera. My fingers were a little sore, as I had no calluses, but I went into the introduction to the *Habanera*, and started to sing. I don't know how far

got. What stopped me was the look on her face. Everything I had seen there was gone, it was the face at the window of every whorehouse in the world, and it was looking right through me.

“... What’s the matter?”

I tried to make it sound comical, but she didn’t laugh. She kept looking at me, and she came over, took the guitar from me, went out and handed it to the *mariachi* player. The crowd began to jabber and drift off. She came back, and the other three girls were with her. “Well, Señorita—you don’t seem to like my singing.”

“*Muchas gracias*, Señor. Thanks.”

“Well—I’m sorry. Good evening, Señorita.”

“*Buenos noches*, Señor.”

Next thing I knew I was stumbling down the Bolivar, trying to wash her out of my mind, trying to wash everything out of my mind. A block away, somebody was coming toward me. I saw it was Triesca. She must have gone out and phoned him when I left. I ducked around the corner, so I wouldn’t have to pass him. I kept on, crossed a plaza, and found myself looking at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, their opera house. I hadn’t been near it since I flopped there three months before. I stood staring at it, and thought how far I had slid. Flopping in *Rigoletto*, in probably the lousiest opera company in the world, before an audience that didn’t know *Rigoletto* from Yankee Doodle, with a chorus of Indians behind me trying to look like lords and ladies, a Mexican tenor on one side of me that couldn’t even get a hand of *Questa o Quella*, and a coffee cake on the other side that scratched fleas while she was singing the *Caro Nome*—that seemed about as low as I could get. But I had wiped those footprints out, with my can. I had tried to serenade a lady that was easy serenaded, and I couldn’t even get away with that.

I walked back to my one-peso hotel, where I was paid up to the end of the week, went to my room, and undressed without turning on the light, so I wouldn’t see the concrete floor, the wash basin with rings in it, and the lizard that would come out from behind the bureau. I got in bed, pulled the lousy cotton blanket up over me, and lay there watching the fog creep in. When I closed my eyes I’d see her looking at me, seeing something in me, I didn’t know what, and then I’d open them again and look at the fog. After a while it came to me that she was afraid of what she saw in me. There would be something horrible mixed up in it, and I didn’t want to know what it was.

As well as I can remember, that was in June, and I didn't see her for a couple of months. Never mind what I did in that time, to eat. Sometimes I didn't eat. For a while I had a job with a Jazzband, playing a guitar. It was in a nightclub out on the Reforma, and they needed me badly. I mean, the place was for Americans, and the music they handed out was supposed to be like the McCoy, but it wasn't. I went to work, and got them so they could play the hot stuff hot and the blue stuff blue, anyway a little bit, and polished up a couple of them so they could take a solo strain now and then, just for variety. Understand, you couldn't do much. The Mexican's got a defective sense of rhythm. He sounds rhythmic on the *cucaracha* stuff, but when you slow him down to foxtrot time, he can't feel it. He just plays it mechanically, so when people get out on the floor they can't dance to it. Still, I did what I could, and figured out a few combos that made them sound better than they really were, and business picked up. But then a guy with a pistol on his hip showed up one night and wanted to see my papers, and I got thrown out. They got Socialism down there now, and one of the rules is that Mexico belongs to the Mexicans. They're out of luck, no matter how they play it. Under Diaz, they turned the country over to the foreigners, and they had prosperity, but the local boys didn't get much of it. Then they had the Revolution, and fixed it up so that whatever was going on, the local boys had to run it. The only trouble is, the local boys don't seem to be very good at it. They threw me out, and then they had Socialism, but they didn't have any Jazzband. Business fell off, and later I heard the place closed.

After that, I even had to beg to stay on at the hotel until I got the money from New York, which wasn't ever coming, as they knew as well as I did. They let me use the room, but they wouldn't give me any bedclothes or service. I had to sleep on the mattress, under my clothes, and haul my own water. Up to then, I had managed to keep some kind of press in my pants, so I could anyway bum a meal off some American in Butch's café, but I couldn't even do that any more, and I began to look like what I was, a beachcomber in a spig town. I wouldn't even have eaten if it hadn't been for shagging my own water. I started going after it in the morning, and because the tin pitcher wouldn't fit under the tap in the washroom at the end of the hall, I had to go down to the kitchen. Nobody paid any attention to me, and then an idea hit me, and next time I went down at night. There was nobody there, and I ducked over the icebox. They've got electric iceboxes all over Mexico, and some of them have combinations on them, like safes, but this one hadn't. I opened it up, and a light went on, and sure enough, there was a lot of cold stuff in there. I scooped some frijoles into a glass ashtray I had brought down, and held them under the pitcher when I went up. When I got back to my room I dug into them with my knife. After that, for two weeks, that was what I lived on. I found ten centavos in the street one day and bought a tin spoon, a clay soapdish, and a cake of soap. The soapdish and the soap I put on the washstand, like they were some improvements of my own I was putting in, since they wouldn't give me any. The spoon I kept in my pocket. Every night when I'd go down, I'd scoop beans, rice, or whatever they had, and

sometimes a little meat into the soapdish, but only when there was enough that it wouldn't be missed. I never touched anything that might have counted, and only took off the top of the dishes where there was quite a lot of it, and then smoothed them up to look right. Once there was half a Mexican ham in there. I cut myself off a little piece, under the butt.

And then one morning I got this letter, all neatly typewritten, even down to the signature on a sheet of white business paper.

Calle Guauhtemolzin 44b,
Mexico, D. F.
A 14 de agosto.

Sr. John Howard Sharp,
Hotel Domínguez,
Calle Violeta,
Ciudad.
Mi Querido Jonny:

En vista de que no fue posible verte ayer en el mercado al ir a las compras que ordinariamente hago para la casa en donde trabajo, me veo precisada para dirigirte la presente y manifestarte que dormí inquieta con motivo de tus palabras me sobre la vida y no pudiendo permanecer sin contacto contigo te digo que hoy por la noche te espero a las ocho de la noche para que platiquemos, por lo que así espero estaras presente y formal.

Se despide quien te ama de todo corazón y no te olivida,

JUANA MONTAÑA

How she got my name and address didn't bother me. The waitress at the Tupinamba would have been good for that. But the rest of it, the date I was supposed to have with her yesterday, and how she couldn't sleep for thinking about me, didn't make any sense at all. Still, she wanted to see me, that seemed to be the main point, and it was a long time before sundown. I was down past the point where I cared how she had looked at me, or what it meant, or anything like that. She could look at me like I was a rattlesnake, for all I cared, so long as she had a couple of buns under the bed. I went back upstairs, shaved, and started up there hoping something about it might lead to a meal.

When I rapped on the door the window opened, and the fat one poked her head out. The four of them were just getting up. The window closed, and Juana called something out to me. I waited, and pretty soon she came out. She had on a white dress this time, that must have cost all of two pesos, and white sock-lets, and shoes. She looked like some high school girl from a border town. I said hello and how had she been, she said very well, *gracias*, and how had I been? I said I couldn't complain, and edged toward the door to see if I could smell coffee. There didn't seem to be any. Then I took out the letter and asked her what it meant.

"Yes. I ask you to come. Yes."

"I caught that. But what's all this other stuff about? I didn't have any date with you—that I know of."

She kept studying me, and studying the letter, and hungry as I was, and bad as she had

walloped me that night, and dumb as it had been up to now, I couldn't help having this same feeling about her I had had before, that was mainly what any man feels toward a woman, but partly what he feels toward a child. There was something about the way she talked, the way she held her head, the way she did everything, that got me in the throat, so I couldn't breathe right. It wasn't child, of course. It was Indian. But it did things to me just the same, maybe worse on account of it being Indian, because that meant she was always going to be like that. The trouble was, you see, that she didn't know what the letter said. She couldn't read.

She called the fat one out, and had her read it, and then there was the most indignant jabbering you ever heard. The other two came out and got in it, and then she grabbed me by the arm. "The auto. You make go, yes?"

"Well I could once."

"Come, then. Come quick."

We went down the street, and she turned in at a shack that seemed to be a kind of garage. It was full of wrecks with stickers pasted on the windshield, that seemed to be here for the sheriff or something, but halfway down the line was the newest, reddest Ford in the world. It shone like a boil on a sailor's neck. She went up to it, and began waving the letter in one hand and the key in the other. "So. Now we go. Calle Venezuela."

I got in, and she got in, and it was a little stiff, but it started, and I rolled it through the murk to the street. I didn't know where the Calle Venezuela was, and she tried to show me, but she didn't have the hang of the one-way streets, so we got tangled up so bad it took us half hour to get there. As soon as I backed up to park she jumped out and ran over to the colonnade, where about fifty guys were camped out on the sidewalk, back of tables with typewriters on them. They all wore black suits. In Mexico, the black suit means you got plenty of education, and the black fingernails mean you got plenty of work. When I got there she was having an argument with one guy, and after a while he sat down to his machine, stuck a piece of paper in it, wrote something, and handed it to her. She came over to me waving it, and I took it. It was just two lines, that started off "Querido Sr. Sharp" instead of "Querido Jonny," and said she wanted to see me on a matter of business.

"This letter, big mistake."

She tore it up.

Well, never mind the fine points. The result of the big Socialist educational program is that half the population of the city have to come to these mugs to get their letters written, and that was what she had done. But the guy had been a little busy, and didn't get it quite straight what she had said, and fixed her up with a love letter. So of course, she had to go down there and get what she had paid for. I didn't blame her, but I still didn't know what she wanted, and I was still hungry.

"The auto—you like, yes?"

"It's a knockout." We were coming up the Bolivar again, and I had to keep tooting the horn, according to law. The main thing they put on cars for Mexican export is the biggest, loudest horn they can find in Detroit, and this one had a double note to it that sounded like a couple of ferryboats passing in an East River fog. "Your business must be good."

I didn't mean to make any crack, but it slipped out on me. If it meant anything to her, all, she passed it up.

“Oh no. I win.”

“How?”

“The *billete*. You remember?”

“Oh. My *billette*?”

“Yes. I win, in *lotería*. The auto, and five hundred pesos. The auto, is very pretty. I can make go.”

“Well, I can make it go, if that’s all that’s bothering you. About those five hundred pesos. You got some of them with you?”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

“That’s great. What you’re going to do is buy me a breakfast. For my belly—*muy* empty. You get it?”

“Oh, why you no say? Yes, of course, now we eat.”

I pulled in at the Tupinamba. The restaurants don’t open until one o’clock, but the café will take care of you. We took a table up near the corner, where it was dark and cool. Hardly anybody was in there. My same old waitress came around grinning, and I didn’t waste any time. “Orange juice, the biggest you got. Fried eggs, three of them, and fried ham. Tortilla. Glass of milk, *frío*, and *café con crema*.”

“*Bueno*.”

She took iced coffee, a nifty down there, and gave me a cigarette. It was the first I had had in three days, and I inhaled and leaned back, and smiled at her. “So.”

“So.”

But she didn’t smile back, and looked away as soon as she said it. It was the first time we had really looked at each other all morning, and it brought us back to that night. She smoked and looked up once or twice to say something, and didn’t, and I saw there was something on her mind besides the *billete*. “So—you still have no pesos?”

“That’s more or less correct.”

“You work, no?”

“I did work, but I got kicked out. Just at present, I’m not doing anything at all.”

“You like to work, yes? For me?”

“... Doing what?”

“Play a guitar, little bit, maybe. Write a letter, count money, speak *Inglés*, help me, and work very hard, in Mexico, nobody work very hard. Yes? You like?”

“Wait a minute. I don’t get this.”

“Now I have money, I open house.”

“Here?”

“No, no, no. In Acapulco. In Acapulco, I have very nice friend, big *politico*. Open nice house, with nice music, nice food, nice drink, nice girls—for American.”

“Oh, for Americans.”

“Yes. Many Americans come now to Acapulco. Big steamboat stop there. Nice man, much money.”

“And me, I’m to be a combination professor, bartender, bouncer, glad-hander, secretary, and general bookkeeper for the joint, is that it?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Well.”

The food came along, and I stayed with it a while, but the more I thought about the proposition the funnier it got to me. "This place, it's supposed to have class, is that the idea?"

"Oh yes, very much. My *politico* friend, he say American pay as much as five pesos, gladly

"Pay five—what?"

"Pesos."

"Listen, tell your *politico* friend to shut his trap and let an expert talk. If an American pay less than five dollars, he'd think there was something wrong with it."

"I think you little bit crazy."

"I said five bucks—eighteen pesos."

"No, no. You kid me."

"All right, go broke your own way. Hire your *politico* for manager."

"You really mean?"

"I raise my right hand and swear by the holy mother of God. But—you got to get some system in it. You got to give him something for his money."

"Yes, yes. Of course."

"Listen, I'm not talking about this world's goods. I'm talking about things of the spirit: romance, adventure, beauty. Say, I'm beginning to see possibilities in this. All right, you want that American dough, and I'll tell you what you've got to do to get it. In the first place, the dump has got to be in a nice location, in among the hotels, not back of the coconut palms, up on the hill. That's up to your *politico*. In the second place, you don't do anything but run a little dance hall, and rent rooms. The girls came in, just for a drink. Not mescal, not tequila. Chocolate ice-cream soda, because they're nice girls, that just dropped in to take a load off their feet. They wear hats. They come in two at a time, because they're so well brought up they wouldn't dream of going in any place alone. They work in the steamboat office, up the street, or maybe they go to school and just came home for vacation. And they've never met any Americans, see, and they're giggling about it, in their simple girlish way, and of course we fix it up, you and I, so there's a little introducing around. And they dance. And one thing leads to another. And next thing you know, the American has a room from you, to take the girl up. You don't really run that kind of place, but just because it's him, you'll make an exception—for five dollars. The girl doesn't take anything. She does it for love, see?"

"For *what*?"

"Do I know the *Americano*, or don't I?"

"I think you just talk, so sound fonny."

"It sounds fonny, but it's not just talk. The *Americano*, he doesn't mind paying for a room, but when it comes to a girl, he likes to feel it's a tribute to his personality. He likes to think it's a big night for her, too, and all the more because she's just a poor little thing in the steamboat office, and never had such a night in her life until he came along and showed her what life could be like with a real guy. He wants an adventure—with him the hero. He wants to have something to tell his friends. But don't have any bums sliding up to take their *foto*. He doesn't like that."

"Why not? The *fotógrafo*, he pay me little bit."

"Well, I tell you. Maybe the *fotógrafo* has a heart of gold, and so has the *muchacha*, but the *Americano* figures the *foto* might get back to his wife, or threaten to, specially if she's staying up at the hotel. He wants an adventure, but he doesn't want any headache. Besides, the *fot*

have got a Coney Island look to them, and might give him the idea it was a cheap joint. Remember, this place has class. And that reminds me, the *mariachi* is going to be hand-picked by me, and hand-trained as well, so maybe somebody could dance to the stuff when they play it. Of course, I don't render any selections on the guitar. That's out. Or the piano, or the violin, or any other instrument in my practically unlimited repertoire. And that *mariachi*, they wear suits that we give them, with gold braid down the pants, and turn those suits in every night when they quit. It's our own private *mariachi*, and as fast as we get money to buy more suits we put on more men, so it's a feature. The main thing is that we have class, first, last, and all the time. No *Americano*, from the time he goes in to the time he goes out, is going to get the idea that he can get out of spending money. Once they get that through their heads, we'll be all right."

"The *Americanos*, are they all crazy?"

"All crazy as loons."

It seemed to be settled, but after the gags wore off I had this sick feeling, like life had turned to the gray-white color of their sunlight. I tried to tell myself it was the air, that'll do it to you at least three times a day. Then I tried to tell myself it was what I had done, that I had no more pride left than to take a job as pimp in a coast-town whorehouse, but what the hell. That was just making myself look noble. It was, anyway, some kind of work, and if I really made a go of it, it wouldn't make me squirm. It would make me laugh. And then I knew what was this thing that was drilling in the back of my head, about her. There hadn't been a word about that night, and when she looked at me her eyes were just as blank as though I'd been some guy she was talking to about the rent. But I knew what those eyes could say. Whatever it was she had seen in me that night, she still saw it, and it was between us like some glass door that we could see through but couldn't talk.

She was sitting there, looking at her coffee glass and not saying anything. She had a way of dozing off like that, between the talk, like some kitten that falls asleep as soon as you stop playing with it. I told you she looked like some high school girl in that little white dress. I kept looking at her, trying to figure out how old she was, when all of a sudden I forgot about that and my heart began to pound. If she was to be the madame of the joint, she could probably very well take care of any customers herself, could she? Then who was going to take care of her? By her looks, she needed plenty of care. Maybe that was supposed to be my job. My voice didn't quite sound like it generally does when I spoke to her.

"... Señorita, what do I get out of this?"

"Oh—you live, have nice cloth, maybe big hat with silver, yes? Some pecos. Is enough yes?"

"—And entertain the señoritas?"

I don't know why I said that. It was the second mean slice I had taken since we started out. Maybe I was hoping she'd flash jealous, and that would give me the cue I wanted. She didn't. She smiled, and studied me for a minute, and I felt myself getting cold when I saw there was the least bit of pity in it. "If you like to entertain señoritas, yes. Maybe not. Maybe that's why I ask you. No have any trouble."

Early next morning I shaved, washed, and packed. My earthly possessions seemed to be razor, brush, and cake of soap, two extra shirts, a pair of extra drawers I had washed out the night before, a pile of old magazines, and the black-snake whip I had used when I sang Alfi. They give you a whip, but it never cracks, and I got this mule-skinner's number with about two pounds of lead in the butt. One night on the double bill a stagehand laid it out for Pagliacci, and the Nedda hit me in the face with it. I still carry the scar. I had sold off all the costumes and scores, but couldn't get rid of the whip. I dropped it in the suitcase. The magazines and my new soapdish I put on top of it, and stood the suitcase in the corner. Someday, maybe, I would come back for it. The two extra shirts I put on, and tied the necktie over the top one. The extra drawers I folded and put in one pocket, the shaving stuff in another. I didn't mention I was leaving, to the clerk, on my way out. I just waved at him, like I was on my way up to the postoffice to see if the money had come, but I had to slap my hand against my leg, quick. She had dropped a handful of pesos in my pocket, and I was afraid he'd hear them clink.

The Ford was an open roadster, and I lost a half hour getting the boot off and the top up. It was an all-day run to Acapulco, and I didn't mean to have that sun beating down on me. The car rolled out and pulled down to 44b. She was on the doorstep, waiting for me, her stuff piled up around her. The other girls weren't up yet. She was all dressed up in the black dress with purple flowers that she had had on when I first saw her, though I thought the white would have been better. The main baggage seemed to be a round hatbox, of the kind women traveled with fifteen years ago, only made of straw and stuffed full of clothes. I peeled off the extra shirts and put them and the hatbox in the rumble seat. Then there was the grass mat that she slept on, rolled up and tied. I stuck that in, but it meant I couldn't close the rumble. Those mats, they sell for sixty centavos, or maybe twenty cents, and it didn't hardly look like it was worth the space, but it was a personal matter, and I didn't want to argue. Then there was a pile of *rebozos*, about every color there was, but mainly black. I put them in, but she ran out and took one, a dark purple, and threw it over her head. Then there was the cape, the *espada*, and the ear. It was the first time I ever saw a bullfighter's cape, the dress cape, I mean, not the fighting cape, up close so I could really look at it. I hated it because I knew where she had got it, but you couldn't laugh off the beauty of it. I think it's the only decently made thing you'll ever see in Mexico, and maybe it's not even made there. It's heavy silk, each side a different color, and embroidered so thick it feels crusty in your hands. This one was yellow outside, crimson in, and against that yellow the needlework just glittered. It was all flowers and leaves, but not in the dumb patterns you see on most of their stuff. They were oil-painting flowers, not postcard flowers, and the colors had a real tone to them. I folded it and put a *rebozo* around it, to protect it from dust, and laid it beside the hatbox. The *espada*, I mean, was just one more grand-opera prop. It's what they use to stick the bull with, and I didn't even take it out of the scabbard to look at it. I threw it down in the bottom.

While I was loading the stuff in, she was standing there stroking the ear. I wouldn't have handled it with tongs. Sometimes, when a bullfighter puts on a good show, they give him an ear. The crowd begins to yell about it, and then one of the assistants goes over and cuts an ear off the bull, where he's lying in the dirt with the mules hooking on to his horns. The bullfighter takes it, holds it up so you can see all the blood and slime, and goes around with it, bowing every ten steps. Then he saves it, like a coloratura saves her decoration from the King of Belgium. After about three months it's good and rank. This one she had, there were pieces of gristle hanging out of it, and it stunk so you could smell it five feet away. I told her if it went on the front seat with us the deal was off, and she could throw it back there with the *espada*. She did, but she was plenty puzzled.

The window popped open then, and the fat one showed, with some kind of a nightgown on and her hair all frazzled and ropy, and then the other ones beside her, and there was a lot of whispering and kissing, and then we got in and got started. We lost about ten minutes, out on the edge of town, when we stopped to gas up, and another five when we came to a church and she had to go in and bless herself, but finally, around eight o'clock we leveled off. We passed some wooden crosses, another little feature they've got. Under Socialism, it seems that there's only one guy that really knows how it works, and if some other guy thinks he does it's a counter-revolutionary act, or, in un-socialist lingo, treason. So back in 1927, a guy named Serrano thought he did, and they arrested him and his friends down in Cuernavaca and started up to Mexico with them in a truck. But then up in Mexico somebody decided it would be a good idea if they never got there at all, and some of the boys started out in a fancy car to meet them. They fastened their hands with baling wire, lined them up beside the road and mowed them down with a machine gun. Then they said the revolution was over, and the American papers handed it to them that they had a stable government at last, and that a strong man could turn the trick, just give him the chance. So wooden crosses mark the spot, an inspiring sight to see.

We had some coffee in Cuernavaca, then pushed on to Taxco for lunch. That was the end of the good road. From there on it was just dust, curves, and hills. She began to get sleepy. A Mexican is going to sleep at one o'clock, no matter where he is, and she was no exception. She leaned her head against the side, and her eyes drooped. She wriggled, trying to get settled. She slipped off her shoes. She wiggled some more. She took off a string of beads around her neck, and unfastened two buttons. She was open to her brassiere. Her dress slipped up, above her knees. I tried not to look. It was getting hotter by the minute. I didn't look, but I could smell her.

I gassed in Chilpancingo, around four o'clock, and bathed the tires with water. That was what I was afraid of, mostly, that in that heat and sliding all over that rough road, we would have a blow-out. I peeled down to my undershirt, knotted a handkerchief around my head to catch sweat, and we went on. She was awake now. She didn't have much to say. She slipped off her stockings, held her bare legs in the air stream from the hood vent, and unbuttoned another button.

We were down in what they call the *tierra caliente*, now, and it turned cloudy and so muggy the sweat stood out on my arms in drops. After Chilpancingo I had been looking for some relief, but this was the worst yet. We had been running maybe an hour when she began to

lean forward and look out, and then she told me to stop. "Yes. This way."

I rubbed the sweat out of my eyes and looked, and saw something that maybe was intended to be a road. It was three inches deep in dust, and cactuses were growing in the middle of it, but if you concentrated we could see two tracks. "That way, hell. Acapulco the way we're going. I looked it up."

"We go for Mamma."

"... What was that you said?"

"Yes. Mamma will cook. She cook for us. For the house in Acapulco."

"Oh, I see."

"Mamma cook very nice."

"Listen. I haven't had the honor of meeting Mamma, but I've just got a hunch she's not the type. Not for the high-class joint we're going to run. I tell you what. Let's get down there. If the worst comes to worst, I'll cook. I cook very nice, too. I studied in Paris, where all the good cooks go when they die."

"But Mamma, she have the *viveres*."

"The what?"

"The food, what we need. I send Mamma the money, I sent last week. She buy much things, we take. We take Mamma, Papa. All the *viveres*."

"Oh, Papa too."

"Yes, Papa help Mamma cook."

"Well, will you tell me where you, me, Mamma, Papa, and the *viveres* are going to ride? By the way, do we take the goat?"

"Yes, this way, please."

It was her car, and I turned into the road. I had gone about a hundred yards when the wheel jerked out of my hands and I had to stamp on the brake to keep from going down a gully that must have been two hundred feet deep. I mean, it was that rough, and it didn't get any better. It was uphill and down, around rocks the size of a truck, through gullies that would have bent the axles of anything but a Ford, over cactuses so high I was afraid they would foul the transmission when we went over them. I don't know how far we went. We drove about an hour, and the rate we were moving, it might have been five miles or twenty, but it seemed more like fifty. We passed a church and then a long while after that, we began to pass Mexicans with burros, hurrying along with them. That's a little point about driving in Mexico they don't tell you about. You meet these herds of burros, going along loaded up with wood, fodder, Mexicans, or whatever it is. The burro alone doesn't give you much trouble. He knows the rules of the road as well as you do, and gets out of the way in time, even if he's a little grouchy about it. But if he's got a Mexican herding him along, you can bet on that that Mexican will shove him right in line with your fender and you do nothing but stomp on your brake and curse and sweat and cake up with their dust.

It was the way they were hurrying along, though, that woke me up to what it looked like outside. The heat and dust were enough to strangle you, but the clouds were hanging low all the time, and over the tops of the ridges smoky scuds were slipping past, and it didn't look good. After a long time we passed some huts, by twos and threes, huddled together. We kept on, and then we came to a couple more huts, but only one of them seemed to have anybody in it. She reached over and banged on the horn and jumped out, and ran up to the door, and

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