



THE

MONGOLIAN



CONSPIRACY

RAFAEL BERNAL



*TRANSLATED BY KATHERINE SILVER
INTRODUCTION BY FRANCISCO GOLDMAN*



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A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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Introduction

Filiberto García, the protagonist of *The Mongolian Conspiracy*, the sixty-year-old Mexico City police hitman, or *pistolero*, or *guarura*, as they are called nowadays, says “¡Pinche!” a lot, which Katherine Silvers translates as “Fucking!” *Pinche* past! *Pinche* furniture! *Pinche* gringo! *Pinche* Tame Tiger! *Pinche* professor! *Pinche* goddamned captain! *Pinche* jokes! Those are just the *pinches* found in the novel’s first three pages. Mexican profanities, such as *chingar*, are famously variable, their meaning subject to context and tone and conjugation, and *pinche* can be used in lots of ways in Mexican Spanish, for example even relatively genteel parents might say, “*Pinche* brats, go to bed,” but probably very few of their English-speaking American counterparts say, “Fucking brats, go to bed.” But “fucking!” is certainly the best possible translation of the *pinches* in García’s inner monologue, an explosive expression of rancor and mockery — including of himself — sarcasm, humiliation, bafflement, defiance, weary or bitter sorrow and resignation, all of which barely suggests the full range of his *pinches*. Let’s just take a look at what the “fucking” “*pinches*” of those first three pages tell us about Filiberto García:

“Fucking past!” García has a sordid job and knows it, called upon by his police and political superiors — who claim to be repulsed by killing and to belong to the modern world of legality and laws — whenever they want someone rubbed out. But García got his start as a killer as a youth in the Mexican Revolution, fighting with Pancho Villa and “the Centaurs of the North,” when killing was manly and served a noble cause. “Here [in Mexico] all they teach us is how to kill,” Filiberto García reflects later in the novel. “Or maybe not even that. They hire us because we already know how to kill.” García was “born in the gutter,” the son of an unknown father and La Charanda, perhaps a prostitute: and poverty and the instinct and struggle to survive, as with so many Mexicans, carved his course in life and made it seem almost predetermined. Better to kill than to be killed; killing was what he was good at, and so a hired killer is what he became. Filiberto García, terse and hard-boiled as he seems, is tormented by the past, the distant memory of the betrayed Revolution and the great generation he fought for, but most of all, he is haunted by all the people he’s killed, usually men, but also women and even a priest. His memories are like a cemetery in which all the corpses were put there by him, and those corpses take turns sitting up, as it were, intruding into his consciousness, forcing him to momentarily grapple with them before slamming the coffin lid shut again with a well placed ¡*Pinche*!

“Fucking furniture!” “He’d often thought about this furniture — his only belongings besides his clothes and the money he’d saved. He bought them when he moved out of the last of the many rooming houses

he'd always lived in; they were the first ones they showed him at Sears, and he left everything exact where they'd been set down by the deliveryman, who'd also hung up the curtains. Fucking furniture. But if you have an apartment, you have to have furniture, and when you buy an apartment building, you have to live in it." Filiberto García has done pretty well for himself, paid to kill for the police and probably illicitly helping himself along the way to the cash that comes his way in the course of his "police work." He owns the building that he lives in. But his material pride is as sparsely furnished as his apartment. Only one other time in the novel is his landlord status even alluded to, many pages later, when, needing to remove the corpse of a man he's slain from his apartment, "All my tenants live quiet lives."

"Fucking gringo!" One of those intruding dead men from the past. In the mirror, Filiberto adjusts his red silk tie, the black Yardley-cologne scented handkerchief in his suit pocket. "The only thing he couldn't fix was the scar on his cheek, but the gringo who'd made it couldn't fix being dead, either. Fair is fair. Fucking gringo! Seems he knew how to handle a knife, but not lead."

"Fucking tame tiger!" "His dark face was inexpressive, his mouth almost always motionless, even when he spoke. Only his big, green, almond-shaped eyes had any life in them. When he was a kid, in Yurécuaro, they called him The Cat, and a woman in Tampico called him My Tame Tiger. Fucking tame tiger! His eyes might suggest nicknames, but the rest of his face, especially his slight sneer, didn't make people feel using any." Filiberto García doesn't stand for teasing anymore than he does for jokes. That woman in Tampico is certainly one of the very few, the reader will see, who could have been inspired to treat this hard predatory macho, who has always considered "bitches" as little more than "holes," with such teasing and ironical tenderness. "Out there in San Andrés Tuxtla, I killed a man then fucked his wife, right there in the same room, I raped her." But in this novel Filiberto García falls in love with Marta, a twenty-five-year-old half-Chinese woman, in a manner that will baffle, humiliate, transform and even redeem him. A good part of *The Mongolian Conspiracy's* almost surreal and eccentric greatness resides in this love story, one of the most moving and unlikely in Mexican literature — and, without a doubt, the saddest.

"Who would ever marry a man like me, Marta? With my . . . profession?"

"Many women. You don't know how good you are, the good you do in the world."

"Fucking professor! Fucking goddamned captain!"

"The doorman downstairs greeted him with a military salute:

"Good evening, Captain."

"That chump calls me Captain because I wear a trench coat, a Stetson, and ankle boots. If I carried a briefcase, he'd call me professor. Fucking professor! Fucking goddamned captain!"

His own air of respectability, the fawning it inspires, galls Filiberto, who has no delusions about what he does for a living. It's of a piece with the societal moral hypocrisy and corruption, the "lawyerocracy" of the modern Mexico that employs him, fueling his relentless rancor.

"Fucking jokes!" "Killing isn't a job that takes a lot of time, especially now that we're doing it legally, for the government, by the book. During the Revolution, things were different, but I was just a kid then, an orderly to General Marchena, one of so many second-rate generals. A lawyer in Saltillo said he was small-fry, but that lawyer is dead. I don't like jokes like that. I don't mind a smutty story

but as for jokes, you have to show respect, respect for Filiberto García, and respect for his general Fucking jokes!” “What’s to laugh about in this goddamned fucking life?” “People who knew him knew he didn’t like jokes. His women learned it fast.” Only his friend, an alcoholic and impoverished criminal lawyer who spends his days cadging tequilas in cantinas, the only friend Filberto García has in the novel, dares to crack jokes at his expense. When the atom bomb was dropped on Japan, the lawyer turned and with a straight face asked García, “As a fellow professional, what do you think President Truman?” Nobody else in the cantina laughs, only this drunken lawyer, who doesn’t fear death but, according to García, doesn’t necessarily have “balls” either, who in his dipsomaniac ruin is a sole figure of integrity because he never expresses hypocritical reverence for “laws” and “legality” and he dares to rib this professional killer.

Pinche Rafael Bernal, he wrote so fucking well, especially in *The Mongolian Conspiracy*, and probably also in the other fifteen or so books he published in his life, mostly novels, some non-fiction, history, a volume of poetry, though almost all of those books are now out of print, all but this one published in 1969, three years before the end of his life, and for years nearly impossible to find even in second-hand bookstores. Bernal, born in Mexico City in 1915, worked most of his professional life as a television and movie scriptwriter and as a diplomat in Mexico’s foreign service. He is reputed to have been at least until the 1950s a right-wing Christian nationalist, even a Synarchist, and reputedly many of his novels were platforms for the didactic airing of his views, especially regarding his religious beliefs and the betrayal of the Mexican Revolution by the country’s political, military, and oligarchic classes. He was also, in other novels, a *costumbrista*, a realist writer of local color and customs, obsessively portraying the jungle as a corrupter of the human spirit and morality, and the ocean as its healthy and invigorating opposite. In a 1990 interview, his wife, Idalia Villarreal, who was fourteen years younger, described Bernal as a voracious reader of detective novels, by Agatha Christie and the like, and said that his first forays into the detective novel or *policier* before *The Mongolian Conspiracy* show the influence of Chesterton. She also described him as a serious reader of ancient and medieval history. The favorite books of his youngest daughter Cocol are Bernal’s *Un muerto en tumba* “where a geeky archaeologist turns detective after a fresh corpse is found in an ancient Moncibán tomb” and *Su nombre era muerta*: “It is based on my father’s experiences in the jungle and concerns a man who lives in a Lacandón village in the jungle of Quintana Roo and learns to communicate with mosquitos. I believe he wrote it when we were in Venezuela in the late 1950s.” Yuri Herrera, the terrific young Mexican novelist, also admires *Su nombre era muerta*, which he describes as being about an alcoholic who retreats to the jungle, stops drinking, observes and studies mosquitos and discovers their language, and then conceives of a plot to dominate the world with the help of the insects.

So how did Bernal produce *The Mongolian Complot*, this revered cult masterpiece that, though it didn’t garner much attention when it was first published, has ever since so greatly influenced subsequent generations of Mexican writers? Writing it, Bernal seems to have thrown out everything that had previously characterized him as a writer, his approach to the novel itself and certainly the didactic expression of his convictions and beliefs — there is no trace of conscious Christian morality or devotion in Filiberto García, who, as we see at the novel’s end, doesn’t know a single prayer. Apparently nobody in Mexico had ever placed a character such as García, a *pistolero*, working for the police, one of the country’s most notorious institutions, a denizen of Mexico City’s lower-depths, at the center of a literary novel. (If anyone else did, nobody seems to remember that book.) In this character, Bernal created an unforgettable antihero hero. This seems all the more remarkable when

one considers that Bernal, apparently a man of the right, published this book in 1969, a turbulent time when nearly every other literary person, writers and readers, in Mexico identified with the left, when the corruption of the political culture that had grown from the Mexican Revolution had been garishly exposed to the world, one year after the authoritarian governing PRI had massacred as many as 40 student protestors and others in Tlatelolco square in Mexico City, a seminal event which haunts Mexico and underlies its politics to this day, and in which many of the assassins who took part must have been order-following government gunmen of the Filiberto García type, maintaining a stone-faced indifference to whether victims on the right or on the left. Bernal must have feared, or perversely expected, that García would repulse his contemporary Mexican readers, and that they would put the book down well before reaching the violent climax that, perhaps ambiguously, redeems him. For there comes a moment in *The Mongolian Conspiracy* when Filiberto García finally disobeys his superior and fulfills his dark heroic journey with an act of sorrowful rage and vengeance through which he adds some final corpses to his memory cemetery — so maybe he hasn't changed that much, after all. But those killings are almost secondary to the narrative of his intimate transformation, which has another source, his relationship with Marta.

On the one hand this is a novel of suspense and detection, cleverly satiric, with a devastating political knockout punch, but even more memorably, it is a novel of the heart, and of a consciousness. The story is full of intrigue and violence, but the real action springs from its language. *The Mongolian Conspiracy* is narrated in the third person, while constantly, with beguiling agility, sliding into the verbal torrent of Filiberto García's inner monologue and commentary in a way that never impedes the taut unfolding of the story. It often feels like a first-person narration, until it suddenly reverts to the screen-filling image of García, as when, in Mexico City's little Chinatown speaking to Marta in the place of her employ, "García's eyes shone in the half-light of the shop," and we grasp the poignant vulnerability of that aging hard man's smitten gaze. The inner voice that Bernal created for his *pistolero* had rarely, if ever, been encountered in Mexican literature before, though anyone living in Mexico City who got around a bit would have heard it everywhere if she or he was paying attention to the voice of the urban barrio, of the cantinas, of harsh, violent deep Mexico, sardonic, fierce, profane, hilarious, pained, defiant, relentless, inventive, and aphoristic — "Fucking memories! They're like hangovers . . . But the trick is to be like an old drunk and carry your Alka-Seltzer around inside you." It's a voice that reveals something essentially and enduringly Mexican, an embattled voice of daily and wily struggle against desperation and humiliation, and also one possessing a grandeur that is always delusionary; a voice filled with the bitter lessons of moral solitude imposed by life in the Mexican labyrinth of an extremely unjust society rife with mendacity, hypocrisy, corruption and danger at every turn, but also redolent of that unquenchable and paradoxical gift for "feeling" that one of the novel's Chinese characters tells Filiberto García, with biting irony, that his elderly and doomed compatriot, Mr. Liu, has absorbed from so many years of living among Mexicans. Nobody, not Carlos Fuentes, only Rafael Bernal, had ever brought that Mexican urban voice so vividly to life before, or that younger Mexican writers, in their various ways, have been mining ever since. When Bernal was writing this novel, he was serving as a diplomat for a sordid Mexican government in Peru. What an antidote Filiberto García's voice must have been to the deracinated, often inevitably duplicitous language of the diplomatic report and the bureaucrat's office. Speaking with my friend the Mexican novelist Martín Solares about the novel the other day, he speculated that perhaps in Lima Bernal had a Mexican chauffeur-*guarura* with a past in the police and who spoke like Filiberto García. Maybe, but I also suspect that as with an old drunk's Alka-Seltzer, Bernal carried that voice with him, and that he identified with his irascible gunman more than a little. His widow described him

“sarcastic, with an extraordinary sense of humor.” Bernal was working as a diplomat in Switzerland when he died in 1972, three years after publishing *The Mongolian Conspiracy*, and was buried in Geneva. Borges, another supremely different master of the occasional detective narrative, died and was buried in Geneva too, rather than in his native Buenos Aires, and had his own nostalgically complexly personal and even “literary” reasons for choosing that city as his resting place. According to Bernal’s widow, he chose not to have his remains returned to Mexico, “Because he had the idea that it was horrible to transport a dead person from one far place to another. He told me, ‘It’s horrible to shovel the dead around like that.’” Add a “¡Pinche shoveling around!” and it would sound just like Filiberto García.

While the pungent crunchiness of Filiberto García’s language could not be more authentic, it would be a stretch to call *The Mongolian Conspiracy* a realistic novel of police investigations and international and political intrigue. The plot mixes Cold War “Dr. Strangelove” satiric goofiness with convincing Mexican Machiavellian political ruthlessness and duplicity in a manner that makes its riveting coherence seem almost accidentally *sui generis*. A Russian embassy source has reported to the Mexican government that there is a possible conspiracy underway, emanating from Communist China to assassinate the President of the United States during his visit to Mexico. The life of the President of Mexico and “world peace” are also endangered. The rumor was first picked up in Outer Mongolia. The terrorists, who are not Chinese, have passed through Hong Kong on their way to Mexico, where they are supposed to make contact with a Chinese man. So have half a million dollars worth of fifty-dollar bills. The Cubans will play a role in the plot as well. It is exquisitely comical that Bernal centers the international conspiracy threatening world peace in Mexico City’s very tiny Chinatown, on Dolores Street, a few restaurants that serve poor people’s Chinese food to poor people, and a few shops, “one street lined with old houses and a scrawny alleyway trembling with mysteries.” Filiberto García is a regular denizen of these cheap eateries, where the Chinese play their “forever silent and ghastly game of poker.” Like these Chinese immigrants, he values keeping to oneself and keeping one’s mouth shut. “There are things you don’t talk about, or better, there’s nothing you do talk about.” Because his superiors know García is familiar with this marginal Chinese population, he is called into the investigation to find the Chinese man, and verify the conspiracy. That is ostensibly why he is given this crucial assignment in an international conspiracy. The real reason is because at least some of his superiors expect him to be a dupe, and for his “investigation” to leave a false trail of inevitable corpses. García is told that he will have to work with Graves, an American agent from the FBI, and with Laski, a Russian from the KGB. “You three will have to figure out how you’re going to work together.” This scenario, which might seem to offer broad farce of a Bullwinkle and Boris Badenov sort, is actually handled by Bernal with great cleverness, insight and compelling, if essentially satirical humanity. The mutually mistrustful FBI and the KGB men are “experts,” highly trained and learned spies, fluent in languages, and politically knowledgeable. Naturally, they condescend to Filiberto García, if often jovially. “Seems like in the international crowd it’s in fashion to be full of smiles. We’ll have to see if they’d keep laughing with a bullet in their bellies.” But the three men also know, for all their differences, that they are all in the very same business. “They know judo, karate, and how to strangle people with silk cords. The gringo uses a .38 special. The Russian a Luger.” Laski tells the American, “One cannot govern without killing, Graves, my friend. All governments have learned that by now. That’s why we exist.” And Filiberto García reflects, “I’m on Hitler and Stalin and Truman’s team. Hey, you guys, how many dead have you got? But I’m very Mexican about it, which means I’m old fashioned. As you know, we’re kind of underdeveloped. Just bullets for us.” The most nefarious

García's superiors says, just before removing him from the case, precisely because he senses García coming close to solving it, "Mr. García is not an expert in international intrigue. The truth is, he is not even an expert in police investigations." "Fucking international intrigue!" "Fucking Outer Mongolia!" After all, they are in Mexico City, which Filiberto García, not the FBI or the KGB man, knows how to read and decipher. García is the novel's detective, who methodically unravels the conspiracy, or rather its several parallel "conspiracies," though in one instance devastatingly too late.

Filiberto García's heart is a greater mystery, to himself. Marta has fled to his apartment, and is staying there under his protection. Why?" "Could it be that Marta wants me to kill someone?" "Is Mi Fong an agent for one of the groups involved?" "Might be pure love, might be pure distrust." Even when she makes it obvious that she is romantically available, García treats her with chaste and considerate tenderness, like a "father. Fucking fathers!" His unacknowledged yet clearly inhibiting scruples about their age difference, and his own anxieties about the failing virility that comes with aging, torment him. "Fucking faggot!" he repeatedly taunts himself. "I didn't take advantage of her when she was afraid and now I'm not taking advantage of her when she's grateful." For the first time in his life, Filiberto García learns to feel unconditional love, and even how to merit it in return, and close to the novel's end, he actually seems on the verge of the most unexpected late happiness. "All I know is how to start down this road, how to live carrying my solitude. Fucking solitude!"

In this very dire, unprecedentedly violent and corrupt moment now in Mexico's history, Filiberto García's voice feels more urgent and more necessary than ever. Not silence but the voice within: it is the essential antidote, defiance, survival, the inexpugnable road out of the past, where we can discover what we might be strong enough to finally give.

FRANCISCO GOLDMAN

The Mongolian Conspiracy

At six o'clock in the evening he got up from bed and put on his shoes and a tie. In the bathroom, he rinsed his face and combed his short, black hair. He didn't need to shave; he'd never had much of a beard, and one shave lasted three days. He splashed on a little Yardley cologne, returned to the bedroom, and took his .45 out of the drawer of the nightstand. He checked that the magazine was in place and that there was a cartridge in the chamber. He wiped it carefully with a chamois and slipped it into his shoulder holster. He picked up his switchblade, opened and closed it, then slid it into his pants' pocket. Then he put on his beige trench coat and Stetson hat. Fully dressed, he went back to the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. The coat was new, and the tailor had done a good job; you could barely see the bulge of the gun under his arm and over his heart. Standing there looking at his reflection, he unconsciously lifted his hand and touched the gun through his coat. He felt naked without it. Once, at La Ópera cantina, the professor said that was because of his inferiority complex, but the professor, as usual, was drunk, and anyway — the professor can go to hell! That .45 was a part of him, part of Filiberto García, as much as his name and his past. Fucking past!

He went from the bedroom into the living room. His small apartment was immaculate, its Sears furniture almost brand new. Not brand-new time-wise — brand-new wear-wise, because so few people visited and nobody ever used them. It could have been anybody's room or a room in a cheap but decent hotel. There was not a single personal item: no pictures on the walls, no photographs, no books, not one armchair more worn out than another, no cigarette burns or rings on the coffee table in the middle of the room. He'd often thought about this furniture — his only belongings besides his car and the money he'd saved. He bought them when he moved out of the last of the many rooming houses he'd always lived in; they were the first ones they showed him at Sears, and he left everything exactly where they'd been set down by the deliveryman, who'd also hung up the curtains. Fucking furniture! But if you have an apartment, you have to have furniture, and when you buy an apartment building you have to live in it. He stopped in front of the mirror on the console in the dining area and straightened his shiny red silk tie, then did the same with the black silk handkerchief in his chest pocket, the handkerchief that always smelled of Yardley. He examined his perfectly trimmed and polished nails. The only thing he couldn't fix was the scar on his cheek, but the gringo who'd made it couldn't fix being dead, either. Fair is fair. Fucking gringo! Seems he knew how to handle a knife, but not lead. His day had come in Juárez. Or, rather, his night. And let that be a lesson not to wake people up in the middle of the night, because the early bird doesn't always get the worm but the worms get that gringo.

His dark face was inexpressive, his mouth almost always motionless, even when he spoke. Only his big, green, almond-shaped eyes had any life in them. When he was a kid, in Yurécuaro, they called him The Cat, and a woman in Tampico called him My Tame Tiger. Fucking tame tiger! His eyes might suggest nicknames, but the rest of his face, especially his slight sneer, didn't make people feel like using any.

The doorman downstairs greeted him with a military salute:

“Good evening, Captain.”

That chump calls me Captain because I wear a trench coat, a Stetson, and ankle boots. If I carried a briefcase, he'd call me professor. Fucking professor! Fucking goddamned captain!

Night began to spread dirty grays over the streets of Luis Moya, and the traffic, as usual at this time of day, was unbearable. He decided to walk. The colonel had told him to be there at seven. He had time. He walked to Avenida Juárez, then turned left, toward El Caballito. He could go slow. He had time. His whole fucking life he'd had time. Killing isn't a job that takes a lot of time, especially now that we're doing it legally, for the government, by the book. During the Revolution, things were different, but I was just a kid then, an orderly to General Marchena, one of so many second-rate generals. A lawyer in Saltillo said he was small-fry, but that lawyer is dead. I don't like jokes like that. I don't mind a smutty story, but not jokes, you have to show respect, respect for Filiberto García and respect for his generals. Fucking jokes!

People who knew him knew he didn't like jokes. His women learned fast. Only the professor, when he was drunk, dared to crack jokes around him. But that fucking professor, he doesn't give a rat's ass about dying. When they dropped the atom bomb on Japan, he turned to me with a straight face, and right there in front of everybody, he asked me, “As a fellow professional, what do you think of President Truman?” Almost nobody in the cantina laughed. When I'm there, nobody ever laughs, and when I play dominoes, just about all you hear is the sound of the tiles on the marble tabletop. That's how men should play dominoes, that's how men should do everything. And that's why I like the Chinamen on Dolores Street. They play their poker and don't waste time talking or telling jokes. Pedro Li and Juan Po probably don't even know who I am. For them, I'm just most honorable Mr. García. Fucking Chinamen! Sometimes it seems like they don't have a clue, but then it turns out they know everything. There I am pretending to be a big shot, and all the time they're seeing what a chump I am, but they always, always, play it cool. Damn right I know all about their wheelings and dealings, their gambling and their opium. But I keep my mouth shut. If Chinamen want to smoke opium, let them smoke opium. And if kids want marijuana, it's none of my business. That's what I told the colonel when he sent me to Tijuana to find some guys who were moving marijuana across the border. Some were Mexicans and some were gringos and two of them ended up dead. But others keep moving marijuana across the border, and gringos keep smoking it, no matter what laws they've got. And the police on the other side make a big deal about respecting the law. All I can say is, the law is for suckers. Maybe all gringos are suckers. Because the law doesn't get you anywhere. Take the professor, he's a lawyer, and all he does is hang around the cantina mooching drinks. “If you get in trouble, he'll get you out.” But I don't get in trouble. I did once, but I learned my lesson: if you want to go around killing people, you've got to have orders. Just that once I stepped out of line. I had good reason to kill her, but I didn't have orders. And I had to go all the way to the top and promise all kinds of things to get them to let me off. But I learned my lesson. That was during General Obregón's time, and I was twenty years old. Now I'm sixty and I've put away a small stash, not a lot, but enough to pay for my services. Fucking experience. And — fucking laws! Now everything's got to be done legally. Lawyers everywhere you look. And I don't matter anymore. Beat it, old man. What university did you go to? When did you graduate? No, sorry, you need a degree for that. Before, you just needed balls, and now you need a degree. And you need to be in good with the gang in charge, and to be full of a whole load of shit. Otherwise all your experience isn't worth a hill of beans. We are the ones building Mexico — to hell with you old timers. You can't do what we do. All you're good for is producing dead bodies, and rather stiff — second-rate dead bodies. And in the meantime, Mexico keeps making progress. It

moving forward. The battle you fought is over. Bullets don't solve anything. The Revolution was fought with bullets — fucking Revolution. We are Mexico's future, and you're just holding us back. Move aside, out of sight, till we need you again. Till we need somebody else dead, because that's a job you know how to do. Because we're the ones building Mexico, from our bars and our cocktail lounges, not your old-time cantinas. You can't come in here with your .45 and your trench coat and your Stetson. Much less with those rubber soles. That'll do in your cantina, for you boys who fought the old fight, you boys who won the Revolution and lost the old fight. Fucking Revolution! And then they come along with their smiles and their moustaches. "Are you an existentialist?" "Do you like figurative art?" "You're one of those people who like those Casa Galas calendar paintings." What the fuck is wrong with Casa Galas calendars? Well, it's just that Mexico can't be built like that: we'll call you when we need another stiff. Son-of-a-bitch kids got the jump on us. The colonel isn't even forty years old and he's high up already. A colonel and a lawyer. Fucking colonel! I'm better off with the Chinamen. They respect old people, and old people run things there. Fucking Chinamen and fucking old people!

The colonel wore English cashmere. He wore English shoes and tailored shirts. He attended international police conferences and read a lot of books in his field. He liked to implement new systems. People said he was such a tightwad he wouldn't even give you the time of day. His fingers were long and delicate, like an artist's.

"Come in, García."

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down, please."

The colonel lit a Chesterfield. He never offered one, and he sucked in as much smoke as his lungs could hold, not wanting to waste anything.

"I've got something for you. Could be nothing, but we have to take every precaution."

García said nothing. All in good time.

"I'm not sure it's in your line, García, but I don't have anybody else to give it to."

He took another greedy drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly, as if sorry to let it go.

"You know the Chinese on Dolores Street."

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. This fucking colonel and lawyer knows a lot, more than I can let on. He never wants to let go of anything, so he never forgets. Fucking colonel.

"You've worked with the FBI a few times before. They don't particularly like you, and they aren't going to like you working on this case. But they'll get over it. I don't want any friction — you've got to work together. That's an order. Understood?"

"Understood, Colonel."

"I don't want any scandals, either — no deaths that aren't strictly necessary. That's why I'm still not convinced you're the best man for this job."

"It's your call, Colonel."

The colonel stood up and walked over to the window. There was nothing to see but the building and the dark courtyard.

Fucking colonel! I don't want any deaths, but you call me. That's exactly why they always call me in because they want people dead and want to keep their own hands clean. That kind of killing ended with the popular uprising, and now everything's done according to the law. But sometimes the law can only stretch so far, not quite far enough, and that's when they call me in. It was so easy before. Take out that bastard. That was it, no questions asked. But now we are highly evolved and very we

educated. Now, we don't want any dead people or, at least, we don't want to give orders for them to be killed. We'll just drop a hint here and there, that way nobody's to blame. Because now we've all got conscience. Fucking conscience! Now they're all squeaky clean, so they have to call in real men to do their dirty little jobs for them.

The colonel spoke from over by the window:

"There are only three men in Mexico who know anything about this. Two of them have read your file, García, and they don't think we should hire you. They say you're not a detective or a policeman, you're just a professional hit man. The third one supports you. The third one is me."

The colonel turned around, expecting to receive gratitude. Filiberto García didn't say a word. A man in good time. The colonel kept talking:

"I've recommended you for this investigation because you know the Chinese, you play poker with them and you know about their opium dens. I assume this makes them trust you and will make things easier for you. In addition, as I said, you've collaborated with the FBI on previous occasions."

"Right."

"One of the two men against your appointment is coming here tonight to meet you. No reason for you to know his name. Let me warn you, he not only questions your ability to carry out an investigation, he also questions your loyalty to the government, and even to Mexico."

He paused, as if waiting for García to object. He wants me to give a speech, but speeches about loyalty and patriotism are for cantinas, not for when you're talking about a serious job. Fucking loyalty!

"Also, García, you'll be working with a Russian agent."

His green eyes widened imperceptibly.

"I know, that might sound like a strange combination, but the man you'll meet will explain it, in that is, he deems it appropriate."

García took out a Delicado cigarette and lit it. There was no ashtray near him so he put the burnt match back in the box. The colonel pushed the ashtray across the desk toward him.

"Thank you, Colonel."

"I think that you are loyal to your government and to Mexico, García. You fought in the Revolution with General Marchena and then, after that unfortunate incident with that woman, you joined the police in the state of San Luis Potosí. When General Cedillo led a revolt, you opposed him. You helped the federal government with those problems in Tabasco and with a few other things. You've done some good work cleaning up the border, and you did a fine job on that secret Cuban operations center."

Yeah, a fine job. I killed six poor slobs, the only six members of the great Communist operations center for the liberation of the Americas. They were going to liberate the Americas from the operations center in the jungle of Campeche. Six stupid kids playing at being heroes, with two machine guns and a few pistols. And they died and there was no international conflict and the gringos were happy because they could take pictures of the machine guns and one was Russian. And the colonel told me that those poor slobs were violating our national sovereignty. Fucking sovereignty! Maybe they were, but once they were dead they couldn't violate anything. They also said they violated the laws of asylum. Fuck the laws! And fuck the malaria I got in the jungle. And after all that they come out in public saying I shouldn't have whacked them. But it was I kill them or they kill me because they were very keen on being heroes. And in a case like that, I don't want to be the one who ends up dead.

The door opened and a well-dressed man entered: he was thin, with salt and pepper hair, and gold

framed eyeglasses. The colonel stepped forward to greet him.

“Am I on time?” the man asked.

“Exactly on time, sir.”

“Good. I’ve never liked to keep people waiting or wait for others. Here in Mexico, we must learn to be punctual. Good evening . . .”

He held his hand out to García and smiled. García stood up. The colonel’s politeness was contagious. The man’s hand was hot and dry, like a bun right out of the oven.

“Have a seat, sir,” the colonel said. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

The man sat down.

“Thank you, Colonel. I imagine Mr. García has already been briefed.”

“I’ve explained that we have a special assignment for him, but that you and another person don’t think he’s the right man for the job.”

“That is not precisely accurate, Colonel. I simply wanted to meet Mr. García before deciding. We have read your file, Mr. García, your history of service, and I am very impressed by a couple of items.”

García remained quiet. The man’s smile looked friendly.

“You are a man who is never afraid, García.”

“Why, because I’m not afraid to kill?”

“As a rule, Mr. García, one is afraid to die, but maybe it’s the same thing. Frankly, I have never personally experienced either aspect of the question.”

The colonel intervened:

“García has previously worked with the FBI, and he knows the Chinese on Dolores Street. More to the point, he’s never let me down, not on any of the assignments I’ve given him, and he’s discreet.”

The man, his friendly smile still playing on his lips, stared at García, as if he wasn’t listening to the colonel’s words, as if he and García had struck up a different conversation. He slowly raised his hand, and the colonel, who was about to say something, got quiet.

“Mr. García,” the man said, no longer smiling, “based on your history, I think we can count on your complete discretion,

and that is of capital importance. However, one thing is not clear from your file. There is no mention of your political affiliations or affinities. Do you sympathize with international Communism?”

“No.”

“Do you harbor strong anti-American feelings?”

“I carry out orders.”

“But you must have some phobias or phobias, I mean, some sympathies or antipathies of a political nature.”

“I carry out the orders I’m given.”

The man sat thinking. He took out a silver cigarette case and offered it around.

“Thanks, I’ve got my own,” García said.

He took out a Delicado. The colonel accepted a cigarette and lit it with a gold lighter. García used a match. The man smiled again, his eyes cold and hard:

“Maybe you *are* the right man for the job, Mr. García. I’ll admit, it’s extremely important. If we bungle this, there could be serious international repercussions and disagreeable consequences, to say the least, for Mexico. Not that I actually believe anything is going to happen. As usual in such a case we have only rumors, suspicions. But we must act, we must find out the truth. And only the colonel and I can know what you discover, Mr. García. Nobody else. Understood?”

“That’s an order,” the colonel said.

García nodded. The man continued talking:

“I’m going to write down a telephone number. Call it if you have anything urgent to report. I’m the only one who answers that phone. If I don’t, or if the situation requires it, call the colonel and let him know you want to talk to me. He’ll put us in touch. Here’s the number.”

García took the card. It was blank except for a typewritten phone number. He looked at it for a few moments, then held it over the ashtray and lit a match to it. The man smiled, satisfied.

“The problem is as follows: as you probably know, in three days’ time, the president of the United States will arrive in Mexico. He will be here in the capital for three days. If you want to see his schedule, you can get it from the colonel. It’s already been made public. In any case, I don’t think you’ll need it. Protecting both presidents, the visiting president and our own, is the responsibility of the Mexican police and the United States Secret Service. You’ll have nothing to do with that; it is a routine assignment — for specialists, we could say. They are taking all the necessary precautions, and all individuals we believe might pose any danger have been identified and are under surveillance.”

The man paused to stub out his cigarette. He seemed to be looking for the exact words to explain the situation and having a hard time finding them. The colonel looked at him impassively.

“A visit like this is always a heavy responsibility for the government hosting a foreign president. We mustn’t forget, in addition, that if there is an attack, our president would also be in danger. And there’s something else: world peace is at risk. This would not be the first war started by the assassination of a chief of state. Plus, we have the precedent of Dallas. You can see, Mr. García, why even if it’s only a rumor, we have to follow up on it . . . We cannot take any risks. What we’ve heard is very serious.”

He paused, as if to let his words sink in deeply. García sat without moving, his eyes half closed.

“I repeat, Mr. García, it is only a rumor. Which is why we must proceed with discretion. If there is nothing to it, all will be forgotten and that will be the end of it. The press will have found out nothing and we will not have offended a country with which we have, if not yet diplomatic relations, at least a budding commercial relationship. That’s why discretion is absolutely essential. Is that understood?”

“Understood.”

The man seemed to keep doubting his own words. He gave the impression that he didn’t really want to reveal his secret. He lit another cigarette.

“First of all, we have to find out what, if anything, is true, and if there is some truth to it, we must act quickly to avoid a disaster. Or a scandal, which wouldn’t do us any good, either. That’s one of the reasons I’ve agreed to give you the assignment. You do not seek publicity for what you do.”

“It’s not newsworthy.”

“Right. This isn’t, either. I see we understand each other.”

“As I told you, sir, García is the right man for the job,” the colonel said.

The man seemed not to have heard.

“Here’s the situation. A highly placed official at the Soviet embassy came to us and told us a strange story. Just to let you know, the Russians do not usually tell us anything, strange or not. Which is why we listened carefully. According to the embassy, about three weeks ago, right around the time the president of the United States announced his visit to Mexico, the Soviet Secret Service learned that in Communist China, that is, in the People’s Republic of China, there were plans afoot to assassinate him during his visit here. They told us they first picked up this rumor in Outer Mongolia. Then, about ten days ago, they heard it again in Hong Kong, and it was learned, apparently from reliable sources, that three terrorists working for China had passed through there on their way to America. You will

notice I said *working for China*, not Chinese. According to the Russian police, one of them might be a North American defector and the other two are from Central Europe. We don't know what passports they're carrying. In Hong Kong, you can get whatever passports you want. Needless to say, we've already beefed up our border security, but we don't know if they've already entered Mexico or if they are going to show up with tourist visas and false passports. As I said, we have placed under surveillance any foreigners and any Mexicans who might pose a threat because of their criminal records or their ideologies. Many of them, during the visit, will take a short trip . . . on us. But about three thousand tourists enter Mexico every single day. It would be utterly impossible to keep tabs on all of them, so our only option seems to be added protection for the two presidents, with armored vehicles and all the rest."

The expression on the man's face turned sad, as if it disgusted him to have to take such measures. He put out the cigarette that he had barely smoked and continued:

"This morning, the Russians gave us some more information. It seems the terrorists have been instructed to contact a Chinese man here in Mexico, an agent of the government of Mao Tse Tung. He will supply them with the weapons — it would be too dangerous to carry them over the border. Are you following me?"

"I'm following."

"Very well, Mr. García. We need to know if this Chinese man is here in Mexico and if this rumor about a conspiracy is true, and we have three days to find out."

"Understood."

"That is your assignment. You are going to spend time among the Chinese, you are going to listen for any word of recent arrivals or new activity among them."

"What if the rumor is true and I find the terrorists?"

"In that case, you will act as you see fit."

"I see."

"Above all, with discretion. If . . . if you must take violent action, do everything possible to conceal the source of the violence."

"Understood."

It seemed like the man had finished talking. He was about to stand up, then remembered something else:

"One more thing. With the Russians' permission, we informed the American embassy, and they insist that you work with an FBI agent."

"Okay."

"The Russians also want one of their agents, someone who knows a lot about the case, to work with you."

"You want me to cooperate with them?"

"Only in as much as discretion allows, Mr. García. Only if it is convenient. The American agent's name is Richard P. Graves. Tomorrow morning at ten sharp he will be at the cigarette counter at the entrance to Sanborns on Lafragua. At that precise time, he will ask to buy a pack of Lucky Strike. You will greet him with a hug, as if you were old friends."

"Understood."

"The Russian is named Ivan M. Laski, and he will be at Café Paris on Cinco de Mayo at two o'clock, sitting at the back end of the bar, drinking a glass of milk. Understood?"

"Understood."

"You three will have to figure out how you're going to work together. Don't forget to update me."

on the progress of your investigation. I repeat: we have only three days, and in that time, everything must be cleared up.”

The man stood up. So did García.

“I understand, Mr. del Valle.”

“You know my name?”

“I do.”

“I told you, Colonel, it was silly to try to hide my identity from Mr. García. Now, all I can do is ask you to forget it.”

García asked:

“Do the gringo and the Russian know who I am?”

“Of course.”

Del Valle turned to leave. The colonel rushed ahead to open the door for him.

“Good night, Mr. del Valle.”

“I would rather you continue to avoid mentioning my name, Colonel. Good night.”

The man left with his friendly smile and his cold eyes. The colonel closed the door and turned to García:

“You shouldn’t have told him you knew who he was.”

García shrugged his shoulders.

“He wanted to hide his identity. He holds a position of great responsibility . . .”

“So, he should have given his orders over the phone, or through you, Colonel.”

“He wanted to meet you in person.”

“We’ve now had the pleasure. Anything else?”

“Did you understand your instructions?”

“I did. Good night, Colonel. Just one thing . . .”

“Yes?”

“Why so much cloak and dagger about meeting the gringo and the Russian? I could just go to the hotels, or wherever they are.”

“Those are your orders.”

“Good night, Colonel.”

Mexico, somewhat coyly, calls Dolores Street Chinatown, a Chinatown made up of one street lined with old houses and a scrawny alleyway trembling with mysteries. There are a few shops that smell of Canton or Fukien, and a few restaurants. But there is none of the color, the lights and the flags, the lanterns and the ambiance you find in other Chinatowns, like in San Francisco or Manila. Rather than a Chinatown, it looks like a run-down street where a few Chinese have dropped anchor, orphans of imperial dragons, thousand-year-old recipes, and mysteries.

Filiberto García stopped at the corner of Dolores and Artículo 123. In the fourth house, belonging to a Chinaman named Pedro Yuan, they'll be playing poker, a forever silent and ghastly game of poker. In the upstairs rooms, several old Chinamen will be smoking opium. Chen Fong manages the business, God only knew for whom, but it couldn't net much because the smokers are older and poorer by the day. For all I know he keeps them on for charity, like nuns who take in old people and cripples. Once, when I was sent after some opium traffickers in Sinaloa, I pocketed three tins and gave them to Fong. Ever since, we've been buddies. Fucking Chinamen! They've won enough off me playing poker to keep the whole lot of them dreaming. And anyway, why the hell do I want Chinese friends? So the colonel can give me assignments like this one and let me know that he's been keeping tabs on me. I know that I know them and cover up their opium dens. Fucking colonel! For all I know he knows about those tins, too. And then there's del Valle. He didn't want me to recognize him even though his mug shows up every other day in the newspaper. He must think a gunslinger doesn't read newspapers. I'd bet everybody and his brother in Mexico knows he's one of the many who have their hearts set on being president. Maybe they also wanted me to play the chump and act like I don't even know who our president is, or who the gringos' president is. Them and their fucking mysteries! Then they feed me that line about Outer Mongolia and Hong Kong and the Russians. For all I know, that Fong with his face of a chump is the agent of Mao Tse Tung. You never know with Chinamen. The professor says they're my real buddies and maybe that's true. They're alright. When I came down with malaria, they visited me and brought me fruit and Chinese medicine. And my own people, they never even knew and they never stopped by. My buddies the Chinamen. Fucking buddies! Fucking Chinamen! And the half-Chinese gal, the one who works in Liu's shop, she's a pretty one, and sometimes she even leads me on. "Can I write you a letter, my lovely?" "Only if you write it in Chinese." For all I know she's Liu's daughter, but these Chinamen don't give a damn anyway. They're like the gringos. That gringo sheriff in Salinas, when there was that trouble with those wetbacks. He was looking right at me when he made a move on his woman and all he did was laugh and order another round of drinks. Fucking gringos!

An old Chinaman stopped in front of him:

"Good evening, Mr. García."

"Good evening, Santiago."

"You not come today?"

“Later.”

“You look at shop of Mr. Liu, right?”

The Chinaman’s laugh was weak, thick.

“Little Marta very pretty, very pretty.”

“You got a dirty mind, Santiago.”

Santiago walked away, laughing his head off. Fucking Chinamen. They’re always laughing the heads off. And they walk like they’re not even walking, like they’re just floating on air. And they just go floating along from one place to another, from Outer Mongolia to Dolores Street.

He lit a cigarette and walked over to Liu’s shop. Marta was closing up and Liu was hanging the wooden shutters over the shop windows.

“Come in, Mr. García, come in.”

He entered the shop. Marta smiled at him shyly.

“Would you like a lychee, Mr. Filiberto?”

“Yesterday, you called me just plain Filiberto, my lovely.”

“But that was disrespectful.”

García’s eyes shone in the half-light of the shop.

“Would you like to have dinner with me, Marta?”

“I can’t.”

“We can go right here, across the street. And you can tell me what I should order because I don’t know anything about Chinese food.”

“Mr. Liu eats there every night. He knows more about food than I do . . . Filiberto.”

García smiled. His smile was cold, as if he wasn’t used to smiling, as if he hadn’t had enough practice.

“How old are you, Marta?”

“Twenty.”

“Have you got a sweetheart?”

“No.”

“You live alone?”

“In a room, upstairs. Mr. Liu lets me live there.”

“You haven’t got any family?”

“No.”

Marta looked nervous, like she wanted to end the conversation.

“You don’t want to have dinner with me?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t want to be seen with an old man, that’s it, isn’t it?”

“You’re not old, Filiberto. But it’s very late, it’s almost nine.”

“We can go to the movies.”

“Another time . . . Filiberto.”

“The way I see it, Marta, you must have a sweetheart.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Filiberto. Who would even look at the likes of me?”

“I would, my lovely, ’cause when I see a beautiful woman —”

“Don’t say things like that, you make me blush.”

A man entered the shop and Marta went over to attend to him. The guy looks like a foreigner but not a gringo. He’s too short for a gringo. He looks European, tending toward Polish. I saw him earlier when I was standing outside, playing the chump there at the door to the cantina. Must be tailing me.

They're already snooping around. Must be the guys from Outer Mongolia. Fucking Outer Mongolia. Crafty bastards. Hey, I got a buddy from Outer Mongolia. Your mother's from Outer Mongolia. better get a fix on this shrimp before he starts showing up everywhere, like that lost soul from Sayu in the song, the soul who never finds peace. Fucking souls! Marta is hot, that's for sure, but I'll be damned if I'll ever get to do it with her. I've never done it with a Chinese gal. And she's just a kid. Maybe if I arrange things through one of the Chinamen, then I can do it with her. Like with the Carolina number, the one who was acting all highfalutin, over there on Doctor Vértiz Street. She wouldn't even let me borrow a smile. Till I arranged things with the owner of the shop and two days later she was mine. They even brought her to my house. All for two hundred pesos and a few favors I could wrangle out of the police. Fucking Carolina! I think it was part of their business plan — snaring chumps like me. For all I know Marta is a business plan for these Chinamen, and they'll let me take her home so I'll keep pretending not to know anything about the opium. She's worth at least two hundred pesos, and I've never done it with a Chinese gal. And that Pole, what's he talking to her about for so long?

At that very moment Marta handed the customer a package and took his money. Then she walked back behind the counter to where García was standing. Liu had finished with the shutters and was ready to close.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Filiberto."

"Is he a regular customer, Marta?"

"No. First time I've seen him."

García went over to the front door and looked out. The Pole was entering the restaurant across the street. García turned to Mr. Liu:

"Want to have dinner with me? Tonight I feel like eating chink food."

"Ah, Mr. García. Very honored, very honored to eat with so honorable man."

"Let's go. See you later, Marta."

The Pole was sitting in the restaurant, at a table next to the window. García and Liu sat down nearby. After staring at the menu that was in Chinese and Spanish, the Pole pointed to a plate. The waiter asked him:

"With mushrooms?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Mushrooms."

"You want bowl of soup, Mr. García?" Liu asked.

"You decide, Liu. You're the expert."

García's green eyes were glued on the Pole, who was gazing absentmindedly out the window.

"Many tourists around here, Liu?"

"No. This place only for Chinamen . . . and some Mexican. Almost never see foreigner, almost never."

Silence. The good thing about these Chinamen is that you don't have to talk when you're with them. They seem perfectly happy when they're quiet. García and Liu ate bird's-nest soup and ribs with soy sauce. The Pole finished his dish, paid, and left.

"Seems he doesn't like Chinese food."

Liu laughed.

"I think honorable foreigner not used to poor Chinaman food."

"Have there been other foreigners around here in the last few days?"

"Why you ask?"

"Just curious. So many tourists visit Mexico . . ."

“When tourists want eat Chinese food they go Casa Han on Avenida Juárez. Only poor people eat here . . . only we —”

“It’s perfectly good food.”

“Very honored, poor Chinese food very honored.”

García didn’t respond. Fucking Chinamen! But that Marta sure is fine. And the Pole looks he new to Dolores Street, like he doesn’t know about anything Chinese. But those three from the Outer Mongolia rumor, they’re coming from China and must know a thing or two. Fucking Outer Mongolia.

The restaurant had emptied out. García leaned over the table to speak to Liu in a low voice:

“You guys from Communist China or the other one?”

“I from Canton.”

“Don’t act dumb with me, Liu. Is your president Mao Tse Tung or the other guy?”

“General Chiang Kai-Shek.”

García forced a little laugh.

“There’s nobody can understand you Chinamen.”

“Ah! Chinese language very difficult, very difficult. Many character, Mr. García . . . Very difficult.”

“Any of your compatriots around here belong to Mao Tse Tung’s party?”

“Chinese very peaceful people, very peaceful. Very happy live in Mexico.”

“What if Mao wins?”

“Chinese very happy here, very peaceful . . .”

Fucking Chinamen! Can’t ever get anything concrete out of them. Or out of that fucking colonel out of that fucking Mr. Rosendo del Valle, neither. Marta must have been surprised when I said goodbye so abruptly. But maybe it’s for the best. Got to play it tough with women, can’t let them get too sure of themselves. Fucking Pole! Why the hell is he following me around? How would he know I’m investigating this crazy shit about Outer Mongolia? I already smell a rat, and I don’t understand much about these international affairs. But they still went and hired me. I definitely smell a rat. Fucking colonel!

Liu sat deep in thought. Suddenly, he smiled:

“You go to house of honorable Mr. Yuan?”

“Just for a while. Gotta work tomorrow.”

“Very dangerous for Mr. García play poker, very dangerous.”

Liu laughed guilelessly.

“The last few games have cost me a bundle, Liu.”

“Game between friend, between friend.”

“Yeah, between friends.”

“I no go tonight . . . many work . . .”

García asked for the check, but Liu had already signaled the waiter that he would pay. García wanted to protest. Liu placed his hand on his arm.

“We Chinamen, we like you, Mr. García. You just like us — you no hear, no see, no talk. Three virtue every Chinese child learn . . . three very good virtue.”

They left the restaurant and crossed the street. Liu said goodbye at the door to his shop.

The game at Pedro Yuan’s house was lackluster. Just him, Santiago, and Chen Po. García didn’t want to buy any chips. The sweetish smell of opium wafted down from the room upstairs. García opened a window and called Yuan over. The others stayed at the table holding their useless cards in their hands.

“I need a little information, Yuan, my friend.”

“Very honored.”

“This is serious, Yuan. I think I’ve proved that I’m your friend and I never stick my nose into what’s none of my business . . .”

Yuan nodded. His face began to show signs of concern.

“There’s a rumor making the rounds that I need to clear up before the police get involved and start finding out other things they’ve got no business knowing.”

“Always bad rumor everywhere.”

“That’s why it’s best if I’m the one looking into this, Yuan, to see if there’s anything to this rumor.”

“You our friend.”

“There’s word out about there being some Communist Chinese agents among you. Know anything about that?”

Yuan sat for a moment in silence. His small dark eyes were full of sadness. When he spoke, his voice was so low García had to lean over to hear.

“We exile in strange land. Our honorable father and grandfather buried in Canton, where they suffer much in their life. Always one warlord and then another warlord, very bad thing. And then the white devil . . . And always hunger, Mr. García, always hunger. We all like animal, not like men who laugh and sing song. You no know about these terrible thing, very bad . . . And always one general and then another general; one party and another party, but for us always same, always very terrible. And now you say about rumor that these terrible thing follow us here.”

“Any Communist agents around here?”

“Nobody know what deep in heart of man, Mr. García.”

“True.”

Pedro Yuan was trying to control himself, but fear was spreading across his face.

“What you do if you find Communist agent among us? Agent of Mr. Mao?”

“Is there one?”

“I know nothing, Mr. García. I not political. What they do to us?”

The Chinaman’s voice was trembling with fear. Fucking Chinaman! He’s more scared than a rabbit in a foxhole. If he’s their agent, those Communists are really up shit creek.

“They won’t do anything to you, Yuan.”

“You think?”

“But you have to tell me the truth. Mexico has welcomed you, and here you have found the peace you were looking for.”

“Very true, very true.”

“That’s why you have to give a little, too. Mexico doesn’t want any rebellions, or any trouble like that here. And I don’t think you people do, either.”

“No, we no want . . . We want peace, Mr. García, much peace.”

“So, have you got anything to tell me?”

At the table, Santiago was shuffling the cards absentmindedly. Chen Po was staring silently into space, but García was sure they were both paying close attention, trying to hear their words and watch their movements in case they revealed what they were talking about. Yuan moved closer to García:

“There’s a restaurant on Donceles Street, a place called Café Canton,” he said, almost in a whisper.

“And?”

“I know nothing, nothing for sure . . . only rumor, always

rumor . . .”

“What rumors?”

“People arrived . . . Chinese people, and from a different country . . .”

“From Hong Kong?”

“No know, but some hear rumor and say much money there . . . and before no money there.”

“Thank you, Yuan.”

“What they going to do to us?”

“Nothing.”

“You want drink?”

“No, thank you. Good night to all of you.”

There was deep, thousand-year-old anguish in the eyes of the Chinamen as they watched him leave. I should have told them not to worry, not to be afraid. They aren't going to sleep tonight. The hell with them — fucking Chinamen! And their “very terrible” things. What terrible things could they have seen that I haven't seen? What I'd like to see are Marta's legs. I should buy her a pretty dress. BROADS always like that. Fucking broads! All that chasing after them for a little bit of a good time, and then they get boring as hell. Fucking Marta! Always wearing that same dress. I should take her to the Alameda Cinema and then to eat some tacos, just so we can get to know each other a little. But I've never done it with a Chinese gal. Maybe it would be better if I arranged things through Liu. They don't care. Plus, they're scared and they like money. And that fucking Pole. Maybe I should tail him, but I don't want to spook him. Better to make him think he's the one tailing me. That way, we'll be running into each other real soon. Fucking Pole!

A woman's voice called out to him from a darkened doorway.

“Filiberto, Mr. Filiberto . . .”

García stopped in the shadows, away from the light of the street lamp. Instinctively, he placed his hand on the butt of his gun. Marta walked into the cone of light. She was wearing a small wool shawl over her head. García walked toward her:

“Marta.”

Not a single twitch of his face betrayed the least surprise, if he felt any. Marta walked up to him and began to cry. She made no sound, but under her shawl her shoulders were shaking with sobs. García placed his hand on her arm:

“Marta, what's the matter?”

“I wanted . . . I wanted to talk to you. Please . . . I have to talk to you . . .”

“Whenever you want, Marta. I always want to talk to you, but you act like you never even notice me . . .”

“Please, Filiberto, this is serious.”

“We shouldn't talk here, Marta. People know you, and me, too. What do you say we go to . . . to my . . . ?”

“Wherever you want, but please . . .”

As she said this, she touched his hand that was on her arm. Her hand was freezing.

“Marta, you're cold. Let's go somewhere you can get something hot to drink. Come on, we'll take a cab . . .”

They stopped a taxi on the corner. Marta got in first. García paused for a moment, as if he was having a problem with the door. About thirty feet ahead, a car that was parked sped off. Could be coincidence, but that car sure looked like it was waiting for me. Fucking Pole!

“Donceles Street,” he told the driver, “Café Canton.”

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