

4, 700 words

The Hands of the Savior

Sam Bilox stopped and kicked a pebble out of his flip-flop. He'd just rounded a bend and when he looked up again, the view stunned him: a horseshoe bay of dark blue, clear water, hosting a few dozen white sailboats and fishing crafts that bobbed like bath toys. A crescent beach book-ended by bars where waiters languidly fetched bottles to lobster-red Englishmen and leather-skinned Spaniards, whose kids ran, frantically playing in the tide-less surf. Staggered cobblestone streets of alabaster dwellings with terracotta shingled roofs, hugging the bay as if protectively, all clustered evenly around a bulky church. Brownish hills beyond, rolling up into unpopulated highlands, offering Cadaqués its charm of remoteness—salvaged from the crush of the 21st century, though crowded enough with those who could afford to enjoy such remoteness.

He remembered the camera dangling around his neck and raised it, framing a mid-afternoon portrait of the quaint Mediterranean town, a postcard of the Costa Brava. He wondered whom he'd give it to, if only he could—if only he didn't have to drop the carefully ruined film in an airport trash can the following morning.

A pair of Valkyrie Dutch women paused on the narrow stone sidewalk as to not block Sam's photo, so he snapped it quick and waved them by with a smile. One of them let her eyes linger hungrily on his and Sam felt the burn of flattery in addition to the

cruelty of the Mediterranean sun on his neck. He flip-flopped downward, pulling the floppy brim of his stupid tourist hat lower.

Italians on Vespas and fat Germans in buses whooshed by, crowding him on the sidewalk. In a cove below Sam caught a glimpse of a red-brown breast—a nude sunbather taking the rays. Oddly enough, she brought his mother to mind. The woman was the age that Sam liked to remember his mother, and her physique—buxom and pleasantly square—was also familiar, though he couldn't say he'd ever seen his mother's breast. With a stab of confused emotion—regret, guilt, anger, nostalgia—he considered how, if it had been up to his mother, he might have seen this magical place decades ago on a summer vacation.

Beatrice Bilox harbored a guilty love for Salvador Dalí that she had hidden fearfully from the Righteous eye of her husband. (Sam considered, despite the risk, that he might bring her back a souvenir—even just a postcard of the famous statue of Dalí that sat beachside). Beatrice had always been called by the exotic magnetism of places like Cadaqués—where the artist had resided and done much of his work—until she surrendered to the provincial ease that she longed to buck (but never dared to) her whole life. Watson Bilox would have spent his hard-earned public funds on no such nonsense vacation. Sam and his mother were resigned to holiday in the brain boiling heat and tedium of deep-Dixie bible camps or, at best, in a Hojo with a swimming pool somewhere near—but not *in*—the tacky and sinful comforts of Alabama's Gulf Shores.

On those awful “vacations” his father spent most of the day deep in his stacks of folders, casting and recasting the juridical webs that would land the next evildoer on Mississippi's well-used gallows. Sometimes, at the bible camps, Watson would emerge

at dusk, lightning bugs detonating around his pointed, sallow face and survey his son at play. Shoot him a look that told Sam he didn't deserve to be so frivolous, so he damn well better enjoy it. Other times, at blue highway Hojos, Watson might lean on the balcony overlooking the swimming pool where Sam and his mother splashed in the over-chlorinated water and the breeze off the gulf, beneath the weird neon bleed from the motel's marquee. Watson would watch, impassive, sucking on a club soda.

“Yall leave off that foolishness. Dry up, dress up, and find an appetite.”

And off they'd go to a silent, stilted meal in a tight booth somewhere cheap where Sam usually didn't find the gumption to ask for a piece of pie.

And now Sam was in a proper paradise and he, too, was there only to work. His mouth folded into a grimace at the irony.

Sam approached the terrace bar, map in hand, careful to bumble. As promised, his objective was there, holding court among a loose circle of big-bellied men with sun-weathered necks and pinky rings. Their two circular tables were crowded with bottles, both the red Estrella beers and larger green ones, Cava, the expensive regional Champagne. Ricardo Monteríos spoke grandly, gesticulating, in the center—the dark center. There was no hiding the Indian blood in his round face despite his presentation and the fact he spoke in a mix of Spanish and Catalan. Sam found he could catch the gist.

“If a cadre of smart men—like we have here for instance—simply landed in San Salvador with a million dollars each to invest, the nation could be as free and open as your lovely coast in a matter of weeks. That is if the government brought a fist down on the monsters that are running in the streets, still hiding, too, in the mountains.”

Monteríos brought his own fleshy fist down—*smack!*—on the table, boogying all the bottles. The men nodded, wearing expressions mainly of tolerant amusement. Sam swiped a menu off one of the tables like a true tourist—all these beachside terraces offered the same fare. Pretending to muse, he wandered a couple of tables closer, bumping a chair as if drunk or sun-stricken, and finally dropped into a seat. He was pleased to see he had a wide view of the bay: the squealing children in the foreground, the warm wind swirling more than blowing, the boats slow dancing on the gentle swells like lovers. Sam set his silly hat aside and rebound his ponytail. He allowed his gaze to drift over.

“So gentlemen, do not think that even though I adore your coast and your culture, that I would not return to release my nation from its backwardness were I given half the chance. And I invite you all,” he said, speaking with drunken precision and pouring a greasy glass of Cava, “to someday come and see me in my rightful place there.”

Monteríos raised his glass and his earnestness caused the men to nod and acknowledge his seriousness. Sam, through his wraparound sunglasses, studied: Monteríos was bald as an old river stone, glossy cranium winking in the failing sun. His face was thick, fleshy jowls like a bulldog, a broad brow, meaty neck, all of which made his small, indigenous black eyes and nose appear odd, as if they belonged on a smaller, thinner man. Judging from the unnatural slate of flab that sat beneath his Armani shirt, and the swollen girth of jewel-wrapped fingers and wrists, perhaps he once was that smaller, thinner man. Sam had never laid eyes on him before, so he couldn't say. What Sam could say, with certainty—because he trusted the men and women he worked for—

was that Señor Monteríos had put those fat hands to nefarious work, that those beady eyes had gobbled up human horror like pornography.

As four of the five Catalans rose to leave, thanking their Salvadoran friend, and Monteríos settled closer to the remaining man to speak more intimately, Sam allowed his mind to travel thousands of miles, decades back. Into the humid crucible that had forged the now-aging assassin in the flower print shirt.

Sam sat outside his rented tin-roofed hovel with an oil lamp, raking his shirt over the washboard. He'd left the transistor radio on inside and melodramatic love songs from the capital—or perhaps some other Latin capital, Sam wasn't astute enough with pop music to say—trilled out and mixed with the bug song and distant laughter of women from the village. Their giggles were like phosphorescence in Sam's blood and he stopped in his soapy labor, his hands raw, to listen for a moment. Susana, the prettiest and boldest of the round-faced adolescents, had offered to do his wash for him. But he'd ascertained that she might be more impressed with him if he insisted on doing it himself. So he had, hoping vaguely to work his way into her favor and that of her family. Slowly, as it had to be done in that culture—though there were plenty of rough-hewn reels of Susana-based pornography that spun behind his eyes, some of it not lovely or intimate at all.

This was Sam's getaway: the outskirts of a jungle village. The irony was that his fulltime post was simply another village, some forty miles closer to the capital, more urban, more desperately poor, more barren than this highland enclave where people's spirits were still nourished by the cool life of the mountain, the greenery and the fruits

that sprang from the richer soil. Poverty was, of course, very real, but the war less so. The war that was taking apart the nation—and truth be told, the entire isthmus of Central America—from within boardrooms and bunkers.

Sam strung his shirt over a wire and refreshed the soiled water from a gourd at his feet. Animals grumbled and hooted in the inky night and a few of the oil lamps down the way blinked out. Sam's neighbors, a young couple with three atypically bold toddlers, called out *buenas noches, gringo!* in a chorus, reddening his cheeks. As they bedded down, their giggles and chuckles fell through the windows.

It wasn't just the latrine digging and cinderblock hauling and English classes in the stifling adobe schoolhouse that Sam was escaping when he came up here. And it wasn't merely the charms and kindnesses of people like his neighbor family that called him. The truth was creeping on Sam, stalking him, propelling him away from his daily Peace Corps world at any pretext: war was mounting. And, furthermore, his country—the same one that paid his pathetic stipend to kick his spade into the earth and pontificate on pronouns—was helping to mount it. Sam's learning of Spanish came wrapped in a political whisper—while the waxing conflict was a homegrown Salvadoran horror, the Reagan administration had decided that El Salvador now represented an East versus West conflict. And the psychotic military junta that ruled the nation represented the best hope of the United States for stopping the cancer of communism creeping north from Nicaragua.

Just the last week Sam had heard some Senator on Voice of America Radio claim that: "This nation will do whatever is necessary to prevent a Communist takeover in El Salvador. We are prepared to draw the line here, here and now." Sam had learned

enough about U.S. support for the regime and its “patriotic forces,” that these words had chilled him. Even living in Zacatecoluca, which was by any measure a hamlet of government control, an effort to “win hearts and minds,” Sam had heard stories of the death squads striking like bloody lightning eradicating the alleged communist menace.

He un-balled his filthy socks and set them to soak in the tub. He stretched and lit a cigarette of local tobacco, pulling the smoke over the wet air in his lungs. He had a year left on his contract, though there was already talk of pulling out. Though he didn’t want to leave Salvador, neither did he desire to continue with what he’d realized was a charade, toiling in the name of the illusion that America cared. Sam knew better by now. He’d suspected as much back when he sat with the paperwork on his Mississippi porch beneath the dangling Kudzu and Spanish moss—almost as tropical as Salvador’s jungle itself—and deliberated. But it was a ticket away from the land of his father who, in the grave then for nearly a year, still harassed Sam, only now in dreams and in echoes of his cruel teachings instead of with a two-by-four and his measured, icy voice. Sam couldn’t remain with his mother, who was quietly relieved by his father’s death at the hands of a drunk driver, but also lost without her mate in a highly patriarchic community. He had to go as far as he could from the legacy Watson Bilox had wrought in Kingdom County, Mississippi and the shame it quietly inscribed in Sam’s soul. But now he’d found more hateful, shameful legacy being sown, by the hands of corrupt, fanatical Salvadorans. And by way of the same dollars that bought his beans. The sharp truth sat like a tumor in Sam’s gut: he wasn’t sure he could ever escape the legacy of oppressor.

Sam sighed out a wafting blue sheet of tobacco. Another lamp blinked off down the trail. All but asleep now—as usual he would probably be the last one awake,

studying the blue moon's voyage or thinking sweetly violent thoughts of Susana and ripping at himself in the lonely small hours. He was ok with that—anything to be away from the boxy hovels and halogen lights of Zacatecoluca where he'd also have to watch military contingents slinking off at sundown, promises of nightmare for Sam—promises of far worse for others.

But suddenly the current promise of a quiet mountain night was broken—not by sound, but by its sudden absence. The rustling of animals was gone, even the insect chorus. Despite the pressing heat (humidity rose with the night) the hairs on Sam's neck stood and before he even saw the first figure, sick unease washed through him like a shiver of malaria.

The squad had two scouts out front, boys almost, in dark olive fatigues with a bolt of lightning and one black chevron patched on the upper arm. They came cautiously and silent, but cockily all the same. They had, of course, spotted Sam—sitting erect and immobile, forgotten cigarette smoke winging out of his throat, a wet sock draped on one palm. They came leading with wicked grins and M-16 barrels. But the worst thing, the largest shard of the nightmare that fell in that moment and wouldn't ever stop shattering in his head, was that they weren't threatening him. Their expressions contained what Sam had seen in others', observing a cockfight or a lover's spat on the street: they were amused at the lanky American sitting absurdly with his wet sock in the middle of the mountains.

Sam rose with the sock still in his hand. The soldiers said nothing, merely pinned him between their half-grins until, slowly, like a river of molasses, the rest of the squad skimmed down into the road. The commanding officer halted them and strode to Sam, a

broad sword riding his thigh, a look of angry disgust—in contrast to his soldiers—riding his lips. He was tall and mustached, light skinned—more Conquistador blood than Indian.

“What are you doing here?”

Sam stammered for a moment, broken pieces of information: his name, station, the Peace Corps, laundry. Then, as rage drained from the sergeant’s face like someone had pulled a plug, clarity seized Sam in its fist.

“I am a volunteer worker in this country. I am a citizen of the United States and I am here to bear witness.”

Sam spoke formally and clearly, biting down on the words to keep from trembling. The growing knowledge of what was about to happen crashed inside of him. Could he stop it? He met the Sergeant’s eyes. And then the worst thing: the commander’s narrow face eased and a smile came down like a guillotine and he joined his conscripts in their mirth.

“Thank you gringo,” he said, slapping Sam’s shoulder, “you are a very generous people. But now you must go back to Zacatecoluca and let us do *our* work.”

And before Sam could respond the man had signaled and two soldiers had slung their rifles to take his elbows and escort him away. Sam tried to plant his feet—the terror of how he would live with himself as great as if they were hauling him to his own death—but the soldiers kicked the backs of his knees and dragged him on. At a distance of fifty yards, Sam did all he could: with a deep breath he let out a scream that ripped his chest with effort and brought the hard edge of a soldier’s hand against his throat:

Militares!

In his half-consciousness, over the sounds of his choking, Sam heard the confused shrieks of the villagers and the chambering of dozens of rifles. The blue moon cooked at its zenith. He squeezed the sock in his fist and water, warm as blood, ran out between his fingers.

Back in the present, at the Spanish table to Sam's right, Ricardo Monteríos was animated again, whispering frenetically in his last listener's ear, pounding his thigh for punctuation. The listener appeared only half-interested, though, and his eyes found Sam's once, as if searching for a way out of the conversation. Sam looked away and signaled the waiter. He was careful to speak yanqui: loud, bad pronunciation, pointing to the menu to clarify.

"Sir-vay-za, and salmon-siyos," he said and the waiter smiled indulgently and wandered off.

The day was running out. Parents folded children into large beach towels and shadows had grown healthy. Couples moved toward hotels to rid themselves of sand and swimsuits, prepare for the cool night's festivities. The waiter returned with Sam's beer and he took a long drink before giving his memory over to Salvador to let the rest of it un-spool.

When Sam had returned to the nameless mountain village, he found what he'd expected: ashes. A shard of bone here and there, but very little trace of the slaughter. He sat back where he'd washed his clothes, where he'd exchanged stories with his bright-eyed neighbors, where he'd secretly loved and lusted after Susana—and he imagined her

end. Though the horror of it was fresh and clear, and though he made himself see it all, the worst he could conjure, it was with a square jaw and dry eyes that he saw the soldiers open her legs and then her throat. As impassively as Watson Bilox faced the poor black men that he bid to death row, Sam faced the flashes of Susana's flesh that he had never and would never know.

The man—the same man who would so many years later send Sam to the Costa Brava—emerged in the atrocious sun of midday, brushing aside banana and mangrove leaves at the tree line. He appeared like the soldiers had in the night, liquid, part of the landscape. He walked steadily and slowly toward Sam, a kerchief covering his mouth and nose, an AK-47 aimed a few feet ahead of him at the ground. He wore sandals made from car tires, blue jeans, and a Baltimore Orioles tee shirt. A web of scar tissue on one forearm. Sam did not feel alarmed somehow. He rubbed his bruised throat and waited until the guerrilla stood over him. The two men observed one another for a moment, allowing their gazes to settle like concrete before laboring on.

Finally Sam said, "I'm not with them."

He found then that one tear—the last one that Sam could remember shedding—zagged down his jaw and neck. The man removed the bandana and let the rifle fall completely.

"I know," he said. "That is why we need you."

The deadpan Spanish waiter put down Sam's salmoncillos on the metal table with a *click*. The little fried fish—eyes, head, and all—slid around with a lemon wedge on the

plate. Swallowing another mouthful of beer and his hesitation with it, Sam turned to Monteríos and his companion and lifted his hand.

“Perdón. Perdón, speak English?”

Monteríos paused, gesticulation stilled in the air. For the briefest amount of time, anger flashed over his face but then manners bloomed. He rose, beaming, and stepped to Sam’s table with his hands folded behind him as if he were a waiter.

“A little,” he said, “can I help you with something sir?”

Sam took a short pull on the bottle and spread his arms, drunkenly.

“Yeah, señor, I hope so. I feel kinda dumb, but...can you tell me how to eat this goddam fish? I thought I was ordering salmon.”

Monteríos let out a cultured guffaw, as if Sam had said something irresistibly charming.

“Ah! How funny it is. Yes, these fish can be...tricky, if you don’t know how. Let me show you, it is my pleasure.”

“Great—hey, thanks a bunch.”

Sam scooted back in his chair and Monteríos plucked the fork and knife from the tabletop and leaned over the plate. Sam watched as he expertly flipped the head away with the knife tip, then split the back of the fish and hooked the miniscule spine out with a fork tine. Monteríos’ plump hands, his sausage fingers, nonetheless moved like a surgeon’s. Sam felt his spine grow just a little cold against his damp shirt as he imagined what those hands had done: how many times had they drawn a blade across a throat, a breast, a genital? How many times had they sent a bullet into a still-developing brain or wrenched wide the legs of a small girl?

Monteríos set down the silverware against the side of the plate.

“So, you see—it is not so difficult. You can do it too now, yes?”

Sam grabbed up the utensils and made a fumbling go at it but succeeded.

“Yeah, think I got it. Hey, thanks, señor,” he said, and stuck out his hand.

Monteríos shook it and closed his eyes and bowed his head in response before turning back to his table.

Sam leaned on a low stone wall and watched the first lights of dawn: a blue-gray glow spreading fast. He could feel the fatigue in him, but it was compartmentalized from his actual state, like a split screen on a computer. The part of him that reigned now was taut and precise. Behind him the clink of the last coffee cups and tumblers had ceased some time ago in the second story restaurant. The door opened at the top of the stairs and muffled voices became clear—light, with drunken laughter. Sam walked swiftly to the side street as Monteríos emerged on sea legs, slapping the back of an obese man, kissing the cheeks of a radiant woman in a purple dress. Sam leaned against the restaurant wall and put a cigarette between his lips. The street was narrow and steep, ankle-busting cobblestone, lined only with darkened doorways. Monteríos rounded the corner singing and chuckling to himself, weaving as if the ground were the deck of one of the vessels nodding on the bay.

Sam stumbled forward, imitating the Salvadoran’s gait but exaggeratedly. Heading downhill he let gravity pull him toward the man, then halted a couple of feet short and took the smoke from his lips.

“Hey! Hey there! You’re...you’re my fish guy.”

Monteríos had stepped back a foot at Sam's approach but now he squinted and leaned forward again, the whites of his eyes narrowing. Then his polite smile retook his face.

“Ah, yes! Hello again. How was your fishes?”

Sam began digging in his pockets for a lighter.

“Pretty freaking good, actually. But I'm an American—I like fried shit, you know.”

Monteríos chuckled at this.

“Well, I like Americans. It is good to see you here, enjoying yourself. And so late!”

Sam made a gesture at the sky with his unlit cigarette as if to indicate that he had, perhaps, overdone it.

“Oh yeah. I like the nightlife—and these fucking women! Say, you got a light?”

Monteríos tapped his breast pocket and pulled out a book of matches. He was smiling as he extracted a match but when he met Sam's eyes it faltered. Then it reformed rather forcefully. He extended his arm with the matches.

“You may keep these, my friend. I rarely smoke.”

For a moment the two men remained still. Sam hesitated and a black swarm of ghosts stirred in his chest. But only for a moment. Then he reached out and took hold of Monteríos' wrist. He pulled the fat man in close, like a lover. And the motion he used to draw the blade across his windpipe and vocal chords was not unlike brushing the hair off the brow of a lover—that delicate, that brief. And the pleasure that Sam felt was as brief but also as intense as a kiss stolen from a new lover deep in the pocket of morning. There

was only time for a gasp from the victim before Sam spun him around to keep the arching blood from soiling him. He whispered in the man's ear, laying on the Salvadoran accent thickly, savoring the gilded bubbles that rose through him, the bitter and infrequent pleasure of the executioner that he was.

“Te toca a *ti*, monstruo.”

Then he folded the dying man very carefully, like a garment bag, against the wall and left him sitting there, as if passed out in the still-rich blackness of the ancient street.

On the promenade the dawn had pushed the sky up with rouge fingers. Sam lit his cigarette and strolled slowly toward his hotel from where the first bus for the airport would depart in half an hour. The skies, during the course of his smoke, were bisected by a burst of burnt orange light, laying a tongue of fire across the milder hues. Dawns always brought back the memory and he let it come, as natural as the breeze off the placid Mediterranean:

Sam, ten years old, on a January morning, stood outside the garage that sat on the riverbank below his home, shivering even in his camouflage jacket. His father, uncommonly cheery, whistled from inside. The pickup idled at Sam's side, a rich white plume of exhaust crooking up from the tailpipe. Suddenly Watson Bilox cursed, which was also uncommon, a *damn!* like a hammer strike. He emerged a moment later with his hunting cap pushed back on his furrowed brow, eyes indignant, jaw set. He handed one blue-black twelve-gauge to Sam.

“Well son, we have our first event of the morning.” Watson broke the shotgun open and nodded for Sam to do the same, then peered into the barrels. “Seems that our Mississippi mice have chosen our weaponry as a place to lodge their young.” Watson

raised his eyebrows at his son, inserted two shells, slapped the barrels closed, and jacked the hammers back. “Don’t imagine that’ll do. Do you?”

Sam put his eye to the barrels, tentatively, like a telescope, and aimed the gun up at the blooming dawn for backlight. Inside, a gray mouse wiggled, stepping back and forth in front of a litter of tiny, pink bodies who made an almost inaudible cry. Sam felt the dread (for some reason it was dread even though he felt mere reluctance to blow a Mallard or goose from the sky) roil in him. His father was watching and now he shouldered the shotgun, training it on the swollen lip of the rising sun.

“Time to reclaim what’s ours, Samuel,” Watson said and it wasn’t glee that flinted in his father’s wide eye but a kind of stolid pleasure. Watson’s large hands were square like boxes, knuckles sharp, even the shotgun something like a toy in his dominant grip. Sam shouldered the big gun.

Together father and son fired their barrels, four leaping, cartoon flames against the foreground of dark Kudzu, Dogwood, and Sweet Gum, then two rooster tails of gore feathering up against the dawn.

Sam crushed his cigarette at the foot of the Salvador Dalí statue. The artist was captured in repose, standing comfortably with an easy—if somewhat wicked—half-smile. Only, Sam noticed, Dalí’s delicate right hand hovered flat, a few inches out from his waist, almost as if he were leaning on that empty space. It took Sam a moment to understand: someone had slunk up, perhaps against a dawn much like this one, and then stolen away into the world with the artist’s famous cane.