

THE
SECOND
BOOK

A novel by
D. R. Evans

The Gringa

It was afternoon, the hottest part of the day on one of the hottest days of the year, and Tecimal was at siesta. On the south side of the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte* Barclay sat under the awning of Montoya's barbershop, rocking slowly, watching from beneath his wide-brimmed hat the cloud of dust that presaged the arrival of the bus. On the table between Barclay and Montoya were two glasses holding the smooth curving remnants of ice and a centimeter-deep layer of water.

"I'll get the next one if the bus doesn't stop," said Barclay, breaking the torpid silence.

Montoya made a kind of snort, perhaps because he had been asleep or, more likely, because he didn't think much of Barclay's offer.

"It's the first Monday of the month," Montoya said.

"So?"

"So it's Isabella's day for visiting Chiclahan. She'll have been there since this morning. So the bus will stop to let her off."

"My friend, you malign me. It's St. Mary Magdalene's feast day, and Isabella hasn't left Tecimal all day. I saw her not an hour ago. Go knock on her door if you don't believe me."

"It's too hot." A lacuna followed while Montoya conjured images of Isabella. Then he continued, "To see Isabella after the sun has set, I would travel to Chiclahan on bare feet. But now? In this heat? I'll take your word for it. After all, don't they say that an Englishman's word is his bond?"

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“A myth promulgated by the English. Take my advice, Montoya, never trust an Englishman. He’ll always give you cause to regret it.”

Montoya mulled this advice as the cloud of dust rumbled up the *Calle*.

“I accept the bet but not the advice, Señor Barclay.”

“You’ll regret both,” the Englishman replied.

A moment later the bus emitted a high-pitched screech, and the vehicle slowed noisily to a halt. The dust dispersed, revealing an American school bus of uncertain vintage and indefinite color. On the side of the vehicle, visible through several intervening coats of dilute paint, the two men could just make out: *Yuma County School District #1 — Yuma County — AZ*.

“Son of a bitch,” said Montoya, honoring the phrase by rendering it in what passed in Tecimal for English: “Zunuva beech. How did you know the bus would stop if Isabella is still in Tecimal?”

Barclay delicately lifted his glass off the table with the thumb and middle finger of his left hand and handed it to Montoya. “The same again, my friend. And here’s another piece of advice: never bet against an Englishman. After all, God may be Catholic, but He’s an *English* Catholic. There aren’t many of us left. Can you blame Him if He plays favorites?”

“Zunuva beech,” repeated Montoya, halting his rocking and getting to his feet.

Barclay’s eyes rested on the bus while Montoya went inside to get the drinks. A shadow moved inside the bus, making its way from rear to front, then disembarking on the far side of the vehicle.

The driver exchanged a few words with the shadow. When the driver turned back toward the road, he spotted Barclay and favored him with a brief wave. Barclay returned the wave unenthusiastically.

The driver revved the engine and engaged first gear with a crash; the bus pulled away, spawning a new cloud of dust.

Montoya returned with the drinks, and emitted a low whistle as he handed a glass to Barclay. Barclay took the glass without looking, his eyes, like Montoya’s, on the woman standing on the far side of the street.

The first thing that struck him was her xanthous, shoulder-length hair. After three decades in Tecimal, the sight of glistening golden hair was so unexpected that it produced an almost palpable shock. In

rapid sequence he noticed with increasing unease that she was young, tanned, slim and well-poured.

“Zunuva beech,” said Montoya again, almost inaudibly.

“Daughter,” corrected Barclay, his eyes still on the woman. “Daughter of a bitch. Hell! She’s seen us. Don’t you dare tell her my name, Montoya.”

Barclay pulled the brim of his hat down so that it almost covered his eyes and let his body go limp, feigning slumber.

Her heart sank as the bus pulled away. She had guessed it was going to be bad when she had been unable to find Tecimal on any of the maps in the university library. But if she’d had any notion that it would be as bad as this....

The metropolis of Tecimal comprised, as far she could tell, a single wide unpaved street — the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte*, according to an unevenly lettered, hand-painted sign hanging crookedly on the corner opposite — lined with tiny stores, all of whose doors were closed for siesta. Branching off the *Calle* more or less at right angles was a series of unevenly-spaced narrow streets lined with shoddy houses, many of which remained upright in apparent defiance of the law of gravity.

She looked slowly up and down the *Calle*, but the only movement came from the receding dust-enveloped bus and a pair of slightly seedy-looking men on the far side of the street. One was standing beside an unoccupied rocking chair, the other appeared to be asleep.

She looked along the *Calle* again, hoping to spot a sign that might indicate a hotel or a guest house, but the only signs were advertisements for Coca-Cola (“*El Sabor de la Vida*”, in what might once have been white, against a background that was, perhaps, twenty years ago, red), *Cerveza de Chiclahan* (there were several of these: garishly colored, showing a too-perfect Indian-Latino girl smiling with flawless, brilliant-white teeth), and the hand-lettered signs above the stores.

She looked more carefully at the two men as the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach grew. The one who was standing stared at her with what she could interpret only as lascivious approval, which brought to mind disturbing thoughts of what could happen to an American college girl travelling alone in this part of the world. The other man seemed to be asleep in his chair, his face hidden by the

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wide brim of his hat. She pressed her shoulder bag slightly, comforting herself with the reassuring hard curvature of the can of Mace.

There was nothing for it. She picked up her holdall, hitched her shoulder bag more securely, and crossed the *Calle*.

“Good afternoon,” she said in Spanish, infusing her voice with false cheeriness.

Montoya threw her a smile intended both to reassure and to disarm the defenses of any woman. The newcomer saw in the smile only thinly veiled lust. Barclay did not move; his face remained hidden from her gaze.

“Is there somewhere I could stay for a few days?” she asked.

“Of course, señorita,” replied Montoya, bowing in an excess of gallantry. “Permit me to introduce myself. I am Diego Fernando Montoya, barber to the town of Tecimal. May I be the first to welcome you to our humble town. You will be staying with us a few days? You desire a guide? Someone to help you see the sights? Up in the hills there are interesting ruins, and I would be happy to escort you there myself. For a gracious lady such as yourself, there would of course be no charge. I do....”

Barclay emitted a loud grunt, cutting off the flow.

“I’m sorry,” said Montoya. “I didn’t mean to impose. The sight of a pretty señorita....” He left the rest of the sentence to her imagination.

“Please, you said there was somewhere I might stay for a day or two?”

“Of course. You see that house there? The green one with the small windows? It belongs to Señora Delgado. Tell the Señora that Diego Montoya sent you, and you will be assured of a heartfelt welcome.”

“Señora Delgado,” she repeated, fixing the name in her memory. “And you’re sure she’ll accept a visitor?”

“Oh, yes. We have few visitors here in Tecimal. But those who find their way here invariably stay at the house of Señora Delgado. Is there any other way I can help you? Carry your bag, perhaps?”

“No, no. It’s all right. But wait a minute, yes, perhaps you can help me. I’m looking for a man named Barclay — Andrew Barclay. He’s an Englishman. His publisher told me he lives here.”

She cast her gaze dubiously along the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte*, her expression making it clear that, whatever Barclay’s publisher had said, she found it difficult to believe that anyone would voluntarily live in such a run-down, pissant flea-pit.

Because her eyes were on the street, she did not see Montoya's reaction to her statement; had she done so, perhaps the entire subsequent course of her life would have been different. Instead, she continued to look forlornly at the empty street, wondering if perhaps there were two towns called Tecimal and she had somehow found her way to the wrong one.

As she watched, a lank, disreputable-looking yellow dog wandered out of a side street and began to cross the *Calle*. Halfway across, the dog halted, circled once, then lay down in the dust. The animal closed its eyes.

"Barclay?" Montoya repeated the name as his eyes bored into the crown of Barclay's still-lowered hat.

The question took the woman's attention from the dog. "Yes. Here, I have a picture."

She opened her shoulder bag and withdrew a hardbacked book, turning it so that its back cover faced Montoya. From the cover gazed a black and white photograph of a young man, his mouth smiling but his eyes glaring suspiciously at the world. In the background was a filled bookcase, the titles too blurred to be readable.

The man whom she had assumed to be asleep (she had mistaken his grunt for a kind of snore) suddenly extended his hand towards her, causing her to start.

"You want to see the book?" she asked.

"Please."

He tilted his head slightly, so that for the first time she could see his face. Most of it was in shadow, but she could see that he was quite old, perhaps in his sixties, possibly even older, with a long, crevassed, weathered face. A thin beard of gray hairs stuck to his chin. His mouth was open in what might have been a smile, although it could equally well have been a grimace. His teeth were yellow but even; his eyes were too deeply hidden in the umbra of his hat for her to see them clearly.

"Does Señor Barclay live in Tecimal?" she asked, surrendering the book temporarily as a *quid pro quo* for the question.

Barclay took the book wordlessly and turned it over to look at the front cover. The book was a novel, and its front cover was graced by a woman in a bikini and a bronze, muscular man, standing at the shore of what might have been a lake, with the sun almost touching a line of unnaturally verdant trees on the far shore. *The Condition of Love*, the

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cover declared; underneath, in slightly smaller print: *The Bestselling First Novel by Andrew Barclay*.

Barclay stared at the cover for a few seconds, then turned the book over. He looked at the youthful figure gazing suspiciously at him for perhaps ten seconds.

“Do you know a Señor Barclay?” he asked Montoya.

“Um....”

“Your book, señorita,” said Barclay. “The face looks familiar, but I am not certain the man you want is here. You should ask Señora Delgado. No, perhaps better, you should ask her daughter, Isabella. You will recognize Isabella immediately you see her. She paints herself like a whore.”

“Th-thank you.”

She took the book, wondering if she could possibly have either misheard or misunderstood what the man had said.

She began to move away, but was halted by Barclay calling after her.

“Señorita?”

She turned. “Yes?”

“Your name? You forgot to tell us your name.”

“Donna,” she replied. “I’m from the United States.” Then, realizing from their knowing smiles that of course they had known all along that she was from the North, she turned and hurried away in the direction of the green house with the small windows.

Two Houses

Señora Delgado's house was no more than a hundred meters from the place where Donna had held her brief, inconclusive conversation with Diego Montoya and his companion, but it seemed much farther. She could feel the eyes of the two men, especially those of Diego Montoya, every step of the way.

It was hot — as hot as hell, much hotter than Los Angeles, which, God forbid, had been hot enough. By the time she was halfway to the house, sweat was dribbling down her brow, around the corners of her eyes, down her cheeks, into her mouth and trickling to the end of her chin, whence it fell, augmenting the slowly-growing damp splotch on the front of her blouse.

She swore at the two of them under her breath, knowing they would laugh at any sign of weakness, attributing it to her gender or her citizenship or both. So she kept walking, refusing to break stride, letting the sweat dribble down her face, her neck, between her breasts (*God! How can women bear to wear bras every day in this heat?*).

She halted in front of the house, putting her holdall down and turning slightly, trying to make it seem that she was simply looking up and down the street, instead of trying to see if they were still watching her.

They had gone. Where the men had been there were now just two empty rocking chairs. The door of the store behind the chairs was open. She turned away and felt in a pocket for a handkerchief.

She wiped the sweat from her face. Surreptitiously, hiding the gesture in the motion she used to replace the handkerchief in her

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pocket, she pulled her bra forward and shook it slightly in an attempt to remove some of the moisture. *I hope they have running water. I'd give a hundred dollars for a good shower.* Then she stretched out her hand and lifted the heavy metal knocker.

The doorknocker was in the shape of some kind of animal: a dog, or possibly a pig. Whatever the animal was supposed to be, the knocker was poorly designed: even though she knocked as loudly as she could, the sound was almost inaudible, even to Donna.

She stood there, wondering how to extract more noise from the obdurate pig (or dog), when without warning the door was yanked open.

“Good afternoon, señorita.”

Donna found herself looking at a rounded, smiling woman somewhere in her forties. She was surprisingly tall, almost as tall as Donna herself. Her eyes were crinkled, echoing and confirming the smile on her lips. She was well-dressed, in clothes that must have come from a large town, for it seemed unlikely that there would be anywhere to buy such habiliments in Tecimal. Her hair showed a trace of gray at the temples.

“Good afternoon. My name is Donna. I'm an American. I was told that perhaps you might be able to rent me a room for a couple of nights.”

“From the North?” the woman yelped enthusiastically. “Los Angeles? Chicago? New York? I know about these places; I've seen the movies in Chiclahan. My daughter, you know, she's always going to Chiclahan and buying beautiful clothes. You think these clothes are beautiful, no? They were a gift from my daughter.

“Sometimes she says to me, ‘Momma,...’ She's a good girl, you know. Always calls me Momma. Never disrespectful. May the Good Lord grant you a daughter half so beautiful and half so mindful of her duties to her Momma.

“‘Momma,’ she says to me, ‘today you are coming with me to Chiclahan and together we will see a movie about America.’

“*Beverly Hills Cop*, yes? And *ET*? It is a beautiful country. Yes. Beautiful.”

She subsided, apparently engrossed in a beatific contemplation of America as portrayed by Hollywood.

“I'm from Los Angeles,” said Donna, when she was sure that the flood of words had ceased. “I was wondering if you could rent me a room for a couple of nights.”

“A room? Of course, of course. An American, in my house. Here, in Tecimal.” The woman was speaking to herself, nodding slightly as if unable to fully believe the miracle.

Then, as if suddenly frightened that Donna might change her mind, the woman took a step backward and gestured for her guest to enter.

“Come in, come in. You honor us. My daughter will be so interested to meet you. Her name is Isabella. She....”

Doing her best to keep up with the flood of Spanish and smiling determinedly, Donna picked up her holdall and went inside.

The house was cooler than the street and Donna halted, appreciating the change in temperature. There was the slightly greasy scent of some kind of food, either left over from lunch or the harbinger of the evening meal.

Ten minutes passed before Donna was installed in her room, mostly because Señora Delgado insisted on showing Donna all the conveniences provided by her establishment, to the accompaniment of a veritable torrent of observations on how wonderful America was; how wonderful Harrison Ford was; how wonderful the president, the president’s wife, the movies, the people and even the weather were.

Donna smiled through it all, doing nothing to encourage Señora Delgado except to offer an occasional nod.

Eventually, Señora Delgado ran out of steam. She said goodbye and closed the door, leaving Donna alone in her room. Donna let out a long phew! of relief, and sat heavily on the bed.

The room was better — much, much better — than she had feared. Not only was there running water, there was even a small *en suite* bathroom with a tiny shower in the corner, although the only way to reach it was by lowering and then clambering over the toilet seat.

The bedroom itself was clean, as were the sheets on the bed. There was neither telephone nor television, although there was an ancient radio on the bedside table.

The room was on the second (and topmost) floor of the house, and looked out over the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte*. Now that siesta was over, the *Calle* was no longer deserted. She could see half a dozen women on the street, darting into and out of the stores, carrying their shopping in bags and nodding and exchanging greetings. In the middle of the road the yellow dog still slept undisturbed.

Almost directly opposite the house was what appeared to be a bar, the words *El Presidente* scrawled above a door in an almost illegible

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script. In front of a massive sign for *Cerveza de Chiclahan*, whence a manic, white-toothed señorita offered a much-larger-than-life can of beer to all passersby, loitered six men, talking amongst themselves. Four of the men leaned against the sign; the other two sat on the bare ground facing the street. Each man held a can from which he took an occasional swig as the mood took him.

Donna switched on the light, locked the door, pulled the drapes closed, and began to run the water for a shower.

The water had an odd, slightly moldy odor, and after flowing for about half a minute it acquired a distinct brownish hue and slowed to little more than a trickle. Donna, naked now, eyed it skeptically.

When in Rome...

She clambered over the toilet seat and stepped into the shower.

Afterwards, Donna felt much better. She changed into clean clothes, stuffing the dirty ones into a drawer. Somewhere, even in Tecimal, there had to be either a laundromat or someone who would wash her clothes in exchange for payment.

Opening the drapes, she looked out and saw that the street was virtually unchanged. There were now seven men in front of *El Presidente*, and the dog was nowhere to be seen, but apart from those minor differences, the view was essentially identical.

Picking up the bag of dirty clothes, Donna went in search of Señora Delgado.

She found her quarry in the kitchen, pressing tortillas. The kitchen was unexpectedly modern, with several old but serviceable appliances. There was even an air conditioner rattling away in the window.

“Excuse me,” began Donna, “but I was wondering if there’s a...,” she paused, trying to think of the Spanish for “laundromat.” She gave up and started again. “I was wondering if there was somewhere in town where I could wash my clothes?”

“No need for that.” Señora Delgado smiled cheerily. “Just leave them with me.” She rubbed flour off her hands. “You would like some coffee? See, I have a Mr. Coffee. The only Mr. Coffee in all of Tecimal. You will join me? Please, sit down.”

It would have been impolite to refuse, and Donna found herself seated at the kitchen table while Señora Delgado bustled around making

coffee, all the time talking and giving Donna no chance to ask whether the señora knew the English author she had come all this way to see.

“My Isabella, she’s asleep right now. She always takes a long siesta, that girl.” Señora Delgado arranged the filter in the Mr. Coffee. “My Isabella gets through clothes so quickly. I don’t know how she does it. I’m always washing her things.” She opened a cupboard door and removed a brightly colored jar of coffee. “Fortunately she bought me a washing machine. There are only three washing machines in all of Tecimal, can you imagine that? Everyone brings their clothes to me. My Isabella, she’s a smart girl. She bought me a Maytag, so it never breaks down.”

She laughed as she counted out six measures of coffee. Donna laughed too, partly to please her hostess and partly because the notion of the Maytag repairman waiting pointlessly in a store somewhere along the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte* was so preposterous.

“You know,” the señora continued, running water into the flask, “when I became pregnant with Isabella, I thought it meant I would never have any of the things I wanted. I thought it was the end of all my dreams. Now look at me: I am the luckiest woman in Tecimal. There, that should do. Now we just have to wait. Ah, it’s good to get the weight off my feet. Listen to what I tell you, señorita, always take good care of your legs. That’s the first thing a real man looks at. But of course I’m being stupid: you know all about men, a beautiful girl like you.”

Donna blushed. “Please,” she began, seizing the opportunity to change the subject, “I came here to find someone. Do you know a man called Andrew Barclay? He’s an English writer, and I have a letter from his publisher telling me he lives in Tecimal.”

Señora Delgado clapped her hands in delight.

“Señor Barclay? You came here looking for Señor Barclay? Of course I know Señor Barclay. How could I live in Tecimal and not know Señor Barclay? Everyone knows Señor Barclay.”

Donna refrained from observing that the two people she had asked on her arrival didn’t seem to know him.

“We all love Señor Barclay,” continued the Señora. “He adopted us, and we adopted him. He is our famous son. His book, you know, is in every house in Tecimal, even those where no one can read. Come with me, I’ll show you my copy.” She began to rise.

Donna shook her head. “No thank you, that’s all right.”

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The señora looked momentarily disappointed, then relaxed back on to her stool. She continued, "He wrote a message in my book, just like he wrote a message to everyone. But mine is different. I looked after him before we knew he was famous. Before we knew he would stay." She sighed. "It was a long time ago now, of course."

The bitter smell of strong coffee began to fill the room.

"Then you know where he lives?" prompted Donna.

"Of course." Señora Delgado stood and conjured a pair of oddly formal china cups and saucers from a cupboard. As she poured the coffee she said, "He lives on the *Avenida La Guardia*. The third house. Pink with white shutters."

"Is he married?" Donna ventured, taking the cup that the señora offered and wrinkling her nose at the strength of the coffee's acrid aroma.

"Señor Barclay? Married? No." The señora gave Donna no opportunity to pursue the topic as she rattled on. "Señor Barclay could live anywhere, you know. He is a rich man. But he chooses to live here in Tecimal." The señora spoke proudly. "Tecimal," she repeated. "People from outside think there is nothing here, but we who live here know better. Señor Barclay, he knows better."

"Do you think he would be home now? I mean, he's not away or anything, is he? On a trip?"

"No, no, my dear. Apart from occasional visits to Chiclahan, the only place Señor Barclay ever goes is into the mountains, and he only goes there once a year. No, he's in town. I saw him myself this morning. And if he's not at home, you can always be sure of finding him at *El Presidente* in the evening."

"*El Presidente*? The bar across the street?"

Señora Delgado nodded. "Just ask the men outside for Señor Barclay. Everyone knows him. Do you want more coffee? I made enough."

"No. Really, I should be going. I've come all this way, and I feel like I'm so close now I should introduce myself to him as soon as I can."

Donna quickly stood and made her escape.

It was still hot outside. As Donna paused outside the front door to get her bearings, she became uncomfortably aware of the stares from the men lounging in front of *El Presidente*. Her appearance outside Señora

Delgado's had caused them to suspend their discussion, and now they were all gazing across the street at the gringa.

Flustered, Donna realized that she had forgotten to ask Señora Delgado for directions to the *Avenida La Guardia*. She turned to her left, and walked quickly along the *Calle*.

She was lucky. The *Avenida La Guardia* was the third cross-street she came to, and turning into it she immediately spotted the house she was looking for.

The faded pink house with the peeling white shutters looked little different from its neighbors. It looked just as seedy, just as poorly maintained; its windows were just as dusty, its paint just as faded. The only minor difference was of a negative kind: the diminutive yard that separated it from the street was simply an extension of the dusty, compacted dirt of the *Avenida La Guardia*, without even the attempt the neighbors had made to enhance it with flowers or a shrub or two. An erratic line of small ocher stones was the only division between street and front yard.

Next door two children played a noisy game with two sticks and a grubby object that looked like a weighted rag. They stopped their game as Donna halted outside the pink and white house. Donna smiled at them; they stared at her.

"Hello," she said.

They were girls, one about seven, the other a couple of years younger. The younger one tried to hide behind the older, who stood her ground with a defiant scowl.

"Who are you?" the older girl asked belligerently.

"My name is Donna," Donna said with a friendly smile. "Can you tell me, does Señor Barclay live here?"

"Why is your hair that color?" asked the child.

Donna masked her annoyance by smiling more widely. "It just grew that way. Does Señor Barclay live here?"

"It looks strange," said the older child emphatically; then she added, "Señor Barclay doesn't like us. He says we make too much noise."

"I expect he just finds it hard to work sometimes, that's all."

"Mama says Señor Barclay doesn't work at all. He just drinks."

Donna could think of nothing to say to that, and the conversation was abruptly brought to an end as the younger of the two children suddenly turned and ran crying into the house. After giving Donna's hair one last stare, her sibling followed.

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Swallowing once, and trying to ignore the butterflies that had suddenly taken residence in her stomach, Donna stepped over the line of stones and walked up to the door of the pink and white house. There was neither doorbell nor knocker, and the door, which opened inwards, stood slightly ajar. She rapped her knuckles against it.

There was no response. After half a minute or so, she tried again.

Still no one came to the door. Pushing it farther open, she called, first in Spanish and then in English, "Hello! Anyone at home?"

No one replied, and for a while she hesitated on the threshold. At length she straightened her shoulders and walked inside.

There was a vaguely sour smell inside the hot, stuffy house. Donna was in a bare hallway, with no pictures on the walls to hide the grubby paint and nothing to soften the hardness of the bare concrete floor. A dusty dun poncho hung on a hook beside the door.

She called again, "Hello, is anyone home?"

Still there was no answer.

An empty doorway led to a room in which she could see a bookcase. Treading lightly, for the thought had just come to her that perhaps the writer was taking a late siesta, she poked her head inside the room.

It was a kind of office-cum-study. Book-filled shelves lined the walls; the librarians overflow was stacked in half a dozen foot-high piles in one corner. In the middle of the room was a desk, its surface almost completely covered with haphazard papers. In the center of the desk was an ancient typewriter, into which a sheet of paper was inserted. A glass stood beside the typewriter, an inch of colorless liquid covering the bottom. There was no one in the room.

Donna tiptoed to the desk. Bending down to smell the drink, she pulled a face at the sharp tang of undiluted tequila. She looked at the papers on the desk. They seemed to be a work in progress: most of them were typewritten, double spaced, with heavy annotations in red.

The disorganized papers were unnumbered, so that it was impossible to guess the order in which they were supposed to be read. Not daring to move them, she simply let her eye rove over them, trying to get an idea of the kind of book that Barclay was writing.

But the pages were so disordered and there were so many crossings out — sometimes entire pages were struck out with a single red line slashing like a wound through the text — that she could form no coherent picture of what it was supposed to be, except that it was obviously a novel of some kind.

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The sheet in the typewriter had only a couple of sentences on it. She read:

Cornmarket lay desiccating in the hot sun as, in the distance ten miles to the northeast, a rotating cloud began to reach an exploratory finger towards the ground. The first person to see it was Sheldon the driver of a tractor John Deere as it crested the slight rise in the north field of the Hodgson farm.

It read like the beginning of a novel, but not a very good beginning.

There was a movement at the window, and Donna's head jerked up just in time to see a figure moving away from the glass. With a sinking feeling, she realized that someone had been watching her. It occurred to her that Barclay would probably not appreciate anyone coming into his study and looking over his rough drafts without his permission.

Without stopping to think, she rushed outside and ran around the house to the study window. She looked desperately around. The watcher had gone.

For a moment she wondered if it had all been her imagination.

"Hello," she called loudly. "I was just looking for Señor Barclay, that's all."

But the only answer was the sound of the children next door as they tumbled out the house and began to play again.

After a minute she turned and walked away, back towards the *Calle*.

El Presidente, and Afterwards

Tecimal had just one bar, *El Presidente*, which was located, like every business in Tecimal, on the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte*. *El Presidente* was almost opposite the house of Señora Delgado, perhaps not entirely by accident.

El Presidente closed its door only between the hours of midnight and four a.m., and not even then if Pedro Grande — a short, stout, smiling man with a neat moustache and overlarge ears — thought it worth his while to remain open.

During the day, often the only person inside *El Presidente* was the man behind the bar, usually either the owner himself or his fourteen-year-old son, Pedro Pequeño. Customers, of whom there was a brief flood at the beginning of siesta and a steady trickle throughout the rest of the day, would come in to buy a *Cerveza de Chiclahan*, and then take it outside to drink with the other men who were a perpetual feature of the street outside *El Presidente*.

Around eight o'clock, everything changed. Men dropped by for a beer on their way home; or, if there was no one waiting for them there, for a meal chosen from the menu of frozen TV dinners brought in from Chiclahan.

It was Barclay's habit to be in his customary place before the busy period started, sitting on his stool at the end of the counter, nursing a drink — sometimes beer, more often tequila — although whether it was his first drink of the evening or his fourth, no one except he and the barman knew.

Tonight, had any of the customers bothered to look closely, they would have observed that Barclay seemed more thoughtful and perhaps grimmer than usual. He downed his drinks speedily, so that by the time Diego Montoya appeared at his side, the Englishman had already lost count.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Montoya, nodding at Pedro Grande and taking his place on the stool next to Barclay. Pedro Grande wordlessly pushed a tequila toward Montoya. Montoya explained: “Fernando Gonzalez came in just as I was about to close, and we got talking. You know how it is.”

Barclay nodded distractedly; he glanced at his half-full glass, then knocked his head back and drained it. He gestured to Pedro Grande to replenish the drink.

“So, are you going to tell me what it’s all about?” Montoya asked as he sipped his tequila.

Barclay looked at him with an unreadable expression.

“The gringa,” Montoya elaborated. “She had your book and she was looking for you. So why didn’t you tell her who you are? And you were expecting her, weren’t you? That’s why you made that bet about the bus stopping.”

“You remember what I said this afternoon? About God being an English Catholic?”

Montoya nodded.

“The trouble is, so’s the devil. The devil knows his own, maybe better than God does. And it’s my experience....” His voice trailed off, his gaze on the glass in his hand.

“Yes?” prompted Montoya.

“It’s my experience that whatever the devil wants, he usually gets. God may be all-powerful in heaven, but God knows Tecimal isn’t heaven. Down here, it’s the devil who usually gets his way.” Barclay looked at Montoya. “Sorry. You mustn’t mind me. I’m maudlin. It’s the booze talking, that’s all.”

“What’s the matter?”

Montoya was genuinely concerned for his friend. Everyone knew that a peculiar moodiness sometimes gripped the English writer, but it was a long time since Montoya had seen him looking so thoroughly defeated. “Who is she and what does she want?”

“She’s a student.”

THE SECOND BOOK

Barclay rummaged in a pocket and withdrew an envelope, crumpled and streaked with dirt. He handed it to Montoya, and Montoya examined it while Barclay finished his drink and ordered another.

It was an airmail envelope, with stamps that bore the silhouette of a crowned woman but no country of origin. Opening the envelope, Montoya extracted a one-page letter and another envelope, this one with American stamps. He unfolded the letter.

“It’s in English,” he said.

“Sorry. Here, give them to me. I’ll translate.”

Barclay opened the letter and spread it out on the surface of the bar. Pedro Grande put a drink down next to it. Barclay fortified himself, then began to translate aloud.

Dear Andrew

I do hope you will forgive this letter. The enclosed arrived at our offices last week, and through some abominable mix-up the young lady who wrote the letter was informed of your place of residence, although not your exact address. Please accept my heartfelt apologies for this incident; you can be sure that the person responsible for the breach has been duly reprimanded. You have my personal assurance that it will not happen again.

As always, I trust that you are well. We await eagerly the drafts of your new work.

Yours sincerely

John Adams

for Adams & Gilt, publishers.

“The other letter, the one from her, is even worse,” Barclay said. “She’s a bloody student and she’s got it into her head that I’m a suitable subject for a Ph.D. thesis. Can you imagine anything more ludicrous? What’s she going to write? I can imagine the first sentence now: *I went to a pissant Latin American town nine tenths of the way to hell, and when I got there I found a washed-up inebriate who once wrote a bestseller but who can’t write even the first paragraph of his second book after trying for more than a quarter of a century.*

“Bloody hell! She sent me a letter care of the post office to say she’d be arriving today. I was hoping she wouldn’t show up. She types the confounded things on one of those electronic word processor abominations, and uses a typeface more suited to a newspaper column

than a letter. What kind of idiot interposes a machine between herself and the recipient anyway? She should have written her damned letters by hand. Not that I would have answered anyway. I suppose....”

Barclay caught himself, realizing that he had strayed from the point. “But the damned fool showed up anyway. That’s the trouble with Americans: they never can tell when they’re not wanted. Now she’s here, and I don’t suppose she’ll rest until she’s hounded me down. What makes it worse is that she probably thinks my hiding from her just makes me all the more interesting.” He lifted his glass and half-emptied it in a single gulp.

“So what are you going to do about her?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m staying out of her way. I’ll move in here. Even an American college student should have enough brains not to walk into a bar in a town in the middle of Central America. Oh, bloody hell.”

This last was in response to the fact that *El Presidente*, for the first time in its existence, had without warning ceased to be a male preserve. Even Isabella, that most favored of women, had never tried to breach *El Presidente*. But now, standing in the doorway and peering into the dim interior, was the blonde gringa whose arrival had been the dominant subject of conversation in Tecimal since siesta.

Silence descended on the bar more quickly than the tropical night. All eyes swiveled to the gringa with the blonde hair and the walnut tan. All movement ceased.

The woman smiled uncertainly as she surveyed the interior of the bar. She descried Pedro Grande behind the counter, and crossed the room to stand opposite him.

“Excuse me,” she said without the merest trace of shame, almost as if she were completely unaware of the enormity of her transgression. “I’m trying to find a man called Barclay. Señora Delgado told me I would find him here.”

Pedro Grande arched an eyebrow. “Señora Delgado said you would find Señor Barclay here?”

“Yes. He’s a writer. English. He wrote this book.” From her bag she pulled a Spanish paperback of *The Condition of Love* and showed it to Pedro Grande.

He ignored the book and looked piercingly down the bar at Barclay.

Barclay mumbled, so quietly that only Montoya could make out the words, “The devil always gets his way in the end.”

THE SECOND BOOK

He slid off his stool. The gringa watched him shamble towards her.

Without a word, Barclay put an arm around her shoulder and propelled her in the direction of the door.

“I’m sorry, Pedro,” he called over his shoulder. “It won’t happen again. She’s from the North.”

Pedro nodded.

“Wait a minute, what the hell are you doing?” the gringa protested as Barclay unceremoniously pushed her through the doorway ahead of him.

Outside, a group of men who had been watching stepped back to make room for the unlikely pair. Barclay grabbed the gringa’s wrist tightly and began to march her away down the street.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Where are we going?” Her voice began to rise to a scream.

It was a nightmare. Here she was, in a tin-pot town in a third-world country, being dragged into the night by a drunken desperado — and everyone was just letting it happen.

“Shut up, you bloody idiot,” snarled Barclay in English.

She was astonished into silence. Open-mouthed but no longer protesting, Donna let herself be led away down the street, then around the corner into the *Avenida La Guardia*, whence Barclay led her into the pink and white house. Once they were inside, he slammed the door behind them so loudly that the building shook. He turned to Donna furiously, but she got in the first word.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she repeated. She rubbed her wrist where he had manhandled her. “You’re Barclay, aren’t you? You can’t treat me like this. And what the hell did you mean this afternoon by letting me make a fool of myself in front of that other man, asking for you when all the time you were sitting right there laughing at me. I mffinwh....”

He slammed a hand firmly across her mouth, but before he could say anything she bit down hard.

Too hard.

He screamed and snatched his hand away. “You bloody bitch. You’ve drawn blood.”

“Good. Serves you right. Get the hell away from me. I’m going home.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all day. Go back where you came from. I never want to see you again. Ouch. That bloody well hurt.”

Donna took an uncertain step toward the door. She was furious, but Barclay's hand was bleeding freely from a red crescent that disfigured the thenar webbing. The man was a pig, but even so she shouldn't have bitten him quite so hard. He sucked his hand, glaring at her as she hovered indecisively at the door.

"Look," she said. "I'm sorry. Really. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Go away," he said, his words barely intelligible.

But she couldn't. She took a step towards him. "Here, let me look at it."

She pulled his hand from his mouth.

"That needs dressing," she declared as a drop of blood fell on the bare concrete floor. "Do you have a first aid kit anywhere?"

"In the bathroom, but if you think..."

"Oh, be quiet, will you? Which way is it? Never mind, I'll find it myself." And before he could stop her, she was off, looking in every room until she found the one she was looking for.

He rolled his eyes heavenwards and mumbled, *sotto voce*, "Bloody women," while she opened drawers in search of the elusive first aid kit.

She returned, frowning and holding something in her hand.

"Is this what you call a first aid kit?" She held up a small plastic box that prominently displayed a red cross on a white background.

"What's wrong with it?"

"You want a list? It's twenty years old, half the stuff's been used, and what's left is useless. Here, bring that hand into the bathroom. Let's run some water into the wound. What's the water here like? It looks filthy, but is it fit to drink?"

"How the hell should I know? What kind of idiot would drink filthy water instead of good tequila?"

She took his hand and led him into the bathroom, where she thrust his hand into the basin and turned on the lone faucet as far as it would allow. After a brief and impressive torrent, the water diminished to little more than a brownish trickle.

"Do you have any iodine in the house?"

"No. Why? Are you thirsty? If so, I recommend tequila over iodine."

"Oh, go to hell. Look, this is serious. Oh, God! I'm sorry. Let me think for a moment." She closed her eyes and put her hands to her temples.

THE SECOND BOOK

“What is this? Some new mystic style of meditation? I’ll make it easy for you. Go away. Do you want me to spell it for you? G-O, go; A-W-A-Y, away.”

“Shut up, will you? There’s a doctor here, right? Even a godforsaken hole like this must have a doctor. Here, dry your hand on this... this towel. This is a towel, right? Tell me, don’t you ever do any laundry? This towel’s a disgrace. With my luck, you’ll pick up an infection from the towel.”

She blotted the blood and water off his hand with the stained piece of cloth.

“To answer your questions in the order asked — one: yes, there is someone in Tecimal who claims to be a doctor. However, he has never been known to take a drink voluntarily, and therefore I regard his claim with studied skepticism.

“Two: yes, this is a towel. Spanish: *toalla*; French: *essuie-main*; German: *Handtuch*, and if you don’t like the state of my belongings, there’s the door.

“Three: yes, I do my laundry. Like most of Tecimal, I do it whenever the mood takes me, which it does on average about once every three or four months.

“Now, assuming you have finished quizzing me, please just go away and leave me alone. I’ll live. Now what’s the matter? Oh, hell. You’re not going to cry, are you?”

She was standing, the dirty towel in her hands, looking at him. There was no mistaking the moist reflections in her eyes, and before either of them could do anything about it, she leaned her head forward against his chest and began to heave.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

“Come on,” he said, his voice unexpectedly gentle, “you didn’t mean to hurt me, and it really doesn’t matter. Listen, if it’ll make you happier I promise I’ll go to the doctor tomorrow and let him have a look at it. Please, now, stop crying. Just go. I’ll be fine.”

“I... I’m sorry,” she sobbed. Producing a handkerchief from somewhere she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose. “I’m sorry,” she repeated. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me. I never cry. I guess... I guess it’s just that today has all been too much.”

He nodded absentmindedly as he opened a drawer and reached into its depths. He withdrew a full bottle of tequila. “Here, unscrew this for me,” he said.

She untwisted the cap, and he took the bottle and poured a liberal quantity of its contents into the wound, baring his teeth at the sharp sting. Then he put the bottle to his lips and took a large gulp.

“All right,” he said. “Look, here’s a dressing strip, just wind it around my hand. Yes, that’s it.”

She wrapped the dirty-white strip several times around the hand, securing it with a rusty safety pin. She looked at the result dubiously.

“It’ll be perfect in a day or two,” he assured her, then ruined everything by adding, “and now, if you’ve quite finished, will you please just go away?”

“You’re still angry with me.”

“If you go away I won’t be angry any more.”

“What’s the matter with me? Why won’t you talk to me? I said I’m sorry.”

“Nothing’s the matter with you. I won’t talk to you because I won’t talk to anyone. Don’t take it personally. Just go back to Los Angeles and choose a more cooperative subject for your thesis. I assure you, it will be much better for both of us.”

“Please.”

“And don’t waste your time simpering. Just go away.”

Her temper snapped. She snarled, “Damn you! I came all the way down here because I happen to think that *The Condition of Love* is the best novel written in the last fifty years. I wanted to meet you because I thought I could learn something from you. Something important. Something about touching people with the written word. I already know how to drink.”

He shook his head ruefully. “Robert Redford to Paul Newman, *The Sting*, 1969 or thereabouts. Redford, I have to say, was considerably more convincing than you.”

“Go to hell.”

She shoved him to one side and stormed out the house. It was not until she had turned the corner on to the *Calle de Generalissimo Javier Felipe Duarte* that she stopped in mid-stride and swore to herself.

“Damn! Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

She took half a dozen deep breaths, holding each one while she counted to ten.

THE SECOND BOOK

The exercise had the desired effect. Calmer now, she said to herself, “All right, Mr. Barclay, you won that round. But it’s not over yet. I’m not going to let you get the better of me that easily.”

Forcing herself to take measured steps, she strode away in the direction of Señora Delgado’s.