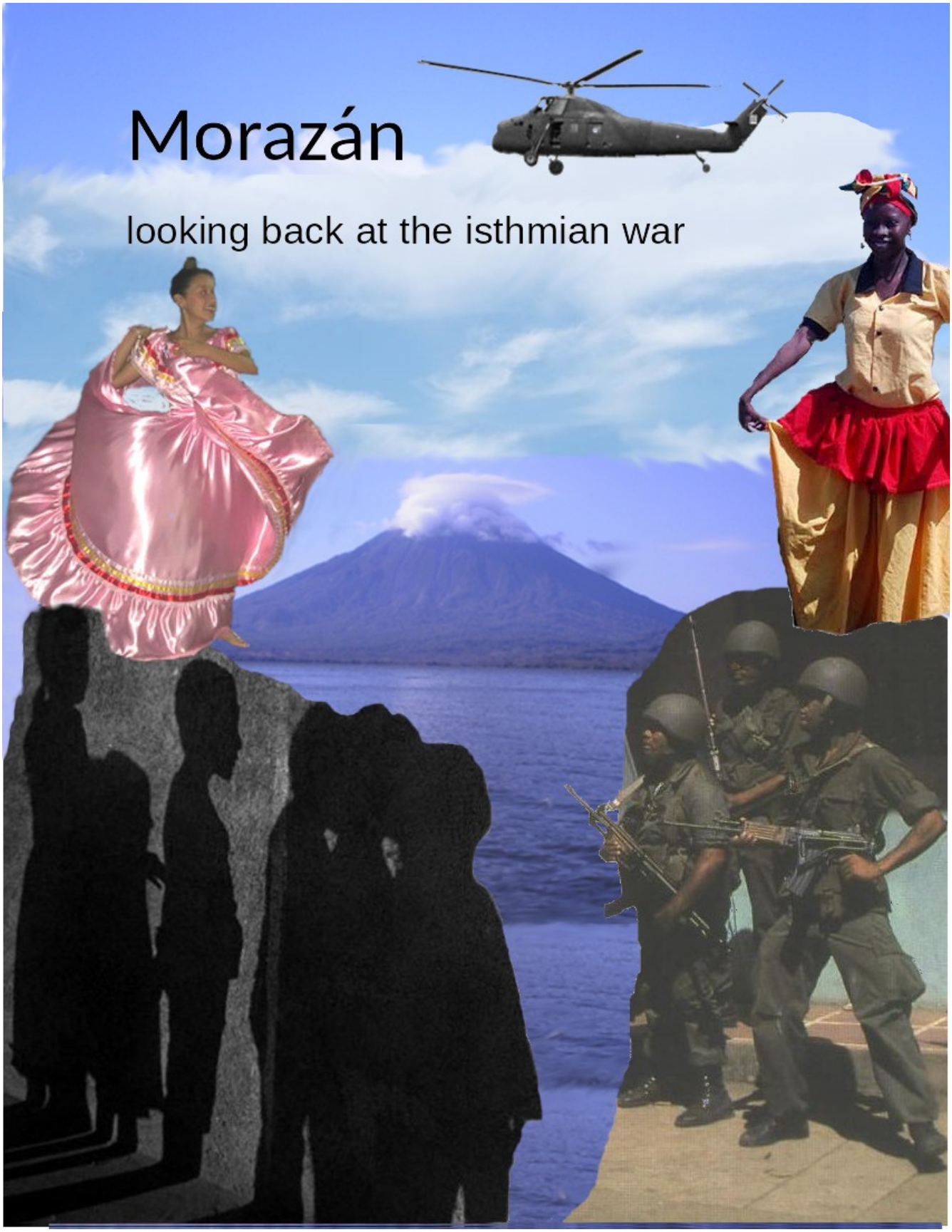
Morazán

looking back at the isthmian war



Morazán

- *looking back*
at the Isthmian War

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a novel by Stephen Sefton

for Janet Melvin, Ondina Padilla, Montserrat Pijuan

Foreword

I wrote this book originally in 2003 or 2004, mainly to try pinning down my experience of working in Central America since 1986 in solidarity activities, community development and human rights research. The story itself is a very simple projection onto a young Irish woman, Maeve, who has moved to live in London after a year away in Central America. The year is 1990. Recovering from an accident, she is visited by police investigating a man she knew in Morazán, a country in the Central American isthmus. The interview prompts memories about the time she spent there and the people she knew.

Her life during the year she spent in Morazan was a liberation from her unhappy, sometimes impoverished childhood in Dublin, from her grief at the death of her construction worker father and an unhappy relationship with her mother. Her memories turn around her relationships with Raul Pec, a French diplomat, and with enigmatic right-wing writer and art dealer, Eusebia Roa. In Morazán, Maeve worked on a literacy project for rural families with a women rural workers' organization.

Despite herself, she got caught up in the country's politics and found herself sheltering a woman political dissident at risk from local paramilitaries. Slowly, her apparent understanding of people and events around her dissolves. Morazán, far from being a quiet backwater is at the heart of a ruthlessly fought secret war for control of supply routes to El Salvador and Guatemala, delivering arms, people and material to sustain the rebel forces in those countries.

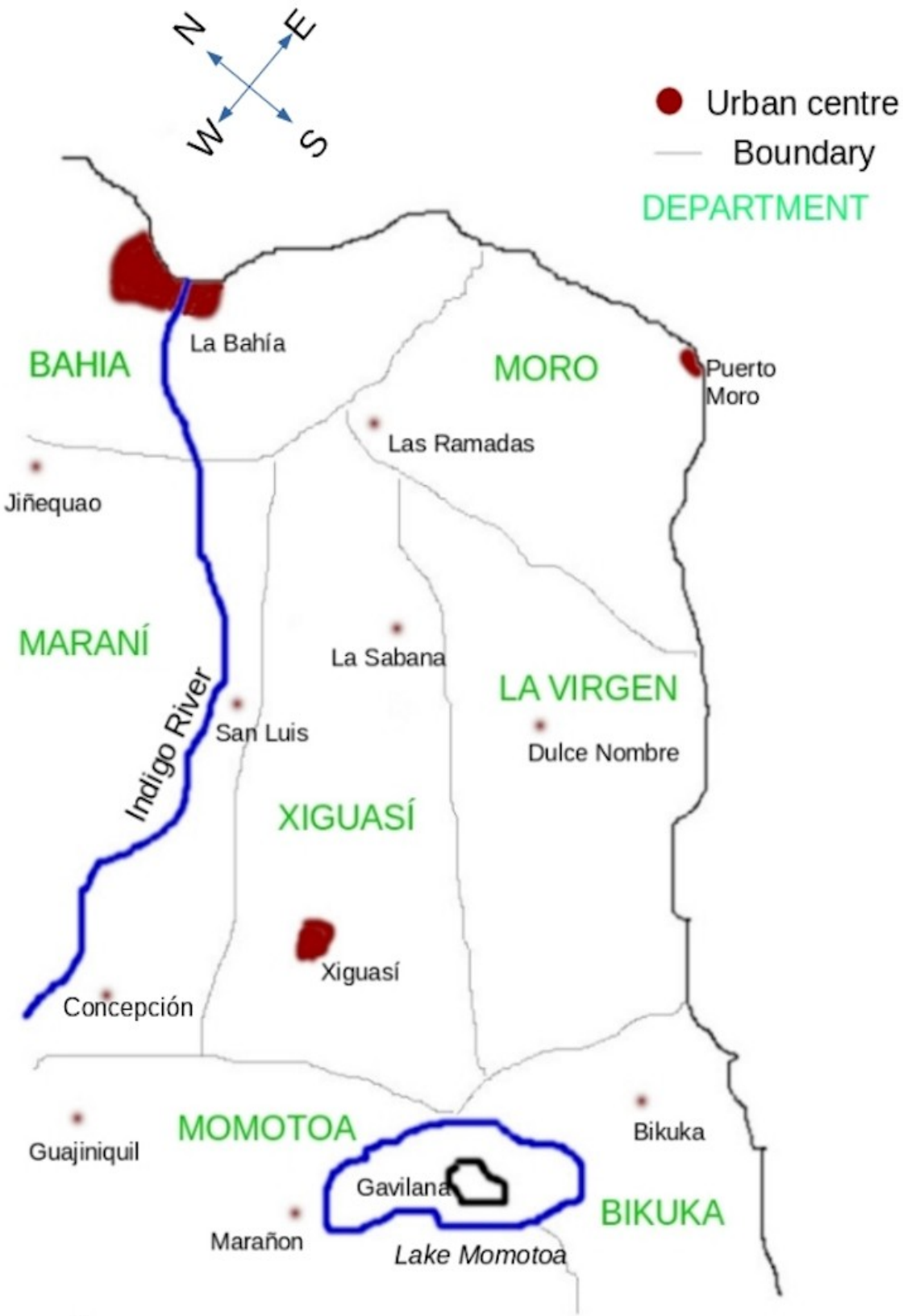
Through it's account of one young woman's developing adulthood, the novel affirms people's right to defend common human values in the face of unscrupulous political manipulation. The imaginary country Morazán is a compendium of Honduras and Nicaragua. Three of the characters correspond in large part to real people, beloved friends Janet Melvin, Montserrat Pijuan and Ondina Padilla. Everyone else is invented, although some of the characters' traits may be based on those of people I have known at one time or another without any one-to-one identification.

For over a decade I forgot about this story, always too busy to look back. But after the failed 2018 coup attempt in Nicaragua it seems to me the two main motifs of this story very much bear repeating. Firstly, the venal, self-serving nature of the development aid business and how it corrupts and co-opts popular movement organizations for the purposes of the imperialist powers. Secondly, the absolutely fundamental imperative of self-critical, anti-imperialist solidarity at every level.

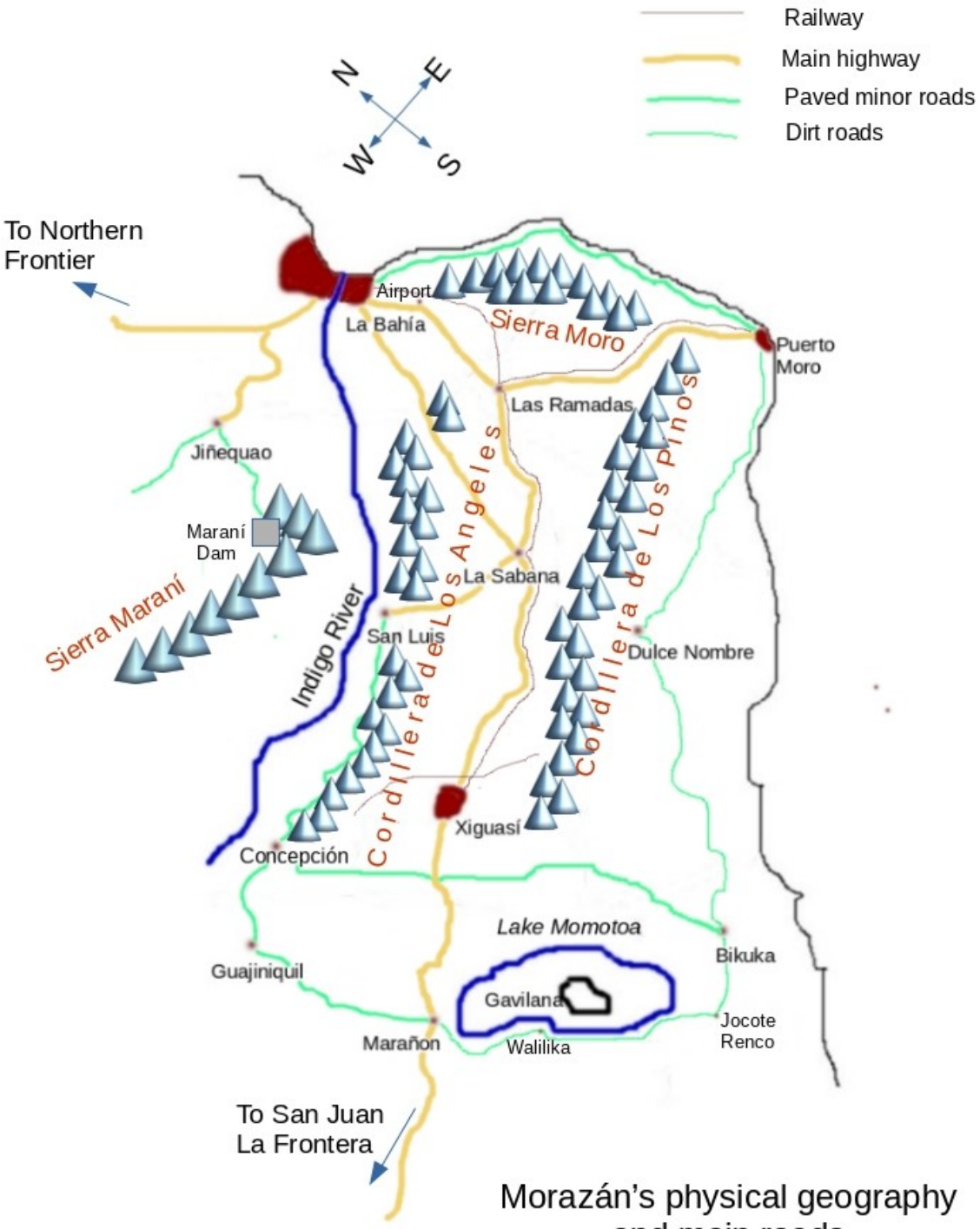
I deliberately invoke memories of the Algerian War and the appalling betrayal it represented of anti-Nazi Resistance as of enduring relevance to solidarity engagements elsewhere around the world, in this case in Central America. I also seek to portray the fragility and elusiveness of faithful reporting in a context where hardly anyone is what they claim to be, appear to be or present themselves as being. All reporting ends up being some variety of propaganda, deliberate or otherwise.

Stephen Sefton. October 21st 2019

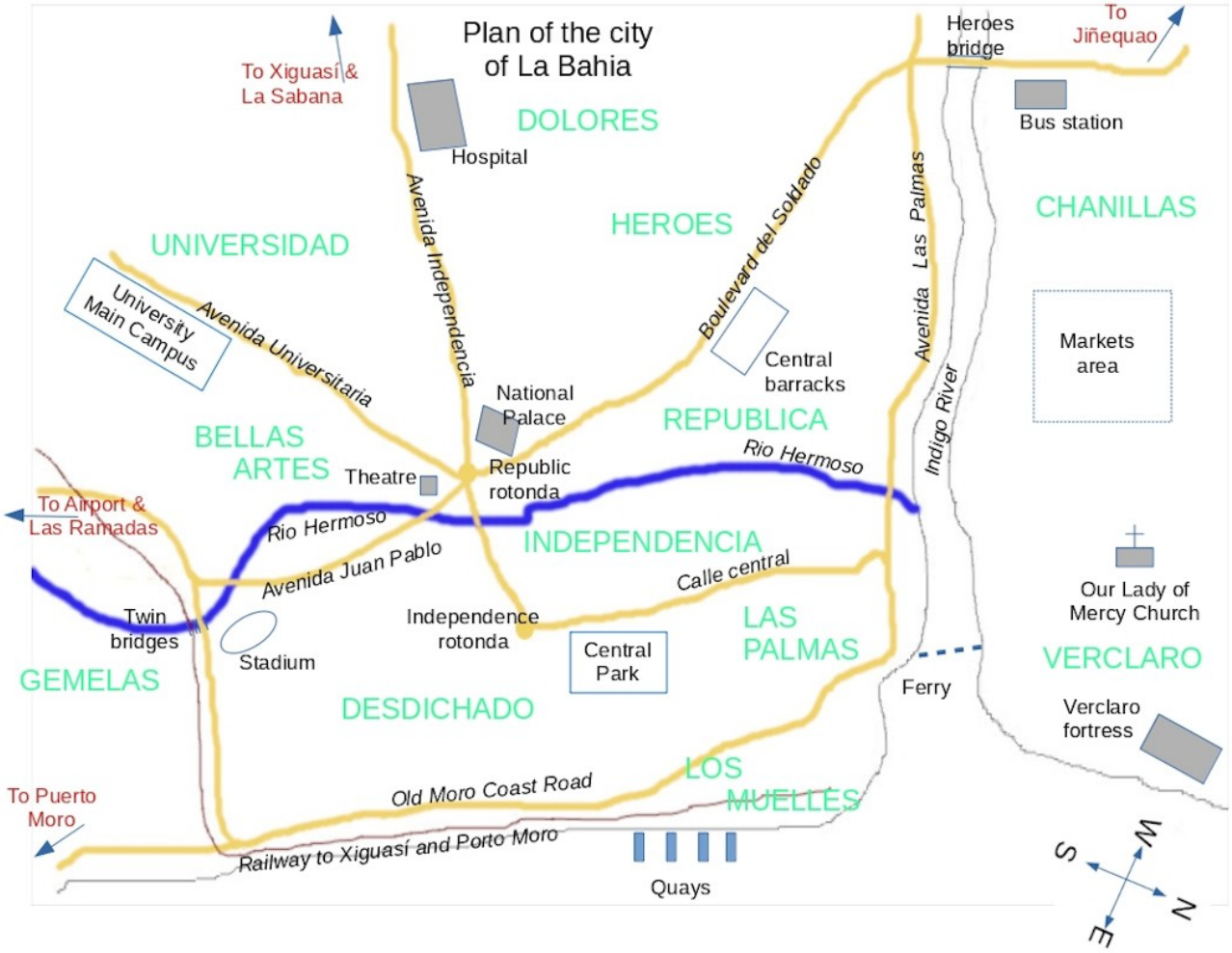
MAPS



Morazán
Political Map



Morazán's physical geography and main roads


Plan of the city
of La Bahia
To Xiguasí &
La Sabana
To
Jiñequao
Heroes
bridge
Bus station
DOLORES
Hospital
HEROES
CHANILLAS
UNIVERSIDAD
University
Main Campus
Avenida Universitaria
Avenida Independencia
Boulevard del Soldado
Avenida Las Palmas
Markets
area
Central
barracks
National
Palace
REPUBLICA
Indigo River
BELLAS
ARTES
Theatre
Republic
rotonda
Rio Hermoso
To Airport &
Las Ramadas
Rio Hermoso
INDEPENDENCIA
Avenida Juan Pablo
Calle central
Our Lady of
Mercy Church
Twin
bridges
Independence
rotonda
LAS
PALMAS
Stadium
Central
Park
VERCLARO
GEMELAS
Ferry
DESDICHADO
Verclaro
fortress
LOS
MUELLES
To Puerto
Moro
Old Moro Coast Road
Railway to Xiguasí and Porto Moro
Quays
W
S
N
E

Morazán

"'Ere! You leave 'im alone!" Jean Dakins from next door. Certain about that, even upside down in a rainwater gully. Frank laughed. Not Dave. My right leg shook. Dave was on my left, Frank on my right.

I like this part of south London. Different cultures rubbing along together, sharp Cockney, relaxed Caribbean, wary Irish. Everyone knew my uncle Pat. He'd lived there since the Seventies, surprised, like Jean, May, Molly and his other neighbours, their once undesirable south London homes were now worth millions. Everyone liked Pat, so they looked out for me. Despite the gentrification further up the street near the Common, our part was still down-to-earth neighbourly

How do keys vanish? Laws of physics? I just couldn't find them, me there scrabbling upside down in the sludge. I'd been laughing at one of Dave's jokes and the car key? It just fell down the rainwater gully somehow, in the street there, outside Pat's house.

Jean's alarm brought May from her Caribbean butcher's corner shop. Out she came and started. Frank told me later she came on waving a meat cleaver and a knife. So then Molly Riordan must have called the police. Waiting for her cataract operation, Molly. Could barely see past her nose.

Jean shouted, "Aitnch yer got nothin' better to do? Leave 'im alone! I've a good mind to call the law!" But Molly already had.

May shouted, "You fellas leave him alone, right this instant, you hear?" I heard that and shouted myself, "It's OK! They're my friends!" She couldn't hear me. Hard to hear someone cry out, upside down in a drain.

Frank is big. Six foot two, half as wide. "We're helpin' 'im" he said.

"Yeah", said Dave, "we're 'elpin' 'im, an' anyway, it ain't an 'im it's an 'er, see?." Dave is stocky. Just five foot one, but tough.

I heard May say "Don't you talk no rubbish to me dwarf-man. You let him out o' there right now. And you Mr Big, any lip from you, I split you damn fool head wide open, you hear?"

Frank let go of my leg. Dave couldn't hold me. My forehead crunched down into the wet black silt.

Everything turned confused after that. Couldn't straighten my arms. Elbows stuck. It started to rain. Ladies Day at Wimbledon I remembered. Martina Navratilova and Zena Garrison. I thought, she'll walk it, Martina. Don't get me wrong, Zena's good all right and she's got tremendous heart. But Martina's such a great athlete....

I heard a police siren. It stopped overhead. Foot and head. "We've had a report about a ritual killing on the pavement, madam. Could you explain what's going on?" I imagined May's bloody apron.

"Ritual killin'!" she cried.

"'S just our mate's lost 'er keys". Frank was flustered. I was teaching him to read and write. He didn't like people to know he couldn't.

"And who might you be, sir? One moment please. Give me those weapons, madam, if you don't mind."

"Wehpponns! You crazy po-lice man! I am a butcher! These ain't no weapon, man, these are mi' damn toools!"

"It's not 'er, officer, it's them there. They was killin' that poor feller down the drain there. You come just in the nick of time, you mark my words." Jean again.

"It's not a feller," said Frank, "It's a woman. Maeve. She's on site with us for a few days doin' research. She's a writer, see?"

May said, "You got our Maeve stuffed down a drain? You get her out o' there or there'll be a killing all right Mister. Out o' my way you bumble-head-man.... Maeve, you ok my darlin? Oh my Lord...!'

The rain was much heavier by then. It started streaming down from the gutter between my shirt and my skin. I waved my legs and tried to shout. I remember a strong smell of asphalt. Sweet papers and a crisp packet. Cheese and onion flavour. Cigarette ends.

"Look, Madam, we've had a complaint about a ritual killing being performed in the street here. It would help if you'd just go talk with my colleague and ...oh my God, she's gone down" A heavy load fell against my legs pinning my feet to the pavement. Something sharp landed in my leg. It hurt.

The rain seemed to fall heavier still. Things were uncomfortable. But I trusted big Frank. "What d'you mean I'm under arrest? I never touched her! She needs mouth to mouth."

"Yeah, 'e never touched 'er", said Dave, "An' she's not breathin' neither"

"Delta Seven to Control...Please send an ambulance as soon as you can we have a woman unconscious....."

So I was left with my legs pinned down and back like the India rubber woman while they tried to revive May. She'd fainted with her high blood pressure. She told me once she suffered from sickle cell anaemia too, as I recall. Rainwater slowly filled the drain. The sludge began to turn to slurry around my temples.

"You all right down there? What the bloody hell is he doing down there anyway? You two leanin' on 'im? What is it, drugs?"

Jean shouted "Can't you see 'e's bin stabbed? Look, blood! May stabbed 'im when she fell on 'im wiv 'er knife."

"Delta Seven to Control,...tell the ambulance we now have two casualties will you? Over... I don't believe this. Can we move her?"

Jean cried, "You'd better bloody move 'er or e'll drown down there in that drain!"

"Maeve? You still all right there love'? 'ang on a mo', soon 'ave you out o' there. ...." Thanks Dave. Rainwater up my nose. Taste of blood. .....

In hospital the nurses sat me in a cubicle, jabbed me with anti-tetanus. Half an hour later a young guy in a hurry and a white coat told them to get me a bed. He was worried about the tendon in my leg where the knife had cut. A woman anaesthetist came and weighed me up.

We got talking. She turned out to be from Dublin too, Cabra, like me, but the Blackhorse Avenue side. Her parents had left Dublin before she even started school. She remembered the deer in Phoenix Park and the President's big house and the way her Sunday shoes seemed to go "ping" along endless tree-lined avenues as she tagged along by her mum beside the giant perambulator where her baby brothers sat enthroned.

I don't remember anything after they gave me the pre-anaesthetic. Just glad I was in Wandsworth, not Brooklyn.

A nurse brought me a cup of tea. Her name was Dolly, from Jamaica. "Miss Jumpy woke up, eh? You jumpin' all night long, mi darlin'. Bad dreams?"

"No, not bad, Dolly. Vivid. Do you dream in colour?"

"I sure do. My family say I'm clairvoyant, like my Uncle Benjamin. Benji had dreams so clear and true to life, nine times out of ten he'd tell people what was gonna happen to them if he dreamt them. In my mum's town, used to be a reverend. Reverend Jimmy Bishop. Every Friday, this Reverend Jimmy Bishop caught the bus into town.

And this Tuesday, Benji dream the reverend fall from the bus and die. But no one take any notice of Benji, he being just a teenager in those days. And sure enough, come the Friday morning this Reverend Jimmy Bishop, he go to jump on the bus and he slip, fall and the bus run him over, dead. Imagine. So many stories like that about Benji. You know they used to beg him to dream about the horse races. Never could do that, now, our Benji, no .....

Frank came walking up the ward. Everything seemed to be coloured cream. "Got the van, Maeve. Garage cut the key with the manufacturer's number. Computerised, see? You all right?"

Things hardly ever seem to get finished the way we want. Dolly has the most beautiful complexion and eyes to melt you, those long lashes and the warm roast coffee bean eyes set in milky pearl. She had other things to be doing. I left a note for her with my 'phone number using the pen Frank always carried behind his ear. He carried it there for show, he couldn't write.

Are people ever what they seem?

I'm minding Pat's house in Wandsworth, not far from Clapham Junction. Pat sculpts. He's in Montreal for a year on a cultural exchange. One of those Irish men who never marry, with at least one woman foolish enough to waste her life waiting around for him, Philomena, daughter of a Kerry horse dealer, a pattern cutter for Zandra Rhodes among others. She calls in regularly to spy on me.

The house is split into two flats. Pat couldn't find anyone to take the downstairs where he lives. He hasn't done any work on it since he bought it and patched it up, back in the 'Seventies. Who'd want to live there except a penniless foreigner like me?

I've turned his studio into a study. He smashed the downstairs rooms into one, to make space for his work. What blarney he sold the Borough Engineer, I've no idea. Ceiling stays up somehow. The place is full of my books now. Philomena sniffs and says, "Pat wouldn't like it."

I don't care, Philomena.

Frank left me home. Closing the door, I found a couple of bills and a postcard. The postcard was from Mike Walker. "Maeve, thanks for writing. I'm bad at keeping in touch. Take care. Mike." It came as no surprise. My leg was sore. I took painkillers and fell asleep, dreamt of Raul.

He and I were collecting mangoes, walking towards a river. Then three men with machetes were following us. We met a goose, white with an orange bill. "They're following us", Raul told her. "Don't worry. I'm with you" said the goose. She walked with a limp but we had to half run to keep up with her. At the river she said, "See where the water breaks and seems to fall faster? Those are dips in the river bed. Don't you be after falling in them now." And Raul was on the other side and the men were shouting after him in Arabic. I was flying overhead. They had no shirts and their heads were all bloodied. Why didn't they cross the river?

Raul had written asking me to proofread his "Cahiers sur la résistance civil en temps de guerre". There it is on the table now. Yes, I'd said to myself, I will read it, for the sake of a memory, forever the dearest part of me

Something rang or buzzed. The doorbell. Reality? Loose wires. I limped out to answer. On the doorstep a man and a woman, casual: her, blue jeans, cream blouse, short blue flannel jacket; him, green corduroy slacks, white, Aran-style sweater. I felt cold "Hello there. Maeve O Siochrú?" Friendly enough. "That's me. Good pronunciation. I'm not feeling great right now, can I help you?"

The woman produced an ID. I read it. Metropolitan Police, Detective Sergeant, Mary Norris. "We're investigating a suspicious death, Maeve. We need your help with some information about a man called Sergio Lopez, You may know him as José Fiallos. May we come in and talk?"

I was flying over them. "Sure, come on in. Kitchen OK? More space there." My little joke. We sat around the table. They stared at the books, the sculptor's lumber, the unmade bed.

"Original" observed the man.

"Practical", said I.

Mary asked, "When did you last see Lopez? Let's call him José Fiallos, if it's easier for you."

"About a month ago."

"What do you know about him?"

"D'you not think a little preamble might be in order? It's not every day I get a visit from police detectives."

The man spoke. He was older than Mary; her thirty, him forty, thereabouts. "Maeve, if we explain why we're asking you these questions, our explanation may affect the answers you give us. But I can tell you the matter is very serious and your cooperation will speed up this conversation. What did you do to your leg by the way."

"A butcher fell on me with a knife. Didn't mean any harm, She was unconscious at the time. Your lot startled her. I need a drink. You?"

"No thanks. Help yourself...."

Mary said,"We're interested in Lopez because he may be able to help us with our enquiries. Any idea where he might be now?"

My body poured itself a large whiskey. For the moment, I was still flying over the men with bloodied heads. Raul had told me once. "Never offer rational answers in a hostile interview or let them drag you into discussions with a logic of their own. A bogus story inevitably breaks down if you try and make it rational. Men tend to do that and, mostly, women don't. That makes them harder to break down." It was only after he had left Morazán I understood why he told me that.

Mary Norris looked like a fast-track young bureaucrat who spends too much time at a computer screen. A bit pale, slightly dark patches beneath the eyes, too much office coffee, she was presentable but with no time wasted on appearances, her lank hair cut short, no make up. I put her accent between Walthamstow and Southend-on Sea.

Her companion seemed to me the very type of a development agency manager a long time overseas. His slightly weathered complexion and informal manner, expertise bogus or otherwise, gave him confident unobtrusive authority. Brown curly hair going grey at the temples, he had the false candour of those who never admit their worst mistakes.

How much did they know right then? What was my duty to Joe? What I owed him was what I owed someone else. My leg hurt. I nursed the bandage on my ankle

I said, "Joe was visiting for an interview for a scholarship in University College. He phoned me and we went for a pint in town, round the corner from Dillon's."

"What's José's subject?"

"Economics. He wanted to improve his econometrics."

"How did you meet him, Maeve?"

"I met Joe in Morazán. I was filling in a year between studies and met up with him in the university there. He was an acquaintance. I knew a lot of people there."

"What took you there?"

"My degree is Spanish and French. I was tired of Europe. A friend of my uncle knew of a community organisation there and arranged for me to do a year with them as a volunteer."

"What were you doing?"

"Boning up on Latin American literature, dancing salsa and merengue, drinking lots of beer, scuba diving."

"No political involvement, Maeve?"

"None at all."

"Are you aware that José Fiallos is a leading member of a terrorist organisation, the GPC?"

"You're joking me."

"It's no joke, Maeve. Have you had any contact at all with José Fiallos since you met him?"

"No."

"When you met him did he ask you to help him in any way?"

"Not at all. I was buying the pints though....."

Mary looked at me. False Candour looked at Mary. It was a moment in the conversation where I had just slightly strained our brief tacit complicity. In fact, everything I'd said was true. It might be no more than their realising I had nothing to say to them, that I was unsurprised by them and relaxed at their questioning. Clear, surely, I knew more than I wanted to tell. Then or now, I really don't care at all. No doubt they have their information about me on file - the usual mix of fantasy, fact and hearsay. Let them think what they like.

In any case, they left. False Candour gave me a card. "If you think of anything that might help us, call us on this number." Mary said, "Thank you for your help, Ms. O' Siochrú. We may well be in touch again. Don't get up. We'll see ourselves out." They did.

So many presences in our lives of people we hardly know. Do they make us all enigmatic strangers to ourselves? I remember innumerable things garnered or stolen; stories, places, conversations, gestures of and between people I love; figures of strangers far off, landscapes and speech hoarded piecemeal in memory, remembered, misremembered, present even when forgotten. Does this piecemeal me survive anyone's scrutiny intact?

Raul steps out of my reverie, the stout man with the short haircut and the thick neck, his tie always askew in the hapless shirt-collar. I watched him once in La Bahía walking through a crocodile of schoolgirls. They devoured him in giggles. He was the image of that clown in the Mexican television series, the one with the crew cut and the ill-fitting suit. The first night, as we lay on the bed with the electric fan whirring above us, the interminable traffic noise of Xiguasí intruding from below through the open hotel window, he told me:

"I grew up in Auvergne When I was little, my mother worked for the local doctor as a receptionist and my aunt Sophie used to mind me. She made this great chestnut and lentil stew with mushrooms. In autumn, we used to down bowls of it with fresh rye bread my mother baked. In the winters, my uncle Gerard took me skiing cross-country..... I get homesick when I remember, something about never seeing a bright winter's day and snow as far as you can see.

My parents moved to Paris in 1948. They took over a bar belonging to my grandmother. We sold coal and wood in those days. Things were bad. The bar was in Ledru Rollin, Rue Trousseau. Did you know Ledru Rollin met Daniel O'Connell in 1841? My Dad and my Aunt Agnès were in the Resistance. Dad was a clerk in the Bridges and Highways Office. Gave it up to take care of grandma when she fell sick after my grandfather died.

Agnès was a schoolteacher. She died at Vercors. Dad went there every year on the anniversary. I used to go too, until Aunt Sophie died….. Vassieux, Sancy, Ouradour, Vercors; names hardly anyone

remembers now. I can just remember being with Dad at a service for the ones the Nazis executed at Sancy..... Maybe it's good to look forward and not back. I am all for the young. They're our salvation. As the playwright said, the rest of us die too early or too late.

I did OK at school. But I wasn't happy. The Parisian kids used to bully me…. the fights I got into when they used to call me "flathead"…. I got my baccalaureate and joined the army rather than wait for the military call up. I was in Algeria from '59 to '61.

I moved around in the army for a while, then went back to college. That's where I met my wife Beatrice while she was studying for her aggrégation. In '66 I made it into the Foreign Ministry and we got married. Then in the '70s I was posted to Argentina and Venezuela. Our first daughter Agnès was born in Buenos Aires. Julie, her sister, was born in Caracas. For a while we were back in Paris. In 1984, I was assigned to the isthmus. I've been in La Bahía as Cultural Attaché since 1986. So here I am."

Three reasons why I loved him? He was funny in bed, charming at dinner, kind to children. Old enough to be my father? Sure. Part of the attraction? So what? His manuscript sprawls over the table.

Now I can´t sleep. The visit from the police disturbs me, prompting memories to flow in me; hot sometimes, like desire; then still and calm. Why should it happen so? A sharp recollection of what Raul told me over lunch one time:

We are up in a restaurant on the old road out to Puerto Moro by the stadium looking down on the bay to the north. Two cormorants skim out to sea, a solitary grubby pelican beating south to the coastal forest. Raul is recounting his day, his encounters: Celia Rodriguez, the human rights lawyer.... Mike Walker, the journalist... Ninoska Vileda:

Rodriguez says, "Speaking as someone who has known her since she was my student and speaking, as I know I can with you, in complete confidence, you should understand Ninoska has deep emotional problems." She opens her hands, makes a face of regret. "These stem immediately from the disappearance of her husband by the security forces late last year. But she has a history of instability that originates in feelings of loss about her father who died in 1978.

She's not deceitful. But she tends to exaggerate and dramatise..... Clearly, any final decision rests with you about what is and is not the case. But I am concerned you shouldn't be swayed by well-meaning people, anxious to help Ninoska, but who don't understand our culture and are easily misled either by opportunists, or, in this case, by an individual who is, to put it plainly, paranoiac."

The air conditioning goes off. The motor sighs and rattles to a halt. Another of the power cuts caused by problems with the Maraní dam. Morazán depends for its main power supply on a single large hydroelectric project, built up in the Sierra Maraní by an Italian and Mexican consortium in the early Eighties. The dam is silting up and the turbines have had technical problems since the plant first opened. The government has yet to negotiate a long-term grid sharing arrangement with its neighbours.

Raul thanks Rodriguez. She stands to see him out, looming over him like a heron peering down into an intriguing rock pool. Her air of always being engaged in several things at once irritates. Moderately competent, mostly an actor, she makes people feel at the margins of her concern. Then again, her office

is always crowded with people, above all women, supplicants, relatives of victims; sometimes a delegation of foreigners, earnest students or church people.

Raul crosses the street, makes his way through to the nearby square and walks across to the church, Our Lady of Mercy. The polished dark wooden pews and the statuary remind him of the church back home in Chambon-sur-Lac. How distant the simple presence of his home!

The Romanesque church where Beatrice and he were married. The patchwork fields, pale in spring with the early wheat and, in summer, fragrant with the scent of hay and soft bearded barley. And the deeps of the lakes in the shade of forested volcanic slopes, the water crisp cold even in the summer Auvergne sun.

He sees Rita his secretary. On her lunch break, she helps her mother clean and arrange flowers in the church. Raul nods to her, sits for a while in prayer, missing his daughters and angry with his wife, wishing his faith were stronger.

Outside again, in the glare of the bright heat, he takes the lanes behind the church among the cheap concrete housing. Something tugs at his jacket. Two scrawny street kids gaze up at him like stray would-be domestic animals. He slips them a couple of caramels, as they know he will. They run off, kicking at each other.

Using the limited embassy funds available for small humanitarian programmes, the ambassador's wife has helped Raul set up a project to assist homeless children in La Bahía. She is Cuban, went to college in New Orleans with the current President's wife. They sit together on the boards of a couple of local charitable organisations. With the new young priest at Our Lady of Mercy they obtained a nearby building from the Archbishop. The kids go to school there and get fed. The few for whom there is room can sleep there, the younger ones. The programme runs a small dispensary there too.

Raul enjoys strolling through the market down to the ferry across the Indigo River. The streets are narrow, packed with stalls so pedestrians find it impossible not to walk in the road. Traffic is noisy and slow. Raul passes young Enrique, a thalidomide victim. He has only rudimentary arms and legs. Raul lends him books to read from time to time. Enrique is very bright.

His family dump him on the street each morning to beg and collect him in the evening. He is friendly with the police who use him to observe the ins and outs of the street. He confides many things in Raul. Or perhaps he just invents them to pass the time.

Raul is greeted by the young American writer, Walker, an unfortunate name for an American in the isthmus. William Walker was executed in Honduras after trying to set up a slave state in Nicaragua in the 1840s.

"Hi Mister Pech" he begins. Even his salutation annoys Raul. Walker has the touching, urgent anxiety of people determined to get an answer to matters only either they themselves or no one at all can really sort out. What answers does he want from Raul Pec?

That the world is a just place after all? Should Raul Pec always have a bag of comforting answers at the ready, like caramels for intellectual waifs, like Walker? The writer is on his way to see the lawyer

Rodriguez. He wants to know if there is news on the asylum request from Ninoska Vileda. Raul tells him, "When I have news from Paris I'll be in touch. I hope to hear this week."

His asking is harmless. What offends is his insistent manner, implying the overweening certainty that he, Walker, has a right to an answer.

Raul says, "Unfortunately, I am already late for an appointment, Mr. Walker. You can still make it for Thursday as we arranged? Yes? At the embassy. Good to see you looking so well. Always rush, rush, rush eh? I envy you all that energy. Do please excuse me. Everything is in hand. See you on Thursday."

And so Raul escapes. Further on, he turns to watch the American. Lithe and well built, all that California swimming and athletics, no wonder the women here lose their heads over him, dazzled by his Pre-Raphaelite looks, that glossy brown hair.

Raul takes in the street as he strolls down to the river. Its cast of stall-holders, quarrelling shoe-shine boys, dallying customers and casual passers-by, a thronging theatre of appearances where nothing goes unnoticed. What interpretations are made of what is noticed?

Every mind a world of its own.

A clutch of passengers await the little boat. Short and wide, the cabin forward, rows of benches running aft, it sits low in the water, its diesel engine chugging quietly. Already its twin is returning, part way across the river, neatly painted white and navy blue, the colours of the republic of Morazán. It cuts a diagonal so as to sail into the wharf with the current. The narrow delta of the Indigo River that divides La Bahía in two is tidal.

Raul tries not to pity Walker. But it is difficult. The man wants to help people all the time. Perhaps not to solve their problems. Perhaps he is not naïve in that way. His existential predicament calls to mind the difference between writers who help and writers who prescribe. Some writers point to things as if to ask "See? What d'you make of that?" and others set things out as though saying "This, this is how things are!"

With Walker the underlying cry seems always to be "Look, this is how things should be!" An offer of messy decisive helpfulness to the world. A moral Jackson Pollock. This blob of justice - here! This fleck of compassion - there!

No journalist covering a war has ever been free from a personal agenda. Little changes. Reports on the war here in the isthmus read the same to Raul as reports he used to read of the war in Algeria. Walker's writing is no different. He makes an effort to put the government position fairly. But his outrage at the perceived injustice of the status quo colours every one of his articles.

Maybe people whose own lives have been marked both by resistance to foreign occupation and too by their colonial occupation of another country are less ideologically anxious than professional journalists. They know the falsity of "balance". Balance is always in someone's favour. The main truth about us is our vulnerability. Maybe the best journalism points to what's vulnerable in what people say or do, leaving its audience to consider that for themselves.

In Walker's case, Raul finds his simplicity the best thing about him. He was helpful when they got the request in the embassy seeking political asylum for Claudia Savala the trades unionist, after the murder of her colleague Manuel Gutierrez, gunned down in the street as he shielded her from their assailants, just two blocks from the police headquarters.

In that case, Celia Rodriguez had been anxious to assist. But it was Walker who had helped Raul corroborate the justice of Claudia´s request through contacts with a variety of credible individuals Raul would not normally have been able to meet readily. For her part, Rodriguez offered little more than the usual radical harangue. The embassy granted Claudia's request but the context of the affair caused Raul disquiet.

In the case of Ninoska Vileda, the obvious question regarding Celia Rodriguez seems to be: what has prevented her or any other of the radical luminaries - the union leaders, the politicians, the local non-governmental bureaucrats, the outspoken priests - what has prevented them from assisting Ninoska Vileda? Blacklisted, threatened, unemployable and pregnant, already with two other children.

In her interview with Raul, she came across well - sincere, thoughtful, dignified. Her gaze penetrated beyond courtesy's fences, detecting all falsity, questioning "Where is my husband? Will they not give him to me to bury?" What Rodriguez suggested about her was completely false. Ninoska is no more deranged with paranoia than those around her. So, what could underlie the patronising farrago offered by Rodriguez? The usual pathetic, distasteful mixture of personal and political vendetta? Sectarian antipathy? Tyranny from a perennial radical chief? Some local embellishments, maybe.

Raul walks from the gangplank, across the Avenida Las Palmas, up the steps to the Banks, past the grand Corinthian portico of the municipal offices and across the pedestrian square in front of the Cathedral. Its dome is badly weathered and mouldy, the paint peeling. Along from the steps down to the muddy red waters of the Rio Hermoso, Holstein cattle graze the rubbish-strewn riverside. Incredible they find any nourishment there by that polluted canal. They belong to the local dairy that makes fresh butter and cream for sale in the streets each morning early.

Past the furniture store whose owner changes money illegally. It will be election time soon. She hopes for more clients wanting US dollars before the polls. More secure than the volatile Morazán peso. Raul dutifully notes the rate for his weekly report.

At the embassy the flag is drooping, for once there is no breeze off the sea. Rita has arrived before him. Raul remembers her birthday is tomorrow. He must buy her a card. She turns on the radio for the afternoon news. They go through the final arrangements for a reading at the Alliance Francaise that evening. He asks her to check with the Colegio Darío about renting that empty hall of theirs for dormitory space for the street children project.

On the radio, a newsreader reports that Ninoska Vileda was taken to hospital and later released. Her little boy kept in for observation. A bomb exploded at the house where she was staying. Rita says, "It's that asylum case you're handling. Bad about her boy. Poor little thing." Rita supports the government.....

When Raul told me all of this, the conversation was like a hidden signal for my life to break out and flower; all the loneliness and stifled emotion of my childhood bursting out of me in the weeks that followed. I'd thought I'd grown up after spending a semester in Carcassonne and discovering something of myself there. Morazán made me feel as though I'd been reading everything upside down all my life.

I first saw Raúl in the Alliance Francaise, encouraged to go by Rob Barnes, a sociologist attached to the university with Inter-Church Service Overseas. Rob was a contact that friend of Pat's had given me. So I'd called him the day I arrived in Morazán, St Patrick's Day. Within a week, a colleague of his had found me an apartment up in the old Desdichado district of La Bahia.

Rob knew I'd read French and Spanish for my degree. One evening, soon after I had arrived, his Spanish wife, Evora, took me to a reading of work by the Guatemalan poet Otto Quesada, a noted regional writer, promoting his translations of Rimbaud. There was Raul and there, too, I first saw Eusebia. Evora said, "See the woman in orange? That´s Eusebia Roa. Some people say she´s a man. She's a right wing writer. Runs an art gallery too."

Eusebia was saying in a svelte, level, boy-like voice, "Yes and who do you think pays for that? Who pays for the housing and the health care and the schooling of the mineworkers and their children? The paradox is that Transamerican has created a perfect little welfare state in their little enclave and here come the Europeans prating about free trade and level playing fields. How much are the Europeans paying those communist union leaders to make trouble? "

Eusebia detached herself from her group, taking hold of Raul. I heard her say out loud, "Raul, my dear, explain to these europhiles how totally beastly all you colonialist European social democrats are beneath all your human rights nonsense, there's a good fellow."

She led Raul to one side. They were the same height. Slight and slender beside him, Eusebia seemed to have hardly any breasts. Her bright orange dress matched her auburn-tinted hair. Her lips were full, done in dark purple lipstick. Her café-au-lait complexion and just slightly wide nose made her seem Caribbean. Her eyes were almost Chinese. She must have been in her late thirties. Her arms were lean and muscular. As she spoke she gesticulated constantly with her hands, small compared to her strong looking wrists, moving them sinuously as she made her points. She seemed to have Raul fascinated, as if she were a snake charmer.

I stuck with Evora and a couple of her friends from the university. Otto Quesada, a slim, quietly spoken, grey haired man, in a perfectly-ironed, white collarless shirt, was signing books of his translations - which surprised me by their fidelity and inventiveness. As the evening petered out, we heard a cry from behind us. "Ay Dios! Something is stabbing me!" I turned to see Eusebia with her dress up around her waist, beating at her ribs. She was certainly fit, not a pick of fat on her. She had Flo Joyner-Kersee´s legs. I remembered watching them first across the line at Seoul, time after time, wherever I could find a TV to see FloJo run.

A long black wasp flew out and away. In the silence, Eusebia gracefully collected herself and smoothed her dress down about her. Evora muttered softly, "Well, if she is, where on earth does she keep it?"

"Perhaps she had surgery", I suggested. Evora made a face.

I got my copy of Quesada's Rimbaud and headed home. My barrio was in an old part of the city close by the sea. The nights are so warm in April. I could neither sleep nor concentrate enough to read. In Dublin I had always stayed up late studying. I'd expected to break that routine in the allegedly lackadaisical tropics. In fact I slept less during my time in Morazán than ever.

I used to go walking down by the quays. The first night I startled one of the vigilantes, who keep watch in the neighbourhood, by running up the steep street from the quay as fast as I could. He thought I was a burglar. We got friendly.

He told me his brother worked as a driver in the British embassy. The family are from the Atlantic Coast in Nicaragua. They came to Morazán in 1982 when the war in Nicaragua began in earnest and the revolutionary government began to clamp down on dissent. William, my vigilante, made his way to Morazán with his brother, Johnny, Johnny´s wife Mavis and their two children.

"I don't want no trouble, see, Maeve. I don't have no time for them there politicians and their nonsense. They make life so complicated. No one bothers me here. I do my job. Save a few dollars. When things calm down, I go home. We send our mother money every month. Now and then she writes us. We're fine."

"Don't they discriminate against you here for being Nicaraguan?"

"Maeve, everyone discriminate against the black man, against the man from the coast. You in Nicaragua, you in Costa Rica, you in Honduras, you in Morazán, you in Guatemala. Everywhere they discriminate against the black man, 'gainst the man from the coast. You ask me "Do you breathe air?" Yes I breathe air. You ask me "You walk on the ground and swim in the sea? "Yes, man, I walk on the ground and I swim in the sea. You ask me "They discriminate against you?" Yes they discriminate against me. But what am I gonna do? Swim in the air? Breathe me the ground? I gonna walk on the sea?"

He chuckled ironically.

"Maeve, my gran'father, he from Belize, OK? Died some year ago. My gran'father he speak Arabic, he speak English, he speak French, he speak Spanish, he speak German. My gran'father was a very smart fellow. He fight in the First World War for the British. He fight in Turkey, he fight in France. One day some Turkish guy, he blow my grandad´s leg away. So they send my grandad home. And the British they make big promises. You know, for all the veterans, Home for Heroes they say. And they offer land to the guys that fight in the war. And you know they kept their word. Sure. They gave everyone land who fought in the war. All the stoniest, rockiest land, up on the hillsides. So many stones not an ear of corn could squeeze its little head up through. That´s the land they gave away. And grandfather, him with only one good leg.

My Dad was so disgusted with the British, he married a costeña from Pearl Lagoon, my mammy Daisy Smith, and that´s how come we live in Bluefields. The Spanish here in these countries. They no different to the British. The only reason we survive out there on the coast is there ain´t nothin there but hard work and the sea. Was there easy money on the coast, the Spanish, they'd move in and ship us out in no time."

The moon was full and shed a clear light all down the quay. The seawater was dirty with oil and diesel from the small fishing boats moored all along it. A short man came walking slowly along the railway lines that run the length of the quays and then crossed over, down to where we sat

"Good evening, William. What´s new? Been out on the boat lately?" It was Raul. He saw me, but seemed not to recall me from the reception two days before.

"Hi, Mister Raul. No, man but you name the day and the time and she's already stretchin' to be off from the quay. And you? Must still be worrying about your family, Mister Raul. Why else you walking out so late?"

Raul looked at me. The sea breeze turned cold and I shivered, I put out my hand "Hi, my name´s Maeve. I was at the reading the other night. I was surprised how good Quesada was."

He took my hand. "Raul Pec. Glad to meet you. Hey, William, you're full of surprises. What net d'you use to catch an Irish mermaid in the waters of Morazán?"

"Well Mister Raul, it´s a moonlight seine with this especial fine net, so fine, fine, fine, why, you just can´t see it. And you come round easy, easy, easy while that little mermaid lady she's just dreamin' away just beneath them there waves in the warm part of the water, see, sooo sleepy she is and then sweet and fast you take up tight...so..." He brought his great big hands together as swift and quiet as gentle big men move when they've a mind to. "But what I want to know, Mister Raul is, will Atlético La Bahía beat Diriangén tomorrow evening down there in Managua. You know, I can't help hoping those Nicaraguan Diriangén fellas trash this Morazán side. They are just so full of their selves!"

A whistle blew lightly, three times, somewhere up the hill. William jumped up. "Missed my beat there. Excuse me ...." He headed up the street, loping fast, completely silent, like a ghost in the moonlight. Invisible once he reached the shadow of the houses.

"My accent's not so strong. How d'you know I was Irish?"

"Eusebia Roa mentioned it."

"I don't even know her."

"Not much escapes Eusebia. What brings you to La Bahía, Maeve. Study?"

"Kind of. I'm taking a year off before moving to London next year."

"First time in Latin America?"

"Yeah, everything's so new. I feel like a baby."

"Enjoying yourself?"

"I think so. The poverty's depressing though."

"If you're looking for work, I run a small project for local street children near the cathedral"

"Thanks. I´m already committed to a literacy programme with some women farm workers."

"Too bad. We could do with some good volunteers. Maybe later when you feel more at home here?"

"Maybe."

"How about lunch tomorrow?Are you free?"

"Sure....."

So we met for lunch. Raul was lonely and unhappy then. He´d promised his wife Beatrice just a couple more years. But, fed up with the limitations of life in Morazán, she had returned to Paris early the year before. His own assignment still had eight months to run, finishing in December. His daughter Agnes had just been over for a visit. It had not gone well. They hadn´t argued, but everything they'd done together had been awkward.

He's a charmer, Raul, easy to get along with, passionate about literature and music, good at his job, knowledgeable. Before meeting him, I knew little of Morazán or its history; never knew, for example, that the British settled all along the Atlantic seaboard. I knew nothing of the ethnic distribution or the economy. Just the stereotype of a banana republic and Sam Zemurray's contemptuous dictum on politicians in the region, "in Honduras you can buy a politician cheaper than a mule".

Morazán in the Thirties and Forties had been run by the army under General Ponce Espinoza. He was overthrown after being pressured into holding elections in 1946. In 1949 a moderate nationalist government tried to increase tax income from the big open cast mining operation run by Transamerican Zinc. Suddenly a long forgotten maritime territorial claim by Colombia flared up. US navy ships sailed in, "to maintain stability in the region" according to a White House statement at the time. In the crisis, the government fell and a junta of colonels took over.

The army had run the country ever since, with rigged elections putting a string of venal local businessmen into nominal power. The army owns the national airline, the telephone company, the national cement company, runs a couple of supermarket chains, has its own bank, and a minority shareholding in the Xiguasí Mineral and Railway Corporation, Transamerican's local proxy.

The late Seventies saw what was called La Apertura, when progressive army officers struck a deal with the Liberal party and instigated land reform in response to the threat of social unrest. Then the Conservatives got back into power, taking a harder line both internally and in the region. At any rate, unlike much of the isthmus in the late 80's, Morazán was free from armed insurrection.

Perhaps there's a kind of cachet to having travelled in zones of conflict. And Raul was interesting on the political history. But mostly I'm a hedonist. In Morazán, I was looking to have fun and to broaden my Spanish. The relationship with Raul was, for both of us, a convenient, temporary bonus.

He came along with me to my salsa classes. A fast learner, all adroit with French aplomb, he was unusually agile for such a short man, quick with his hands. I found it easy to slip into those strong arms of his. Later, when we were seeing more of each other, he spent hours teaching me wrestling tricks. He had been army champion at his weight.

He introduced me to a game called Julie, after his youngest daughter, to help decide who paid for our next meal together. We fed lines from modern French drama into our conversation. Lines recognised scored a point. We kept a more or less accurate count. It was a fairly unsuccessful way of organising

who paid for dinner since we were both always trying to get even. As the months went by we took it less and less seriously.

We talked about contraception and HIV. He'd had a vasectomy, but admitted a one-night stand with someone on a trip to Miami, shortly after Beatrice went home to Paris. He said, "I tested for HIV and it came back negative but what does that mean when it can lie dormant for years?" So we used condoms anyway.

He had a thing about my long back and my chestnut hair. I felt like a daddy-long-legs making love to him. He said, "You're more American than Irish. So straightforward about sex." I told him, "Don't be getting possessive now. You older fellas are well-known for getting sentimental when the good thing comes to an end." He sang me a line from the Tino Rossi repertoire, which he knew by heart, "Love is like tobacco, you light up, it burns a while...."

We saw each other two or three times a month. He was discreet enough. I never phoned him.We might have seen more of each other had my assignment with the Women Landworkers Union not taken me down around Xiguasí for stretches of up to a week. Xiguasí, a city of around eight hundred thousand people, was an important commercial centre and Morazan's second city.

Transamerican Zinc money had driven rapid development of the old town through the Thirties and Forties. A strip of modern shops, stores and businesses of all kinds ran alongside the highway leading west to the border, about 110 kilometres away and north to La Bahía about 270 kilometres away. The Xiguasí Mineral and Railway Company operated a track from its mining sites that ran by Xiguasí up to Puerto Moro through a junction town called Las Ramadas. Journeys on the freight trains were dead slow, so almost everyone travelled by bus.

In the border area west of Xiguasí, the military presence was unobtrusive, but noticeable. Traffic on the highway into the city was controlled by checkpoints, usually manned by pistol-toting police. But at times of tension, heavily armed soldiers would accompany them. A small military air base lay to the northwest of Xiguasí near a place called Guajiniquil. Helicopters and military transports flying overhead were infrequent but not unusual.

I fell in love with the country on those journeys, travelling up from the coast into the mountains and pine forests of central Morazan and then on into the plain west of Xiguasí, over to Lake Momotoa. My treats were early morning bus journeys into dawns rolling out before and around you as you coast in descent round a stark mountain road above and down into mist, pine trees like innumerable seedlings pointing keenly up through ghostly wisping white. And then the sun rolls over the skyline like a great auburn disc and you can smell the morning open out as you glance down village streets full of life - not dead like the vacant film lots that pass for suburban Dublin, my home.

Wanting to learn Latin American Spanish as a living language, the job with the Women Landworkers' Union literacy programme gave me a unique opportunity to do so. It also gave me the chance to see the country the way no tourist could, taking walks along remote rivers and lakeshore, down forest trails only local villagers knew.

I spent most time with my colleagues Eva Maria and Yelba Rosa. Eva Maria was of Indian descent, as were most of the rural women we worked with. Like its neighbours, Morazan has several ethnic minorities, surviving enclaves of the colonial annihilation of indigenous peoples.

Yelba was very much a city girl, Eva Maria more at home trekking in the countryside. Both women were primary school teachers. Yelba told me she'd had to give up college. "Only better off families can get their children through university. One day I hope to finish my education degree. If I can save enough money from what they pay me for this literacy programme, I'll go back to college in February."

When we weren't planning or writing up reports in the office in La Bahía, we'd meet up in the WLU departmental offices around the country. If we were working in the Cordillera Los Angeles we'd often work with Eva Maria at her mother's house in Concepción.

Concepción and Xiguasí were just two points in a system of nodes we designed in those months. Although the programme had originally been planned just for WLU groups on the axis running from La Bahía to Xiguasí, we extended it on a pilot basis to make it more accessible for WLU groups in the far west and in the east around Las Ramadas. We rotated our training workshops with the literacy promoters node by node.

Geographically, our program followed the organization of Morazán imposed by the nationalist dictator Ponce Espinoza in the 'Thirties. He had divided Morazán into seven departments: Bahía, Moro, Maraní, Xiguasí, La Virgen, Momotoa and Bikuka.

Maraní is virtually unpopulated. A mountain area forming Morazan's western border, it contains the popular tourist town of Jiñequao and the huge hydroelectric project, the Maraní dam. Bahía contains the capital and some spectacular forests in the foothills of the Sierra Moro and the Cordillera Los Angeles.

Moro, south of Bahia, includes the railway town of Las Ramadas and the deep-water port at Puerto Moro, the departmental capital. Both towns are important centres for surrounding rural areas. The departments of La Virgen, with it's capital of Dulce Nombre, and of Bikuka with its departmental capital of the same name, cover the forests and swamps of the Atlantic Plain.

Xiguasí is the big central department with most of the valuable bauxite deposits. Its departmental capital, also Xiguasí, is the second largest city in the country. The department of Momotoa with its capital Marañon, takes in the lake of that name and, together with Bikuka, completes Morazán's southern border.

Of Morazán's total population of six million, nearly a third live in La Bahía and over half in the three cities of La Bahía, Puerto Moro and Xiguasí. The rural-urban demographic ratio in the 1970s used to be 80:20. By the time of the last census in 1986, that had changed to 50:50. Evidence in 1989 indicated a continuing and accelerating shift from rural areas to urban centres and increasing emigration too, as people travelled abroad in search of a better life.

In our constant round of workshops in one department after another, I was reminded so much of Ireland as my mother and father remembered it and as it still is to some extent even now in 1990. Da' taking

the Rosslare-Fishguard boat, tramping for work as a youngster on the Pembrokeshire farms with his friends from Kerry. Was that so different from the isthmian migrant workers chancing their luck across the Rio Grande? And me? What was I up to if not looking for a better life - albeit a different kind of better?

Eva Maria and Yelba Rosa gave me great practice at teaching basics and a fine moral lesson in solidarity. I learned the techniques of that kind of informal community education. In exchange, I helped them with the project's administration. What I offered was much less than what I gained.

Frequently, I'd go out to the villages. The programme was supposed to serve adult women. In practice, we'd find a class of four or five women, several of their kids and occasionally a man prepared to ignore the jibes of his fellows in order to learn how to write his name. We taught basic numeracy too.

I helped one tall, thin man with huge hands to hold a pencil right, so as to shape his letters more easily. He must have been fifty, tho' he seemed much older. His hands were like wizened steel talons. He had one yellow, nicotine-stained front tooth in all his head. But he was determined to learn to write his name and smiled like a baby every time he mastered a new letter with me. He called me his gatita. Gato, or cat, is what they call people with blue, or grey-green eyes.

That was in Walilika, an untidy settlement by Lake Momotoa below La Gavilana, the wide squat volcano you see in the distance as you drive down out of the pine forests on the way south west from La Bahía to Xiguasí. Walilika lies some 60 kilometres along the dirt road to Bikuka round the lake from Marañon, the last town before the frontier at San Juan. The road runs almost parallel to the border, in places no more than twenty kilometres away.

The main public transport to Walilika, apart from a daily service as far as Bikuka, was a twice daily service in an old Toyota truck, its red paint well faded, with wooden benches for seating. The motor rarely broke down, but punctures were common. Tyres generally, at least in rural Morazán, were worn well beyond their useful life.

Those rides out from Marañon seemed never ending. At a river crossing with a ramshackle concrete slatted bridge, the army ran a checkpoint, a couple of young lads with carbines. Some twenty yards away a couple more swinging in hammocks under trees by a bivouac sheeted over with black plastic.

The forest on either side was full of birds and fauna. People in Walilika would catch monkeys and iguana, armadillos and macaws and try selling them to visitors. The Natural Resources Ministry frowned on it, but did little in practice to stop the trade.

Two steep descents on the way took us down nearly to sea level, before crossing a wide shallow river into the village. The climb back up added an hour to the outward journey, the truck pondering along in lowest gear over twelve bumpy kilometres. It frequently overheated on those climbs.

So between punctures and stops for the engine to cool down I got to know several different spots along that road. Once while we were stopped, a troupe of black congo monkeys began shouting at us from the trees. A small boy with us had a catapult. He shot stones at them until they moved off out of range.

Other times, I'd sit and Eva Maria would point out birds and insects to me, the long grass on either side of the road covered in miraculously camouflaged grasshoppers, mantises and spiders. I discovered a delicate grass spider, translucent green with the most beautiful long legs. There were dozens of them. Yet a casual glance passing by the roadside caught no sign of life.

Walilika was a small town of about 1200 people. Over time, I became acquainted with almost everyone. Two cooperatives were the mainstay of the local economy. They grew watermelon, bananas, rice, beans and maize. One cooperative had cattle and ran a dairy. The early morning bus out would carry milk churns and plastic buckets full of cheeses to Marañon.

At one of their regular stops en route, they sold milk to a Swiss fellow who had a small business on the outskirts of the town making yoghurt. He flavoured it with fresh fruit - papaya, mango and pineapple. He also made a very good Emmental for which I used to take orders from people I knew at the university. Raul too.

We held the literacy workshops in the local school, a couple of classrooms with wire mesh for windows and a zinc roof. Sometimes we had to wait till late afternoon, even nightfall, for the students to assemble. There was no electricity, so we worked by paraffin lamps through scenes from inside a painting by Caravaggio or de la Tour. In the mixture of shadow and dim light combined with the smell of paraffin smoke and sweat, the whining mosquitoes and the sound of letters getting chalked onto a board, came a raw, social, educative intimacy completely new to me.

All through April and well into May the weather stayed dry and hot. People complained that the seasons were changing, recalled the fertile rainy seasons of their youth. The rains finally began in late May, in time for the farmers to be able to harvest their maize and beans in August. Through June and July the rains were good, regular and steady.

In mid-June I had to cross the border at San Juan La Frontera for the day in order to renew my visa. Morazán gave Irish citizens ninety days on a tourist visa. Since I was unlikely to stay the full year it hardly seemed worthwhile to go to all the trouble of processing my residency. That would have involved getting my birth certificate sent out, organising a police record from home, getting a medical certificate, and paying a fee of two hundred and fifty dollars. It was cheaper and easier to cross the border for the day three times a year.

Between mid July and mid August came the dog days. The country people - campesinos - call this time the *canícula*, or *veranillo*, little summer. The rains stop for about three weeks before beginning again with renewed intensity toward the end of August. The mood in the villages was cheerful. Everyone expected a good harvest, despite the late sowing.

In the long periods spent waiting around at Walilika, we walked the lakeshore. In the mornings, La Gavilana towered right up out of the lake with a scarcely moving skirt of cloud about her squat top. There'd be a breeze off the water, almost always from the east, but the cloud hardly seemed to move.

Up to their hips in the water, the women would wash clothes in wooden trays they'd carry down on their heads, piled high with the day's laundry. Their children played and splashed around them. The

women's wet dresses stuck provocatively to their bodies. Some would bathe themselves in the same soap they used for their clothes - a coarse soap, full of bleach.

I never saw a woman there bathe unclothed. The men would go some way away to wash themselves. As a foreigner, I was exempt from local custom. But I was still careful to control my longing to strip into a bikini. The women might have lynched me.

Most of the men thought foreign women were degenerate - the principal images of us stuck in their heads were of white women from the pornographic videos they flocked to see in Marañon and Xiguasí. Can I imagine the fantasies they must have had? Much like my own, maybe.

It took me a while to get used to the constant remarks from men everywhere in Morazán. The men in Walilika were a little more respectful because everyone knew I was a teacher. Besides, the WLU put a lot of work into gender awareness in their literacy classes.

Sometimes we'd broach the delicate area of domestic violence. The women had desperate stories of abuse from their men. One woman I met had only one hand - her former partner had severed the other with a machete in a fit of drunken anger. He'd managed to escape before the woman's brothers could find him. She was lucky to be alive.

Common law marriage is the norm in Morazán. Few people want to pay a lawyer to get married. Unemployment is high, despite the country sharing the low wage economy common to the whole region, or perhaps because it does. Men father children on deluded women who must think, "oh with me and him it'll be different". The man can't earn enough to support her and the baby, then more babies, starts drinking too much, gives up and leaves her.

I found it amazing anyone could survive it emotionally intact at all. Even more astonishing that some loving couples stay together despite everything and make a go of the seemingly hopeless poverty. Slowly, I came to some understanding of the puzzling car stickers I occasionally saw, "Morazán - so violent, so sweet."

Between the journeys involved in my work with the WLU, I'd usually get a few days to myself back in La Bahía. There I'd meet up with Raul. He took me diving, my first time.

One Sunday not long after we first met on the quay that night, we went out with William to the reef that starts about 12 kilometres out to sea to the north west of La Bahía. Raul rented some diving gear from acquaintances who ran a scuba diving school. William located a sandbank shallow enough for Raul to teach me the basics. Then they found a part of the reef only twenty feet deep for me to have my first dive.

The officer said, "That's enough, Sergeant, step aside, if you please" He pulled his weapon and shot the poor bastard in the heart.

All the villagers were watching. This officer, the sergeant, they weren't crazy men, Maeve. They were just men doing their job. These people knew where the arms were. We had to find the arms. The people won't tell us. We'll make them talk. The officer turned to the people.

They just looked at him. Blank as a mist, not blank like a wall. You can see a wall. I looked at those people, Maeve, it was like looking into a mist. There it is. The mist. I watch it. But what do I see? Eyes of witnesses, sullen vapour of hatred, thoughts I can't stifle, shouts of accusation and cries of denial, history impossible to remake, revenge and death, endlessly swirling and silent, unforgetting.

The officer said to my friend Gérard "You do the next one". Questions. Silence. "Do it". Gerard fires. The women cry out. It's so hot, my head feels on fire, I just want it to stop, to be anywhere but there. "You. Pec. The next one's yours."... My God.....God forgive me!....."

I couldn't believe it. Raul, my sensitive, tender lover, couldn't bear to hear him so desperate and listen to his terrifying story. It seemed like a myth, something many worlds from me, he was a traveller returning from somewhere far away with incredible tales.

"A woman screams at us. I fire, Maeve. I.... The man falls back away in front of me no more than five metres away. She screamed "Stop! OK!". The men beating at her. We club them with our rifles. But I've already murdered. She tells us where the guns are. But I've already murdered that guy. If I'd hesitated just a second, the guy would be alive. I wouldn't be a murderer. I didn't. I am. Our officer says later, "You did well, men. It's hard, I know. But it's them or us."

We take all the men and they uncover the weapons where the woman told us. They're underneath a hen-house. I remember wondering why the scrawny hens weren't running free. But they were right beside neat rows of tomatoes and aubergines. We make the men load the guns and sacks of ammo onto our trucks. We take them all back to camp. Most of the younger men are sent north to the prison in Constantine. The next day trucks go out and take the women and children and the remaining men off to internment camps. We burn the village to the ground. We steal their tomatoes and aubergines. We make the women and the kids pick them for us.

So I'm no better than a Nazi. We have learnt from the Nazis. Go after the weapons. You can get the networks later. No weapons, no military activity. So find the weapons. We have remembered our lessons from the Nazi policemen Friedrich Dhose, from Klaus Barbie - recruited by the Americans after the war, by the way. We have forgotten our lessons from school teacher Agnès Pec.

Salan and Massu. What were they? Torturers, authors of the *corvée de bois*, the *gégène* What did they make me and my comrades? Fascist thugs in the uniform of the French army. Soustelle, Mollet, Mendès-France, Mitterand, imposters every one. Mitterand was Justice Minister then and denied a pardon to that Yveton guy. Those bastards all believed war and repression were some kind of way forward - they learned nothing from our time in Vietnam, nothing from the Occupation. The social democrats were worse than anyone in that regard. Even the communists did nothing. Christ, they even voted for the special powers! Even now some of them are as racist as Le Pen....

I remember in 1960 we were several in my unit ready to gun down our officers if they gave orders to support Salan and Massu. There was that business in Algiers when the pieds noirs tried it on, Strong Arm Joe and that guy who always dressed as a paratrooper, I've forgotten his name, real hoodlums. I remember when some of us heard Massu on the radio calling De Gaulle "a man of the Left" - we near burst our sides laughing.

I despise de Gaulle for many things, for his arrogance. Most of all, I remember my father's contempt for the utter disorganisation around D-Day. Our fighters deserved better. Over the radio from London, de Gaulle told the resistance "fight the enemy with all the means at our disposal", *folie de grandeur*, there was no plan. Maybe after all we'd been through we were no good any more at planning. What happened at Vercors... it was just a mess.... over 600 dead. But, after all, and it seems incredible to me now, did you know the Nazis killed more people in Kiev alone, than all the French dead in that whole war? And it's so easy, we too. Me, a bewildered coward, obeying barbaric orders...."

"Raul, stop it! You were a kid then. You've no business talking like that. It's all so long ago now. You're here now with me. You have a talented wife and beautiful daughters. So many people who love you, Raul..... I'm not saying put these things out of your mind, I suppose that's impossible, but don't let them torture you like this...you're a different person now."

He looked at me, just carried on."We French, we mess up on a grand scale. Do I have to regret the loss of Vietnam or Algeria to be a patriotic Frenchman? We should never have even been there..... I suppose whatever else he was, de Gaulle was a patriot. Once the Fourth Republic voted through the special powers in '56 they opened a Pandora's Box no one but De Gaulle could get shut again without a bloodbath in France. I remember my Dad raging at the radio news...

I believe in France, Maeve, and the greatness of France. Is that pathetic? An anachronism? I believe in our capacity to recognise our crimes and to remake ourselves as something better. I work for my country, but sceptically. Like thousands of others who work in government not because we believe in the gangsters who run politics in France but because we can do more to protect what we love of France from inside than from the outside. We have to resist bastards like Le Pen - did you know the creep called for legalisation of the OAS back then? There were times when they were exploding over a hundred bombs a day.....

In '58 people feared a military coup. My memories of those years are all mixed up. I remember in August 1960 the terrible massacre of women and children at Chenoua. We'd got the FLN beaten by then in the field. But it seemed there was no end to the killing. We knew there were negotiations, but they seemed without end.

It wasn't till April '61 the generals tried their luck again, not long after Challe had resigned command. Like everyone else serving at that time, I was praying to survive without getting wounded or worse. The generals were helped by Franco's brother-in-law, Serrano Suñer who was so pro-Nazi, even Franco was forced to get rid of him. That's what *algérie française* meant….

With my mates I listened constantly to radio broadcasts. We listened to Challe. We listened to De Gaulle and by then not one of us would have hesitated to fight the units in Algiers if they'd moved to support the generals. None of us said anything, or planned anything. But all my comrades knew how it would be. It didn't come to that, thank God. Our officers were loyal to De Gaulle, to the Republic.

I left in September of 1961. I was on leave and witnessed the demonstration in Paris the following February in '62 when Maurice Papon's police killed those people at the Charonne metro. Only years

later did I learn of the massacre of Algerians in Paris under Papon's orders the year before. I felt so terribly ashamed, Maeve. We really were the same as the Nazis, worse, for our hypocrisy.

Sometimes it seems like yesterday, familiar, normal and sometimes as though in an ancient past, memories in a dead language. All that stuff is taboo. Censorship makes informed investigation almost impossible. Left or Right, everyone is dirty on Algeria. The only ones who come out of it with dignity, who did something to save some little bit of France were the resisters, just as we were under the Occupation when maybe two per cent of people worked in the Resistance.

We French still can't talk about the Algerian War, we're told we must talk about "events" there. Beatrice used to try and defend the government by reminding me of the atrocious conduct of the war by the FLN. But I don't have to respond as an Algerian, they must live with what they did. Not me. I must live with myself. A Frenchman.

I've seldom ever mentioned all this except to my Dad. Beatrice sometimes helped me talk a bit about it. Now you. Forgive me. Very occasionally, memories flood up from within and choke me, paralyse me. At times I feel as though I can hardly speak. A close friend told me not so long ago I'm like a burglar or a safecracker trying to break into myself to find the judgement of my innocence locked up inside me. Funny, she knew nothing of my time in Algeria. Am I such an open book?"

We heard a train, shunting wagons down on the quays.

Raul said, "One of the attractions of La Bahía for me is the way the town spreads out above the quays, with the railway running away along the coast, the sound of the sea. It reminds me a little of Algiers....."

I put my leg over his so my vulva rested on his hip, his soft penis comfortable against my thigh, one breast in his shoulder, the other on his chest. His hands drooped around my back like sunflowers in the dark. "I'm sorry, Maeve. Sometimes..." I kissed his lips. I kissed his bristly cheek, salty and moist. He closed his eyes. I got my head comfortable on the pillow. We fell cuddled together asleep.

The water was clear and warm. William told me to wear a T-shirt since even under water the strength of the sun can cause sunburn to people unaccustomed to it. Raul and William just used snorkels. They could dive for several minutes at a time, making me feel clumsy, so elegant were they among the groups of colourful fish and other creatures there on the reef. A small ray started up from the sandy bottom, flapping away like a great flat bird.

A long, lone barracuda strayed into our area. It seemed nervous of us, watching us for a while from afar, with a resentful look in its eye, before moving off. I enjoyed the weightless sensation. Puffing myself up with air so as to rise, breathing out to let myself drop. I used up my oxygen like a crazy spendthrift.

The colourful waving hands and fronds of marine flora enchanted and fascinated. It was like being submerged in an enormous body, observing its inner workings of tubes and valves and hemispheres and cells. The anemones waved fronds and fingers, pink, red, yellow and blue,.

As we clambered back on board William's boat, the sun clouded over and a wind got up. The boat felt small and vulnerable now the sea was less calm. Cold, I changed my clothes. We ate sandwiches I'd brought, washed them down with swigs of rum and fresh orange juice. It started to rain hard. We got soaked, laughing as we munched through soggy bread and cheese and tomato.

We had several such trips. I never saw Raul happier than when we were at sea, diving. He seemed to enjoy it even more than making love to me. But he clearly felt the year-end approaching and with it, his return to Paris. He became more serious; occasionally even intense. For our encounters we'd invariably stay in hotels, sometimes in Xiguasí.

The last time we met there was in September. I had just completed another trip to the border to renew my visa. Raul seemed anxious not to violate what seemed to be for him an unwritten etiquette. Sleeping with me in transit areas like hotels was all right. Sleeping with me at my place was somehow to cross a line into a zone of damnation. Very occasionally, he would visit my flat but would never want to sleep there. To stay at his house was absolutely taboo. Although I did visit him there once, for a meal with other guests.

My apartment was on the first floor of a corner house. Rob's colleague, Graham Reed had found it for me through a journalist friend who was a stringer for one of the international press agencies. The house belonged to the journalist's brother. It was very convenient for the centre of town. The brother, Marcel, and his wife, Asunción, ran a grocery mini-market downstairs.

At one end of the street was a small park that overlooked the sea. It had a basketball court where the local youths would congregate night and day, incessantly practising run-ups and lay offs and fancy shots. In between they ogled the girls from the college next door. And the girls ogled them back, watching the boys show off their naked torsos, small bottoms and desirable athletic legs.

The house had a patio on the roof where I would have liked to sun bathe, given the chance. But one of the neighbours was a peeping tom. Even putting up a curtain left me feeling uncomfortable, knowing this fellow was leering over at me from next door. No doubt the curtain increased the excitement for him.

My entrance was up a narrow stair with a heavy metal door at the bottom that opened out onto the street. The steps and floor of the place were tiled. I was fortunate in this. The water supply was very erratic in La Bahía at that time because the city depended on pumping stations powered by electricity.

The constant power cuts meant that water too was often cut off. So it was typical to try the water, find nothing flowing, forget to turn the tap completely off, and then discover later that the tap had been running for hours. This happened to me several times.

Coming back with Raul late one afternoon from a diving trip, I found the journalist's brother, Marcel, pulling at his hair in a dance at my front door, up to his ankles in a chuckling stream of water pouring down the stairs from my flat. I must have left the washing up, accumulated over several days, covering the outlet in the kitchen sink.

"Miss Maeve, you a millionaire? Have you any idea the fine I'll have to pay if the water company finds me wasting water like this?" I hurriedly opened the door and ran upstairs, Marcel at my heels, "You think my neighbours are angels? My neighbours hate me." My feet splashed water behind me all over him. "Every chance they get they try and cost me money, play tricks on me, lie to the police about me, go telling tales to the municipality about me. Please, Miss Maeve, help me. Don't be helping my neighbours to hurt me and my poor family." I turned off the tap and stacked the plates and pans out of the sink on the side.

Marcel turned to Raul then, "Sir, you Miss Maeve's father? Her uncle? Maybe you can explain to Miss Maeve she has to be more careful. Water is very expensive. You tell her Sir, she'll listen to you. She's young. These young foreign people, they don't understand about money."

Raul replied with a genial smile, "I'm sorry. It's true we forgot about the mud. But it is our opening day..." Marcel smiled in response to Raul's smile and then looked perplexed as the words sank in.

Me too, until I realised Raul was being unkindly mischievous, playing Julie. I said, "Sorry Marcel, my uncle doesn't understand Spanish very well..."

His wife came timely up the stair from the street, just far enough to be able to see us. "Hey, Marcel, get down here and leave Maeve alone, you big cry baby. Good evening, Sir. Good evening, Maeve. Don't take any notice of this one. You'd think a bit of water's the end of the world. Need a hand to clean up?"

I said, "No Asunción, thanks. Let me present you: Raul, Asunción."

"Enchanted, Señora."

"Likewise", said Asunción.

Marcel put out his hand. "Marcel Galeano, at your service, sir. Please excuse my outburst. And take no notice of Asunción, everyone knows how women exaggerate."

"Come on out of that and leave them in peace…macho…. "."

Marcel smiled and shrugged his shoulders with arms outstretched, "Can't live with them, can't do without them", grinning his fatuous way down to the street. Who knows why Asunción put up with him? They were different in almost every conceivable way.

"Julie!" I cried, when they were gone, "Genet. Le Balcon."

"Ah yes, but that was easy. Half a point only." Raul helped me swab out the apartment. We brushed the bulk of the water out into the rainwater down pipe on the rear balcony and then got down on our hands and knees mopping up with dirty laundry.

I jumped him just as we were finishing. He played along as I practised the wrestling holds he'd shown me.

"No, not that way. Like this. See?" We laughed till we were sore, lovers in the grip of folly. It was dark by then.

"Shall I cook you supper?"

"No, Maeve, let's eat in town. They think I'm your uncle. You don't want me to be a wicked uncle do you?"

"And what'll you wear? Sure you're all rakish in those jeans and T-shirt."

"We'll eat on the quay, no one cares down there."

So we ate supper in one of the many cheap restaurants along the waterfront: grilled fish in garlic sauce with fried rice and beer. No one caring what anyone looked like.

"You're getting more confident" he said, "the way you flipped back over off the boat for your dive today was really good, you're a natural."

"Thanks."

"Where are you working this week, Xiguasí again?"

"No, this week the WLU have a conference with the Rural Workers National Coordination Council. They want me to help prepare a report to send to their overseas donors. I'm stuck up here for the week."

"I can't persuade you to drop them and work for our street kids programme?"

"Sorry, Raul. I'd go crazy if I were stuck in La Bahía all the time. I really enjoy travelling around the country and working in the villages. It's great seeing people learning to read and write a bit more every time you see them. And I'm learning country vocabulary I'd never come across here in town. You get attached to people too."

"How d'you get on with the union people? Are they ok?"

"They're great. Well, the women I work with are. There's politics going on I don't understand and that affects the work sometimes. Yelba and Eva Maria get fed up with it but don't say anything because they need the jobs. They get angry with some of the men in the other land unions who push for violent land occupations but never seem to get their hands dirty or get arrested. There's never anything in the papers about the land disputes, but most people in the campo really are pre-occupied with land, how it's used, who owns it. They're bitter about the failure of the land reform a few years back. Right now there's some dispute over lands belonging to Transamerican out past Las Ramadas. I still can't make out why Transamerican is such a big deal here."

"Bauxite is Morazán's main export, Maeve, although not its main source of foreign exchange. Back in the twenties, Transamerican struck a deal to get monopoly rights over bauxite exports. They own some of the richest agricultural and forestry land in Morazán. Morazán bauxite is highly economic. Chemically, it's generally more gibbsitic even than Jamaican bauxite and also has a high rutile content. So it's marginally less costly to extract the aluminium and also renders marginally better material for titanium products than comparable deposits elsewhere. Morazán is just a few day's sailing to aluminium plants Transamerican operates in South Carolina. So Transamerican, through local proxies, owns the railway, the biggest local shipping company and about 14% of the surface area of Morazán..... But they don't have it all their own way, the army here owns the telephone company and the national airline, and has an effective veto on presidential candidates. I should add the army high

command are trained at Fort Benning, just up the road from Transamerican in Georgia..... But don't read too much into that."

"This is the first time you´ve given me a clue about your politics, Raul,."

"I'm a Frenchman, Maeve. And although I'm not a Gaullist, if you knew how the Yanks treated De Gaulle, especially between the Casablanca summit and the landings in Normandy, you'd hardly be surprised at the way we see things, even now. Maybe at Casablanca the Americans thought they were in Central America, after all, it was hot there with lots of funny little brown people all over the place, an easy mistake to make. One thing I'm sure of, never trust a Yank. In any case, from there to here, we French have learnt some bitter lessons about our allies and about ourselves too. They reach deep into every one of us, into our marriages and into our children....."

"You hardly ever talk about them. Or Beatrice. We're happy Raul and I like you very much. I'm no psychiatrist and don't want to be. But don't think I'm someone you can't trust, please...."

"You're a good person, Maeve..... I'm not sure any more whether it's my nature that keeps me in my job or my job that defines my nature. Diplomacy is an extended confidence trick, like so many other vocations and, obviously it affects the way I treat people outside work. The job never leaves you....

Beatrice and I are by no means radicals. We've both always kept our thoughts and beliefs to ourselves. But we had a kind of contract to be open with each other and to hide nothing from each other. One of the reasons she went back to Paris is because I found I had to keep some things from her. She couldn't bear that breach of faith. Before she'd always put our life together before her own.

She's a brilliant teacher with many friends. Here, she did seminars and classes in the university. They were very upset when she left. Then, once the children got a taste of Paris at their age they were hardly going to want to come back here. But we'd always planned on the girls finishing their education in France, going to university there. So in a way all that's happened is that we've brought our plans forward a year. It's not that Beatrice wants to finish the marriage. She's angry that something changed. We just need to work it out."

"Am I a problem?"

"No Maeve. Beatrice and I are married, not chained to a galley oar."

"So what did change?"

"Some people say Morazán is a very special kind of place. Sometimes the very ground seems to slide away from under you. But I've lived all that before, Algeria, Argentina ...any conflict seems to turn things all on their head. For me the only difference is that here, for once in my life I was convinced to do more than lean off the fence from time to time. For Beatrice, that's what changed. I still don't know if I'm an idiot or not. In Algeria I saw terrible things. It was Beatrice who helped me come to terms with the guilt and depression I felt about all that. For a soldier from a Resistance family, serving in Algeria was heart-rending. It's hard to explain. And I really shouldn't."

"But there's nothing going on here, Raul. The army's got everything sewn up. Nothing happens here."

Raul looked at me as though it had never occurred to him until I said it, "Yes Maeve, I suppose you're right. Perhaps nothing that happens here is worth mentioning. Another reason Beatrice headed for home. More beer?"

That night he stayed at my place after all, for the one and only time. My body never touched the ground. He hugged me into him and I wrapped my crane fly legs around him. He burst open inside me like a beautiful, great flower opening up to the sunlight. (Surely botanists got their terms wrong: pistil for the female part of the flower? What were they thinking of? I doubt they knew that "pis" means vagina in Irish).

The first wave broke over me later, I fell softly into our deep sweet well of desperate longing, clinging to his neck while he stayed with hardly a pause until we both came again together and he just sank to his knees with me onto the mattress on the floor and we toppled over and he just said my name over and over again, with little sobs in between. I was barely conscious of him there underneath me, a floppy wet anemone between my legs. I was on a petalled lakeshore with warm fresh water breaking through me, lapping over me.

We slept for a while. I woke later and found him awake too, gazing away somewhere. "Where are you now?" I asked, stroking his forehead.

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, "I'm in a village north of Biskra in the Aurès. It comes back to me again and again.... We'd rounded up some guys from the village and knocked them about so they'd tell us where they kept their arms. They wouldn't talk. We stripped them and one of them had a fresh gunshot wound in his side....Our sergeant took a pencil and stuffed it in the wound and wiggled it around, stabbing around inside this guy with his pencil. Every stab a question. The guy just stared at him. Didn't scream. Nothing. We just watched.

A couple of days before, we'd laid out some of our men collected from a fellahin ambush , their throats cut, their privates cut off. We laid them out so as to parade newly arrived draftees past them. It was standard practice to terrify the kids just arrived in Algeria into doing whatever they were told to do. Them or us. Them. Or us. What's it going to be? Them. Of course. Every time. Them.

"Things with us are a little difficult right now. A lot of the guys in this cooperative are thinking about going away to look for work in Costa Rica or maybe Guatemala. A couple of guys have gone wetback to the US. If you look at the membership of the cooperative now you'll find more women than men because so many of the guys have gone away. That really began last year, but it's worse this year and it'll be worse again next year. The best we can really hope for is to try and grow enough food to feed ourselves and see what we can do to sell enough produce to be able to pay ourselves a wage and leave some aside for future investment. Another problem we have here is that inflation is high. So a machete that cost twenty-six pesos last year will cost you thirty-five this year and that's the same across the board, but the prices we get as producers hardly go up at all. More often they go down. It's tough."The group liked Maribel. She was charming and knew her stuff. She had an attractive, simple way about her that didn't mask a resilient and resourceful nature.

The exchange carried on for about forty minutes before Eva Maria and Yelba began pointing at their watches. We had a schedule to keep. Shirley and Connie and couple of the others asked to take photographs of the hamlet and the people.

They were given a quick tour: the bare kitchen with its clay stove and cement sink, where the children received lunch each day on a programme funded by a Belgian aid agency; the houses, poor timber walled structures with roofs patched up out of zinc sheeting and lengths of plastic. A couple of the buildings had adobe walls with the typical small, red roof tiles. In one of these the cooperative had its office, where Maribel proudly showed off the ledgers with the cooperative's accounts.

The children and some of their parents followed Maribel down to the roadside to see us off. Everyone in the group was very affected by this, the skinny, ragged children waving and shouting as we drove away. Connie said, "I'm real glad we made the effort to get down here. I think I've learned more about what our foreign policy means in practice today than I'd ever learn watching TV or reading the newspapers."

We left the co-operative just before five, so by the time we returned to the delegation's hotel in La Bahía it was nearly eight o'clock. We'd chosen a hotel where the menus were in English as well as Spanish. So we left the group to clean up and eat.

Yelba and Eva Maria came with me for a beer. We found a comedor nearby, a couple of voluble students the only other customers. We sat watching the traffic crawl along La Bahía's narrow central streets.

Yelba said, "Seems like they're enjoying their visit. They seem like nice people." Eva Maria agreed, "They're very different to the usual image of people from the States. When I was in Nicaragua last year I met a lot of people from the United States working building houses in the poorer barrios. Some of them explained to me there's a big protest movement in their country but they can't do much to change government policy because everything is dominated by big business. "

"I didn't know you'd been to Nicaragua"

"I went for a seminar on Women and the Environment. The WLU sent me with a couple of others. It was good. There were women from all over Central America and the Caribbean."

"What was it like there?"

"Lots of shortages because of the war. The US trade boycott makes everything difficult. People complain about the rationing and the queues. But health and education are great compared to here. Thousands of students from poor families are studying who'd never get the chance if they lived here. I don't like the militarisation and the way everyone's careful what they say, but that's the same here. At least in Nicaragua they have a war to explain why things are like that. Here we..."

Yelba poked her beneath the table with her foot . The two students had shut up and were listening to us. We drank our beers. I paid and we left. Eva said, "Me and my big mouth. Thanks Yelba." "Sorry, Eva. I didn't like the way they were looking at us" "You were right. I'm so stupid. Being with these gringos makes me forget where I am somehow."

Yelba said to me, "We have to watch what we say when there are outsiders around, Maeve, especially someone like Eva who's been to Nicaragua. There are plenty of Nicaraguan Contra here and the police have informers all over the place. The last thing we need is unwanted attention from people like that. Here they think you're a communist just for teaching people to read and write."

For the first time, Yelba's remarks made me realize the work I was doing might be more politically coloured than I'd realised. To me, all I was doing was teaching literacy skills to women living at a level of poverty I couldn't have survived more than a day. I left Eva Maria and Yelba and took a taxi home. It wasn't safe walking alone back to my barrio from the city centre after dark.

I started wondering about Raul's circumspect relationship with me and about Eva and Yelba and their lives. I began to feel vaguely apprehensive about being in Morazán. I could taste Raul's tears from our last night together. And I felt the angry anxiety in Yelba and Eva Maria as we headed for home. It all got mixed up in me somehow. I was glad to be tired and able to sleep.

I slept profoundly and woke alone. The fish seller went by outside crying "fil..et....e!... chu..let...a!.....".

I was late. What had he meant, "For once I was convinced to do more than lean off the fence..."?

The Women Landworkers' Union had their office in a narrow three-storey house round the corner from O'Higgins Park. A bust of the first president of Chile sat in a small triangle of grass facing a couple of stone benches and a busy bus stop. Steps led down behind O'Higgins to the terminal of a fixed route taxi service. The office was a twenty minute walk for me, up to the top of my street and then straight down to the cathedral, past the Independence Rotonda then across the little stone bridge over the misnamed Rio Hermoso, past the central army barracks and then up again towards the US embassy over by Heroes of Verclaro Bridge, named after the band of independence fighters who stormed the Verclaro fortress in 1795.

It wasn't a rich barrio, most of the houses were owned by families struggling to make do on two or three incomes from family members working in low paid clerical or retail jobs, maybe helped by occasional remittances from a relative in the United States. Right next door to the WLU was a cheap comedor run by an Ecuadoran man known to everyone for some reason as *el panameño*. Up the street from us was a cafe and bookshop, "Alcaraván", run by a local writer who taught at the university. Across the street was a tailor's workshop and next door to him a shoemaker's. On the corner was the Golden Tiger International Restaurant and a Chinese mini-market run by the same family.

They sold attractively decorated porcelain soup bowls with matching spoons and half-litre mugs with lids, ideal for small gifts. When I had trouble with cockroaches once, Yelba Rosa told me about the special chalk they sold. I thought she was kidding me. But it worked. Just draw a few lines around the kitchen and in the cupboards and drawers and the cockroaches stay away. Every time I went there it was evening, the children serving customers between homework, their schoolbooks open on the counter.

Yelba was on the phone in reception when I finally got to the office. The WLU had a high staff turnover. Secretaries came and went, cleaning women too. The organization paid very little and the

executive were demanding, especially the director Amelia, who was frequently overbearing with subordinates. Yelba, Eva Maria and myself often found ourselves minding reception.

Eva Maria hadn't arrived yet. She was travelling up that morning from the country. A couple of officials from the National Coordinating Committee chatted on the stair, Segundo Perez and Chico Miranda. I disliked them both because they treated Eva Maria so dismissively. Eva was short and plump with glasses. She always wore baggy jeans with a loose top and clumpy boots.

But they were all over Yelba who was slim and pale skinned with long chestnut hair and hazel eyes. She had a nice figure and often wore her clothes deliberately tight, "just to get the bastards going" she used to say. And you'd catch the men occasionally, hanging their mouths open after her like newborn calves.

Preparations for the national rural workers' conference were complicated for us by the arrival of a delegation of fourteen people from Canada and the United States. That day, I found myself with Eva Maria and Yelba, dragooned into organising a programme of visits for the delegation in the country outside La Bahía, prior to the conference. They were a mixed group both in age and background, mostly church people.

None of us had ever met this kind of group. We felt apprehensive. Later in the day, we went to meet them at the hotel, all squeezing into one of their rooms. To the group's amusement, I fell into a classic transatlantic Englishism. We had explained the program. Someone asked about arrangements for the morning. I translated Yelba's explanation, finishing "so we'll come around at about seven and knock you all up for breakfast" after a moment of puzzlement, one of the women turned to the men and said, "well it looks like these gals have you fellas pretty well out of a job!" A woman from Philadelphia kindly explained my gaffe to me later.

We set off early next day from La Bahía in a rented bus, with room for twenty, comfortable enough with space to stretch out. The group looked about them from within the culture-capsule we'd launched. Settlements of shacks of tin and cardboard stacked and perched up hillsides steeper than a pyramid. Shoeless children in nothing but grubby shorts, scrabbling and squabbling and laughing in the dust. Old women bent double, carrying bundles of firewood bigger than themselves on their backs. Men like scarecrows wheeling gimcrack carts with loads of reinforcing steel and sacks of cement along what seemed like an endless highway. Past hungry looking cattle, ambling at will along the roadside, slight young girls walked with plastic buckets full of water on their heads. In that sun, they could have been the daughters of Danaus, condemned for eternity to fill a sieve.

At a cooperative near Las Ramadas, we showed the delegation the literacy and gender programme the WLU ran there. They took photos of the children and the women making *güirillas* and *tamales* with freshly picked maize, squeezing the moist grain through what looked like hand-mincers to produce a pasty mass ready to work and cook. Most of the men were still in the fields, but some of the cooperative's junta directiva showed up to explain the workings of the cooperative and the main problems they faced: lack of technical support and credit.

They explained the perennial temptation to sell up for hard cash and the constant pressure of bigger landowners to buy the families out, especially in time of drought. "But we've worked so hard to get some independence and at least some control over our lives. We'd have to be really starving to give all that up now. Most years we can squeeze by if we can get credit. But the banks get tougher each year and right now interest rates are up around 18%. So our margins have never been tighter. That's why it's so important we get a good harvest this year. We're lucky because we have good storage capacity. So if the prices are good, we may even end the year with our debts cleared and a small surplus."

The interpreting was both tiring and tiresome. Many of the exchanges were repetitive. I felt mildly annoyed at being made part of a show, unfairly maybe. For our visitors the chance to speak directly with rural families was a great way to discover how people really live behind the glib foreign policy jargon and news magazine gloss.

Yelba was happy flirting with a couple of the younger unattached men under Eva Maria's sardonic eye. I fell in with Joanne, a bus driver from Chicago. Joanne didn't say much but asked intelligent questions. She didn't seem especially political. She had lovely hazel eyes, like Yelba, but set off more sweetly by her rosier face and full mouth. Yelba's face looked harder because her lips were thin.

We were driving to the southwest by then, to the edge of the central highlands where one of the cooperatives was trying their luck growing tobacco, hoping to break into Morazan's nascent cigar industry. Despite the heat, everyone in the group, all much older than me, was agreeable and patient. About half were retired. When I sensed Joanne begin to tire of the attention I was paying her, I retreated over to Shirley, from Philadelphia, and her friend Connie from Portland, Oregon.

Unlike the others, they were long-time campaigners against US government policy in Latin America. They had memories of South American friends who had escaped the many frightening conflicts in those countries in the early seventies. Shirley said, "But in those days everyone was still caught up in the anti-war movement. It was hard to get people that interested in Latin America".

I was stupid enough to ask, "Which war, Shirley?" Connie said, "Now isn't that interesting, Shirley. We forget how old we are, you and I." Shirley smiled and told me "Vietnam, honey." Joanne looked at me with interest and said, "How old are you, Maeve?"

Eva Maria said, "Tell them we're stopping here for lunch."

The roadside restaurant stood at the junction called La Sabana, where the road from Las Ramadas joined the main highway between La Bahía and Xiguasí. Several restaurants and cheap comedores were sited there since it was a halfway point for the express buses on the four-hour journey between Xiguasí and La Bahía. Plenty of trucks and cars used it as well.

A crowd of women and children hung around stalls under trees some way from the restaurants over by the railroad tracks. The tracks sat up on a slight embankment running parallel to the main highway. The crowd were food vendors waiting for the stopping buses that carried less well off passengers who'd be mostly too poor to use the restaurants even if their buses stopped there long enough.

Not hungry myself, I helped Shirley and Connie work out what they wanted in the restaurant. My mouth and throat felt dry from all the talking I'd been doing, speaking for both sides in every conversation. I left the others to their lunch and went out to see if the vendors across the road had any fresh orange juice.

"Hey you, gimme *peso*", the children, mostly barefoot, "peso, peso", milling around me, "hey *gringa*, dollar, gimme" but they soon lost interest. A bus pulled in to take on passengers, as a convoy of large Toyotas with polarised windows and covered with election campaign materials, slogans and photographs, sped past blaring their horns. Leaflets scattered from the windows, blowing about in the slipstream before falling to the dust, ignored by everyone but me.

The children charged across to the bus stop, provoking the even louder horn of a charging freight truck, heading down to Xiguasí and the frontier. They ran from end to end of the bus on either side, as if laying siege to it like a pirate boarding party, trying to find the weakest point at which to enter. They all carried little posts with a cross piece at the end studded with nails on which they proffered up dangling and swinging plastic bags containing quesillos, enchiladas, tajadas, cola, fruit frescos, roast chicken pieces and salad.

I bought my fresh orange juice from one of the women at her stall and made it back to the safety of our little bus, sitting beside it on a bench outside the restaurant. I read one of the leaflets. They were for Enrique Cabañas, the Liberal Party presidential candidate, a pale-skinned middle-aged man in a jacket and tie, beaming unconvincingly out of the photograph. "Everyone with Cabañas. For a better tomorrow." Joanne joined me.

"Who's gonna win?"

"No idea, Joanne. Most people say the Conservatives will get in again. But the policies are pretty much the same whoever wins. The Liberals messed up the land reform so badly a few years back no one takes them seriously any more, so they say. Who knows?"

"Sure is hot," she said, "what's that you're drinking?"

"Fresh orange juice. Want some?"

"Will it give me diarrhoea?"

"Mmm...might do It's got ice and I doubt if the water for the ice was purified"

"Ok, I'll pass, thank you" She sat down beside me. "Maeve, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"Are you gay?"

"Depends."

"Depends?"

"Sure, who'd turn down the chance of a loving, happy relationship just because the other person happens to be the same sex? Or the reverse? If I love someone it's for what they are, not for what they carry between their legs."

"You like guys too, huh?"

"Sure."

"That's interesting. I wasn't too sure about you, you know."

"*Tranquilo*"

"*Tranquilo?"*

"Fine, no problem."

Joanne watched the children fighting over money thrown down from the bus in payment. "I don't think I could live down here at all. Don't you find it depressing?"

"Sometimes. But there's plenty going on and people here don't sit around making victims of themselves. Tough on the children though...."

"Yeah. You know, you don't seem to be too political, Maeve. That's nice. I get so tired of hearing people run down my country. I don't think anyone wants these people to live in poverty, why don't they vote in a government that will help them? I just don't get it."

"I try not to talk politics, Joanne. I don't understand enough of what goes on here to feel entitled to an opinion. I know in Ireland we're still a poor country relative to the rest of Europe. Morazan is like Ireland in some ways. Anyone with a brain will emigrate if they get the chance. There's little opportunity here for people with talent."

"Don't you miss home?"

"No. Well, some yes, some no. I miss the *craic* like, but..."

"*Craic*?"

"Fun, y' know, going out for a drink and listening to good music and having a laugh.... letting yourself go. But Ireland's still in the dark ages socially, there's no divorce, right now you can't even buy condoms over the counter, views of sexuality are still incredibly oppressive, my gay friends wouldn't dream of coming out...."

"No divorce? What, it's illegal?"

"Aren't I after telling you?... That's how far advanced we are socially, with politicians to match. The gangsters in power here have nothing to teach Charlie Haughey....."

Joanne laughed, "You sure you try not to talk politics, Maeve?...."

"Don't be windin' me up, now, you."

She grinned at me and flicked her hair as she looked up and round behind her as the others filed out from the restaurant back onto the bus. We joined them.

As we headed west along the highway to the next visit, we saw the tobacco drying houses just twenty kilometres further on, heading up towards La Bahía. They were in a valley set in the lower slopes of the central highlands, built like huge frontier galleries from the Old Wild West from *costanera*, the timber cut off from the outside of the tree, still covered in bark.

Each drying house was about fifty metres long and maybe as much as six or seven metres high with two rows of neat little wooden shuttered windows spaced every couple of metres or so. I almost expected them to fly open any moment and cannon or muskets to poke their barrels out for a broadside as we drove by, something out of Fenimore Cooper. The extensive fields around were full of tall green tobacco plants. Gangs of men manhandled sets of aluminium irrigation tubing and sprinkler systems between the corridors that separated each block of cultivation.

The cooperative we were visiting lay up a track off the main road. We had to leave our bus and walk. The cooperative president met us at the side of the highway, a woman. She introduced herself as Maribel. She and a couple of men from the cooperative escorted us up a slope to the hamlet where most of the families lived. On the way up the wooded track we passed a pool of water below which a woman was washing clothes. The pool was fed from a narrow plastic pipe that stuck out from brickwork built into the ground above the pool. Maribel said, "This is where we get the water for the houses. It's much closer than the river."

From where we sat we could see their land stretching away to the west of the highway. Maribel pointed it out to us, doing all the talking. She was a short woman, strongly built, with a sweet round face, a small nose and slightly Chinese looking features. She wore faded blue jeans and a red T-shirt with blue plastic flip-flops on her feet.

She led us to a place in the shade of a huge ceibo tree where a couple of dozen old painted chairs had been set out for us. The whole cooperative assembled around us. Children seemed to outnumber adults. Their clothes were soiled from the day's activities. Only the older ones had shoes.

Some of the boys sought vantage points for gringo watching from the lower branches of the ceibo. More women than men were present, a couple of them painfully thin-looking. Some beautiful young girls stared at us between telling off the boys and minding the infants they carried. The younger adults seemed fit and well, the older ones all worn out.

We settled down for Maribel to begin her talk. She had her hat in her hands. As she spoke she kneaded it, wrung it and turned it over and around constantly, as if she were nervous. But she spoke fluently and coherently, which made my life much easier as I found the interpreting less of a strain than with the people over near Las Ramadas. I almost knew what Maribel was going to say and the phrases she was likely to use before she said it, the flow of what she said was so logical.

"Well, hello, my name's Maribel, people call me *La China*, I'm the president of this cooperative which is called the "Enrique Contreras Amador" Cooperative after one of the martyrs of the rural workers' movement here in Morazán. We work with the Women Land Workers' Union on education programmes. And they thought you'd like to visit us to get an idea of what life is like for us compared

to what it's like in the United States. On behalf of everyone in the cooperative I'd like to thank you for coming all this way to see us and I'd like to tell you too that you're very welcome."

As I translated, the group responded "Thank you".

"We have about 180 manzanas of land in our cooperative. This year is the first year we're trying to grow tobacco and it's been a big mistake. Because just after we decided to try and grow tobacco we discovered that the price of the insecticides we'd need to control pests went up by over a third and then we had trouble with our irrigation pumps so we had to buy two new pumps and then our neighbour, who's a big shot cattle rancher round here, he ran his cattle through about half the area we had put down to tobacco. So it looks right now like we're going to make a small loss. It's not a complete disaster but it's not something we expected at all. We'd have been better off staying with maize and beans and sorghum and maybe onions. The only thing we can say is we saw far enough ahead to plant a bit more maize and beans than we actually need to feed ourselves, and unlike other years we've been lucky with the rains so we've had a pretty good harvest this year, for a change."

Someone asked her why they had tried tobacco at all.

"Well, maybe we got greedy, or maybe we all had hangovers the day we took that decision... It doesn't make much sense looking back now. We'd had a good few years growing cabbage and tomato so we had some money in the bank and those vegetables were getting harder and harder to grow as the white fly and other pests became more prevalent. You see what happened was that the bigger guys round here began to get into tobacco about three or four years ago. And they really piled on the insecticides. So the bugs kind of got displaced from their crops to ours and then they seemed to start being able to survive any but the strongest pesticides. So that made growing our vegetables much harder, we ended up being able to grow just onions 'cos everything else just cost a fortune in pesticides and the return we got didn't cover the cost. So then we got to thinking, well, maybe we should try growing the crop that does pay enough to cover the cost of all those inputs. And then we spoke to the government technical people and they came out and did a few workshops with us. And then we talked to the bank. And then we talked to the Cuban guys who run the cigar making companies who buy the stuff. And they were ok. And it didn't seem like such a bad idea. And then we planted it and things just seemed to go wrong one after another."

Joanne asked "What's the story with the cattle rancher, can't you sue him for all the damage he caused?"

"Sure. But we wouldn't get far. He's also the local army battalion commander and his sister is the local judge. Really, they're just saying to us, "know your place and stay there". We don't have much room to move around here without bumping into some kind of wall or other. And we have to know the limits of what we can push for without inviting too much repression. We're lucky he didn't arrest us when we drove the cattle out. These big time guys, they just do what they like and we have to nod our heads and say "Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir!" It's pretty frustrating."

"Why did you think you'd do better with tobacco than with basic grains?"

"Well, the price of maize and sorghum has dropped a lot in the last couple of years because the government has imported a lot of maize and wheat from the United States as part of a big aid programme - I think it's called some number like PD90 or something"

"That's PL-480" said Shirley.

"OK thanks PL-480, yeah, so these imports come in and they affect the prices wholesalers want to pay us for our maize and sorghum. In any case, the last few harvests haven't been too good anyhow. And neighbouring countries have been sending their grains to our markets too. We'd been doing pretty ok until about 1986, about three years ago. Between basic grains and vegetables we were doing pretty ok. But then we got that problem with the pests attacking our vegetables and then we found our prices going down for our grains and that pretty much corralled us into a decision about how to find a more profitable crop. We got it badly wrong."

"So what do you think you might try in future?"

I rose early so as to wash the laundry I always let accumulate for too long. The laundry area was a large concrete sink up on the top floor of the house with lines strung out over the roof to hang the clothes. It was another beautiful morning. Down in the city, that enormous theatre set, its cast all ready for the day's performance, shopkeepers ran up their shutters. People stood at bus stops heading for work and soldiers on guard outside the barracks.

A *sanate* landed on the rooftop parapet wall, cocked its shiny black head, and winked at me. Asunción and Marcel were quarrelling. One of their children began to cry. They stopped. The child stopped crying. Marcel rolled up the security shutter to their mini-market. Seven o' clock.

I hung the last of my T-shirts out to dry, leaving some sheets and jeans to soak. Asunción used to tell me I was crazy to wash my own clothes, dissolute for never ironing them. But I'd promised myself never to have anyone wash or clean for me. I couldn't forget the line Edmund Wilson quotes from Villiers de L'Isle D'Adam's "Axel", "Living? Why, our servants will do that for us..."

The more I stayed in Morazán and came to know it, the more I realised how much I love life, the things and people in it, how complicated and fascinating seeing and touching and hearing it all can be. I don't want to dream and theorise and have servants to do the routine business of living for me. What can that be except some fancy solipsism? I remember Da' driving Mum into fury, mocking her when she quoted a line from Yeats. "Sure, the only stuff of all that fella's dulcet blarney worth reading are the poems about real people..... O'Casey, now ..... " and they'd be off……

I made it to the hotel in time to grab some coffee with Joanne and Shirley and Connie, I couldn't warm much to the others. They were good people, sure. but I suppose I fell in with these three for the mild interest they showed in me. I mentioned the incident with Yelba and Eva Maria in the bar. "It worried me. I suppose I'm used to being free to argue at college. I can't get my head around the idea that someone can be there looking over you, policing what you can say."

Joanne said, "I guess we all have to be aware of what people think about us and maybe worry about it some. But if you don't conform in the US, you don't get locked up." "Well Joanne, honey," said Connie, "I have to disagree with you there. Things may be a little bit different now, but only because a whole lot

of people have gone to gaol and lost their jobs and been harassed in all kinds of ways for their beliefs. And the only reason we enjoy our freedoms is because people are still willing to make a stand and demand justice. Look at this Iran-Contra affair. We must be the only country in the world with a president who has crazy moments of aberration and then just forgets he ever had them and everyone smiles and says "what a Great Communicator"!"

The others were leaving. We joined them, heading for the WLU office where the group had a meeting on the political situation in the run up to the approaching election with a journalist called Walker. He was already waiting for us at the WLU office chatting to Yelba, the WLU president Amelia Duarte and another woman I didn't know. Walker was a tall, slim man with broad shoulders and shiny curly brown hair. His bright blue eyes were startling, set in a sharp sun-tanned face. He stood up from the desk on which he had been sitting, "Hi everyone. Let's go upstairs to the meeting room"

The entering group offered their "hi"s and "hello"s and followed on up the wooden stairs. Thankful not to be translating, I hung back to greet Yelba. We had reports to prepare for the rural workers' conference and evaluation sheets to design for our literacy work.

Yelba said, "Maeve, this is Janet. She'll be translating at the conference over the weekend."

"Hi, Maeve, Yelba's been telling me about the great work you're doing on the literacy programme." She embraced me as she spoke. Her strong voice, earnest and gentle, opened out in friendship like a great hand, "You going to the meeting upstairs?"

"I need to work with Yelba on some reports."

"Too bad.... see you later maybe."

One of those great waves of impulsive desire flooded along my spine and broke, receded. Is it just me that has these moments? And then she wasn't there.

Yelba and I found Eva Maria already working in our big back office on a questionnaire we needed for the evaluation exercise we had planned. For days before the delegation, we'd been trying to decide on the balance between open, closed and multiple-choice questions, what was too complicated, what we could assess realistically in terms of changes in attitude and confidence. The original information gathered the previous year as part of the funding request left several gaps, making meaningful comparisons difficult.

I said "Hey, we just say that and explain why the project has developed in ways that weren't foreseen at the start. No?" Yelba looked at Eva. "Amelia wouldn't like that."

"Why not?"

"She did the original baseline study with Mary Douglas."

"Who's she?"

"The local director of Action for Peace and Development. They're the project's biggest funder. She's been here for years. She's very influential."

"So what do you two think? Are we going to do a Mickey Mouse job or are we going to do it right?"

Eva Maria laughed, "We're not supposed to think. We just present our work to Amelia and the others and they write it up the way it looks best to the funders."

"So what are we supposed to be doing? Evaluating the results of the literacy project or writing fairy tales for the funders?"

Yelba sighed, "Maeve, it may look simple to you but we have to live with this all the time. You think we don't get frustrated? Do you know what I earn on this project? I get US$250 a month. Where else am I going to earn that kind of money here? I'd have to work two jobs in order to earn that anywhere else. Here it means I earn enough to keep my family and still have a chance to study at night for the university entrance exam. Do you think we want to put up with all the crap we take from the other rural workers leaders we end up being secretaries for half the time because Amelia and the other executive members owe them favours? We can't argue with Amelia and risk losing our jobs. "

Eva Maria said, "Don't worry about it Maeve. The funders don't care so long as they get a report that shows an evaluation was done and some people were taught to read and write. The important thing for them is that they've spent the money and it looks good on paper. That's all they care about. We can worry about whether we do a good job, that's our business. All Amelia and the junta directiva care about is ensuring the funders keep doling out the money. That's their bottom line. It's not wise to make an issue of details. It just causes trouble."

This was the first time we'd talked about the way Amelia and her colleagues treated us. I was determined not to let the chance slip. "Is that why we travel by bus all over the place and Amelia and the others drive around everywhere in their big Toyotas, courtesy of the aid agencies? Who does pay your travel costs anyway? I've never seen either of you fill out an expenses claim."

"Maeve, stop it. Everything is fine. Don't stir things up, please." Yelba pleaded with me the way a parent might with a spoilt child.

"You pay your own costs don't you? And they bill their meals and transport to the project? They probably write out receipts for your expenses and put the money in their pocket. Do they?" Yelba just stared at me.

Eva Maria said, "Maeve, we need some more display paper, come and help me get it will you?" She wasn't really asking me. She said to Yelba, "We'd better type out the questionnaire as far as we've got and leave it for Amelia to edit, OK?" "Sure."

I hadn't wanted to upset Yelba. But she was upset. Conflict sometimes springs from nothing when we least expect it. A single unexpected word can be enough, a look, an intonation. Like desire.

As we walked glumly down the street, we passed some young Conservative government party workers glumly pasting up election posters for Teofilo Largaespada, their presidential candidate. Eva Maria said to me, "The election's only a week away now..... Maeve, can you do us a favour."

"Tell me."

"Yelba and I really need you on this project. When you came first I thought you'd be just another selfish intern passing a few months before going off to some fancy college in your own country. But you're different from the usual foreign volunteers we get. We've learned a lot from you."

"Thanks. Me too."

"But we need you to tread carefully for us. Many interests cross close to us. A problem in one thing can make problems with other things." She looked at me to see if she was getting through.

"Go on," says I.

"So we need you to be patient and silent, to help us, me and Yelba. Let's just do our job, avoid asking questions and not worry about things that don't concern us. Can you do that for us, Maeve?"

"OK Eva. I'm sorry. You know I like you and Yelba and I love working with the campesinos. I just can't bear to see you being cheated. It's easy for me. I'm the one with the ticket out of here. I know that. But... come on, let's buy this paper. We need some acrylic markers too."

When we returned to the office we saw the delegation leaving. I waved to Shirley and caught up with her. "Hi Shirley, look, I don't think I'll be able to make the conference. But I'll catch you before you go."

"OK Maeve. Thanks. Gotta run now, we're meeting that woman lawyer, Celia Rodriguez."

I followed Eva Maria back in to work, gave Yelba a hug and a kiss. She'd been crying. I apologised for being so insistent. We carried on preparing materials for the following week. We forgot our sharp words, but we were all tired, glad it was the weekend. We worked through lunch, just eating some enchiladas we bought from the neighbouring comedor, El Panameño.

The heat and humidity made me feel sluggish. I realised I probably wasn't drinking enough. But the purified water was all gone. And I knew coffee would just make me irritable. The afternoon went quickly and I was glad, looking forward to some time completely to myself.

We'd made good progress towards finishing the evaluation materials on Monday so as to run them off on the Gestetner stencil machine ready to print. Come five o'clock, we packed everything away in the cupboards. Yelba and Eva Maria made a quick getaway to avoid any of Amelia's last minute "Can you just type this for me before you go?" tricks. I stopped to chat with the night security guard, a wiry old man called Esteban.

Esteban believed people are kindred to plants since we, like them, depend on water. In the small patio at the WLU he kept beautiful roses. Sweet natured and eccentric, he had a soft spot for me. and would give me seeds for the little herb garden I kept on my rooftop: coriander, basil, a mint-like herb called hierba buena, oregano and rosemary. For my part, I had introduced him to butter beans and courgettes with seed from a foreign donation made to one of the groups we worked with down near Xiguasí.

Esteban was notoriously bad at taking messages; either forgetting them or passing them on so garbled that no one could make sense of them. Amelia regularly threatened him with dismissal for this failing. I

think I was the first to notice he seemed to be deaf in one ear. In any case, he was always saved by his faultless attendance and time-keeping and his complete honesty.

As I was taking leave of him, Amelia and Mary Douglas came down the stairs. "Maeve, are you away now? Have a good weekend. You deserve it. Do you know Mary? Mary, this is Maeve, she's been working with the literacy programme for the last few months."

"Hi, I'm Mary Douglas with Action for Peace and Development, what agency are you with?"

"I'm here on my own. A family friend put me in touch with the WLU."

"Oh, how interesting...." Her superficiality splashed over pedestrian me like spray from a limousine speeding through a puddle in the street, "we must meet up, maybe you could write something on the programme for us. You here long?"

"Till March next year. I'd better head, I'm late and it looks like rain. Good luck with the conference Amelia. See you now..."

I couldn't care less about them. What they thought. What they felt. Brash me, let them think.

A minute after I left, the rain started, falling steadily as I negotiated the busy pavements and streets jammed with traffic, reckless noisy buses and office workers hurrying home. Before getting too wet, I stopped at a bakery near the central park, ordered a coffee and sat watching the crowds, waiting for the rain to stop. Half La Bahia seemed to have the same idea, the café area filled up in minutes.

It was mid-September now, the time of the Independence Day parades. September fifteenth was Independence Day. But in Morazán the main marches were on the sixteenth, the anniversary of the heroic, but ultimately vain, assault on the Verclaro fortress.

A youth band out for a final practice in the park stood bedraggled wet in their nineteenth century military costume. Skinny teenage boys with triangles laughed with voluptuous majorettes, their hair in rats' tails over epaulettes sticking awkwardly out off glossy blue tunics. Slender legs disappeared upwards into skimpy frocks and downwards into impossible stiletto-heeled, fairy tale boots. A fat boy with a crew cut shielded his bass drum. All huddled against the frontage of Abdallah Cloths - the city's biggest general drapers' store.

I was thinking how to catch up with the delegation before their flight on Monday morning. I really did want to say goodbye to them. My ear was aching. I felt as though some kind of infection was taking hold of me.

"Hi, Maeve." It was José Fiallos, one of Rob Barnes' colleagues. "Can I squeeze in?"

"Sure. How you doing?"

"Pretty well. A bit worried as the election gets closer. Feelings run high at the university. But it's always like that in the university at election time."

"What's been going on? I've been out of touch the last few days."

Looking around the packed café as he talked, José said. "Nothing much really... I envy you being able to get out of it all working in the villages down south. How's that going?"

"Pretty well. I enjoy it so much and it's great for my vocabulary. This last week I've been interpreting for a delegation from the United States."

"That's the group down for the solidarity conference at the Teacher Training College this weekend. I have to give a workshop there tomorrow. You going?"

"No José. I'm feeling pretty rough. I think I'm coming down with some viral thing. My ear's aching and really I'm not sure I'm that interested. I can't work up enthusiasm for politics and elections. I think all that's pretty superficial given the scale of the problems here."

José smiled, "Rob and Evora are having a barbecue tonight. Did Rob phone you?"

"No."

"He asked me to mention it to you anyway. Come along. It'll cheer you up. I think he wants to organise last minute things for Graham and Zenaida's wedding next Saturday."

"Thanks José."

"Rain's stopped. I'm off. See you later maybe. If I don't, take care of that ear infection. Don't want you going deaf on us."

"I'll cross the park with you" We walked out into the fresh evening air, avoiding puddles in the uneven flagstones. We mingled with stragglers from the troupe of musicians, water droplets glistening on their trombones and bugles.

Francisco Morazán, hero of Central American independence, reared over us on his stone steed, failing to rally the musicians to a glorious destiny.

"Told you it would rain," moaned a drummer to a soggy fife player.

Someone gave commanding voice to the ghost of Morazán, "Come on now everyone! Form up! Hurry along!"

Parting from José, I trekked slowly up the steep hill to my apartment. The rains had washed little gullies among the uneven cobbles. I felt I almost had to use my hands and climb to make the top. Darkness fell just as I reached the door. Asunción was minding the shop "Hi Maeve. You ok? You look worn out."

"Got anything for an ear ache, Asunción? I think I just got over tired and some bug has grabbed me."

"Dolofor is good for pain relief. One every four hours. Here." She gave me a couple of sachets, eight tablets.

"Thanks. How much?"

"Forget it. Go on upstairs and rest. I'm on my own tonight. Marcel's gone to the football. Got anything for supper?" She slapped a mosquito on her shoulder.

"Yes I do. Thanks Asunción. You're a pet."

"Water's off you know. Don't leave the tap open...", she laughed.

Upstairs I took the painkillers with some boiled water from the fridge, kicked off my shoes and lay down. The pain ebbed away somewhere. I fell asleep in my clothes, exhausted.

Waking in the night later, thirsty, my ear felt much more painful. I had antibiotics left over from a previous infection and decided to try them as well as the painkillers to see if it eased the inflammation.

The streets were quiet. Frogs and toads sang out in the neighbours' backyards. Downstairs Marcel was snoring. I went up to the roof and watched the moon drifting through the prussian blue ocean dark and the pale drifting cloud. The painkillers worked quickly but cold and sweaty at once I couldn't sleep. I got out of my clothes and put on a vest and sweater. Some chicken soup remained from the night before. I heated it up and drank it from a mug.

The solitude brought to mind my student days, that semester in Carcassonne, the attic room up seven flights of narrow stairs, carting water to wash each morning from a tap in the courtyard below. The roof leaked whenever it rained, until I climbed out one bright Sunday morning and hooked myself to the ridge with an old rake. It broke and I fetched up clinging to the eaves. The neighbours called the pompiers. An Alain Delon look-a-like rescued me and got us both our photo in the local paper. Still, I fixed the leak.

It was my first time away from home in Dublin, my first affair, Soulange, my landlord's wife. "We aren't bad just because we love each other, Maeve. My husband's bored with me. He has a woman in Perpignan. I'm glad. While he's with her I can be with you." I slept, remembering my mouth yielding to her tender kissing, her sweet wide smile and strong freckled shoulders.

When I woke again it was daybreak, a dull cloudy sky, rain blowing in off the sea. My sweater was damp with perspiration. I wanted to shower but only a trickle of water dribbled from the showerhead.

Switching on the radio, set to Radio Maravilla, the biggest independent station in Morazan, I stripped the bed and carried all the laundry up to the big sink on the roof. The drizzle blew in under the open canopy. I heard Asunción clattering pots in her kitchen and looked out again over the city below as it came to life: the nothing-new forever new.

The centre of La Bahia is compact. The commercial and residential areas stretch along four radial ways that start out from the huge Republic rotonda. A boulevard crosses the Indigo River to the poorer side of town where most of the city's population of over one and a half million people live. The National Palace is conveniently located not far from the Central Army barracks, so the generals have only to cross the road to topple the President, whenever national interest demands.

The house I rented, at the top of the hill called El Desdichado, looks down over the Central Park and the adjacent cathedral. The banks, post office and phone company are only fifteen minutes walk away. The Central Street stretches from the small Independence rotonda down to the passenger ferry on the Avenida Las Palmas, which follows the Indigo River from the docks to the Heroes of Verclaro Bridge.

The bridge is the main route out north from central La Bahia, connecting it with the Chanillas market area, the bus station and the sprawling shanty barrios and the industrial areas and commercial districts on the ring road beyond.

The ferry is run by the city corporation, taking foot passengers across the river to and from the market area and the city centre. Up on the Verclaro point over Las Chanillas, the old colonial fort, now the city penitentiary, looks down as the ferries cross. A squat presence, it has wide crenellations along its walls, cloudy opal white in the sunlight against the tropical blue sky. Hard to imagine the courage required to attack such a place as the independence fighters did, without artillery, taking the defenders by surprise, storming it by sheer bravado. It did them no good. The Spanish retook it; starving out the rebels after routing their army with superior firepower at a battle near Las Ramadas.

Traffic flows freely along the Avenidas and the Boulevards, but the narrow streets in between are clogged with vehicles all day. So the Verclaro ferry is a quick, efficient service that saves a lot of time, connecting with cheap fixed-route taxis on either side of the river. The fare is just 50 cents of the Morazan peso. Set on a monthly sliding devaluation against the US dollar, the rate for September stood at just over 12 pesos.

At that hour on a Saturday morning the city is quiet. The vegetable, fish, milk and cheese traders wander their rounds, crying their produce. Shoeshine boys go from door to door. Over at the smart Hotel Atlantico, curtains draw back from the windows, one by one. The grubby, litter-strewn Rio Hermoso looks marginally less worn-out and hopeless as the rain swells its meagre current.

I tried the tap again on the laundry sink. Muddy coloured water gushed out. I managed to wash a few shirts and some underwear. The effort made me tired and faint. I went downstairs again to rest.

On the radio, the reporter was describing the previous night's football match. Real Xiguasí beat Atlético La Bahia four goals to two. One in the eye for Marcel, his team are having a bad season. They lost out in the Central American Cup in their quarter final against Nicaragua's Diriángen and now have only a two point lead in the national league over the Moro Lions. And the Lions have a game in hand.

I left the radio on, an interview with the Xiguasí forward who scored a hat-trick, a Costa Rican international, then some commercials:

Fabuloso soap powder - "for a whiteness your mother-in-law will envy"..... Dollar Gigante, remittance and parcel service - "taking giant strides to be the best"..... La Serenidad Funeral Parlour - "ready credit available, sympathetic service"..... "To the Point" Adolfo Lacayo's current affairs show, "Adolfo brings you the facts they want to hide, don't miss it!" .....Then a spot for the ruling Conservative Party - "Vote for Stability and Growth. Vote for Peace. The Liberals are bad for Jobs, bad for the Family. We're doing OK. Let's keep it that way!" .....The news headlines: National Guaranty Bank may default..... A bad car accident on the airport road, two killed..... Student leader stabbed in assault.....Strike looms at Transamerican.....

It went silent all on its own. I puzzled on this for a moment, before realizing it was another power cut.

I fell asleep again and woke to find Asunción feeling my temperature on my forehead and neck. She and Marcel had kept a key ever since I left the tap open that time and flooded the apartment. "How you doing? I was worried not to see you this morning after you said you felt bad last night."

"I'm Ok, Asunción, just dead tired and my ear hurts like crazy."

"Want to see a doctor?"

"No. I started some tetracycline in the night. If that doesn't clear it up I'll worry about seeing the quack then."

"Someone called Walker phoned with a message for you. Said he'd call round at lunchtime. And a messenger left this note for you just now"

"Thanks a million Asunción"

"I made you a lemon drink. You must drink plenty when you're sick with fever."

"Thanks. Could you pass me that bottle of pills on the chair there? "

"Shall I let this Walker fellow in if he comes?"

"Sure", I took another tetracycline.

"Ok, I'll call in later anyhow"

"Thanks Asunción. You shouldn't trouble yourself you know."

"It's no trouble. See you later. You sleep now:"

Just after she left, the radio came on again, music. I opened the message. It was a note in French from Raul:

"Dear Maeve,

in haste while I finish some work here at the embassy. I hope your week has not been wearisome accompanying the American visitors. I've missed you, and am anxious to see you. Beatrice has written. I may have to leave earlier than planned. I'm free tomorrow afternoon, Sunday, and after that on Tuesday and Thursday evening. Are you still going to Graham Reed's wedding?

Tenderly

Raul."

I closed my eyes. Raul might leave early. Did I care? Sure. Much? Hard to say.

What could Walker want? I hardly knew him.

I realised I was anxious to say goodbye to Shirley and Joanne and the others. How would I see them?

Radio Maravilla began the Saturday morning request show. Nine a.m. My joints were aching now, not badly, but enough to make me feel tired. I turned the radio off and put on a cassette, Stan Getz, one of my father's. The only material things he left behind, his music collection, some funny shaped chisels, a small tool for pointing masonry and a couple of pulley blocks for a three-and-two handy-billy: His

legacy to me along with his semi-marine steeplejack jargon, his contrariness, long limbs and the modest engineering union accidental death insurance of which he'd made me the beneficiary.

I tried reading for a while, Amaya Amador's "Constructores" about building workers in mid century Honduras, curious, the correspondence between the feckless, noble, dour characters of the novel and my father and his mates; a forest of symbols casting familiar looks at me. I didn't read for long. So tired, I was glad to pass out for a while.

Asunción woke me with another glass of limonada. The pain in my ear seemed less acute. Outside it was still overcast and drizzling.

"That Walker guy is here. You up to seeing him?"

"Sure... this limonada is great Asunción. ...Did you show him in?"

"Yes. He's next door."

"I'll get up. I feel much better, you know. Just the aching in my legs and hips."

"You'll need to rest up a good week, Maeve. Seems to me you've got a dose of dengue fever. That can affect your heart, you know. You mustn't get agitated. You're always mixing up your washing and cooking and taking showers and opening the fridge when you're hot and bothered, just in off the street, when you should be resting and cooling down. I'm surprised you haven't fallen really ill before now, the way you carry on...It's a good job you never do any ironing, you'd do it just before or after taking a shower or doing some washing and that would really finish you off...."

I pulled on my slacks and combed my hair as I listened to Asunción's strictures. She looked at me. "You young people, you think your elders are fools and were never young ourselves. Well, smile all you like. When you're my age you'll be telling your children the same and then you'll remember Asunción Garcia of La Bahía, you'll see."

How old was Asunción? I put her in her late thirties. Short and shapely despite the beginnings of a flabby midriff, with her beautiful glossy black hair in one of those complicated decorative plaits, a golden brown Madonna in her cooking stained T-shirt and tight fitting jeans. I could see the teenager she was before she fell in with Marcel.

"Asunción, you're so good to me." I hugged her. "Would you be cross if I asked you one more favour?"

"Tell me."

"Could you phone the French Embassy and leave a message on the answering machine? The number's double two one double zero. It's just for the cultural attaché. Can you tell him I'm sick and I'll phone him on Tuesday?"

"Sure."

"How's Marcel doing? I heard on the radio La Bahía lost to Xiguasí."

"He's OK. It was a good excuse to get drunk. Now he's regaling all the customers with how bad the referee was and how lucky the other side was and of course they only won because they had that Costa

Rican player and half the Xiguasí team are gay. That'll keep him happy for a few days, maybe even until the next game."

When we went next door to the main room we found Walker sitting leafing through his newspaper. Asunción said, "I'll leave you then and I'll do that message right away Maeve. I left you some chicken broth on the cooker. Don't forget it, will you?"

Walker smiled at her as she left. "She's nice," he said, "Tough, but nice. I'm sorry to bother you when you're sick, Maeve. I wouldn't have come if I'd known. How are you feeling now?"

"Just tired and sore. Asunción thinks it's dengue. Seems like a mixture of things to me. Some viral thing and an infection that's gone to my ear. I'm drinking Asunción's limonada and a cocktail of painkillers and tetracycline. Seems to be working."

"If you can sleep and drink plenty, that helps..... I've been at the solidarity conference this weekend. The delegation are very impressed with you, you know."

"Thanks. I'm worried I won't be able to say goodbye to them and they leave the day after tomorrow. How's the conference going? Are they happy with it?"

"It's going well. Everyone's got a lot out of it. José and Graham Reed both gave very accessible presentations on the economy and the environment. José covered the macro financial stuff. Graham gave an overview of the economic impact of environmental trends and vice versa. It was fascinating for me. Economics isn't my strong point. This afternoon we cover the political background. Tomorrow morning the proposal is for a series of workshops before lunch and a plenary session afterwards, hoping to finish around four p.m. Maybe a couple of the group could call over to see you then?"

"That would be great... forgive me, I've forgotten your first name...."

"Mike.... the reason I wanted to see you Maeve is to ask your help. Quite a big help since we hardly know each other."

"Try me."

"I'm involved with a support group for people suffering harassment from the army-backed paramilitaries here. We have a teacher called Ninoska Vileda who's very active in the national union. She's having difficulties and is under pressure to leave the house she's renting, over in the Chanillas. My place is full and we're desperate for somewhere for her to stay this side of town for a week from next Wednesday. It's her and one of her children. I know it's asking a lot. We can pay you if money's an issue."

"Why me?"

"Well, you seem a kind person. Everyone speaks highly of you at the WLU. And there's no one else reliable who can help."

"That sounds far fetched, Mike. What about all those university people?"

"The fact is, Ninoska believes only a foreigner will be able to give her the temporary protection she needs until the elections blow over. We think the Jesuits over in Puerto Moro may be able to help her out with some work medium term. We just need someone to put her up while we get that sorted out."

"There's no need to pay me Mike. If she doesn't mind sleeping on a mattress on the floor and minding for herself, that's fine. I've loads of space."

Walker looked pleased, then quizzical. "That's real good of you, Maeve. I'm worried about taking advantage of you on barely even an acquaintance. Not everyone would say yes, you know."

"I'm not political. Mike. But I flatter myself I'm a humanitarian. Want something to drink?"

"No thanks. I'd better get back to the conference. I left Janet managing the interpreting and she'll be needing a break real bad." He stood up and offered a bashful handshake, like a giant toddler. "This is real good of you. I'll turn up with Ninoska on Wednesday night about seven. O.K?"

"Fine, good luck, now."

"You rest up good, Maeve. Bye."

The door banged shut behind him at the bottom of the stair. I looked about me. How bare the place was. A large, plain, unvarnished pine table, one two three four five plain pine chairs, a couple of planks on red bricks to shelve my books. Files and papers set out in piles along one wall - my filing system. The floor of those ubiquitous ornamental cement tiles, flecked red and white, practical, cool in the heat and easy to clean. The off-white coloured walls.

There, my collage of photographs: Dublin, Paris, Carcassonne, London. Mum in the garden in Cabra, Dad suspended off Deptford power station over the Thames, Soulange on the beach near Perpignan, student friends from Trinity, Uncle Pat in his studio. Then a print of an odalisque by Matisse, movie posters of Simone Signoret, Jeanne Moreau, Arletty; a gallery of icons from my lonely teenage years transplanted to this space stolen by volcanoes from between two oceans before people even existed.

I went and leaned in the bedroom doorway, observed the ever-patient chair; floating duplicitous matter, my clothes slung over a cord stretched from window to wall, the sheet-strewn, rumpled bed. Was this quasi-harmonious mess something I wanted?

Soulange said she fell for the rebel in me. And me? Three things I like about Soulange, her gentle laugh, her charity, her beautiful full breasts. And Raul? I like the way he's vulnerable, his massive biceps, and, paradoxically, his loyalty to Beatrice. Of course it's possible to love several people at once. Most people of any feeling do, one way or another. Isn't that what parenting's about? That quote from Signoret about Marilyn Monroe, "If she loves my husband, that shows she has good taste, I love him too...."

The fever rose in me again. I realised I hadn't eaten. I took the soup Asunción had left and my pills, opened the persianas to see the weather. Rain. I closed them.

Back in bed reading "Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter" I was surprised to learn De Beauvoir came second only to Simone Weil in their year-end philosophy exams. Her philosophy tutor asking, "Do you

really think, Simone, a woman can find fulfilment without love and marriage?..." All that learning, so little help.

What variety of fulfilment? Are there not many? I laid the book aside.

Raul would go. I wished him and Beatrice happiness. Why should I not? I did love him. Yes. But that's not my fulfilment. A string of more or less happy loves won't be my life, nor is it. My heart holds them all for good, not more deceived for that, nor less. Just what it is.

I wanted what Soulange wanted, une vie humaine, a human life. Fulfilled in myself not in or with anyone else, lover or family or friend. I carry their gifts to me, glad of them, but glad most of all when my heart is not hidden from me. Yes, I'm sad Raul will leave. He'll have my love in whoever's arms he is. He may want to remember me, or to forget. That's his life, not mine.

I passed the afternoon and evening in bouts of sleep, listening to the radio and in fitful revision of my papers. I even managed some correspondence: a letter to my mother, a postcard to Soulange.

In the night the ear infection was less painful but I had bad diarrhoea and puzzled over how my body could produce such large quantities of liquid on so little input. My hips and legs ached more acutely. I passed out in the dawn and woke later to bright sunlight from the open persianas. Asunción must have called in while I was asleep. The wind had dropped. A pleasant breeze blew fresh sea air into the room. A new glass of limonada sat on the floor by my head.

I reckoned it must be late morning, maybe even lunchtime. Radio Maravilla gave me the time and more commercials: " "Clínica Fajardo - the best in medicine for you and your family." …… "'Make it New' - the latest in art and writing. Eusebia Roa, 2 till 3 every Sunday. Radio Morazán, the Voice of Morazán."…… "Eight years on. The country needs a break. Eight years of corruption. Eight years lost. Let's get the country back on track. Vote Liberal! Vote Cabañas!"…… "Fabuloso - washes more - washes whiter - try it and see!"…… "You want it Rapido! If we don't stock it. They don't make it. Don't waste time looking around. Try us first, Rapido Autoparts. The best parts at the best prices." ..... Time now, one forty, one forty on a beautiful afternoon here in Morazán here on Radio Maravilla.....Let's move on now with this, the latest from Mabel Duran:....:"

Mabel Duran with her chirpy sexy outrage, plenty of accordion and raucous sounding brass

"I phoned you in La Bahiá, I phoned you in Xiguasí, I called you in Puerto Moro,

You're never in...What's going on? What's this game? You say you love me, Then just disappear....

I called you in San Pedro, Roatán, San Salvador...you're never there, Just the same old message every time....

I called you in Managua, Choluteca, San Miguel, Even tried your mother in Miami. Your sister in New Orleans..... Enough's enough,

No more messages, no more tears, No more calls, no more fancy phone bills..... You and me, we're through.....

Don't call me, baby. You're out of line. Out of order and out of time..... Me and the operator we're doing just fine....."

I hadn't heard Eusebia's program and switched over to Radio Morazán to catch it. Nearly two o'clock.

The pains in my joints had eased and my ear felt much better, sore but not painful. I took my pills with the limonada, thought about getting dressed. Hungry, I took what was left of Asunción's chicken broth and the last of some soda bread I'd made during the week in a late night fit of nostalgic domesticity.

Eusebia's programme came on with the opening of "Rhapsody in Blue". Her strong, direct, dry voice, seductive even across the airwaves. "On today's program we discuss his recent award of the Ruben Darío Literature Prize with essayist and journalist Rodolfo Rugama Galo; Francisco Machado reviews the visiting exhibition, currently in Mexico City, of Twentieth Century Italian Sculpture and Claudia Tellez reviews the latest films. First our weekly poem in translation, read by Gloria Suarez, Cavafy's "Poseidonians" in a version by the Mexican poet, Javier Valladares....."

The efficiency and smoothness of the programme was slick, her interview technique provocative and clever. She got the best out of Rugama who seemed to enjoy evading her intimidation since it gave him a chance to show off his learning. In his seventies , he came across as an engaging, incorrigible old flirt.

I was surprised Radio Morazán, the Conservative party station, ran Eusebia's programme. Her right wing views were well known, but her flamboyant reputation, especially in sexual matters, ran against the party's image. From Brazil, she had arrived to live in Morazan after her father died in 1987. She had friends in La Bahía and ran a gallery with them.

Apart from that apparently successful art business, her articles appeared regularly in the local and regional press. Rob and Evora had told me the gossip. Her family had money from sugar and cattle on some huge acreage in the Brazilian northeast, so she could survive the regular cash flow droughts of the local art market.

Her political views had won her many friends in Conservative circles and her unconventional frankness about sex, perhaps excusable in an exotic foreigner, made her acceptable to many of the Liberal Party elite who fancied themselves as contemporary, if not progressive.

Radicals and left-wingers, especially in the university, reviled her. Abuse Eusebia was happy to return with healthy interest, so Rob Barnes said. Myself, I enjoyed her programme and was seduced by her style.

The front door clattered. I tidied myself up and went to see who it might be. Asunción poked her face through the stair rails, "Hi Maeve, you ok? That Walker fellow is here with some gringas."

"Oh, thanks Asunción. I'm much better now. "

"You slept ok, that's good. Sleep is the best doctor. I'll send them up. See you later."

"Thanks"

What could I get her to show my thanks? A dress? Some material to make a dress? A good excuse to dawdle and dally around the aisles of Abdallah Cloths.....

Shirley and Connie came up with Mike Walker. It was a short visit. They were tired after the weekend conference, anxious to rest before an early start the next morning. They had to be in the airport an hour before their flight at six fifteen.

They brought me a few gifts from the delegation. I was touched and surprised. It reflected more on their kind natures than on any service I had rendered them. They stayed long enough for coffee, which Walker made and brought up to us where we sat on the roof. They enjoyed the view and the easterly breeze in the cool of late afternoon.

Below in the city we could see the Conservative election rally, the last of the campaign, a mass of blue flags with people crowded into trucks and pick-ups and cars in convoy from across the Heroes of Verclaro Bridge to the Republic rotonda. There on a podium, surrounded by an impressively large crowd, the Conservative party candidate, former La Bahia mayor Teofilo Largaespada, was making a speech.

We shared our bewilderment that people from the poverty stricken shanties across the river and from along the old Puerto Moro coast road could show such enthusiasm for a wealthy elite that cared little whether they lived or died.

"Pork barrel politics" said Shirley.

Walker added, "Without the pork. Anyway most of that crowd will have been bussed in from the country. The Conservatives are stronger in rural areas than in La Bahia or Xiguasí. That's where the Liberals hope to make inroads in the vote."

Talk turned to their early departure and naturally then, to our goodbyes. As they left, Walker handed me an envelope marked RSVP, "Graham Reed asked me to pass this on to you." It was an invitation to his wedding the following Saturday, the day before the election.

Life was rushing by, leaving me behind; these good, generous people walking in and out of my life while others, as if in the distance, made life-long commitments. Freak-like, clutching goodbye presents, I observed the world flit past from my temporary stage-prop apartment. It made me giddy, that intimation of fragility beating against permanence, like a bee at a bolted window, sunlight and flowers unreachable in the garden beyond.

They left and I was alone again.

I felt well enough to have a shower and put on clean clothes. Feeling fresher, better able to concentrate on reading, I managed to finish off the rest of "Constructores" at one go, closing the book just before midnight. I liked it for its realism and humanity, a tougher version of Robert Tressell's "Ragged Trousered Philanthropists", one of my Da's favourite books. Someone had recommended Amaya Amador's "Green Prison" but so far I'd been unable to find that in La Bahía.

All day Monday, I rested. Asunción helped me yet again by phoning the WLU to say I wouldn't be in until Thursday. I thanked heaven the rural workers' conference would be over before I got back.

By Tuesday, I felt much stronger. I went down to Abdallah Cloths, wandering its cavernous halls almost the whole morning before buying five metres of an attractive floral cotton print in the pastel

blues and greens that Asunción likes best. I bought her a perfume from one of the stalls in the square on Central Park too.

In the post office I mailed the letter to my mother and the post card to Soulange, checked my mailbox. Nothing. From Unitel, the state owned phone company, run by the army, I phoned Raul using one of the public booths.

"Maeve, thank you for calling. How are you feeling?"

"Good. I don't have to go back to work till Thursday. How are you fixed for Graham's wedding on Saturday? Will you be my dance partner?"

"Of course. Can you make supper this evening?"

"Love to. My turn tho'...How about La Plancha?"

"What time's good ? Seven thirty?"

"Seven thirty, La Plancha."

"Formidable."

"Formidable?" Joanne's habit sprang to my lips. I could hear Raul smiling.

"Precisely."

"Till then, Raul."

"Till then."

As I waited for a taxi home to save myself the walk up the hill, I noticed a cheap wall clock in one of the hardware stores. I bought it. Back home, Asunción was in the shop. She had no customers. She let me in so I could show her the cloth for her approval. She seemed delighted with the material. "Get sick more often", she said with a cheerful grin.

In between bouts of dozing, I spent the afternoon catching up on chores left undone over the weekend. I re-arranged my system, neurotically shifting papers from one pile to another, making notes as I went on fresh sheets of paper that then became another pile.

Some of the system contained notes on language. Some were photographs and cuttings of people and places in Morazan. Some was bumpf from government offices and local development institutions. The UN had a good information office and the US embassy AID office was very helpful. Some notes were printed out courtesy of Rob who loaned me time on his computer.

He had tried to persuade me of the virtues of e-mail. But the only person I knew in Ireland who had a computer was my former university tutor back in Dublin. The WLU had a fax machine and a smart new Macintosh computer - Amelia's. Raul had one, but hated it.

Looking at my system, I wondered if a computer would help me be more tidy. It seemed unlikely. Perhaps it might speed up my disorder. I remembered my clock and found a nail opportunely placed between two film posters of Signoret - Casque D'Or and Les Diaboliques. Radio Maravilla told me it was seven o'clock. I set the time, hung the clock and made ready to go.

La Plancha was a plain restaurant not far from the ferry near the Banks. In the daytime, it served mainly office workers: in the evenings, mainly young people out on the town. I ordered a beer, a Rubia ("Grab a blonde - the way you like 'em!", sexist advertising, great beer. Rubia means blonde.). I hadn't finished the antibiotics but by then I felt so much stronger it seemed unimportant.

Raul arrived late. He recounted his day: the visit to the human rights office, his thoughts on Mike Walker, the bomb attack on Ninoska Vileda. I hadn't heard that on the evening news. It was a shock to me.

I said, "Raul, Walker has asked me to put up Ninoska Vileda in my flat for a week."

"Really? Did you agree?" "I did."

"Of course. Good for you."

"I don't think I'll change my mind. Is that awkward for you?"

"Not at all. Good of you to think of it in that way. Even if it were awkward for me, that's your choice. Nothing between us has to do with that. The bomb today was nasty, but cleverly done so as not to damage neighbouring property. The blast was directed into the apartment. Someone well trained in explosives."

"I sometimes wonder if you ever left the army, Raul. You seem almost nostalgic for it.... Is it the excitement of the mayhem?"

"The memories never leave you. I guess they keep their fascination for the intensity of the time they recall..... another beer?"

"Thanks.... in any case, Walker and his friends will probably change the arrangements. The truth is I don't care. The deal is that she stays for a week. Why is she such a target anyway?"

"Her father was a leading labour organizer in Puerto Moro back in the seventies. He helped found UTI, the Union of Industrial Workers in 1972. He died of cancer in 1978 when Ninoska was still at school. Ninoska trained as a teacher. She's secretary of the northern section of the main teachers' union. She's been very outspoken about abuses in the management of the government teachers' pension fund. The Right hate her because she's hitting them at a weak spot at election time. But she's been a target for over a year now. Most people are sick of the corruption in the government. But it's the army that really runs things. And people are afraid to criticise openly because the security forces have made a fine art of intimidation and harassment. Ninoska can't find work right now because no school will take her on and her union salary is a pittance."

"I hadn't ever expected to find myself this involved."

"Funny how we use the same kind of language about politics and love. Neither did I. Are you angry with me for leaving early for Paris?"

"Do you want me to be?"

"Not in the least. I hope you're glad we know each other."

"I am glad we know each other. Tell me three things you like about me."

"Let's see... your long white feet, your candour....your charity."

"My charity?" I remembered Soulange, her amused smile.

"Yes. What's the dress for the wedding? Formal? Hats and bow ties?"

"A jacket and tie. I'm borrowing a cherry red dress and shoes from Rob's wife. What do you mean, charity?"

"The way you're kind and worried about people without making a career of it. I can't help disliking Walker. His heart is too much on his sleeve."

The beers arrived.

"When do you have to be in Paris?"

"By the end of October. A month. I arranged with the ambassador to take two-months' leave. He'll be moving on himself at Christmas. We'll be very busy after the election next weekend. I have to sort out who'll take over running the street children programme, get my final reports in and there are a couple of meetings with European Community officials too. The ambassador will need me and the other staff to hold his hand for those. He's good at the PR side of things but has no talent for administration."

We looked into our beers for a while until Raul took my hand, "I wouldn't have coped half as well through all these months without you, Maeve. You've been a great friend to me."

"You've been a great friend to me too. But I don't want to get sentimental ..... Do you remember the first evening we saw each other?"

"Very well. The Rimbaud reading."

"Eusebia Roa cornered you, didn't she? What do you make of her?"

"Eusebia's an excellent writer. At that time she was in touch with me for help with an article on Gabrielle Russier, "Machismo sans frontières". It was an attack on supercilious European accounts of machismo in Latin America."

"Soulange told me about Gabrielle Russier. She died in 1969 after being gaoled for an affair with one of her students, didn't she? It was straight out of Zola."

"I remember it very well. Beatrice's mother knew the family of the boy concerned. Georges Pompidou was interviewed on national television about the case and ended up quoting Eluard. Didn't miss a trick that guy. But I couldn't help feeling some Auvergnat pride about him - our man from Montboudif.....Well, Eusebia's quite a character all right. But she's got her head screwed on whatever you think about her politics, sexual or otherwise….. Shall we pay?"

I paid. Raul insisted on me taking a taxi. As we kissed goodbye, we arranged to meet at Our Lady of Mercy church on Saturday for Graham Reed's wedding. The taxi dropped me by the park at the end of my street. William the boatman came walking towards me.

"Hi Maeve, Everything ok? Asunción say you was sick."

"Hi William, I'm fine now. I just had supper with Raul. What's new with you?"

"Nothing much. Things is very quiet now, everyone waitin' for the election next weekend. Mavis is planning to visit family in Bluefields if she can get her visa. Things is hard there in Nicaragua. Plenty of bad things goin' on there right along the coast and there right along the Rio Coco by Honduras. Some big army activity and you know, they say Yankee army artillery was in firin' from Honduras. Seems like they're all tryin' to get the best seat for these here peace talks we keep hearin' of.....how's Mister Raul? Ain't been out in the boat for some weeks now."

"He's fine, just very busy. He may have to leave for Paris earlier than he thought."

"Oh. That's too bad. Hope I get to see him before he goes."

"I bet he won't leave without a goodbye boat trip."

"That's good, Maeve...You expectin' visitors?"

"Not tonight. Why?"

"Bin a car sittin' down the road from your place reg'lar every twenty minutes since seven. Man and a woman. Man's a gringo."

"That's funny. Thanks William."

"Any time, Maeve. I'm right here now." He stepped off a way and I went on. The street was dark. Another power cut. Candles, glowing in windows along the street, failed to shed much illumination outside. As I approached my flat, a dark coloured saloon came slowly along towards me and pulled up by my front door, switching off its headlights. The driver got out. It was Walker. His car, an old blue Mustang. "Sorry to startle you, Maeve."

"That's ok. What's going on?"

...me going down to the kitchen for a glass of water in the dark, the luminous figures on the hall clock reading two and my father sitting there a year after he'd walked so quietly out - the Quiet Man, my mother called him - nothing different, his straight sandy hair and thin face, in shirtsleeves, those great long freckled arms of his - "Sorry if I startled you, Maeve..." "That's ok, you're grand... how you been?" "Fine.....see a lot of your Uncle Pat over there.....stay at his place between jobs...plenty of travelling in the industrial chimney game"... "Still with Buchanan's?" "No, there's a new outfit started by some old Beaumont hands, call themselves International Erections, for a joke I suppose....d'you get the photos?" His way of asking were we getting the cash each month... "Yes Da', we get the photos and the money too. You're very good"..... "Am I?" looking at me as if his worth hung in some balance I held, me there like a seven year old with a glass of milk and a banana. I said "It's all right to be you, Da' and it's all right for Ma to be herself, too".... "Thanks. That's good to know ..... I mean, to know you think that way..... How are the studies? We're very proud of you…..... Pat says it's time we had a scholar in the family 'stead of navvies and housemaids..... He's selling loads of his carvings y'know, gets invited to lectures; to give 'em, sure"..... "You know he hates you calling them carvings, Da', his sculpture, and when has Pat ever cared a fig for study? Wants me to do what he couldn't be bothered to, is it.? Wasn't it him who always said the universities were the Satanic Mills of our time and there's him now giving

lectures an' all?.... You staying long this time?" "No Maeve, just passing through. You know I always tidy your Gran's grave for the anniversary..... Is your mother on duty tomorrow? I see her bag's on the table...."... "Yeah, she'll be up by five, in time to get down to the hospital for six"... "I'll wait down here for her then. Mind if I take a nap on the settee?" .. "It's your house too, Da"... "Courtesy costs nothin', Maeve,..... Maybe I'll see you later..." "Sure".....but he was gone by the time I was up and dressed, gone to catch the early bus for Tralee. Not even a kiss, as though he were afraid of me or something. I never saw him again.

Then Walker said, "I know we agreed tomorrow night, Maeve, but today there was an incident, did you hear?"

"Sure I heard. It's fine. Come on let me open up. She got much stuff?"

"Just a couple of bags and she's got her little girl with her. Her boy's with the grandparents. No one knows she's here for now."

Only William and half the street if they were watching, which they usually were. It began to rain. I found my key and went to the door, "Let's get inside."

I was glad no light showed in the street. Could we trust William? Did it matter? All I knew was I had a woman and child I'd promised to take in and here they were. They followed me up the dark stair and waited while I found candles and matches. I'd barely lit a couple of them when the lights came on outside in the street. "Good timing," said Walker.

"Let's get the spare room sorted out," I said, finding the lights in the main room. Then I remembered the washing,

"Washing!..." I ran up to the roof leaving Walker with the bundled up girl in his arms. Ninoska came up after me and helped me get the clothes in out of the rain. She was a slender, shapely woman, the bulge of her pregnancy just beginning to show.

I wondered who she'd be having it for. Her stylish dark blue dress emphasised her wide hips. She seemed taller than she was, wearing her light-brown hair up. Her strong features were set in a dark, delicate face. I thought maybe she was from one of the Lebanese and Syrian families that migrated to Morazán after the First World War - in Morazán and Honduras they called them turcos.

She had a graze across her forehead and looked very tired. She spoke gently with a strong voice that she projected from deep within her. Taking my hand in both hers, she said "Thank you for this kindness. How can I ever repay you?"

"Don't you be worrying about that. Let me show you the state of the place so you don't get a shock coming on it all on your own..."

Walker had already laid Ninoska's daughter, Aracely, to rest on my bed while he made up the mattress in the spare room. He seemed too domesticated for the ruthless philanderer he was reputed to be. Perhaps that was his insidious charm.

Ninoska carried her daughter in from my room. I helped her hang some of her things on clothes hangers along a bit of cord I strung out for her. "Sorry I don't have any furniture Ninoska. But there's loads of food..."

She made a tired smile, "We have the same priorities, at any rate."

For someone literally blasted out of her home that day, she seemed unbelievably calm. "Is your boy OK?"

"Yes, God is great. We were in the kitchen when the explosion happened, that's in the back part of the house we rented. My boy, Rogelio, suffered mild concussion. He's with my parents-in-law now while I find somewhere more permanent to stay. He's OK with them. When I'm working away from La Bahía he often stays with them. Things should calm down after the election, God willing..... Have you any coffee?"

"Sure..."

I found Walker in the kitchen wiping down surfaces as though he'd worked in kitchens all his life. He said "I'd better get going now. A guy from the Detroit Free Press is down for the run-up to the election and is paying me to interpret for him all day tomorrow, starting early. I'm very sorry things are working out so abruptly, Maeve. Ninoska will be OK with you for a few days until after the election and she'll be able to rest up better knowing her boy is safe with her in-laws without having to take care of him as well as her daughter. I promise we'll find somewhere for her by early next week."

Ninoska stood in the doorway. "Thank you, Walker. Don't worry about me. I know I'll be OK here. Perhaps tomorrow or Thursday you or Sylvie can take me over to my parents?"

"I'll ask Sylvie to call by tomorrow to sort that out, Ninoska. If she can't, I will certainly, tho' it might be late." He seemed anxious suddenly.

She said, "OK. Let's see then. It might be better after dark anyway."

"Please try and rest, Ninoska."

I put some water to boil on the stove and followed Walker down to the front door, watched him get into his car. The starter complained a couple of times, but the engine sounded fine when it did finally came to life. I saw as he drove off that William watched him go too, then stepped out of the shadows and waved to me discreetly. I waved quickly back and bolted the door, wondering how much William knew of what he had witnessed and whether it mattered.

Upstairs Ninoska was making coffee. "Ok?" I asked.

All my years of reading in three languages to cultivate wider, deeper responses; me a lonely child of literature, reading books under the bedclothes by torchlight, and there I go, after all: the triteness of it. "OK?"

How else might I have put it? How are you feeling having been blown up and your boy in hospital and nowhere to live, no job and pregnant and total bleakness beckoning?

She took her time to answer, but then said, "Maeve. I'm fine. And I know how it must be for you. I've had strangers with problems in my house too, before now. Don't worry on my account. I mean that truly. Truly. I'm responsible for my life, no one else. One way or another, I've chosen all this. It's me that has to cuddle my children and tell them I love them and these things happen because there are bad people in the world and that God is good and protects us from them. Imagine how many mothers round the world right now are saying the same things. Walker tells me you're from Ireland. Isn't it the same there? I'm just one more mother among millions, lying to my children that they're safe when all around them hatred and greed conspire to destroy us. When they are older I can explain the why of this hatred and greed and its origin. For now I just have to love them and tell them they are safe from the bad people. What else can I say? So then what else are you to ask, if not, OK? You want to ask me "Can you cope? Will you get through this?" Yes, my dear. I can cope. I will get through this dreadful time. And one day you and I and my children will meet in a better world where no one has to hide or lower their voice, where no one goes in fear. But for now, here we are drinking our coffee, let's put from our minds the murderers and their gringo masters talking forever about democracy... I was looking for sugar and found chocolate powder and flour. Do you have eggs and margarine? I love to bake. Can I do some chocolate muffins for breakfast? Aracely loves them. What d'you think?"

"The oven's not great. I don't bake much. Just soda bread on the hob. Try it and see. Here are matches."

She checked out the oven and surprised me by getting it to light. I'd given up months before, assuming it was no good, baking my soda bread on the round metal plates they use here called *comales*. I had no cake tins. Ninoska made some from an old roll of aluminium foil I had forgotten about that she found under the sink. She was quick and efficient. As she slipped the makeshift baking tins into the oven, her daughter called out calmly, questioningly, "Mama?"

Ninoska went to look after her. I looked in later to see how they were and took them in my reading light, gentler than the main light, a harshly flickering fluorescent tube. The homely, warm smell of baking drifted in from the kitchen.

Ninsoka's daughter had beautiful indigenous features, set off by shiny black hair hanging neatly down in a plait. I guessed her father was from one of the indigenous ethnic groups located mostly around Dulce Nombre, Bikuka and the coastal forests. Raul had explained to me some of Ninoska's story. Here, enjoying such normal intimacy with her and her daughter, the trauma of disappearance and bombings seemed completely alien. What could those things have to do with these people?

Aracely said, " I'm sorry you are poor. When I'm older I'll buy you a bed."

Her mother said, "Aracely, that's not polite, you know."

"That's ok," says I. "That'll be great, Aracely. Can I have a big one?"

She thought for a while, "Only married people have big beds. Are you married?"

"Not right now. But I might be by the time you're older. But by then I may be back in my country and it'll be a long way to be sending a bed."

"Is your country in the United States?"

"No it's across the Atlantic Ocean. It's an island."

"Like La Gavilana?"

"Much bigger than La Gavilana, Aracely. If you bring me my bed when you're older you can visit me there and see it for yourself. Would you like that?"

"Yes I would. I would like to. Mama would too, wouldn't you, Mama?"

"Yes my darling. We'll go together to take our friend Maeve her big new bed. Let's go to sleep now. In the morning we'll have chocolate muffins for you. The ones you like. They should be done by now Maeve, twenty-five minutes. I never checked the time."

In the kitchen, I turned off the gas, slipped out the oven tray and set it on the table. The muffins had oozed up over the edge of the improvised baking tins and seemed to have just the almost-mushy texture I could never seem to get when I did them. The trick must have been in the speed with which Ninoska worked the cake mix. Too lackadaisical, I could never get it right.

From behind me, I heard her say, "They turned out well. That's good.... We're going to sleep now. Thank you for everything, I hope we're not too much trouble."

"You're fine, Ninoska. Take it easy and please make yourself at home. I'll be shuffling papers around for a while but I won't be noisy. If you need anything just help yourself. Treat the place like it was yours"

"Thank you. We won't hear you anyway. We're exhausted. Good night"

I knelt down at my system and read up some material from the US Information Service on human rights in Morazán. Raul had left me a couple of reports from Monitor, a human rights organisation based in Washington. It was interesting comparing the accounts of the USIS and Monitor of the judgements by the Inter-American Court for Human Rights on forced disappearances in Honduras.

Monitor paid a great deal of attention to the political background in Morazán, citing the disappearance of Ninoska's husband the previous year. USIS played down the period of the dirty war in Honduras and its repercussions in Morazán, emphasising the stable civilian government and the absence of armed conflict. Unlike Monitor, they mentioned the impact of neighbouring conflicts in terms of attempts by insurgents in neighbouring countries to destabilise the government. Monitor emphasised the damaging effects of United States regional intervention in favour of the status quo on civil and political rights in Morazán.

I had dismissed as beyond my sphere the effects of the political gangsters who carve up our world so glibly for their own ends. But here I was in that very world of disappearances, murder and torture analysed and described with such detachment by people in comfortable offices far away. Even so, it was all still far removed and abstract compared with my experience of Morazán. Here in my apartment I had someone who had lived these terrible things. My life and hers seemed out of phase.

Did I know what I was doing? Of course not. Does one ever? How do we know what we've done until we have done it? And even then, understanding will slip away from us. Unlike the story where the girl

holds on to the shape-shifting Prince despite all his metamorphoses, endings of any kind seem not to be for us. Even when we die, loose threads we leave go on spinning themselves out.

Arletty looked out at me from the poster of her role in "La Garçonne", as much as to say, "Well, what did you expect?" I like Arletty, not because she tended to portray strong, knowing women, but because she was a miner's daughter, followed her heart and suffered imprisonment for it. If she was seductive and impressive as Garance in "Les Enfants Du Paradis", I preferred her gentle portrayal of Clara in "Le Jour se Lève". As Garance, Arletty balances her sense of life's theatre against the absolute necessity of being able to love for keeps. Clara is simply more sensible.

I used to argue with Raul about that. He remembered her best from the film of "Huis Clos", one of Beatrice's favourite plays. Not surprisingly, he generally got the better of me playing Julie. I suppose it was a game he and Beatrice played too. I remembered him repeating Arletty's relentless mockery of Garcin, the man she was sharing hell with, "Lâche, làche, làche....", coward, something I want not to be. So I walk backwards into this world of Ninoska's to escape something I want not to be and offer no greeting to what may come: something more than hiding under the blankets, but not much.

It was nearly midnight when I turned in, Ninoska snoring gently as I closed my door.

When I went down to get milk the next morning. Marcel was minding the shop. "I have some friends staying till the weekend. Could you give me your copy of the key, Marcel? I don't want to have to go to the bother of cutting another one." And I definitely did not want him snooping around while Ninoska was trying to get some peace and quiet.

"Sure. I'll drop it up later."

"It would help me if you could give it to me now. I have to go out and I want to show her the trick with the lock."

"Well, I can do that for you."

"Marcel, you're married, remember?" He gave me his stupid grin, went to fetch the key and handed it to me with a wink. I wanted to slap him so badly, pull out that moustache of his one hair at a time....

"What's her name?"

"Aracely," I said, "thanks...see you."

Aracely was happy with her muffin and a cup of coffee. She smiled happily when I offered her a glass of milk. Ninoska was making tortillas. She had some soft white cheese she must have brought with her. We ate that and the tortillas with fried eggs and avocado and some beans I heated up from the day before. "Like being at home", said Ninoska.

"You are home", I told her, reflexively.

That morning I had to go over to Rob's house to pick up the dress and shoes his wife had promised to lend me for the wedding on Saturday. I showed Ninoska the trick with the lock to the front door. She seemed rested and calm. She asked if she could read my books. Of course she could.

I left before ten expecting to be back around lunchtime. But there was a transport strike that day. The Conservative media accused the Liberals of fixing it to disrupt the electoral preparations. Some taxi cooperatives were running, the ones run by Conservative Party supporters. I managed to get a cab over to Colonia Universidad where Rob and Evora lived..

Evora was from Gran Canaria, pale, very slim, mischievous and direct. Although she was shorter than me, the dress she had for me was just right, a tiny bit tight. The shoes too were a wee bit small but bearable for the couple of hours I expected to be wearing them "It really suits you," she said.

"Doesn't make me too vampy?"

"But that's why it suits you!"

"Maybe I should wear something more staid."

"Maeve, the more staid you look, the more vampy you look. You have that shape and look."

"Don't be winding me up, Evora."

"I'm not. You do. It's all that swimming and sun."

I observed the lanky maraschino-red siren in the mirror. A long way from the twig-creature changing behind the curtain at Dunne's Stores in Dublin, but with the same perplexed frown at what to make of the shape and texture reflected in the glass. Evora was right. The plainer I dressed the more explicitly my body spoke, face and figure conspiring to allure, despite the economy of flesh. My regular swimming had toned up my muscles.

I pursed my lips and flexed my biceps to make Evora laugh, which she did. Beside me she seemed skinny, a role reversal unfamiliar to me. Strange to have thought I should lose weight in the tropics. I must have gained ten pounds or more, the effect of more regular meals through working with food-loving Eva Maria, I guess.

Evora was ironing a load of marital washing she had piled on the bed. I asked, "What did you get Graham and Zenaida for a present?"

"A microwave oven. Rob has a friend in the import business. Got him one at cost price. You?"

"I want to get them a painting. There's an artist from Managua called Xenia Gomez who does nice studies of domestic life. I saw a poster earlier this week advertising them in Eusebia Roa's gallery."

"I didn't think she'd do Nicaraguan artists that don't live in Miami."

"Well, she does. They're not cheap but a friend said he'd ask Eusebia to knock the price down."

"Zenaida will be pleased to get a painting. She's a very creative kind of person. I can't quite make out what she sees in Graham. He's very bright, but he's obsessed with saving money. Do you get on with him?"

"Not really. He helped me a lot when I first arrived by arranging my flat for me. After that we had a couple of days working quite closely when he asked to me to check some statistics on conservation

practices with some communities the WLU works with down in Xiguasí and Marañon. He's certainly on the ball. What's Zenaida like?"

"Zenaida's fun. I think she's making a mistake marrying Graham. He's too money oriented. I think he imagines himself as different or maybe that exotic Zenaida will expand his horizons somehow. But we don't grow up Maeve, we just get older and Graham isn't going to stop being the likely lad from the provinces who did well in the metropolis. He's marrying a native Indian girl with film-star looks and a good brain and he sincerely thinks it's not so as to get yet another career accessory. But that's all this marriage can be for him. He lost his soul somewhere on the journey between his home in Bradford and London's King's Cross railway station. He doesn't know what love means. Maybe he thinks Zenaida will patch that up for him. Then again, maybe I'm not cynical enough. Zenaida wants a better life and they share economics as a career. Maybe that'll do. Who knows? Or maybe she's foolish enough to think she can change him."

As she spoke I changed back into my own clothes and carefully folded the red dress to take with me.

"But marriages across culture can work, Evora. How long have you and Rob been together?"

"Rob and me? I'm lucky with Rob. He's easygoing. We have a friendly relationship. He wants children now. But I want to wait until we're back in Spain. He doesn't really want to go back to the UK and has the offer of a teaching post in Barcelona. So he has to choose between London and Barcelona. Not my favourite place, but better than Madrid. Me, I'd be just as happy back in London and I should be able to get a nursing job there easily enough. Then, who knows? His contract ends in March next year. So we only have six months to go. I'm glad. Morazán is a beautiful place but so, well, so backward. I know that's patronising, but it's true, isn't it? Will you have some lunch?"

"Thanks, I'd better get going. I've a friend staying. Don't want them to think I'm avoiding them. And the buses are on strike. Say hi to Rob for me. Thanks a million for this dress, Evora, and the shoes. See you Saturday."

"God willing. We'll be having some people back after the reception. Join us if you can."

I had forgotten Rob and Evora were Catholics. I said, "Thanks, I'd like that."

No taxis appeared. I walked for half an hour before managing to flag one down. At the supermarket on the way home, I stocked up on food and bought a storybook for Aracely, Saint-Exupery's "Little Prince" abridged with illustrations for young children. I was pleased to have recovered my energy after the fever and found myself walking quickly up the steep streets home, even loaded down by several bags of shopping.

Ninoska was asleep on the roof in a hammock with her sunglasses on. Not much sun for that, I thought. Aracely was drawing downstairs on the floor in their room. I recognised something from my own childhood seeing her alone there.

My mother used to fall asleep in the red canvas deck chair in our tiny back garden. Our lone apple tree and Da's bosun's-chair swing. Da' forever away in England. "Climbing chimneys for Britannia" he used to say. I thought Britannia was a steeplejack company for years. Maybe I wasn't so wrong, a bunch of shady chancers with offices in Whitehall.

Ma was always tired after her shift. In those days she worked at the Beaumont Hospital, two bus-rides distant, rain or shine. Our neighbour Olive looked after me, I called her my Dublin granny. Sometimes Ma took me to stay with my Kerry granny. She was just Gran, a Maeve, like me.

Aracely on her own there, drawing, her father vanished, keeping her always-tired mother company, cared for one way or another, lost in her crayons, pretty, determined.

As I went into the kitchen, she looked up. "Hello.... We had lunch. Did you?"

"Hello, Aracely...Kind of " She came and watched me putting things away. "Can I help you unpack?"

"Sure. You unpack. I'll put away. Ok?"

"Ok."

The place was spotless.

"You and Ninoska have been very busy Aracely. You didn't need to clean up for me."

"Spaghetti .... Mama did it all .... sugar... one bag two bags... why do you keep all your things in heaps everywhere? ...tomatoes..."

"I'm a heapologist"

"What's a heapologist?...Onions..."

"Someone who makes heaps and studies them."

"Can I be a heapologist?...looks easy to me…. Cheese and cream..."

"Well, if you study hard at school you may...."

"Water...one bottle, two bottles...I think you're joking me..."

"I think you're too smart for me to joke you." She eyed the bag of sweets she found at the bottom of one of the bags and a packet of chocolate biscuits.

"Let`s see if your mother's awake and ask if you can have some, ok?"

"Ok."

The afternoons in September were generally wet. Rain squalls came into La Bahia off the sea like clockwork each afternoon around three. Ninoska was awake and taking down the hammock as the first drops of rain blew in. We made our way downstairs just as it came down hard

"Who's that horrible man over the road, Maeve? He kept staring over at me." Without the sunglasses Ninoska looked tired again, her beautiful dark eyes looking through me. It was not the weariness of my mother, worn out from work and worry. It was the fatigue of loss, unresolved loss, that Raul had remarked on the other evening over supper.

"I put a curtain across when I'm on the roof so as to keep him at bay. I should have told you about him. He's a nuisance."

"Did you get the dress from your friend?"

"Yes. It's great. And the shoes. And I bought some stuff for Aracely. Can I give them to you for her? Here..." She took the bag, gave a couple of biscuits to Aracely and looked at the version of the Little Prince. "I wasn't sure if it was too old for her. I guess not."

"This is lovely Maeve. You're very kind."

"D'you want some milk with that Aracely?"

"Yes please. Can I see my book, Mummy?"

"Yes, here. Say thank you to Maeve." Aracely reached up and pulled my face to her so she could kiss me. Ninoska set her milk and biscuits on the table where she was drawing and there she sat with her "Little Prince", turning the pages, touching the illustrations.

"Did anyone call by? The guy from downstairs?"

"No. It's been completely quiet. It's been great. I've enjoyed skimming through your books. So few in English. I was surprised..... One of the things I miss most about home in Puerto Moro is the chance to just sit and read when the children are asleep. My father left me all his books. I'd love to go back to college one day.....I couldn't help noticing you have some interesting papers on land and agriculture here. Walker told me you worked in the WLU. How do you get on with them?"

"Ok. I work with a couple of the literacy promoters. I don't think much of the leadership. They all seem more interested in riding around in fancy vehicles and appearing on TV than in solving real problems. I've got a lot of time for the local organizers. Why do they seem to go bad when they make it to the national leadership?"

Ninoska responded quietly, with a deep contempt and anger which I found intimidating, until I realised who she was, this woman who had seemed so composed - here I began to know the person some people wanted dead. Not so much in what she said, it was the cold, disdainful certainty of her.

"They sell out. Politics here is just another career. It's normal for people to lie. The more people you get to believe your lies the cleverer you're thought to be. The union leaders say "we must fight for a better life" when most of them mean "you must fight for a better life for me". The church says "Defend the family" when the bishops mean "Don't touch our power, grind women into the dirt." The colonels say "We must fight for our country" when they mean "your children must die to protect our business interests." Look at me, Maeve. I`ve been in the labour movement since I was Aracely's age, traipsing from meeting to meeting with my father. My father died poor. He left us nothing but the house, his books and an unpaid grocery bill at the corner store. The union paid his funeral expenses and that was it. I was supporting the family as soon as I started work teaching. Why? Because my father was honest and lived on his union pay. He never stole a cent. I'm the same. I can't help it. I'm not a good person, just what he made me. My colleagues praise me and think I'm stupid..….. The fact is the popular movement here is in ruins. The big unions here, the power workers, the Transamerican workers, the dockers,... their leaders make deals all the time with the army, with the government, the bosses. They disappeared my husband because he believed some things aren't negotiable. Now they want to drive me out. And I will go if I can Maeve. I've had enough. Yesterday, my children might have been killed. I

have to think of them first.... Forgive me. This is nothing to you. Why should I be troubling you? But you're right about the union leaders. Don't trust them. They put their own power struggles well before any concern for rural workers and their families."

"You make it sound as though people in the unions were responsible for your husband's disappearance, you can't mean that, surely?"

"Is that what it sounds like?..... Maybe it does. Some questions have never been answered that I'd like answered. But here everyone owes favours to everyone one way or another, nothing is ever clear. My husband was very careful Maeve. The way he was snatched..." Aracely looked up from her book...."Forget it. It's not worth it now. Little will come of worrying and questioning. Not for us, anyway."

She smiled broadly at her daughter, "Shall I read to you, my beautiful baby? ...."

She went to sit with Aracely, who seemed sleepy, hoisting her onto her lap at the table. I felt sweaty and sticky and went to shower. When I came out, I saw them through the open door into their room, cuddled together on the mattress, resting.

As the afternoon wore on into evening, I reorganised my system adding a couple of heaps to the current affairs section which I had prided myself on keeping tiny. It was my mother's indictment against me, keeping safe, hiding from the present. "Your life doesn't begin tomorrow, young miss. You're living it right now!" her infuriating self-righteous pursing of the lips, the no-longer-convincing exasperated frown, the hint of tears; a pantomime act that stayed the same for decades. Ok for five year olds like Aracely. No wonder Da left her. Did he have to leave me too?

And then the letter by express courier for my mother from Pat:

"Dear Teresa,

There's no easy way to break bad news.

Anthony was killed in an accident at work up in Scotland on Saturday night. I'm making arrangements for him to be taken to Dublin. If you agree I'll be glad to do the funeral arrangements from there. I'll arrive with Anthony on the early Irish Ferries sailing from Holyhead tomorrow a.m.

I am so sorry.

Pat"

No time for Pat, my mother. "Peter Pan gobshite" she used to call him, adding always "God forgive me."

"So that's that then," she said, and spent the rest of the day staring at the peat briquettes burn away in the fireplace as I stacked them on the grate from time to time. That was that between me and her too, though neither of us realised at the time. I can hardly remember ever kissing her since that day. "You were always his daughter", so often her parting Parthian shot.

The electricity was off again. The evening dark drew quickly in. I lit some candles and looked in to Ninoska and Aracely, "There's water boiled. Can I make you coffee?"

"Thank you, yes.."

Someone rattled the front door. I guessed rightly it was Walker.

"How was your day?"

"Busy. Good tho'... Hi, Ninoska, everything going all right? Have you rested?" He gathered Aracely up and hugged her.

"Yes, we've been fine. Maeve has been wonderful to us. She bought me a story."

"Did she? You going to show me?" She did, by candlelight.

"It's such a great story," he said, "they`ve done the illustrations nicely too."

Ninoska said, "I'll skip the coffee, Maeve, thank you. Walker, I'm ready. Let me just get something warm for Aracely."

"Are we going to granma's, Mama?"

"Yes, my baby. We'll see Rogelito and then come back here so he can rest. OK?"

"Yes. Is Maeve coming?"

"Thanks Aracely, I have to study for my work. Can I come with you another time?"

"Oh..."

Ninoska said, "Thank you so much Maeve. We won't be late."

"Don't worry. Take your time. I always work late myself anyway."

I went down with them to the darkened street and watched them go, looked out for signs of William. But there was nothing. Someone was on the corner talking to Asunción in the shop. I went inside again and began to read by candlelight.

I looked once more at the Monitor account of how Ninoska's husband, Adán Rivera, was disappeared. Monitor accused the army-linked Acción Morazán. AM, as everyone called it, was a front outfit for army so-called "dirty war" operations.

Rivera had been the first person to disappear for over two years. A leader of the Tolti ethnic group from the Atlantic coastal plain, he organised indigenous communities around Dulce Nombre de la Virgen, 100 kilometres southwest of Las Ramadas. Monitor interpreted his disappearance as a message to set the limits of protest acceptable to the army and business dominated government. The government explained it away as a criminal matter related to drug trafficking along the Atlantic Coast.

Monitor tied this in to events in Honduras earlier that year when narcotics dealer Ramón Matta Ballesteros was kidnapped and taken illegally to the United States. Student leader Roger Gonzalez was disappeared after strident demonstrations that led to the burning of the United States Consulate in Tegucigalpa. Some cynical comment there suggested the Honduran army collaborated with the United States authorities to eliminate an unwanted competitor in the local drugs trade. Reports circulated of compromising US Drug Enforcement Agency files vanishing in the disturbances.

Indeed, that same year, newspapers in the US had published reports of Morazán army involvement in drugs-for-arms deals linked to the Reagan administration's funding efforts for the Contra in Nicaragua. Two of the army officers named in those reports also figured in Monitor's accounts of the 1984-85 dirty war in Morazán. I remembered reading that one of them had been promoted soon after the disappearance of Adán Rivera. The other fled the country to avoid corruption charges engineered by fellow officers who allegedly resented his winner-takes-all approach to their many questionable extra-mural business activities.

Every now and then fragments of information relating to this underworld would sneak out in the national press. In Morazán, only the centrist Xiguasí-based El Mensajero attempted serious reporting of human rights stories. The La Bahia papers, El Despertar and La Nueva Tribuna, dominated by rival interests of the *de facto* oligarchy, tended to report government and army press releases with little extra material or context.

For a proud woman like Ninoska, the humiliation of insulting official versions, linking her husband to organized crime, must have been crushing, likewise the contemptuous promotion of people responsible for disappearances. Now she had suffered the attempt to kill her, which the Interior Minister had already hinted might itself be drug related. Only the toughest of people could keep any emotional equilibrium faced with such levels of intimidation and abuse. And Ninoska did. As Raul had observed, so much for Celia Rodriguez's accusations of paranoia.

I remember how angry I'd been myself, reading newspaper reports of Da's fatal accident. No mention in the press in Ireland. In Britain, a short paragraph in the Sun and, incongruously, the Guardian. Pat somehow got copies of the local Scottish papers with photos of the helicopter winching his body off.

Da' had been rigging a scaffold on a power station chimney stack outside Glasgow, him and a lone mate. Da' was always a great one for the bonus: fewer hands meant more cash. The rig collapsed, trapping him under a steel beam at 600 feet. His mate couldn`t lift the beam and had to climb down for help. It was late on a wet Saturday afternoon in winter. Who was going to go up there? By the time an RAF helicopter flew out, Da' was long dead.

I'd tried to take that in. The life crushed out of him under the unforgiving steel. Him alone up there rainswept in the cold dark, knowing no one would get to him. My dear tough quiet Da'...

An inquiry was held that made recommendations for new safety measures. Some good came of it. Maybe the new regulations will have saved a few lives. But no matter what government held office, safety resources were always a joke.

You just have to let go sometimes. Maybe that`s how it was for Ninoska. She was certainly near the end of her tether.

I set aside the Monitor report, starting a new pile with the notes I'd taken. The electricity came on again and with it the radio. It was the sports hour. They were analysing the chances of Costa Rica qualifying for the 1990 World Cup. Discussion turned to Morazán's perennial failure to put together a national side capable of winning anything.

All so normal. I suddenly felt resentful that I'd stepped out of normality. What was I playing at? Was anything normal about my life?

No, what I was angry about was not being able to shut out other people's normality. The exhausted women in every rural community we worked in, their threadbare clothes, all with a clutch of undernourished infants. Ninoska caught up in who knows what sinister intrigue to destroy her physically, emotionally, one way or another. Eva Maria and Yelba working at the mercy of disingenuous terms set by the local aid and development cooperation elite.

Had I really tried shutting it all thoughtlessly out, expecting to return to Dublin much the same as when I left? Possibly. Certainly no longer. Though I could see little of the way ahead, I clung to a tenuous determination to take my own steps so far as I could without someone taking them for me.

One day at a time. Tomorrow? Back to work. Buy the painting for Graham and Zenaida. I took out Evora's shoes and stuffed them as hard as I could with newspaper to try and make them a bit bigger for Saturday.

The door banged. I went down and opened, "You weren't long...."

But no one was there.

"You're all right Maeve. It's just me here now."

"William?" William stepped up. Asunción had shut up the shop. Just the light at the end of the street by the park. "Someone banged on the door: Was it kids?"

"Some fellas, Maeve. Don't you worry. I keep this place under close watch. You should call out who's there before you open you know. How's your friends? I see them drive off with that gringo fellow."

"They`re fine, William. They're only here till after the election. Waiting to move into a new apartment."
"

Well if they need help with a pick-up to move their things you tell me. My brother Johnny and me will help and give her a good price too...."

Just then the blue Mustang drew up. Walker got out, but not Ninoska. "It's ok", said I. "William, this is a journalist friend, Mike Walker. Mike this is William. He takes me out diving on the reef sometimes."

"Really? I hope you'll invite me one of these days. Nice to meet you, William."

"Likewise, Mister Walker. Be glad to have you out with us. You dive?"

"Sure do. Excuse me, I'll just help my friend. We brought a couple more bags, Maeve."

Things ricocheted, banging off the roof of the car. Stones. Aracely cried, "Mama!" William blew hard on his whistle and went running towards where the stones came from. More whistles as the vigilantes converged. Silence. Lights came on in windows along the street as a couple of people looked out. Ninoska hurried inside with Aracely. Walker took up the two bags. I stayed outside pushing the front door to.

The hullabaloo ended quickly. William returned just as Walker came back down. "Funny thing to happen round here."

"Maybe someone who doesn`t like gringos" Walker offered.

William looked at him. Then at me. "Can I offer you two some advice?"

"Sure, William. You know I trust you."

He lowered his voice as if we were in a crowd, "If that lady is who I think she is, move her on fast. Me, I don`t want no trouble. I'll keep an eye open for you, Maeve, but you is sticking your head in the mouth of one big, mean tiger. Does your wrestling partner know?" William was at the edge of his familiarity with me, very near crossing the frontier. "Maeve, you know who I mean."

"Yes. He knows. He told me he thought it was ok."

"Ah.....That's good. Then stones is maybe all it'll come to. That`s good...Well...." and he smiled again his usual happy-go-lucky smile and spoke relaxed as normal "I feel better now you've told me that. Means things is just fine. Mister Mike. You take it easy now... Let's talk another time about a dive out on my boat."

"Sure thing. Love to."

William set off away from us. Stepping back from the frontier, but he had crossed it as far as I was concerned and I didn't like it. "Good night you folks."

Walker asked me, "Who's your wrestling partner? You wrestle?"

"No one you know, Mike. I'll go inside I think. Ninoska OK?"

"I think so. You don't want me to stay?"

"No. William just explained something that makes a difference. We'll be fine. You take care. Good night"

"Good night."

I didn't watch but heard him go. Heading upstairs I found Ninoska standing there, holding her hands out to me, "Maeve, I'm sorry. We can move tomorrow. I can stay with Adán's parents. This isn't your fight."

She spoke quietly. Aracely was in their room. I embraced her, "Ninoska, you're safe here, believe me. I didn't understand until just now why that should be so. Nothing will happen to you here with me. We have friends who are protecting us, believe me. Did you have supper?"

Her eyes were full of tears, "you... you ... how can I..." a wave of sobbing took her and carried her against me. I was Soulange cradling her Irish cry baby through that till-then-unspoken grief for my father, the grief I could only have spoken finally to someone like her, far from my impregnable mother: Soulange's gift of charity.

It felt strange, me the younger woman, comforting Ninoska. The moment faded. She recovered quickly. "Forgive me. You're not like Walker. He's a good man but I can't help thinking he helps me for other reasons than to be good. You're different. Your heart is clear and true."

"It's easy to be kind when you've no worries like me, Ninoska. I've got some Cuban rum. Want some?"

She laughed. "Thank you. I don't drink alcohol. But I am hungry now. Shall we bake?"

Aracely was fast asleep. I put on one of Da's favourite tapes, some soothing music of Herbert Laws, the jazz flautist. I showed Ninoska how to make soda bread. She explained to me the working of my temperamental oven. It had a simple adjustment to allow more air to mix with the gas. I'd had it too wide open We shared an omelette she fried. By the time the loaves were out, my eyelids were dropping. Ninoska said,"Go to bed, Maeve. I'll clear up."

"Thank you. Sleep easy. I know everything will be fine."

Next morning, I was ready to leave before they were up. But as I went down to the front door, Aracely came out in her nightdress. "Maeve, will you come back today?"

"Yes, Aracely. I will." She ran to me and reached up to give me a kiss. "Thank you for my book and for my biscuits."

"You're very welcome my baby. Go back to bed now. I`ll see you later. Look after your mother. She needs plenty of rest."

"I will."

"Try not to walk around barefoot on this cold floor Aracely, you'll catch cold."

Asunción's prediction, already coming true.

I wanted to get to the office early so as to have time later to buy the wedding gift for Graham and Zenaida. Though I had no real obligation to get them anything, Graham had been kinder to me than he needed to in helping me get the apartment, which had saved me hundreds of dollars.

Esteban let me in, "Early today, Miss. Good to see you back." He called me "Miss", no matter how often I asked him to stop; a lifetime of inculcated deference, or at least the externals of deference, and constant anxiety not to fall foul of authority - even over leaving a few minutes early. So far I had escaped those petty feudal-industrial controls.

"Things have been pretty quiet here," he went on, "Doña Amelia's away for the next few days in Costa Rica."

"I bet that makes you sad" I muttered.

"No, it's no joke. She told me herself..... I brought you a ginger plant. Let me get it." No wonder poor Esteban got all the messages back to front. His hearing was good only for very loud conversation.

I looked on our whiteboard at the tasks pending column we always kept up to date. In Eva Maria's hand I read:

"1. Re-do list of participants by node: Marañon, Concepción, San Luis, Las Ramadas, La Sabana, Dulce Nombre, Guajiniquil, San Juan Frontera, La Bahia. Check gaps to harmonise stats by/cross community: Sex, Age, Max/min/Average income. % desertion.

2. Justify project extension for APD

3. Report on garden vegetable programme for Belgian Solidarity

4. Type stencils for Rural Workers Coordinating Committee meeting materials

5. Buy ink for Gestetner

6. Phone Education Ministry delegation Xiguasí"

That made me cross. Why should we do the secretarial work for the Rural Worker's Coordinating Committee? They had plenty of European aid agency money and it was always us who ended up being the secretarial skivvies. I remembered what Eva had said about not rocking the boat and felt angrier still. And then, we had done all that statistical stuff in July.

"I got this ginger plant for you, Miss." Esteban set down the plant in a little pot. "Now you're here, d'you mind if I leave a bit early? My grandson has a hospital appointment. I promised my daughter I'd take him. She works you see and...."

"Esteban, please don't treat me like I'm Amelia. Thanks a million for the plant. Sure, I'll mind the place. You head off."

"Thanks. Miss..... You won't tell anyone?"

"You're fine. It's between you, me and the ginger plant." Although the way I was talking at him, the whole street outside might have heard.

"That's good. Thanks."....

On the big square table where we worked, Eva and Yelba had stacked out the workshop archives for each node of our literacy network. I found a sheaf of analysis sheets they had run off on the Gestetner to accommodate the data and began working through the workshop records, transferring information to the analysis sheets. The morning was fresh and cool, I felt rested and relaxed.

Around seven thirty, I made some coffee. From our office I could see past Esteban's roses in the little central patio right down to the front office door. The bell sounded. I made my way along sipping from my cup as I went. It was Yelba. "Good to see you back!" she exclaimed. "Esteban?"

"Just left a couple of minutes ago. How's things? I thought we'd handed all the stats for the programme to Amelia. Didn't we spend all of July getting that right?"

"Maeve. Take a deep breath and count to one hundred. Then promise to behave and I'll tell you why."

"Go on, tell me."

"Amelia deleted the file in the computer and the original summary sheets were lost about three weeks ago. They were in a box of documents she left in the jeep she loaned to the Coordinating Committee. The box was removed to make room for passengers and now no one knows where it is. So we have to do it all again from the project archive."

"Great…. Well, Yelba, I made you and Eva a promise to keep my mouth shut and shut it'll stay. Better get back to work hadn't I?"

"Thanks Maeve. I really mean it. You feeling better?"

"Much better, thanks. Esteban says we're on our own till after the election."

"It's true. It'll be quiet until next week. Everyone's waiting to see what happens. They reckon it'll be a close result, for all the difference that makes. Still, Cabañas is making a strong anti-corruption pitch. Who knows? He may even mean it."

Yelba stayed on reception. I finished my coffee and went back to work. Eva Maria turned up shortly afterwards. The work was boring but straightforward. We ate lunch, bought in as usual from el panameño's comedor next door. El Panameño was an elderly taciturn man. I thought his silence was just his indigenous way - he wore the plait and the white felt hat of one of the Andean ethnic groups But lately I'd found he would open up to me from time to time when no one else was around.

So I finally asked him that day when we were on our own, "Why do they call you *el Panameño* when you're from Ecuador?"

He said nothing for a while, carried on preparing the food before he looked up, "I left home young and went to sea. My family told me I was crazy, that we live off the land. But I saw what all that had done to my father and my older brothers. I was lucky I had the sense to get out. I learned a lot, some engineering; learned the guitar at sea. Never gave up my roots though, see?" He took off his hat and put it back on again. The silver grey hairs mixed with black in his long plait. "Me and a Panamanian friend, we started a bar in Panama City. He was an invalid from a shipboard accident but had the money. I ran it for him for years. That's where I met my wife. She was a dancer. From here, La Bahía. We saved up some money and came back here to live. She used to call me Panameño all the time, God rest her soul. She died last year. I didn't used to be so quiet, you know. Losing her was... well, it was just terrible. It's good for me to see you young people. I am all for the youth.... you seem ok, not like some of the gringos we get here. I could have played you a romantic song a year ago but my left hand doesn't work good any more, arthritis. It's got much worse since she died. Doctor says it's psychosomatic..... That's a big word for me just after lunch.... Chilli with your tacos?"

"Yes, thanks. "

I ate with Eva Maria and Yelba, then walked over to Eusebia's gallery. She rented a space in one of the old colonial districts behind the Unamuno Theatre, not too far from the Twin Bridges - the old railway bridge and the road bridge that cross the Rio Hermoso on the east of the city taking traffic out along the

main coast road to Puerto Moro. The district, called appropriately enough, Bellas Artes, was cut in two by a new three-lane highway running out to the airport. The Conservative government built it for Pope John Paul's visit in 1985, taking him direct from the airport to the stadium for the huge open air mass. He was in the country for three hours before heading off to his next international stop.

The gallery was in an old colonial era building right next door to an unfinished shopping and hotel complex belonging to the big National Guaranty financial group that had just gone bust. This was the new La Bahía so many people complained about; quickly built, poorly designed modern buildings supplanting the original colonial buildings in these older and poorer parts of the city.

In the decades after the Second World War, La Bahía's importance as an Atlantic commercial centre for the region had increased rapidly with a corresponding demand for workers of all kinds So it received a great influx of people from the rest of the country and many immigrants from other parts of the Isthmus. Many of the old colonial buildings had been converted in those years to tenement housing.

Despite the squalor and poverty, most Bahíans were nostalgic about the old city and complained bitterly about its disappearance. The most common complaint was the loss of most of the Bellas Artes park to the new highway, leaving the old church of San Nicolas and the Fine Arts Institute stranded between the highway and the loop of the Rio Hermoso, difficult of access for pedestrians and beset by the constant noise of heavy traffic.

It may not be true that the face of a city can change faster than the human heart. But the rate of new construction along the Avenida John Paul in just a couple of years had obliterated most of those slum areas, forcing the inhabitants out into shanty housing along the Puerto Moro coast road, far from the airport. Much of the Bellas Artes district was now a grid of glass and concrete offices and apartment blocks. Many buildings were unfinished, covered in scaffolding in various stages of completion. The National Guaranty project loomed up amidst this activity like a memento mori, a hollow sarcophagus of unrendered brickwork and rusty reinforcing steels sticking forlornly into the air like severed limbs of a suppliant robotic giant.

Beside it, an uncomfortable companion, was the building housing Eusebia's gallery, the Galería Mirandola. A three-storey colonial building, its high windows with folding wooden shutters looked out beyond the street, down to the never very impressive Rio Hermoso. A parapet wall topped the amber and white frontage, hiding the roof. A plain Doric cornice separated each floor. The entrance doors to the building must have been ten foot high. On entering, visitors stepped into a pool of light dropping into a long courtyard that ran along one side of the interior. The rear of the building was slightly higher so as to shield the front from the sun traversing across the south.

On the ground floor, outside Galeria Mirandola, an armed guard sat unobtrusively to one side of a notice board in the entrance area. Most commercial buildings in Morazán had such guards. Armed robbery, though uncommon, was a very real menace. The second floor was occupied by an expensive restaurant reached by a wide cream-tiled stair at the front of the courtyard. The third floor consisted of offices accessible only by a narrower stair at the rear. The original wooden doors into the gallery and much of the interior partition walling had been replaced by glass set in stainless steel frames. I could

see Eusebia working at a desk just inside the gallery entrance. She looked bigger than I remembered her and seemed to be alone.

As I entered she greeted me,"Good afternoon."

"Hi, you look very lonely in such a big space."

"Yes, it is big.... the architect handled the conversion rather well I think. How can I help you?"

"I'm interested in some paintings by Martina Aguilar, the Nicaraguan artist. I think Raul Pec may have mentioned something to you."

Eusebia smiled. "Of course. I remember you now. You're Raul's young Irish friend. Maeve, no? But you speak such excellent Spanish..."

"Thank you. I studied it at university so I should be able to stumble through it."

"Raul mentioned this to me a couple of days ago. I can't give you much of a discount you know. My profit on that genre of painting is small enough. Martina's work is on display at the far end of the gallery. See what you like and let's work out a reasonable price. Raul is a dear friend but he doesn't pay my electricity bill."

She seemed different from the woman I'd seen at the poetry reading. Straightforward and business-like, she looked younger than I remembered. Perhaps her make-up deceived me. She caught me gazing at her just a bit longer than was polite and smiled gently. I was fascinated by the texture of her complexion and her colour, a kind of matt coffee. "Don't be shy. Go ahead."

"Thanks." I did, wondering how she coped with the endemic racism of the Morazán upper-classes.

Someone had told me that a few years earlier the national soccer team had come close to qualifying for the World Cup finals. Much comment ensued as to the desirability of this, since the national side was entirely of African or African-Indian descent. Apparently one commentator had actually said on national television, "The rest of the world will think we're all descendants of slaves!"

Some metal sculptures occupied the floor space, uninspiring interpretations of ideas from Don Quixote. The paintings on view consisted of three sections, the first of large, striking abstracts, and some clever pieces of bricolage by the same artist. A second section of naturalistic townscapes and landscapes of the Isthmus was followed by Martina Aguilar's work.

Her section included paintings and some excellent large photographs of her murals. Her portraiture was a cross between Modigliani and Nicaraguan primitivism. With skilful economic use of line, she somehow generated great expression in the eyes and faces of her characters while depicting their surroundings with storybook stillness.

I fell straight away for an interior showing a woman reclining in just her pants on a bed while her male companion walks naked away from the onlooker. The perspective was cleverly done using the floor tiles to draw one's vision towards the interior door through which the man seemed about to exit. A

curtain blew in from the window beside the bed, on which the woman was reading a magazine. But the price at US$1200 was much too steep for me.

As I moved on I heard someone enter, a woman by her voice. She and Eusebia greeted each other in what sounded to me like an African language, reminding me of the African stallholders near my uncle Pat's place in south London. Then they carried on speaking in Spanish. I continued my deliberation about what I might be able to afford.

A much smaller painting of a mother and daughter cost US$400. I liked the interaction between their faces, which virtually filled the small canvas but for a moon and stars over a hillside on which sat a small house throwing light out through its open door. I felt disappointed. Nothing was within my reach.

As I turned to go back to tell Eusebia, she herself came towards me. "I must go now. Have you seen anything?" "Well I like them all. But I can't afford any of them. I...well, that one of the mother and child is nice"

"Martina does have a most attractive way creating warmth and expression from her portraits... Make me an offer."

"I'd be insulting you."

She looked at me for a while. "In fact Maeve, we may be able to do a deal. I'm crossing the river. Can I give you a lift? Let's talk on the way."

"Sure." I followed her out.

She picked up her bag as she passed the desk. "Maeve, Urania. Urania manages the gallery." Urania smiled, I thought she might be garifuna from Puerto Moro. That would explain the West African conversation. Then I remembered the Brazilian connection. Urania had a definite foreign accent, nothing local about her. I smiled and shook hands. She started slightly at my touch. And quickly laughed, saying, "That's some electricity you carry there..."

No one had said that to me since Soulange, who used to say I gave her gentle shocks when I touched her. I stared dumbly at Urania. Eusebia observed me for one of those moments that burst into you, shards of a second. She said, "See you tomorrow, Urania. If anyone calls, tell them I'm out of town until tomorrow."

"Ok. Take care. Nice to meet you, Maeve."

Eusebia was already on her way outside walking quickly to her car. I caught up with her as she opened the door. She stopped and leaned on the roof, asking me, "How about this, Maeve. I need a translation done from English into Spanish of a catalogue and some other bits and pieces for the gallery. I also need to send a brochure to a dealer in Paris. Raul says your French is excellent. It's not a great deal of work. I could do it myself but just don't have the time.

How about you do that for me and the painting's yours for US$125. What d'you think?"

"That's great, Eusebia. Thank you. I can afford that OK. I'd love to do it."

"That's good. In you get."

Her car was a new-looking two-door Toyota with gearshift. She handled it swiftly through the unruly Morazan traffic, driving quickly down the narrow streets behind the Unamuno Theatre out toward the Republic rotonda. She was no-nonsense, perhaps even rather hard - I could see why people thought her masculine.

We came up behind a delivery van blocking the way. Eusebia sounded her horn to no immediate effect. As we waited, I said, "I heard your radio programme for the first time over the weekend."

"Good. What did you think?"

"I think it's smart and attractive... like you."

She laughed aloud. "I suppose you don't approve of my politics though. I remember you at the Quesada reading among those types from the university.... Come ON!" She shouted as the van's driver appeared. He made a sign at her and she muttered, "You too, pretty boy."

The afternoon rain began to fall, drumming heavily on the car roof, almost outpacing the wipers on Eusebia's windscreen. She wound her window up. I did likewise. "I don't have much time for politics Eusebia. You seem a good person to me. Raul wouldn't be a friend of yours if you weren't. What more do I need to know?"

"Forgive me Maeve, that's certainly sweet. Pretty naïve too, I think you'll agree. At last… " as we drove out onto the Republic rotonda. Past the National Palace and onto the racetrack of the Soldiers Boulevard.

"I'm glad you like my programme. I enjoy doing it. There's some good writing and painting going on in the region. The theatre is wanting and the musicianship pretty average, but you can't have everything and the arts are one of the few areas where we can fight machismo on something like equal terms.... About the painting, I'll have it sent over to your place this evening. Will you ring Urania and give her the address? I'll send the material I want translated at the same time. You work up near the embassy, don't you? Raul said the Women Landworkers' Union."

"Yes. But I can walk from anywhere here."

"Nonsense, look we're there." A minute later, she pulled up, right up outside the office. " Don't get wet."

I suddenly felt bewildered. Without being aware of it I was out of the car, listening to her say, "We must meet up and talk, Maeve. Here's my card. Ring me when you've had a look at the materials for translation. Must go. Bye.", and she was away.

Yelba stared at me from the door of the office. As I ran in past her from the rain, she asked, "Isn't that Eusebia Roa?"

"Yes. She gave me a lift from her gallery."

"What did she want? She hates us..."

"She's getting me a painting I want for some friends who are getting married on Saturday. Anyway, she doesn't hate me. How do you know she hates you? Did she tell you?"

"She's always attacking the popular movement in her newspaper articles. She's got a weekly column in the Nueva Tribuna. She accuses us of selling out to machismo and selling Morazan women short. She says the women's leaders of the popular movement hoodwink women in Morazan, that women will only get equal treatment through higher employment, more urbanisation and liberalising markets. She's awful."

"Yelba, from what I've seen of the way Amelia and some of the others on the National Executive treat you and Eva Maria, there's several varieties of awful. Anyone call for me?"

"No. It's been really quiet. Some women called in from the office in San Luis to pick up the spectacles and medicine the delegation left for them last week. They gave Eva Maria and me T-shirts. Did they get you anything?"

"Much the same. It was nice of them."

"Can you mind the office for a bit Maeve? Eva Maria's gone for a dental appointment and I need to check the post box."

"Go on ahead. I'll carry on with the statistics. Can I give you my key so you can check mine too?"

"Of course. And Maeve, I know we deserve better sometimes from Amelia and the others, but if I have to be treated like dirt I'd rather be abused by Amelia than a fascist like Eusebia Roa..... I'm stealing Eva's umbrella." She left, hugging the side of buildings as she went so as to avoid rainwater cascading down from overhanging eaves.

I closed the door behind her and went back to the statistics. Yelba had turned the radio to Station X, the music station most popular with younger people in Morazan. Old before my time, I turned it back to Radio Maravilla, to catch the hourly news. Nothing. Since it was gloomy inside from the overcast sky, I switched on the light. There was none. Another power cut.

The phone rang. No one spoke when I answered. As I returned to the back office, it rang again. I returned and picked up the receiver saying, "Hello. WLU...." and this time a young man's voice said seductively, "Hi, how are you doing? Think we can't touch you? You're all alone in that brothel now, you know..." and he hung up.

At first I felt angry. It took a while to realise what he had said. Then I felt anxious, wishing I were not alone. I made coffee. The phone rang again. I let it ring and went back to my paperwork, finding myself peering at it in the gloom.

The phone rang a couple more times but I let it ring. Then the doorbell sounded and I jumped. Eva Maria looked in through one of the small front windows. She waved and smiled as I approached to let her in. It was still raining, although not so hard. She came in soaked right through, her big country boots squelching.

"Oh, Eva, I am glad you're back. Some bastard's been ringing trying to intimidate me..."

"Where's Yelba?"

"Gone to the Post Office."

"What did he say?"

"He started off sounding normal and then just turned nasty, called the place a brothel."

"Are you ok?"

"Just angry someone should abuse me like that..."

The lights came on and the radio too.

"Can you remember exactly what he said? It may help us..... We really need an answer phone. Last time this happened it went on for over a week. We borrowed an answering machine from some Belgian friends so as to filter the calls."

"It's happened before?"

"Yes. It's the army. We ran a campaign with some other women's organizations protesting against compulsory military conscription. So they tried to intimidate us. We're protected because of our connections with foreign development agencies. But it's nasty all right. Especially when you're not used to it."

Eva dried herself with a towel and took off her top. As she changed, I told her what exactly what I thought the caller had said. From a drawer she took a T-shirt and removed her bra. I envied her those beautiful dark nipples of hers and wished for a moment my breasts were bigger, hoped she hadn't noticed me observing her.

She smiled, slipping into a dry shirt and came to the desk, her hair hanging in little wet tails. "It's funny they're watching the place. That's new. But why now? We're not doing anything out of the ordinary. They've left us alone for over a year.... I wonder what's going on."

"It may have to do directly with me, Eva. You see I've got Ninoska Vileda staying at my place till after the election."

"Ah....well, that would certainly explain it...is she ok?...."

"Yes, she's ok. That guy Mike Walker and some other people are helping sort out arrangements for her somewhere safe long term. But she's with me until next week"

"You're a good woman, Maeve. I didn't know you were that interested. You always shove us off when we talk politics."

"I wasn't involved, Eva and I'm not sure I am now, in a way, or that I want to be. But I promised Ninoska she could stay and I keep my word. These people are morons. I don't know how you cope with this kind of stuff. It's like being in a gangster movie."

"Forget about them. That's what they want. They want to paralyse us with anger and fear. Let's get back to work. How far have we got?"

"There's just Guajiniquil and San Juan La Frontera. Sorry Eva, how's your tooth? That business completely threw me"

"A bit sore. I had to get a bridge replaced just here."

She stuck her finger into her mouth to show me the shiny metal bridge. Cheap dental work, the price of poverty. Almost everyone I knew in Morazan apart from the foreigners had bits of metal gleaming somewhere in their teeth. We settled back down to work.

Yelba returned, handing me the key to my post box "Letter for you Maeve. Hi Eva, how's your mouth?"

"Fine. Love your umbrella. New?"

"Wasn't doing you any good, was it?"

The phone rang. Eva said, "I'll get it....WLU..... Really? Well, go tell your colonel this is me sounding very very afraid ...That's good, why not try it on your boyfriend? ...Sure.... Don't call us, we'll call you. Don't you know our computer can trace your call? Just you keep talking, ...poop.... He hung up on me…. Can computers trace phone calls Maeve?"

"How would I know?"

Yelba said, "What was all that about?"

"Some guy harrassing Maeve."

"Prick."

I read my letter. It was from my uncle Pat.

"Hi Maeve,

Hope you're getting a good tan and saving the world, God knows we need it. I was talking to my lodger - he's got the upstairs now I've had it converted - and mentioned you were in the Isthmus. He's an ex US Air Force guy, served in Korea. It drove him to the priesthood and that drove him to Micro-Biology. Bugs make better theology than angels he says. Anyway I also told him you were having problems with power cuts and he insisted on sending you this design for a back up system that runs off a car battery with an inverter and cuts in as soon as the power goes off. Then when it's on the battery re-charges. Well. That's what he says anyhow. He's a kind of cantankerous genius and thinks you're great for going to Morazan. You know you can stay at my place whenever you get back if things aren't great for you in Dublin with your mother. Take care and drink some rum for me - the quack has me on the wagon these days.

Your affectionate uncle

Pat"

Stapled to Pat's note was a sheet of music paper on which, in spidery black lines and diminutive neat block capitals, Pat's tenant had drawn the circuit for his back-up system. I folded it up and stuffed it in my back pocket. Maybe Rob Barnes would be interested for one of the projects run by Inter-Church Service Overseas.

Later on, Yelba was ribbing me about getting dropped back to the office by Eusebia Roa. Eva didn't take much notice, just observing, "She may be a right wing bastard, but she stands up for women."

I remembered I had to ring the gallery. "Hi, Urania? It's Maeve here. Eusebia told me to call you with my street address...Got a pen? It's, from the basketball court on Desdichado Park, one block east, next to the Pulperia Asunción, the black metal door. ...Thanks. I should be home by six thirty....."

However, it was nearly six thirty by the time we finished up in the office. The rain had stopped, but traffic was so heavy, it was quicker to walk than try to take a taxi-cab. Yelba headed off home and Eva walked with me across town, up El Desdichado to the bottom of my street.

The electricity was still on, the light from the street lamps reassuring. As I got to my door I looked back and Eva was still there watching me. Surely she was just as much at risk as me from the attentions of whoever was harassing me if they had serious intent to do us harm?

No one was home. I guessed they'd gone to see Ninoska's son. A note on the table read:

"Maeve, we'll be back before 9.00 tonight.....we're fine.....I left some guacamole in the fridge and a rice pudding..... Tortillas under the towel in the red pot. Ninoska"

Aracely had drawn me next to my name, me long and thin with a shock of brown hair - what I feel like in the morning.

I worried that the place might have been empty when Urania delivered the painting. The clock between sultry Simone in Casque D'Or and cold calculating Simone in Les Diaboliques, said seven fifteen. Did Simone Signoret eat rice pudding? I hadn't since the last time I had a meal at my mother's house in Dublin before we fell out and I went to stay with friends in one of those little streets behind the Meath Hospital.

That was after my time with Soulange in France. I couldn't keep censoring myself for my mother's benefit any more. "Go on, that's it, go on and leave me, just like your father.....!" I keep in touch now for form's sake. She'll be retiring soon. Age and Ireland's slow social revolution seem to have mollified her feelings about having a daughter she perceives as a sexual pervert.

After two spoonfuls I heard the door rattle. I went to the top of the stair. "Who is it?"

"Urania...from the gallery." I opened up. She was carrying the painting. "Hello, Maeve, can you take this while I get the things from the car? Thank you."

The evening was fresh after the rain. I saw her talk to a man in the driver's seat of the car - an old looking Mercedes estate. She left him and came back across the street with a briefcase. I let her go up before me and closed the door. She was taller than me and very fit. She took the steps lightly two at a

time moving freely in a loose-fitting cream trouser suit, attractive bracelets clacking on her ankles and wrists. I followed her with the painting.

"The place is a bit spartan.……have a chair. Can I make you anything? Coffee?"

"Thanks, my husband, Mateo, is waiting in the car. He's taking me to class. We're already rather late. Here are the things Eusebia wants translated. The catalogue is this one. This here is the brochure she needs put into French. She needs that in English too she said. And this is one she needs done just into English. Seem all right to you?"

The brochures were hardly any work at all. And the catalogue was only thirty pages, sparsely filled with text. As I scanned them Urania said, "Interesting posters and photographs. Did you study in France?"

"Yes, just a term. In Carcassonne, in the south. "

"Eusebia has contacts in Paris through the embassy here. If this dealer is interested I may go over next year to accompany an exhibition. That's why we need the translation.... If you have any questions call me. From ten till five someone's always at the gallery ... I'd better get going." As we reached the door she remarked, "Eusebia said to thank you for what you said about her programme. She's very shy you know. She's not the way people think.....Thank you for helping us, Maeve." She kissed me good night.

Mateo was talking to William who opened the passenger door as Urania got in the car and closed it behind her. The two men shook hands. Mateo waved to me and smiled, I was surprised to see he was white. He looked solid and tough.

William came over. I said, "Hi William,..." but he walked past me, turning and gesturing with his eyes to where I looked beyond him. "Yes, ma'am" he said looking deliberately at his watch with his torch, "just coming up to eight pm" and he turned and kept walking.

A large saloon car with a polarised windscreen and no licence plate sat half way up the street. The very kind of unmarked car I'd read about in the Monitor reports of forced disappearances here. I felt blank. So I was involved after all, like it or not.

"You see," Da' said to me once in the middle of one of their bitter arguments about money, "Your mother wants peace and quiet. Who doesn't? But what peace and quiet can you have if the price is letting someone steal what's yours? She's always telling me I'm a troublemaker and why don't I leave things alone. Well the answer is if you leave things alone you'll soon find that something else happens and then you have to leave that alone too and so it goes, on and on, until in the end you've nothing left that's yours. And you lose your self-respect from the very start. You just remember what that yank wrote, that there Robert Frost feller. "Good fences make good neighbours", that's it. "Good fences make good neighbours".
Then he sat down to darn his socks and his work clothes and the night went on between them in accusing silence; so many of those nights when he was at home, out of work. I hid away with my studies and my books and my fantasies of seducing beautiful French film stars.

That was after he'd lost his job for denouncing the company he worked for to the union in a big oil refinery in the England. The firm had been charging the oil company the trade union site rate and paying Da' and the other men their normal day rate, which was almost half the union rate even when they made bonus. And they used to work on those union sites for months at a time, maintaining and repairing the big stacks.

And another time he lost his job for trying to organize a branch of the local engineering workers union. My mother used to weep with rage when she'd get those phone calls telling her he was coming home. And then he'd appear and she'd keep quiet for a day or so and then out it would come...

"You and your feckin' principles. What shall we have for supper tonight then and tomorrow and the night after, eh? Principle Stew? With fine words for starters? Y'amadán ye!" and then on would go that Joan-of-Arc-at-the-stake face of hers and the weeping into the kitchen sink, peeling spuds through the sobs.

Marcel stuck his face round the corner, looked past me up the street, and disappeared without saying a word. The street corner was well lit. I closed the door and went to the shop for some milk - Ninoska had used it all making the rice pudding. "Hi Marcel. Can I have a litre of milk please?" He served me silently.

"How's Asunción?"

"Fine. She's fine."

"I heard on the radio today the rains are supposed to have filled up the big Maraní dam up in the Sierra and they've repaired one of the turbines that was down. Maybe we'll have fewer power cuts for a while."

"Yeah. Maybe. Excuse me." He went out back.

As I returned to my door I saw a group of six or seven youths from the basketball court walk down the street bouncing their ball. They sat down on the pavement opposite the house. Just talking.

"You Ok, *gatita*?" they asked.

"Thanks. Yes, I think I am. Are you ok?"

"I is very excellent OK," said the biggest one in terrible English, grinning crazily to his friends' amusement.

I went inside and began looking at the translation for Eusebia. I unwrapped the painting. It was as expressive as I'd felt on first seeing it, the daughter could so easily have been Aracely.

The sinister car drove off. I heard its wheels screech as it shot past the youths, them shouting. I looked out. The youths dispersed their different ways and the street resumed its neutrality. No doubt William had sent the basketball players to keep watch over me.

To my surprise, Marcel's brusqueness left me completely unperturbed. I could just imagine his line were he to discover Ninoska was staying in the apartment over his head, which he doubtless would. It worried me I might cause discomfort for Asunción.

Eusebia's catalogue was from an exhibition of West African art at a gallery in New York. The language was straightforward apart from a couple of passages that lapsed into anthropological gobbledygook. I was engrossed in deciphering them when I had to go down and let Walker and Ninoska in.

"Hi...how's Rogelio?" I was determined to say nothing about the phone calls or the car. Ninoska came up carrying Aracely asleep in her arms. "He's much better. Have a good day?... I'll put this one to bed."

I heard the door close and Walker came up with another woman, middle-aged, fat, with rimless glasses, curly grey hair down to her shoulders. Smartly dressed in a navy blue skirt and jacket, she looked incongruous next to Walker in his shabby T-shirt, unpressed slacks and sneakers. She had a genuinely friendly smile.

"Maeve, this is Sylvie Blanchot. She's attached to the teaching hospital here. She's part of a French government exchange program. She was our contact for the application to the embassy." Sylvie said, "I'm glad to have the chance to thank you for helping Ninoska."

Walker asked me, "Did she tell you?"

"What?"

"The embassy turned her down for political asylum"

"I'm sorry"

"But we had some good news, " Sylvie said. "The Jesuits in Puerto Moro have offered her a part-time job so she can stay with her mother there. Her main worry has always been not being able to work. Her union pay is barely enough for one person never mind a family and her mother depends on her too. She's trying to work out plans. We really appreciate you giving her this break while she makes arrangements."

"You're welcome. Fancy rice pudding? Ninoska made it. It's delicious..."

From behind me Ninoska said, "You're easily pleased Maeve, and I forgot to get milk while we were out."

"You're fine, I got some."

"You must visit us some evening." Sylvie said "I have fond memories of yachting at Kinsale when I was younger."

"You probably know Ireland better than I do."

Apart from the trips down to Kerry, it was true. The furthest I ever went out in Dublin was to Phoenix Park and Dollymount. Even Howth might as well have been on the edge of Outer Space. Just a handful

of memories of my mother and Da' and a little me on Dollymount Strand or out kicking through autumn leaves in the Park. Happier times vanished for good.

Sylvie and Walker didn't stay. They puzzled me. There seemed no clear connection between this well-groomed professional European and Ninoska's plight or the scruffy young Californian journalist.

"They look funny together don't they?" Ninoska remarked. "Sylvie's a bit of a mother to Walker. I think she helps him with money. He's foolishly generous with his own. He has no measure.... As if I should complain. It's true, though. I can't work out if he has something to prove or if he really just doesn't care about material possessions. Sylvie is active in the Socialist Party in her home town back in France. "

"Are you fed up about not getting asylum?"

"No, not really. Walker said the man handling the matter is the cultural attaché who interviewed me a couple of weeks ago, a short guy, very serious and careful. It was funny when he interviewed me, he reminded me so much of one of the straight men in Tirulín Topado, the TV comedy show for kids...what's wrong?"

I managed not to laugh, but failed to suppress a smile. "Nothing. Sounds like an appropriate choice to represent France in Morazán."

"Walker said he was very clear. He explained his superiors in Paris believed it would be too difficult for me and the children to make the move to France. And they'd already turned down the student leader who was stabbed recently, who had also made an asylum application. He promised the embassy would make strong representations to the government in my case requesting them to protect me from further harassment. In fact he showed Walker and Sylvie the letter his ambassador had drafted to present to the government here. And he explained that the European embassies of the European Community countries are planning a joint approach to encourage the defence of civil and political rights here as a result of the attacks. He didn't spell it out but Walker thinks he meant that the European Community countries will link economic cooperation to political developments." She sighed, "Who knows how seriously to take all that? I'm just relieved my Rogelito is better. I told him we'll probably go back to my mother's house in Puerto Moro. He was so happy. We've always been happy there...But there's so little employment there for someone like me. Too many people and too few jobs. Sylvie has a contact among the Jesuits who are based there. They've offered me work that makes returning home a realistic option. So, that's me right now. How have you been?" She looked at the translation work on the table. "You always keep very busy. I admire you."

"It's some work I'm doing in exchange for a painting. That one on the floor." I had left it face to the wall.

Ninoska picked it up, "Why this is beautiful! It reminds me of Aracely. Where did you get it? Who did it?"

"From a gallery called Mirandola up in the Bellas Artes a few blocks behind the Unamuno Theatre. The gallery owner wants me to do some translation and she's paying me with the painting."

"I've heard of that gallery. Isn't that the one run by that strange Roa woman? Someone told me she was a man. They say she's a transexual from Brazil."

"Is that bad?"

Ninoska paused, "She has a terrible reputation, Maeve...."

"You know how people gossip in Morazán, Ninoska. Look at what they say about you. You're supposed to be the brains behind a violent revolutionary takeover according to right-wing propaganda. I should imagine left-wingers in the university put out that gossip about Roa with the same idea in mind. They don't want anyone credible contradicting them. All I know is she's given me a chance to get this painting that I really wanted to give to someone I know. And even one of my WLU colleagues agrees she stands up for women, whether we like her politics or not."

"You're a great defender, Maeve. You should be an attorney.

Later as we ate supper, we heard Asunción and Marcel arguing below. It went on for a while, their muffled garbled exchanges like stifling verbal clinches, no referee to prise them apart. I chatted with Ninoska so as not to be listening to the incoherent exchanges below, which I feared had to do with her.

"They're often like that. I don't know why she stays with him, he's such a mutt..... How's your pregnancy going?"

"Pretty normal. Better than the first two..... It's not one I wanted especially. Sometimes one gets so desperate nothing seems to matter. You can bet that's why the woman downstairs stays with her husband, fear of the unknown, being alone, he probably owns the property...what's new? I go for a check up and an ultrasound on Monday. Sylvie will see me at the hospital. Walker says she's a top gynaecologist back in France. Don't you want children?"

"At the moment, no. Later on, who knows? I'm not sure what I want in that way. I want to study some more first. Maybe even try for a Doctorate. I did well in my finals last year, so I stand as good a chance as anyone else. My problem is I don't take academia seriously. It's easy enough to wangle your way into things if you're prepared to play the game. I'm no good at it."

"What brought you to Morazán?"

"I needed a break, to get away from things. Most of all I wanted to get away from Europe. My father died a couple of years ago. I don't get on with my mother. Why should I stay?"

"That's too bad. You must feel lonely. My father's dead too. But I'm very lucky with my mother. She doesn't have good health, but she's a great friend to me. I couldn`t manage without her."

"I expect she feels the same about you..."

I went back to my translation. The catalogue explored Yoruba culture, relating the masks and sculpture, jewellery and pottery to the history of slavery and colonization in Africa and the Americas. For me, brought up with a smattering of classical mythology and brainwashed by Catechism classes, this exposure to Yoruba cosmogony was delightful.

For the Yoruba an entity called Oldumare is the source of all creation. Lesser deities called Orisha respresent nature in its different aspects. Ancestral deities called Egungun also move in the spiritual world, a heavenly outerworld called Oruna. People can make contact with these spirits during a *bembe* where priests will fall into a trance of possession.

I was fascinated by the female trinity, Oshun, Oyá and Yemaya. Oshún is the goddess of love, fertility and art. She owns all fresh water. Oyá is the fierce goddess of winds and storms and guards the entrance to graveyards. Yemaya rules all the seas, watches over sailors and fishermen and, as the great mother, also rules women and childbirth. This was a welcome door into another world for me.

By the time I put the papers away, Ninoska had already gone to bed. It took me some time to fall asleep through a mélange of thoughts about unmarked cars, forced disappearances, Aracely, gods of crossroads and of iron, coral deeps...

Coming to Morazán I'd stepped into a world stripped of consumer gloss, the world of the majority, a neo-colonial world where reality shifts and changes to the whim of ruthless people in comfortable offices far away, the people who set interest rates and decide international banking policy, or intervene to decide the price of oil or other vital materials, or lean on a vulnerable currency for their own ends, or foment a war here, an incident there, railroading peoples and nations along the desired way.

I was losing my initial nonchalance about Morazán, conscious of the dangers of becoming angry and resentful. Were my feelings so important that I should do so? To me they were. This work we did, bringing some level of education to people abandoned to hunger and want, gave me solid ground to stand on and space to feel something like a free agent, something like those barefoot slum kids down on La Bahía beach, below the passing trains from the docks, booting Kant's Third Antinomy across the sand in the shape of a tattered old football: free, not free, Goal! Was that some kind of hope?

I slept in later than usual next day, but managed to get up and out in good time. Ninoska had risen early to bake. It was good to wake and eat fresh bread first thing. Aracely wanted to come with me but Ninoska carried her off to bathe her while I made my escape. I put the events of previous days out of my mind, convinced we were protected by the interest and concern of Raul and the embassy.

The morning passed quietly in the office. We had no more unwelcome phone calls, not counting one from Amelia from Costa Rica demanding to have some information ready for Monday morning. Between the three of us, we finished summarising the statistics before lunch.

I phoned Eusebia, needing to clear up some points in the translation. I wanted to be free of the obligation I was under. She was out. Urania said, "Call over later today, I can help you with that."

Eva Maria and Yelba and I went next door to El Panameño's for a sit-down lunch instead of our usual take-out. El Panameño had a television up at one end of the serving counter. The lunchtime news came on.

Election campaigning had stopped three days before but here was the government channel broadcasting a press conference held by a spokesman for the White House in Washington.

"Yes, we are anxious about the election in Morazán. We have vital interests in the region - security interests, the war on drugs, commercial interests - so we are hoping for a responsible decision by the people of Morazán to defend freedom and democracy, family values and the rule of law in the Isthmus."

"Is the US government concerned about reports of widespread corruption in the outgoing Morazán government and allegations against the government candidate, former La Bahía mayor, Teofilo Largaespada?"

"Clearly it would be incorrect for the government here in Washington to comment on the internal political affairs of Morazán. We have faith in the stable democratic political institutions of the country and are hoping for continuity there."

"Does that mean you view with less than equanimity the prospect of a Liberal party President in Morazán? Some analysts suggest the Sandinistas and the Salvadoran guerrillas are hoping for a Liberal Party victory following candidate Cabañas' recent speech committing himself to promote negotiated peace in the Isthmus and to revive the Isthmian-Caribbean Trade Initiative in response to proposals for a North American Free Trade Area. Does that worry you?"

"Certainly we feel more comfortable working with the Conservatives. But we know ordinary people in Morazan understand the threats to peace and prosperity in the region. We have faith in their ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. So we're confident their vote next Sunday will reflect a realistic understanding of their country's best interests based on the current government's long-standing defence of free trade and democracy. "

The report cut to footage of Cabañas playing golf with an attractive blonde woman. "Liberal Party candidate Enrique Cabañas is taking it easy in the last few days before the election, here pictured at the luxury Xiguasí Country Club with his foreign-born wife Melida, for whom this is her second marriage."

Then footage of a sermon from Archbishop of Morazan, Leopoldo Guzman: "We in Morazan have a heavy moral duty to vote on Sunday. On all sides family values are under attack. Throughout the region forces are at work to destroy the innocence of our children, violate the sanctity of the home and attack the natural justice of private property. Some misguided leaders seem tempted to give the benefit of the doubt to the enemies of freedom and democracy circling eagerly around us at this time, seeking their opportunity. People of Morazán! Look into your hearts when you vote and think of your duty to your family, to your country and to God!"

The bulletin then carried a report of the US ambassador to Morazán smiling and shaking hands with Teofilo Largaespada at a charity banquet in La Bahia, "Meanwhile Conservative candidate Teofilo Largaespada awaits the election here in La Bahía. Last night he attended a fundraising event with US ambassador Morton Blackbridge in support of the La Bahía Chamber of Commerce organized Telethon for disabled children."

"Wonder who they want to win..." said El Panameño, switching channels. "Think they can fool all the people all of the time." He found a football match, to general approval from the customers. Someone murmured "That's better."

Back in the office, my companions collected their bags for the weekend. Eva Maria had invited Yelba to spend the Saturday with her in Concepción since Yelba was registered to vote in Xiguasí, not in La Bahía. They wanted to go early so as to miss the worst of the inevitable crowding on the southbound buses as people headed back to their hometowns for the election weekend.

Yelba had agreed to run the office reception on Tuesday. Monday was a holiday to give people time to get back to normal after the election. Eva Maria and myself would help the San Luis reading groups with an evaluation they were doing. No one wanted to be in the office doing secretarial work for the Coordinating Committee when our own work was getting behind. Besides, Eva and I were both yearning for a spell in the country out of La Bahía. Yelba was happy in the city.

At the Soldiers Boulevard they took a taxi. I headed off west thinking it might be quicker to go around the Republic Rotonda and along by the stadium road into Bellas Artes. Rain threatened. My cloth bag wouldn't protect the papers I was carrying from getting wet. I stopped abruptly, thinking to go into a shop to ask for a plastic bag, I caught a sudden movement at the edge of my vision. On looking back I saw nothing unusual. Was I starting to suffer the paranoia Raul had told me of, that afflicts people living political repression? There were plenty of people in the street.

The shopkeeper gave me a bag and I continued on my way, walking fast and purposefully, only to discover why people complained about the route the Avenida John Paul had cut through the old district. Trying to cross it, I had to walk nearly a mile and a half along the Hermoso river as far as the Twin Bridges in order to cross the river to the meagre strip of park around San Nicolas church and go through the underpass below the Avenida John Paul into the other half of Bellas Artes. Then I had to double back in the direction of the Unamuno Theatre, guided to Galería Mirandola by the Ozymandias-like stumps of the National Guaranty building.

Urania was with a customer, but motioned me to take a seat at a plain glass coffee table with a couple of wide easy chairs. I sat and read one of the magazines laid out there. Called "Vanity", that was indeed its subject matter: cosmetics, hairstyling, fashion, sex appeal, diet. It was a local magazine. Not one of the photographs included a person of colour. It was like being in Ireland. But in Morazan white people comprised maybe ten or fifteen per cent of the total population.

Urania came over to me, "Hi, how are you doing?"

"Fine, can I pay for the painting, before I forget. Here..."

She took the cash I handed her and made out a receipt. Left-handed, she wrote with her arm curled round in what seemed a most uncomfortable way, the pen facing towards her. Her writing was a long italic, beautifully firm and even. I took the receipt admiring it, "I've never seen such beautiful writing."

"Thank you. My grandfather was a calligraphist. He taught all of us to write well. He was very strict." She smiled. She was beautiful, her long dark face, those slightly oriental eyes, her neatly sensuous lips. Every time I saw her she was wearing a maroon headscarf.

She asked, "How far have you got?"

"I've only one or two points. I got lost in some of the anthropological jargon when I sat down to it last night. Like here, they seem to be talking about syncretism and they use the word synchronism, is that something to do with Saussure?"

She explained the point the writer was trying to make, having to do with the changes provoked by the economic and cultural repression experienced by African slaves in the Americas, leading them and their children to cling tenaciously to the beliefs and customs of their forbears, their memories of their African home and its distant forms of material life. She had complete command of the material in the catalogue.

I made notes as she took me through minor points I had worked on the night before. "You're very thorough, Maeve. That's good. Other people would have just done a literal translation without trying to understand what was being said. We appreciate you trying to get it right. It's something we want to recapture, the texture and detail of our lost colonial history, so much more than a few dates and men prancing around on horses..... Excuse me, if that's all, I'd better leave you and get back to my other work, we want to take advantage of the quiet time around the election to prepare for a new exhibition next month." We stood. She walked out with me to the street.

I said, "I want to walk back to El Desdichado without having to go all the way back to San Nicolas church. Is there no way through across the Hermoso between here and the Rotonda?"

"Sure there is, only for pedestrians though. Not many people know. Behind the Unamuno on the far side of the car park wall, there's a footpath that was blocked off when they were building the new highway. It's open again now. When you walk past the Rotonda you can't see it because it's hidden where the highway crosses over the river. Go along that footpath and you come out under the highway in what's left of that end of the park. About two hundred metres to your right then there's a footbridge over the river bringing you straight into the office area of the Andalusia Hotel mall. And that puts you right at the foot of El Desdichado."

"How did you discover that? I've been walking around La Bahía for months and never discovered that."

"Well you wouldn't unless you needed to, and now you have.... I hope the rain holds off for you."

I stepped off the pavement but immediately jumped back as a car accelerated at me, halting in front of me. It was the car from the night before. The passenger window wound down enough for a man to shout "Gringa communist! Think you can come here and do what you like? Think your rich nigger friends can protect you?"

The few people on the street around me stared as if petrified.

Me too. I found someone beside me. Who? "Don" worry," he said. In one movement he took my far arm, pulled me so I faced back toward the gallery and lead me gently but firmly in that direction. The car accelerated away. The stranger watched the car disappear down the street. People went on their way.

Urania took my arm. The armed guard came out, asking "Everything all right?"

The stranger said, "I'm Johnny, William's brother. I've been keeping an eye on you today. He was worried about you."

Urania asked "What was all that about?"

"Some guys bothering me."

"Who are they? Do you know them?"

"No."

"Mateo and I saw that car last night outside your house." And to Johnny, "You were very timely. Maeve, Let me give you some money for a cab."

"That's OK Urania, really."

"Would you be walking so far if money weren`t a problem? Here take it. Don't be silly. We need you to finish that translation, remember?" Her gentle mockery piqued me.

The guard moved to go back to his post, adding as he went, "Those are bad men, Miss. But if they wanted to do more than scare you, they would have done it. You keep your nose clean, you'll be OK."

Johnny said, "That's good advice, my friend. Shall I keep you company Maeve?"

"Yes, I'd appreciate it. Urania, thank you."

"You take care. I mean it."

Johnny hailed a passing taxi. We took it back to El Desdichado.

I said, "You shouldn't let me cause you and William inconvenience."

"No bother. We can't afford to lose customers for Will's boat you know."

As we made our way through the La Bahía traffic, he remarked "That lady sure is a picture.If I were younger I'd hope to get together with a woman like her. Where's she from? Not from Morazán that's for sure.”

"I don't, but I guess she's from Brazil. She was talking some African language in the gallery yesterday."

"You're kidding."

"No." I felt tired and shut up.

He got out at the bottom of El Desdichado. "I'll walk from here. We live on the other side of the stadium. You ok?"

"Sure. Thanks Johnny."

He turned away as the taxi pulled off. I really had no idea what had happened, where he had sprung from. The whole episode had me disoriented, and the pure poison of that "Think your rich nigger friends can protect you?" ate away in me like a cruel worm.

At the house, Asunción came up as I tapped at the door for Ninoska to let me in. She looked very serious, but said in a friendly way, "Can I come and talk to you Maeve? I want to clear something up that's bothering me and Marcel."

"Of course. Right now?"

If there was to be uproar I prayed it might be later. But Asuncion's face indicated now.

"Who is it?"

"It's me Ninoska." She opened the door.

"Hi, Ninoska. How has your day been? Come on in Asunción." We made our way up.

Ninoska said, "Aracely has a bit of a cold. She's ok, though. How about you?"

"So so. This is Asunción. She's runs the shop downstairs. Asunción this is Ninoska."

"Hi."

"There's coffee, want some?"

"Yes. Asunción?"

"Yeah, thanks." She sat down at the table while I dumped my bag in my room and went to the bathroom. When I came out she was talking to Ninoska, "...my little girl's the same age. I think it's terrible what they did to you."

I was relieved to hear that. In the kitchen, I poured myself several fingers of rum before joining them at the table. Asunción raised her eyebrows, "Maeve?"

"Heavy day." I raised my glass "Health... what's up Asunción?"

"Look Maeve. You know Marcel can be a pain sometimes. But he is my husband and this place is his and it's all we have. Now as far as I'm concerned politicians are a bunch of crooks and the army are a bunch of criminals too. But the bottom line for us is our business and we can't afford to get into trouble with the police or the army. Let me finish.... Now Marcel isn't a bad man. But he's angry that we've had plain-clothes police round asking questions. And he's angry that the neighbours are talking about the incidents over the last couple of days. And he's worried about that car without plates parked up the road last night. Because that's the Acción Morazán and they're bastards. He's afraid they might petrol bomb our shop or some one of those dirty stunts they pull to intimidate people. All I'm saying Maeve and

Ninoska is that we don't want any harm to come to anyone, to you or to us. Now we know why the police are snooping around we can cope with it better. But we want to know what the deal is. Are you thinking of staying here long term or what?"

I was going to speak but Ninoska touched my hand and spoke herself, "Thank you for being so sincere. I can leave whenever you want me to. But our plan was to rest here until Tuesday. On Monday afternoon I have a check up at the University Hospital and then we'll move back to my mother's house in Puerto Moro where I've been offered a job. If you could help me and my children by letting me stay here till then I'd be very grateful. But you're right to worry about your family. Who wouldn't?"

"OK. So if anyone asks us, all we know is that Maeve's got a friend staying till next week and we don't know where they're going after that. Last night Marcel was putting on his big macho "this is my house" speech and we had a big fight, you probably heard us. I was explaining to him, it may sound unlikely to you, a lot of our customers round here are anti-army and hate the government, nobody likes the forced conscription and it's that time of year now. This is a Liberal barrio, always has been. Marcel could easily make himself unpopular around here if word got out that we ran Pepe Vileda's daughter out of our house. We don't agree with your political ideas Ninoska but a lot of people admire your fight to clean up the Social Security Fund…. Hey, I'd better get back to the shop. I'll square Marcel till Tuesday. OK?"

"Thank you, God bless you" Ninoska said, embracing her.

I accompanied Asunción to the door where she took my hand and said "Maeve, everyone needs help now and then. Don't be afraid to talk to me about this kind of thing. You're a good person and I care about you a lot. It's sensible to be cautious, but I won't ever try and put one over on you and I know how to keep a secret. Let's talk some more another time. What do you say?"

"Sure Asunción, we've a lot to talk about, it's true. Tell Marcel I'm sorry he was upset. I'll tell him myself when I see him."

"He'll be glad. He's good Maeve, he just doesn't think straight a lot of the time. One more thing, do you mind if I offer you some advice?"

"Of course not."

"I don't like to gossip about people but you'd do well to keep that William guy at a distance. He's a hypocrite. Smile at you one moment and stick you in the back the next. I don't like to see good people made a fool of. He's ok if you keep your distance."

"Thanks Asunción." Her advice engraved itself in my head. The rum had done its work. I felt tipsy and sleepy.

Upstairs I found Ninoska setting herself up to iron some clothes on the table. She said, "That's a real Morazán woman."

"You know where you stand with Asunción, all right." I sat down beside her, " I wonder if I'm up to this Ninoska. I'm glad to help you and Aracely. But I'd go crazy if I had to live here for any length of time. You can never be sure who to trust. Doesn't it get to you?"

"Of course it does. I often wonder if I'm losing my mind. That's one of the things my enemies in the popular movement are always saying behind my back. 'She's crazy...She's got a persecution complex...she's just a hysterical attention seeker...' and it works you know. Especially because I'm a woman and in our culture women are supposed to be weak and to crack easily and to be irrational. Many times I've been turned down for a job because people say I am unstable. And then when something happens they say, 'What do you expect? You want them to sit you down and give you a manicure? Don't you know revolution requires sacrifice?' and they make invidious comparisons with what other people have suffered as if these things can be compared in some kind of theoretical laboratory cut off from real life and real people."

The warmth of the iron and the smell of pressed cotton cast a spell on me. I rested my head on my folded arms on the table beside her and fell asleep.

My mother working through a pile of sheets just fetched in out of the rain. Ma tripping over that broken drain cover because the cat got between her legs. She twisted her ankle. So she sat at the table to iron. "No good expecting you to do it. And I'm not having you wandering around while people snigger at all the wrinkles and creases you leave in your clothes."

"Yes Ma..."

"No one's going to say I can't cope because a daughter of mine turns herself out like a rake."

"Yes Ma"

"Yes Ma.....if I want a mynah bird, I'll buy one thank you, Maeve.....You'll need glasses with all that reading. It's not healthy. You never go out. You've got no boyfriends so far as I can see. You'll be old before your time."

"I'm going to do well in these exams, Ma. This is my way to a better life."

"A better life is it? Going to that godless university you've set your heart on? Or going to university in England where you can't even cross yourself or say a Hail Mary without being called a stupid Paddy? ...What's wrong with going to secretarial school and getting a job, like Mary Kelly or Fionnuala Murphy? They do ok and they help their parents financially. Mary's studying computers in the evenings. What's wrong with that?"

"Ma, I'm going to go to university and I'm going to do well there and get to do something I really want to do, not spend my life being bossed around by some prick with twenty years seniority..."

"Oh really?....Fine words, Maeve, just like your father....you'll see once your grant money runs out, it'll be me you look to to bail you out and where'll all the fine words be then?..."

"That's not fair Ma, I work hard in the supermarket every evening and in the bakery at weekend, you don't complain when I chip in to pay the gas and the electric do you? I don't drink I don't smoke, I don't bet on the horses and I don't go with loose women, what more d'you want?..."

And I got up and left her to it, her calling up the stair after me... "Don't you be cheeky now, young Miss. That's it go on, you never got that pertness and that temper from me you know. Next thing you'll be refusing to go to Mass...."

And that was the next thing and the next row. One thing after another, pecking away at each other like a pair of demented parakeets. No wonder I fell into Soulange's arms, her beautiful Jeanne Moreau arms ..... Carcassonne? It was like waking up in Tir na Nog...No more of that infuriating "just like your father", only ambrosial sunshine and tenderness and friendship and sex leaving me knocked out, time after time.....

When I woke I was alone. A note on the table, "Didn't want to wake you. Back early. Ninoska" I heated some coffee she had left on the cooker and took up the translation materials. As I worked I heard Marcel and Asunción laughing together down in their kitchen. Simone's wisdom about married love - hundreds of tiny threads that hold us together. Would I ever know the full truth of that?

By the time I heard Ninoska and Walker at the door, the draft of the translation ran to over five thousand words. All being well I could finish it for Monday or Tuesday. Walker stayed briefly, admiring the painting for Graham and Zenaida. Aracely sat in my lap as we chatted, her arms round my neck as I cuddled her. She was very subdued with her cold. I had to keep wiping her runny nose for her as she dozed in my arms.

Walker said, "That William seems a nice guy. Known him long?"

"Since I came in March. He tackled me in the dark once thinking I was a burglar. He seems ok. I can't quite make out how far it's genuine interest in people and how far it's just a front he keeps up to promote his boat hire business. Why? Was he talking to you?"

"Yes, just now, just passing the time. It must be real boring keeping watch all night."

"Didn't ask after me did he?"

"No. He did ask again if we'd need transport for Ninoska. I guess he has to hustle for every bit of work he can get, like everyone else here."

Ninoska said, "Maeve, will it be ok if I bring Rogelito here on Monday evening? That way we can set out straight from here to Puerto Moro. One of the Jesuits will pick me up on Tuesday morning."

"Of course. That's fine. Will you be at Graham's wedding tomorrow Mike?"

"No. I have to spend all day tomorrow and Sunday with this journalist from Detroit covering the election here. He's a nice fellow, turns out he's a world authority on bonsai.. He's from Tennessee, like my Mom. It means I'll miss Graham's wedding but I need the money. Sylvie will call over tomorrow to take Ninoska over to her in-laws. Sunday too. I'll be back to help out on Monday."

It was a full moon when I saw Walker down to the street, his old Mustang bathed in the silver light seemed a more dignified dark blue than its unwashed sludgy blue of broad daylight. In any case, it was more reluctant than ever to start. I didn't look out for William, closing the door as soon as the Mustang pulled out. I was glad Walker would miss the wedding. I could relax and enjoy the event with Raul without having to explain anything.

Ninoska had put Aracely to bed. As I made it up the stair, she came over, asking gently "What's wrong?"

I slumped myself at the table before replying, "Nothing really. Like I said earlier, I just don't think I'm cut out for all this. Maybe I've had too sheltered a life. Maybe I'm not as clever or as tough as I thought I was...."

She saw straight through me. "Tell me what's happened, please."

I told her about the phone calls, the Acción Morazán car outside the house, and the incident over at the gallery. I told her what Asunción had said about William. She asked, "Are you angry with me for bringing these things into your life?"

"Angry? Not angry, no and not with you. You didn't bring these things into my life, I did. Like you said to me a couple of evening's ago. This is my life and I'm responsible for it. Well, I think a lot of that's true, if we can be responsible for anything. I often wonder how much of what we do is in our hands and how much isn't. I wonder what kind of "responsible" I'm touting...."

"You're hard on yourself, Maeve. Don't be. No one knows what's going to happen. Just be yourself and don't let anyone tell you you're no good, that what you want isn't important, that you don't deserve consideration. Adán, my husband, taught me the value of dignity and self respect. He often said "What happens to us isn't important, but what we do is important for our children, for our people." I can see him and hear him saying it, with that fervour he always had when talking about his ideas and plans."

She stopped. I expected her to be sad. But she looked at me straight and hard. I suppose whatever tears she'd had to weep had been shed long ago. "It's true, we can only be responsible for what we say and do. Don't let people lead you astray or put you off going where your instincts or your beliefs take you. I think I'm here with you, protected by you, because you already know and believe what I'm saying. In the end, it's only common sense, don't you think?.....I'll turn in early Maeve. You should too or you'll be falling asleep at the wedding tomorrow. "

"Thanks Ninoska, Good night. I hope Aracely's better in the morning." She embraced me and kissed me. I felt her belly against me, the little life there growing determinedly.

More listless than tired, I stayed up for a while fooling with the draft of the translation. I was looking forward so much to spending some carefree moments with Raul. I surprised myself at how nonchalant I felt about his impending departure. For good or ill, I was different to Ninoska. She had faith in revolutionary change and I just believed in behaving decently. She was brave and I was not. She had the courage to have children and to stake out a future for them. I didn't. Too hard on myself? I should have been an attorney.....

Casque D'Or looked out at me from turn of the century Paris. Perhaps I would escape the guillotine of a bad conscience. I half-remembered Clarissa and that quote from Job. "I look into my heart and my own heart betrays me." Was that it? Me the unwitting dupe of callow bluestocking vanity, poring over my books in the tiny sitting room in Cabra, crashing through a translation in a barebones apartment in La Bahia.....

My mother chided me for reading the Protestant Bible. "So shall I be ordering your Orange Sash for you, now then? And shall we open a red, white and blue arch here along the Stonybatter?.....May the Sacred Heart and all the Saints have mercy on us....I suppose now it'll be roast beef on Fridays in future for our Maeve..……Your smart Trinity friends have you brainwashed. That's what happens when you go over to the enemy. It's colonialism and you can't see it, even staring you in the face. Now what was wrong with University College? Or with Maynooth? Oh no, not good enough for our Maeve. And now you don't go to Mass I doubt you even remember your Hail Mary. But you can quote from the English Bible....I suppose I should give thanks you're not getting by heart the Koran....." By then, even she knew she was parodying herself. She just hated to admit I was doing well in my studies and managing financially without depending on her.

The clock beside Simone said eleven ten as I turned out the light. It was cool in my room. The moonlight shone through the glass persianas with a glow like the soft reflection you get from snow on an Irish winter night. I had brought Martina Aguilar's painting in with me for the reassurance of that calm mother and daughter image guarding over me. Under an extra blanket I drifted asleep, making mental notes as I fell away into my dreams.

Early awake, sleepy-eyed, I took a cup of tea upstairs with my washing. Alive the city came beside me through the bright morning, like a genie from some lamp I may have thrown over the wall, as I rubbed and scrubbed and shoved my clothes around the concrete sink. Street sellers and raucous sanate competed with the traffic.

Ninoska came up to wish me good morning. She caught me singing "She moved through the fair". She looked so much better after just a few days rest. She embraced me, told me she was making muffins again, did I want some coffee....

I felt inexplicably happy, as though someone had just let me out of gaol. The thought of a dance and some craic had something to do with it. A good night's sleep had done no harm, either. I felt more whole, more in order and at peace But also it had to do in some vague way with the events of those days, as if I had passed some rite and might now be thought of - at any rate by myself - as more grown-up, better, more solid, less likely to fall leafy victim to the gust of someone else's passing whim. A pleasant fantasy, but a real feeling too, and why should I not indulge it? Since I knew it was likely soon to end up a wraith like Eurydice, flitting from my grasp as events shoved me and my hopes to one side.

I arrived in the kitchen laughing. Aracely laughed too - in solidarity with my frivolous mood. I picked her up, wiped her nose on my T- shirt - "Maeve!" cried Ninoska, astonished - and ran back upstairs with her to show her the city. We could just see the edge of the Verclaro fortress peeping round the side

of the oblong Hotel Atlantico, the great wide Indigo River flowing seawards, the busy traffic on the Heroes Bridge.

"Look at the tiny people!", she cried.

"It's because we're so high up Aracely."

"How can Our Lord and the Virgin Mary and all angels see us if they're right up in heaven? We must be just little specks to them."

"I don't have the answer to that one, my baby. You must ask your mammy. But you know they're very much cleverer than us, don't you? Sure, they can do all kinds of things we can't do."

"When I'm an angel I'm going to take care of you and make sure no bad people ever hurt you."

"You're very good to me Aracely. What shall we do if I get to be an angel before you do?"

"Well, you'll take care of me and Mama and Rogelito, won't you?"

"Of course I will...let's eat..."

It was nearly eight when I sat down to the draft of the translation. The wedding was at eleven in Our Lady of Mercy in Las Chanillas, the reception to be held in the Hotel Andalusia. Sylvie called over just after nine o'clock. They were spending the day with Ninoska's parents-in-law, driving out to La Laguna, a popular park area on the way up to the Sierra Maraní. They seemed just another happy family group off on a weekend outing. I was glad. The children needed that normality.

After Ninoska had gone I tied Graham and Zenaida's present in two sheets of cardboard I'd cut up from a box and wrapped it all in plain green wrapping paper, tying it finally with red ribbon. By the time I needed to get ready, the first draft of the translation was nearly finished. I showered quickly before pulling on Evora's dress: Perhaps I imagined it, but it seemed less tight than when I had tried it on at her flat. I had forgotten about a matching bag but remembered the maroon crocheted bag the delegation had given me. It looked fine with maraschino red and was big enough to carry a pair of sandals to change into out of Evora's shoes should they become unbearable, as well as some light slacks and a T-shirt.

I applied my routine special event make-up of eye shadow and dark red lipstick. Hair? *Coupe sauvage*, as usual. Raul called it *coupe fauve.* At the last minute I remembered the circuit diagram Pat's tenant had sent. It might be handy for Rob. It went in the bag along with some tissues and wipes.

Since it was ten thirty by the time I snapped the lock shut on the front door, I decided to walk down to the park to catch a taxi. That was kind of a mistake, since half the neighbourhood youth turned out to be congregated for a basketball match in the park. The game almost stopped as the spectating males vied with each other for the loudest, sauciest double-entendre at the *gringa gatita* in her tight midi dress. I tried to hide behind the painting.

A cab came quickly to my rescue as someone promised, to general approval from his mates, that I could eat their little bird whenever I wanted. "I'm vegetarian" I cried, lamely, and ducked to negotiate with the extremely fat driver, handy cover for a moment or two.

"Where to?"

"Our Lady of Mercy, Las Chanillas. How much?"

"This time of day, weekend, fifteen pesitos"

"Ten?"

"You want to keep those fellows company for a while?"

"Twelve?"

"Get in then..."

Traffic was heavy. It took an age to get out onto the Soldiers Boulevard and then after racing over Heroes Bridge we hit traffic into the market area. I made it to the church door at five past eleven. Raul was waiting there, unfamiliar in a dark blue suit, his close cut hair, his poker face. The service was ready to start. Only Zenaida was missing. The large church was by no means full. Even so, well over a hundred people had turned out to attend the service.

After greeting Raul quickly, I sought out Rob Barnes. He was chatting with Joe Fiallos.

"Quite a turn out" said I.

"They sent out over three hundred invitations. People think highly of Graham. He's been working with the Liberal Party economic team on a model for them, so some of the politicos have turned up as well as the university crowd. And Zenaida's parents have a large family. The reception will be busier. A lot of people will come up later from Xiguasí."

Joe said "I'm glad you could make it. You're looking great."

"Thank you, José. Won't Graham get into trouble for doing work for a political party?"

"Oh no. His assignment with ICSO finished in June. He's just killing time now before going to the States. He's been offered a teaching post in UCLA. Starts next month. So the wedding reception's doubling as a kind of send off ."

I caught Raul's eye. He smiled at me. He was talking with a young priest.

Evora came over. "You look terrific, Maeve. Is that the painting?"

"Yes. I was thinking of giving it to them at the reception. Will that be ok?" "Sure. Have you come with anyone?"

"No I'm on my own. But Mister Pec from the French embassy has promised me a dance or two. We go to the same class."

"He's old enough to be your father, Maeve."

"Maybe. He's a great dancer though and he's got an encyclopaedia for a brain."

"Reminds me of the straight man in that ..."

"Tirulín Topado, yes....you know I think he deliberately plays to that resemblance sometimes."

"Here she comes, here she comes, look! Come on, let's get inside...think it'll rain?"

I let her go and waited to go in with Raul. He stopped at the church door, looking at me quizzically.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I'm wondering why they have left the door open....."

"Don't be daft come on in.....That's a Julie I suppose,...."

He grinned and in we went, getting into a pew just as Zenaida came in with her father, much shorter than her.

Her long plaited hair hung down the centre of her back. I was struck by how plain her dress was and how it set off the beauty of her features. She wore no make up. A simple lace veil covered her head and shoulders. Greeting her at the altar, Graham looked even paler than usual, his dark suit emphasising the effects of staring at computer screens for hours at a time seven days a week. But he was obviously happy. They faced the priest and the service began.

Although the day outside had turned overcast, the church was full of light. It had two large doors on each side as well as the doors at the end of the aisle. All these doors were open. Large round windows beamed light into the nave along the length of the clerestory. A fresh and gentle sea breeze blew in off the river delta just a few hundred yards from the church.

Raul joined in the responses to the service. Staying mute, I found it hard not to fidget. I recalled Evora's analysis of Graham's relationship with Zenaida, promising myself I would never marry, even to save tax. Nothing much could be heard from where we were. We could only see the back of the couple and the mostly bowed head of the priest. My eyes wandered over the images of the Signs of the Cross, their sado-masochistic barbarism. I congratulated myself on my paganism and solved a couple of problems in the translation I'd brought with me in my head.

Finally they kissed and headed down the aisle. Zenaida's family and Graham's university friends made their way out first, greeting them with rice and confetti as the couple ran laughing to the car. I wished them well with all my heart and no conviction. My parents' wedding photograph hung in the air in front of me, a vivid combination of Banquo's ghost and Belshazar's "Mene Mene Tekel Upsharin": Da grinning and gawky into the camera, Mum short and solid beside him, looking out at somewhere else, distant, as if having forgotten where she had left something.

Evora pulled at me, "You coming with us? Get Mr Pec and we can all go together in the jeep. We're in the pay car park a couple of blocks away. Coming?"

"Good idea." She headed off to join Rob. I found Raul standing talking to the young priest again.

"Father Martin, this is my friend Maeve O'Siochrú. She's a volunteer on a literacy project for rural families." "Nice to meet you Father."

"We were discussing our project for street children. Can't we convince you to work with us for a few months ? We need all the help we can get."

"Sorry Father, Morazan has made a country girl of me….. excuse me, Raul, we have the offer of a lift to the reception. Shall we take it?"

"Well, Father, if you'll excuse me?"

"Enjoy yourselves. And thank you Señor Pec, for all you have done."

We caught up with Rob and Evora a couple of blocks before the parking lot. As we went I claimed my point for the pause in the church doorway "Julie!" I said to Raul, "Huis Clos, Garcin, one point."

We were very much out of place in our smart wedding clothes among the Saturday melée of the market area. When I remarked on this to Raul he launched into one of his historical asides, "Our Lady of Mercy was always a community church. In the 1890s a French priest came over here and later got caught up in the 1915 civil war. This was his church. His name was Thomas. He was a geologist by training. From Murol, just down the road from where I was born at Chambon-sur-Lac. Very brave and generous, a very good man.

"The Liberals caught him sheltering some Conservative militia, the so called "Copistas", the "Top Hats" after the style in headwear of the Conservative caudillo Bismarck Largaespada,, and sentenced him to the firing squad. He was shot up there in the Verclaro fortress in 1915. His dying words were extraordinary, as if he were taking tea with some fine lady parishioner. When the officer commanding the firing squad asked him why he had sheltered the Top Hats when his Liberal sympathies were well known, he simply observed, "I am with Lacordaire, an impenitent Liberal but a loyal Catholic". And that was the end of him. That's why the children's refuge is called "Casa Thomas".

"What was moving about his death was that the same firing squad bore his coffin down from the fortress to the Northern Cemetery just across from the Heroes of Verclaro bridge. Some of them had been orphans in the school for poor children here at Our Lady of Mercy and their officer had been a pupil at the secondary school - both run by Thomas. A crowd had gathered outside the fortress kneeling in prayer at the time of the execution. When they carried the coffin out, everyone followed them down to the cemetery for the burial service, which was led by the bishop of La Bahìa the father of Ponce Espinoza, the dictator. That's why the Liberal's used to call Ponce "the Holy Bastard", because his dad was a bishop. You have to remember, Morazán is a small place and secrets are hard to keep..... Anyway, Thomas was a champion of the market people. In 1907 he helped them get a hundred year lease on the Chanillas area at a peppercorn rent from the city council. Heaven knows what'll happen when it runs out in twenty years time. "

We had to step into the road to get past the stallholders. That part of the market area was for hardware and plumbing materials, tools of all kinds, electrical goods, paint, kitchenware. I clutched the painting close, anxious it might get damaged. But keeping in behind Raul's solid progress through the crows, I made it safely into the parking lot. Rob and Evora had acquired the ICSO office jeep for the day. We turned out to be seven all together; Rob, Evora, me, Raul and three local people, whom I didn't know from the ICSO office.

The talk was banal, mostly of how great Zenaida looked, what a lucky man Graham was to have hooked such a beauty, what a lucky woman Zenaida was to have landed such a clever man with such great prospects and how she deserved it, after all, she's worked hard and she's not so dim herself you know and what a shame they have to move to Los Angeles and how Zenaida will be sorry and pine for home and oh no, she'll soon get over it and in no time they'll have a beautiful family and what will the children be like - well Conchita married that German and they had two kids and they both had light complexions and were so beautiful, they say mixed race children are healthier because they get the best of both sets of genes, someone asked, "Do you think that's true Rob?....."

"I'm a sociologist not a geneticist, how would I know?"

I said, "Hey Rob, someone sent me a diagram for a power circuit that cuts in automatically when the power goes off. Runs off a car battery. Interested?"

"Not for work. We have stand-by batteries on the machines in the university that do the same job. But it would certainly be handy at home when the power goes off at night. The lights would stay on and Evora would be able to carry on ironing....Ow!... On the other hand, perhaps we should market it as a contraceptive device for countries subject to power cuts..... might go partners with the Vatican..... Not much traffic for a Saturday."

"It's the election", someone said, "everyone's taking a break. Most people finished work at noon yesterday and Monday's free to give people time to get back from the country."

"D'you think Cabañas can do it?" asked Raul.

"Depends what games they play. The gringos want Largaespada in."

"How about the economy?"

"Hardly makes any difference. Massive debt. Meagre investment. Can't do much to stimulate activity without printing money. The Conservatives tried encouraging exports with a system of certificates with preferential interest rates for exporters and linked it to tax breaks but that hasn't really worked very well because people have created a secondary market in the certificates that diverts the planned benefits into what's basically a new element in the country's internal debt, which just makes things worse. There are things Cabañas can do but he's up against so many vested interests in the economy. The most he can hope for are some mild improvements in the investment climate, a bit of debt forgiveness combined with some re-scheduling and maybe a preferential oil deal with the Venezuelans or the Mexicans to help keep the balance of payments stable. Will that be enough to finance the health and education reforms he's promised? Or keep a lid on the military budget? Impossible to say...."

"Cabañas won't win." One of the ICSO women said. "At least, he may win the election but he'll lose the count."

"What makes you say that?"

"The Conservatives have a better election machine than the Liberals. You mark my words. Cabañas will need a landslide to beat the fraud the Conservatives will pull. My sister lives near Dulce Nombre and her best friend is the head of the Liberal electoral team in one of the local voting centres. Yesterday she was arrested accused of stealing a turkey. She wasn't even in her village when the neighbour reported it stolen. But she'll be in gaol over the weekend until the election's over. So who's going to coordinate the electoral team she was leading? Things like that are going on all over the country. Mind you, the Liberals are at it too. But the Top Hats do it better."

"For most people it makes no difference anyway," said Evora. "There's a space Rob!...." Rob sneaked the jeep quickly into the parking space just a short walk from the Andalusia Hotel. It began to rain just as we made it inside.

The Andalusia was probably the fourth smartest hotel in La Bahia, behind the big three - the Atlantico, the InterAmericano and the Istmeño. The owner was a leading Liberal businessman, owner of La Plancha restaurant, a big shareholder in La Nueva Tribuna newspaper and owner of the Invicta express bus company. Like many Liberal business leaders he had investments and family contacts throughout the Isthmus.

The hotel was small compared to the big three with only 60 rooms and a distant car park. But it ran an excellent restaurant making almost as much money from functions and dances as from paying guests. The function room had a large wooden dance floor in the basement of the hotel. We were among the first to get there. But the other guests were not slow to arrive. Soon almost all the tables were full.

As people took their places, I sought out Graham and Zenaida to offer them the painting. Graham was occupied talking to one of the hotel staff. But Zenaida greeted me with a smile, taking the painting and opening it there with one of the steak knives from her table. "Maeve! this is so lovely...and it must have cost you a fortune....Graham ..." but Graham was busy. I gave Zenaida a hug. "Don't worry Zenaida, I hope you're both very very happy. Congratulations." Someone else wanted her attention. I withdrew to find Rob and Evora and Raul. Apart from them and Jose Fiallos, I knew hardly anyone.

I noticed Mary Douglas at one of the tables. About a quarter of the guests were foreigners. A band of eight or nine musicians sat in one corner in tight black suits with white frilly shirts open at the collar. As if at an invisible sign, they began to play the Morazán national anthem. Everyone stood.

I liked the Morazan anthem for its lightness and optimism. Lines like, "the hawk and the dove share our skies in peace" and "the fragrance of roses and orange blossom fill our days" but, invader beware, - "even against impossible odds to the very last of our lives, we will defend the dream of our beloved country!"

The band sat down. Everyone found their place. The speeches were brief. Graham's best man was one of the professors from the University. His deadpan delivery and timing were superb. "I had always

wondered how, after arriving at the department, Graham managed to develop so rapidly his knowledge in such recondite skills as, for example, exponential smoothing....." A universe away from Ninoska and her troubles, I remembered to squirrel away some wedding cake for Aracely.

During the meal, Graham came over and surprised me by the profuse thanks he offered for the painting. He seemed so happy and sincere compared to the dour character described to me by Evora. With me he had always been distant but kind. This was the first time I had seen him open up.

"That was a lovely gesture Maeve. I know you must have made a sacrifice to be able to buy it for us. We'll treasure it. Thank you. Everything going well for you?"

"Yes Graham, you and Zenaida have laid on a real feast for everyone. Thanks for inviting me and thank you for all the help you gave me with the flat."

I surprised him with a quick kiss. His face was very different to Raul's, soft as a baby's.

The talk at our table was light and amusing enough. Evora, sparkling and naughty as ever, took a shine to Raul, somewhat to Rob's disgruntlement. "Come on dance partner", says I, taking him away.

The band were versatile, playing a mixture of slow Mexican ranchera melodies, lively polkas and mazurkas, a tango and a couple of stints of merengue as well as some Lennon and McCartney. Raul moved sleekly and decisively, very easy to partner. Occasionally I'd surprise him with a variation and he always adapted instantly. As the reception wore on we danced more and more alone without realising other couples had stopped to watch us. The music ended. The band stood to applaud us. Raul took a bow. I blushed, as usual whenever the object of any attention.

As we passed him, Joe Fiallos said, "that's some affinity you two have..." and I found myself smiling weakly at Mary Douglas. "You're obviously a bit of dark horse" I heard her say as, beyond her, I noticed an older distinguished looking man whisper something in the ear of one of the young women at Douglas's table who was slipping a full bottle of courtesy whisky into her bag, unnoticed by all but me. "Sure, we're famous for horseflesh, the Irish...." I parryodied, and made it back to my seat by Evora. It was great to slip into my sandals out of Evora's beautiful but too small shoes.

The mood was happy and tired. Graham and Zenaida slipped out quietly, leaving the guests to finish off the drink and straggle off their different ways. Rob and Evora asked us if we wanted a lift. I didn't think Rob was up to driving. "Don't worry" said Evora, "the ICSO secretary is driving, she's taking the vehicle back to its garage at the office. Come back to our place for a bit. Won't you come Mister Pec?"

Rob rolled his eyes. But Raul had to accompany a delegation of election observers from the European Parliament early the next day. "Not for me, but thank you. I have a busy day tomorrow with official visitors and must get home."

"Sure," said I, "Love to".

"If you see William", said Raul "sound him out for a diving trip next Saturday could you? It'll be my last chance before I leave for Paris."

"Ok. Have a good week Raul. I'll ring you. Thank you for the dances. You were great."

He smiled an official smile, taking leave of us with a polite bow.

All the ICSO crowd met up back at Rob and Evora's. Their house had a pleasant patio area covered in orange, red and purple bourgainvillea. In a corner out of the way, I quietly sipped a long rum and orange listening to the conversations and enjoying the cool calm of late afternoon.

The chat wore on, unexceptional, some banter that was out of my ken. I went upstairs with Evora to change out of her dress into my slacks and T-shirt. She said, "You looked terrific, Maeve, I'd no idea you were such a great dancer. And that Raul...What is it about that man? He's got this way of arousing your curiosity... I refuse to say je ne sais quoi, but it's that kind of thing. Do you, you know, with him?"

"Diplomatic immunity, Evora." I laughed. "He goes next month. We're just good friends. Besides, as you said, he's old enough to be my father..."

I hadn't lied. It was none of her business. I liked Evora, but she wasn't bosom buddy enough for that kind of confidence.

The bell rang. She went to answer, since Rob was in his study explaining some technicality on the computer to Joe Fiallos. As I passed the door I remembered the circuit diagram Max had sent in my bag and offered it to him. "Thanks Maeve. I was just being facetious earlier. It may come in handy for a duck and goose-rearing project in San Luis. Good of you to think of us." Evora greeted some arrivals downstairs. My hermit instincts kicked in. I set what seemed to be a decent interval and counted down to my departure.

Some tension developed in one of the conversations out in the patio, which soon became heated. Someone said loudly, "I support the Popular Revolutionary Forces in Honduras because they are the only organization with the capacity and the agenda to rebuild an effective popular opposition there. Your Communist Party people there just tag along behind the latest line they get from their people overseas. Times have changed. You need to modernise and network. Do you think the Sandinistas won in 1979 by toeing a party line?"

It was a lanky ginger-haired Belgian arguing with some people from the university. One of whom, a woman, said quietly, "Of course, what do we know? We only live here. Our countries belong to you foreigners who come here with your big money to help the poor and end up consolidating a bourgeois class of managers and fixers in your own image. What's the difference between you and the gringos? You're here imposing a political agenda just like them. Don't they dole out food and medicine and help the poor? Sure they do. Where does that leave you social democrat Europeans? We know what to expect from you. Don't most of your agencies get funding from the very governments who are NATO allies of the United States? What are you aid agency people but agents for the extra-mural programmes of your countries' foreign ministries?"

"We are here in solidarity with the popular organizations who constantly come to us seeking money and resources in order to survive. How long do you think the human rights defenders here would last if we

weren't shoulder to shoulder with them? How long would the trades unions hang on or the women's organizations or the rural workers associations?"

"Yes it's true. Our need is your opportunity. And we really need you to explain that to us, don't we? How much do you earn a year? Would my yearly salary pay you for even a couple of months?"

"Well we can't win can we? If we pull out you call us mean and cowardly. If we stay, you call us opportunists and profiteers."

Evora broke in saying "Yes Anton, but it's true isn't it? We enjoy a standard of living here we'd struggle to achieve in our own countries. We're an aristocracy of poverty, perhaps not as bad as the people who work for the UN or the World Bank, but certainly in the same kind of class."

"But why is more expected of us than of the people who run the popular organizations in the Isthmus? This argument would make sense if you could point to some solid cohesive programme in these countries. Sometimes I get the feeling all we are seeing are re-runs of the conservative and liberal conflicts of the last century. That's why I believe we have to work with people who are clear about what they plan to do."

"You mean people who are clear that they need to tear the opposition movement apart so they get their snouts in the deepest part of the aid agency funding trough?" That was José Fiallos. "And who do you think that works for?"

"Conspiracy theories seldom match the complications of real life, José. Although they can be comforting alibis for failure...."

I caught Evora's eye. This political rough and tumble was of no interest to me. They all seemed to be floating comfortably in mid-air compared to Ninoska.

"Thanks for helping me out with the dress, Evora. Perhaps some evening you and Rob will come over for supper. Say goodbye to Rob for me."

"Ok, Maeve. Wish I could get away with you. I don't know why Rob invited Anton. He always causes these stupid arguments. Keep well now."

The evening was cool and dry. Plenty of taxis were plying for hire. Despite feeling nervous after the incident the previous day I decided to walk for a while. It was a smart part of town. The road from Rob and Evora's ran down to a local commercial centre.

I remembered I needed a couple of fluorescent tubes for the lights in the flat and called in to the hardware store. In the queue, I listened to the store radio, tuned in to the five-thirty news programme. A reporter was interviewing one of the Liberal politicians..."This confirms the fears many people have expressed that the government intends to use electoral fraud to win the election. How can the Electoral Council permit a leading government supporter to store surplus electoral ballots in his private house with no control whatsoever as far as one can see? It's an obvious violation of the electoral law....."

"It's going to be a long count." someone said. An older man who seemed to be the store owner said, "Maybe Cabañas will find the right corner."

"Come again?"

"The Long Count. The Jack Dempsey/Gene Tunney rematch. Dempsey knocked Tunney out but the ref suspended the count until Dempsey moved to a neutral corner. Tunney was down maybe fifteen or sixteen seconds. The bell saved him and he won on points. The Long Count. It's famous. Can I help you young lady?"

"Thanks. I'd like two three-foot fluorescent tubes please. You certainly know your boxing history."

"Sure do. Used to be regional lightweight champ. That's me, there." He pointed to one among a row of faded black and white photographs of boxers up above a shelf of paint. His was of a thin faced young athlete crouched scowling at the camera, right fist forward.

'Tigre Zurdo' that was me, nearly forty years ago now. I was sparring partner for some of the best, Flash Elorde, Carmen Basilio, Joe Brown, Harry Gomes, Paddy DeMarco, Sandy Saddler.What a great fighter he was. Tough? Fighters these days don't know they're born. These guys took me on 'cos I hung out plenty with the great Cuban fighters and knew their moves, Isaac Logart, Angel Garcia, Orlando Zulueta, Benny Paret, Florentino Fernandez. That's Florentino there. What a puncher! Shame what happened in Cuba. It was a great country before the commies took over. You from the States?"

"No I'm Irish. From Dublin."

"I met a great Irish fighter once. In Miami. A guy called Mick Leahy. Ever hear of him? I thought he was pretty good. Had an accident though. Had to give up the fight game. Shame. That's thirty pesos. Got a car? No? Be sure you take a taxi 'cos they're sure to break on the bus. Can I help you , sir?"

"Thanks....."

These encounters epitomised Morazan for me. Bits of history tumbling out of every cupboard and drawer. Maybe for foreigners Ireland's the same. Would I ever feel about Ireland as I do about Morazán? Unfair comparison. Like comparing my mother with Isabelle Adjani.

The taxi I hailed took me quickly home. Lights were on in the flat. I saw William waving to me from the park end of the street. I waved back and walked along to greet him. He asked, "How you doing? Any more trouble?"

"Not at all. I've been fine. You?"

"So-so.Things are very quiet right now."

"It was good of you and Johnny to be looking out for me. You didn't need to really. I think those boyos were just out to scare me. I saw Raul today. Have you a booking for the boat next weekend?"

"No. You going diving?"

"If you're free. Raul wants one last dive. Usual time, Saturday. How about it?"

"Sure thing, Maeve. That's good news for me. How's your friend? She need help with transport?"

"Still don't know really. She doesn't say much to me about her plans. You going to vote?"

"I'm not entitled, Nicaraguan, remember?"

"You seem so much part of the place to me... Take care then. I'm away in San Luis next week until Friday. Have a good week if I don't see you."

"Thanks Maeve, you too. Till Saturday then."

"Till Saturday."

Smiling and happy, Ninoska let me in.. Aracely ran to greet me. "We went up into the mountains, Maeve. Higher up even than here! And we found a lake and we saw deer and sheep and a snake....didn't we Mama?"

"That's great Aracely. Was the snake alive?"

"Yes. Pink and black. Sylvie said it was very poisonous. But I wasn't afraid."

"Do you remember what I was doing today?"

"Going to your friend's wedding."

"And do you know what they give the guests at a wedding?"

She frowned at Ninoska for a moment, then beamed at me and cried "Cake!" I fetched the pieces I'd brought for them out of the bag.

"You mustn't eat it all, Aracely....." warned Ninoska.

"Are you OK, Maeve? Hungry?"

"Hardly. The food was wonderful. Wouldn't mind some coffee if there is any."

"I just made some. Let me take those lights....My mother-in-law gave me some camomile tea. Fancy some, instead of coffee?"

"Yes, thanks...."

We spent a while comparing our days before Aracely fell asleep in Ninoska's lap and she took her to bed early. Ninoska seemed almost a different person after her day out; gay and amusing. I was glad for her. She was full of optimism.

"In a way" she said, "I'm glad now they turned down my asylum application. So long as I can work here, I'll be fine. It's better for the children. Better for my mother too." She was disappointed I had to leave for San Luis, "I was hoping you'd meet Rogelito."

I tried my hand at the translation, but without enthusiasm. I fell to thinking of Raul; how happy we had been together dancing, Evora's curiosity, Rob's foolish petty jealousy. Was I wrong not to feel more

passionately for Raul? No. The most sensible thing was for us to say goodbye, for good probably; some letters for a while maybe. Beatrice and his daughters would absorb him then.

Would I be lonely? I would not. But miss him? Yes.

I spent some time pottering in my system, looking forward to a rest on election day, finishing the draft of the translation for Eusebia before setting off for San Luis on Monday morning. The night was cool with more mosquitos than usual. For a Saturday night, it was very quiet. The government had imposed a ban on sales of alcohol from Friday lunchtime. Only the periodic whistles of the vigilantes disturbed the silence.

I slept late, waking to the sound of Ninoska slapping out tortillas in the kitchen. Aracely was up on the roof patio watching the city. She reached up to me, smiling. "Will you come and see us at my grandmother's?"

"Sure I will. Can I come for Christmas?"

"Yes. That's a long time. Come before. We can go and play on the beach in the morning before it gets too hot."

"I'd love that. Do you have a ball?"

"No, but Rogelito does. He's much better now. We ran a race yesterday and I won."

"Good for you. Let's see if your mother wants to go to the beach for Christmas."

As we got down to the living room, someone rattled the front door. From the top of the stairs I called "Who is it?"

"Sylvie!"

As I let her in, she greeted me with a kiss. She was dressed more casually today. Even so she had great style, made more natural by her extrovert smile, "How was the wedding?"

"It went really well. They made a great looking couple. I had a good time."

"That's good. So did we. We went up to La Laguna in the Maraní. It was a great break for Ninoska and the children. I hadn't been there before. It's really quite spectacular."

"I've been there once. Did you get as far as the waterfall?"

"No that was too far for the children. We saw a snake though. One of those poisonous *corals*. But it left us alone and slithered away into the forest."

"What's the plan today?"

"We're going over to Ninoska's parents early to look after the house while they both go and vote. They may be away some time because the reports are of polling stations opening late and all kinds of delays. Have you followed the news over the last couple of days? The atmosphere is very tense."

"I've seen a few reports. My problem is I don't really care who wins. What difference will it make? The poor will still be poor."

"It could make a big difference to the region if Cabañas gets in. He supports the regional peace process. The Americans don't want him to win. So he must have something going for him.... How're we doing Ninoska?"

"Fine. Had breakfast?"

"Just coffee. What's on the menu?"

"Tortillas, sour cream and beans. Want some?"

Sylvie did. She was charming, so different from any other medical consultant I'd ever met, completely herself, simple and outgoing as Aracely.

"What brought you to Morazán, Sylvie?"

"It's a tenuous connection really. You see, I'm sister to Agnès's's godmother, Raul and Beatrice's eldest daughter. I try and get to do short term assignments every two or three years, because working to improve gynaecology and obstetrics in developing countries is an interest of mine. People here are very competent. But no one pays much attention to training outside the main hospitals. I've been working on an outreach programme with people at the university hospital and in the Health Ministry…… I wouldn't have come here were it not for Raul and Beatrice. I am so glad Raul is returning to France next month. They need each other you know. Beatrice is a great teacher, but she drives herself too hard. Raul gives her balance in her life. He knows how to enjoy life."

Ninoska went to shower and get ready with Aracely. Sylvie asked me, "Maeve, may I ask you something? Please don't be offended."

"Sure"

"You and Raul go to dance classes together. He's told me he's very fond of you. Please. Don't be angry. It's natural. We're almost family. I haven't said anything to Walker or to Ninoska. Is there any special reason why you didn't tell them you knew Raul?"

"It just didn't seem like a good idea. It was really an accident after all, me knowing Raul. I suppose I didn't want Ninoska to feel she was being set up in any way. And as for Walker, well, it's none of his business. He came to me out of nowhere with a request to help Ninoska. So I did. At the time I don't think I even knew Raul was involved at all."

"Forgive me. I was curious. Ninoska was lucky to be able to stay with you. She thinks the world of you. And Aracely adores you. I have to leave for home in November, shortly after Raul. I hope we'll be able to stay in touch. Your great virtue is that you love France and speak French, what other qualification do you need?" Her infectious laugh brought Aracely running to the doorway. Sylvie said, "Are you ready my love? Come on then. Let's be off."

Ninoska appeared. "Get some rest today, Maeve. You have a long week ahead of you."

"I intend to. Enjoy your day."

After they left, the apartment seemed even more bare than usual. I washed up the dishes and remembered the lights. One of them had to go up on the roof patio. The other in Ninoska's bedroom. I turned on Radio Maravilla listening in snatches as I moved around the flat.

"Long queues have developed outside many polling stations across the country where the presiding officers have opened many voting stations later than the prescribed time. Reports from the departments of Bikuka, La Virgen, from Maraní and Momotoa speak of polling stations unable to open for lack of polling cards. Juan José Medal reports from Bikuka. Hello, Juan José...Juan José?"

Along a crackly line, the journalist's faint voice could just be heard, "Here in Bikuka, of the eleven municipalities, the departmental electoral council has confirmed only four - that's four municipalities here in Bikuka, received their full quota of polling cards ...transport difficulties, mainly impassable roads but also inadequate fuel allowances for the local electoral staff have impeded delivery. The army has offered help to make good this breakdown in the electoral process....."

I had always been sceptical of the mechanisms that might corrupt an election. It seemed to me the level of possible corruption would only ever matter in a dead heat. So it had never occurred to me anyone might be able to prevent people voting by simply disappearing the polling cards. The predictions of a corrupt electoral process already seemed justified, hardly two hours since the polls had opened.

I settled down to my translation and found myself immersed in the relation between Yoruba religion and art, expressed in sculpture, ceramics, pottery, bas-reliefs and woodcarvings. *Gelede*, the masquerade performances of ancestral spirits, with their masks, music and dancing, are the most vivid expression of Yoruba sensibility and culture. The *bata* family of drums in particular - the *Iyá, Itótele* and *Okóngolo* - embody Yoruba culture both through the music they make and through their beauty as artefacts.
In the era of New World slavery, Yoruba religion took different forms in different countries. Many of the African deities were syncretized into the Catholicism of the Americas. Yemaya is associated with Our Lady Of Regla, Our Lady of the Conception and Mary, Star Of The Sea. Obatala, creator of humanity, has many aspects, some male. some female. He is sometimes worshipped as Our Lady Of Mercies. By early lunchtime, I had finished the first draft of the translation of the catalogue.

I listened some more to the election coverage on the radio….."Now we go to Martha Vargas reporting from Puerto Moro. Hello Martha....Martha Vargas in Puerto Moro, ...can you hear us Martha?…. No…. Looks as though we have problems on the line from Puerto Moro. While we try and get in touch with Martha there, a quick resumé of the election news so far. In La Bahia voting has been normal in almost all parts of the city, most of the initial delays have now been dealt with, although in some polling stations in the Chanillas area and in the coast road barrios, people have been complaining they were not permitted to vote for various reasons. In the rural departments most problems have been reported from Bikuka where in four municipalities polling stations failed to open at all for lack of polling cards. Similar problems, though less widespread were reported in Momotoa and Maraní. Initial problems in La Virgen seem to have been overcome according to the electoral authority in La Bahía..."

"Hello, Marcos in La Bahía, can you hear me now? Hello, Marcos?..."

"Martha, glad to have you with us. Martha Vargas in Puerto Moro, third city of Morazán. How is voting going in the Moro department, Martha?"

"Well everything seems to have been much more orderly here in Puerto Moro than in some parts of the country Marcos. We've had few reports locally of polling stations opening late. There are queues at some polling stations but people seem to be moving through the voting process quite quickly here. The only difficulty I've heard off while moving around the city from one voting station to the next is in a couple of places people were complaining they'd been denied the chance to vote for minor mismatches between their identity card and the information on the electoral roll."

"What kind of anomalies, Martha. Can you explain more on that point?"

"Well, yes, one woman told me she was refused a vote because on her ID card her surname had a one letter spelling difference from that on the voter list. In fact this particular woman claimed that several people she had seen voting weren't even on the electoral roll. They were voting with the provisional voting document issued by the Electoral Commission in the last weeks before the election. Many of those people aren't on the official roll. There's some concern here about the procedure followed in issuing those provisional documents."

"We'll follow that up with the Electoral Commission here in La Bahía, Martha. Thank you. Perhaps we'll be back with you later in the afternoon."

"OK Marcos. Thank you."

"Staying with that point of Martha Vargas reporting from Puerto Moro, we have on the line now the Vice President of the Supreme Electoral Council, Dr. Rodolfo Hernandez. Good afternoon, Doctor."

"Good afternoon."

"Dr. Hernandez, many people are confused about the rules relating to the Provisional Voting Document and with the procedure used for them to be issued. Can you explain to our listeners what the arrangements are? Many of them may be anxious about this before setting out to vote today."

"Well, it's really very straightforward. Budgetary problems earlier in the year made it impossible for us to get all the identity cards processed for the population who don't have them. We just hadn't got the resources we needed. So as the election approached we consulted with all the political parties about the best way to resolve this problem. An all-party commission was formed to reach a decision in liaison with our office. This resulted in the decision to issue a Provisional Voting Document to individuals who, for whatever reason, were unable to satisfy the very stringent requirements for their National Identity card. We saw this as vital so as to guarantee the right of everyone entitled to do so to exercise their vote."

"Could you explain to our listeners the procedure followed?"

"Certainly. Again, this was very simple. Anyone of voting age without an identity card on August first was entitled to receive a Provisional Voting Document on presentation of a reference from the local police confirming that they lived at the address they sought registration for, accompanied by two other references from reputable individuals already registered to vote with their full National Identity Card."

"You don't think this system was open to abuse?"

"No doubt some unscrupulous individuals will have attempted to abuse this attempt to guarantee a democratic vote. In the view of the commission - an all party commission remember - the potential for abuse was outweighed by the need to ensure that as many as possible of the people entitled to vote were enabled to do so."

"We've had reports in from places like San Luis and Dulce Nombre de la Virgen that some party electoral workers fear more votes are being cast than there are people entitled to vote at their voting stations. Can you comment on that?"

"Not really. It would be foolish to comment on what can only be speculation. All our information so far is that despite initial problems due entirely to logistical difficulties, the voting process is proceeding normally."

"Thank you Dr. Hernandez. A break now.....Stay tuned for more on the election after this ....."

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I realised it must nearly be time for Eusebia's programme. The clock beside Simone said one fifty. I fiddled with the dial to get the right station and managed to catch the end of an election bulletin. "…..so these reports from Liberal Party media are really little more than mosquito bites. No serious commentator disputes that the Conservative Party has the preferences of ordinary people in Morazán."

"Should people be prepared for further antics on the part of the Liberals? Do you think these inflammatory accusations may escalate into something worse?"

"Not really. I don't think the Liberal Party leadership is that irresponsible. Though the extreme left wing, people who support subversive individuals like Ninoska Vileda or Celia Rodriguez or some of the more extreme union leaders, like Enrique Artola, for example, these kinds of extremists who believe in violent revolution and are always on the look out for opportunities to cause disruption and chaos, these kinds of people may attempt to stain this important civic occasion with sectarian violence. Of course, in Morazán we are fortunate to have a robust police and a loyal army, so the chances of any significant sinister mischief on the part of such elements are minimal."

"Thank you Minister…. Internal Affairs Minister Francisco Calderón there, with reassuring words for our listeners who have been calling in to complain of Liberal Party provocations through reports being

broadcast in the less responsible media. Now it's coming up to one fifty and as usual on Sundays we have a brief moral reflection by Monsignor Alonso Digby, postponed from it's usual ten a.m. slot by the election coverage. Stay with us at two o'clock for the highlight of the cultural week, "Make it New" which today has a fascinating account of the composition of our beloved national anthem."

"Good morning. Today I woke up full of remorse. Remorse for something I had failed to do yesterday. It was a little failure. Perhaps insignificant .."

This suave young-sounding voice belonged to the Bishop of Xiguasí, notorious for his business acumen and love of money.

"And I realised I had violated one of life's golden rules and indeed fallen into one of the gravest of causes of sin - I had permitted anger to darken my heart and let night fall without first redeeming my fault….. And then on further reflection, God's grace showed me that at bottom my fault lay in a lack of forgiveness, in pride and in my inability to acknowledge that my own will, my own desires count for very little….. And this is something we see very clearly in those who cling desperately to the illusory things of the material world - to power, to wealth, to the status and prestige of public acclaim - transitory things. Things of little moment in the sight of God our great Father and ultimately our final judge. ....."

I heard the door and went to the stair. "Who is it?"

"Mike Walker!" I went down and opened up.

"I won't come in," he said. "Ninoska OK?"

"Sure, what's up? She's gone over to her parents-in-law with Sylvie. She's fine. She had a great day yesterday out at La Laguna. How are you?"

"Busy. I just left the guy I'm interpreting for while he has lunch. I was anxious to see how Ninoska's doing and to confirm that I'll pick her up tomorrow to take her to the hospital."

"I'll tell her. Is your assignment going ok? Listening to the radio things sound pretty quiet after such a bitter campaign."

"It's hard to say. We won't really know until later on when they start sending the results to the national count centre. There are so many rumours and claims and counter claims. One thing's for sure. It's been a real dirty election by the Conservatives. They were anxious early on in their campaign to get a bigger majority so they can change the constitution. But all the signs in the last week have been that they're going to lose seats. The big unknown is whether they'll lose enough to give Cabañas a majority. The Christian Democrats may end up holding the balance of power - now that would be a real turn up. Most people think there'll be just two Christian Democrats this time. So the two main parties will need thirty one seats in order to control the National Assembly sharing power with the Christian Democrats. Last time it was thirty seven to the Conservatives and twenty four to the Liberals with four Christian Democrats. Nobody thought Cabañas would run Largaespada this close for the presidency. The

Liberals have never won both the Presidency and the National Assembly. So it's quite exciting in a way....."

"You make it sound like some kind of eccentric minority pastime, Mike."

"Well, it is pretty irrelevant in terms of daily life for most people here. Ninoska's right about that, but it may make a difference in the region if Cabañas gets in rather than Largaespada. Better run. I'll catch you tomorrow."

"No you won't. I'm off to San Luis tomorrow to spend the week with Eva Maria. We've some evaluations to do out in the communities. Don't worry about Ninoska. She's fine. She was much better when I saw her last night."

"Well, I'll catch up with you some time. Take care now."

"Bye."

Back upstairs Bishop Digby continued his homily. "..... the person with whom I had been in discord and ask their pardon for my fault. And as so often in these cases where God's abounding grace plays its silent but essential part we two children in Christ were reconciled in peace and raised up from our error, to go forward once more with a clear conscience…. So on this day, this proud and exalted day for all sincere believers in God's will and in the sanctity of the family and of our beloved fatherland, we should all carry in our hearts an awareness of the need for charity and for forgiveness and refrain from easy condemnation of faults in others and the sin of pride this represents in the eyes of the Lord Our Saviour."

I found it incredible Bishop Digby believed anyone might be taken in by such hypocritical balderdash or that Radio Morazán could broadcast it apparently in all seriousness. It was like having to sit through one of Prime Minister Charlie Haughey's "we'll all have to tighten our belts" exhortations back home in Ireland.

Instead of Eusebia's signature "Rhapsody in Blue", the Morazán national anthem played in at the start of "Make it New" and then Eusebia, direct, more sober than in her previous programme. "Thank you for joining us. On this solemn day we felt it more appropriate to begin "Make it New" with the sacred notes of the Morazán national anthem. Today, election day, we have chosen to focus on the brief life and work of José Benito Acuña, the poet, and the setting of his beautiful lyric by the composer Sodelba Rivera Thomson. Guillermo Soto Meneses, recently back from Spain after completing a music scholarship in Madrid, will look at the history of the composition of the beautiful hymn to Morazán's nationhood that is the envy of the rest of the Isthmus. Later on, we feature a discussion of the work of the Cuban writers Benitez Rojo and Cabrera Infante. First, as usual, our poem in translation. this week, Robinson Jeffers "Tor House" in a version by the Colombian writer Octavio Huete....."

Soto Meneses' elegant and detailed account related how Sodelba Rivera Thomson, the daughter of the Morazán consul in New York and his Virginia-born wife, became a highly regarded pianist and composer in Morázan around the turn of the century. Rivera Thomson's family were close friends of leading Conservatives. They left for New York when civil war broke out in Morazán in 1915.

José Benito Acuña went to Cuba to fight against Spain in the 1890s and returned home disillusioned after the intervention in the war by the United States. Subsequently, he studied for the priesthood during which time he wrote his "Hymn to Morazán". Acuña was killed when trying to save some Liberal prisoners from summary execution during the civil war in 1916.

Acuña's death so moved Rivera Thomson she put his "Hymn" to music. Before she was able to return to Morazán, Sodelba herself died in the influenza outbreak that swept the United States after the Great War. Her family returned to Morazán at the invitation of the dictator Ponce Espinoza. Acuña's hymn, with Rivera Thomson's music, was chosen by a commission set up by the dictator to choose a non-partisan anthem, a small part of his 1930's National Reconstruction Plan.

Soto Meneses struck a scrupulously neutral political line. He really caught the listener's attention when pointing out the cleverness and melodic strength of Rivera Thomson's composition and its relation to the church music of her childhood in the United States. He played examples himself on the piano.

The subsequent discussion of the Cuban writers Benitez Rojo and Cabrera Infante was less interesting, perhaps because I hadn't read their work, not even the famous "Three Trapped Tigers". I knew little of Cuba and found references made during the discussion too obscure to follow.

Changing back to Radio Maravilla again, I finished some soup and fell asleep in my room for a while. I was looking forward to getting out of La Bahia for the week. With Ninoska moving on and Raul's departure looming, I began thinking of the months ahead. It was October now, I had only five months left before returning to Europe. What on earth would I find to do there?

Throughout the afternoon the election reports from Radio Maravilla indicated accumulating evidence of widespread electoral malpractice. Bundles of the official cards advising people where they should go to vote were found dumped undelivered in various places, particularly in areas with strong Liberal sympathies. Another Conservative Party organizer was caught with surplus voting ballots in his car.

The Christian Democrat leader, Ramón Cáceres, down in San Juan La Frontera, complained of people being bussed in from across the border to vote with Provisional Voting Documents procured en bloc by the local Conservative candidate's electoral team. In Xiguasí and La Bahía Liberal election workers complained of the number of suspiciously young people voting with the Provisional Voting Document. It seemed as though the Conservatives were trying every trick they could think of to prevent a win by Cabañas. At least, that was the Radio Maravilla version.

They ran an interview with a spokeswoman for former United States President Jimmy Carter, in Morazán to monitor the election, together with other international observers from the Organization of American States and the European Community.

"What are the impressions of Mr Carter's team so far in this election?"

"Pretty positive. I think the people of Morazán have demonstrated exemplary patience.in what has been a very complicated election logistically. Mr. Carter will certainly be communicating to the United States government the need to offer more material support to the electoral authorities here. They've done an outstanding job organizing these elections. They deserve everyone's thanks."

"Has the team come across significant anomalies in this election?"

"Significant, no. Some concerns have been voiced about the use of the Provisional Voting Document. Our observers believe there may have been minor abuses in a few instances but certainly nothing that would affect the overall vote in the presidential elections. As for the elections to the national assembly, I think the electoral law in Morazán is robust enough to ensure fair arbitration in any disputed result……"

I heard a car pull up outside. Through the window I saw it was Ninoska and Sylvie. Ninoska had brought Rogelito with her. He was very shy and quiet when they came up. A thin dark-haired lad, paler than Aracely, he sat in Sylvie's lap observing me, taking in the new surroundings, staring at the posters and photographs on the walls.

Aracely said, "I went to vote today with my grandmother."

"Good for you Aracely. Who did you vote for?"

"I helped my grandmother vote for Cabañas. She told my grandfather off for voting for someone I can't remember. Grandfather was very naughty and used a bad word."

"Men use bad words now and then, if they're not allowed to be right all the time."

"Well grandmother told him off and he said sorry to me for using a bad word. And in the afternoon he took me and Sylvie and Rogelito to play football on the beach. Sylvie scored a goal, didn't you Sylvie?"

"I scored a goal and you scored a goal."

"And Rogelito?" I asked. Rogelio curled up small into Sylvie's bosom.

"He's tired", said Aracely, as if she were his mother.

Ninoska laughed and grabbed her daughter. "And you're tired too, aren't you my little princess? Let's get you two to bed "

"Read to us Aunt Sylvie", said Rogelio plaintively.

"When you're in bed, we'll read together. Come on, bathroom."

I asked "Have you eaten?"

"Yes thanks. Some camomile tea would be good."

"Sure. How about you Sylvie?"

"Coffee, thanks Maeve."

Radio Maravilla had managed to get hold of Enrique Cabañas. "...to be expected, I think. Nonetheless, all our information indicates that we are doing better than the Conservatives in the assembly elections and are neck and neck in the presidential election. This will be a good result for us despite the fraud."

"Do you agree with the assessment of Mr. Carter's team? Are you aware of their comments?"

"I am aware of their comments, yes."

"They suggest that allegations of fraud are inappropriate. Can you comment on that?"

"Certainly. I admire Mr Carter tremendously. He is an eminent statesman and a fine ambassador for his country."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry I have to go. Thank you for your questions. You'll appreciate I have a great deal to attend to just now."

Ninoska laughed quietly, holding Rogelio in her arms. "He's no mug," she laughed. We carried on listening.

"Liberal Presidential candidate Enrique Cabañas there. Well, the voting stations close at 9.00pm. That's in about an hour and a half. Many voters across the country are still standing in line waiting to vote. The electoral council has said that the polling stations will stay open until everyone waiting to vote has been able to do so. Let me repeat that information which we received just a short while ago...….. No, we can do better than that I'm being told.....yes....ok...well, sorry for this confusion, we can go over now to the offices of the Electoral Council here in La Bahía where the President of the Council is making an announcement. ......Can we? Yes, ..."

A long pause followed and then, "This is an official announcement that I am making now as President of the Supreme Electoral Council of the Republic. Owing to delays in the opening of some voting stations in the departments of Bikuka, Maraní, Momotoa and La Virgen, some voters may still not have been able to vote by the time set for the closing of the voting stations, originally set for nine pm. Those voting stations with people who have been queuing to vote which opened later than scheduled will stay open until everyone has been able to vote. Voting stations which opened at the scheduled time will close at nine pm. These instructions have been delivered to every voting station in the country by officials of the departmental and municipal Electoral Councils. Thank you."

"Well it appears that our original information was incorrect and that only those voters at polling stations that opened late will be able to vote after the nine pm deadline. That certainly seems to be the meaning of the statement we just heard live from the President of the Electoral Council. If we hear more on that very important issue, we'll update you straight away. We want to go over to our Xiguasí studio now where my colleague Edmundo Rocha is talking to Dr. Ramón Cáceres of the Christian Democrats. Edmundo?"

"Good evening Marcos. Yes, Dr. Cáceres is here with me. Dr. Cáceres, you've just been over to the departmental office of the Electoral Council here in Xiguasí. Can you tell us what for?"

"We're very concerned about abuses of the Provisional Voting Document. Especially in relation to people travelling over the border to vote. We stand a good chance of getting a seat in the assembly down in San Juan. The Liberal Party have never done well in the border communities and our candidate there who lost by a small margin at the last election was well ahead of the Conservative candidate in

the last opinion poll taken before the election. We've made a formal complaint to the Electoral Council here in their departmental office which is a necessary step to trigger certain supplementary oversight procedures relating to the closing of the voting stations and the management of the local count before the ballots are sent to the national count centre in La Bahía."

"These are very serious allegations, Dr. Cáceres. Will they stand up?"

"We Christian Democrats are very serious and very responsible. We don't make these kinds of accusations lightly. In notifying the departmental Electoral Council of our complaint we are availing of the appropriate remedy in accordance with the electoral law of the Republic. It will be for the Electoral Council to verify the truth or otherwise of the allegations. Our duty is to report them."

"Dr. Cáceres, thank you. Back to you in La Bahia, Marcos....."

"It's turning into a real mess", said Ninoska.

"Something for Walker to write about I suppose. By the way, he called by earlier to say he'll pick you up tomorrow to take you to the hospital. Here's the tea. Ready for bed Rogelito?"

He looked at me silently and solemnly. "My grandmother says thank you for looking after Mama."

"I've been glad to look after your mama. I'm very lucky to have met her and you and your sister. Your mama is a great woman. Will you tell your grandmother that for me?"

"Yes I will."

Ninoska said, "Say good night now Rogelio, Aunt Sylvie will read you and Aracely a story."

Rogelio said a dutiful but timid "Good night." I went with them to give Aracely a cuddle and promise her I'd visit them in Puerto Moro. She was sad to say goodbye, but cheered up when Sylvie settled them down to their story. It was "The Little Prince" I'd bought for Aracely.

I went to pack some things for the week ahead. Eva Maria had warned me to take some warm clothes because San Luis is up on the Los Angeles side of the Maraní valley, the highest part of Morazán. Temperatures drop to around eight degrees centigrade at night between October and February, from the mid twenties during the day.

Later I found Sylvie examining my bio-photo mosaic while she drank her coffee.

I asked her, "Do you think Ninoska will be ok moving to Puerto Moro?"

"I think so. The army here know they can't keep up the attacks on her without quite serious consequences for Morazan's international standing. They'll be going around with the begging bowl early next year trying to re-structure their debt. So they won't want to look bad around then. And they know they can't expect much more aid from Washington. A lot depends on what happens in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. There'll be an election in Nicaragua in January. That'll be crucial for what happens throughout the Isthmus."

"Has Ninoska's pregnancy been affected by the bomb attack?"

"She had some bleeding. But she seems ok. We'll know more tomorrow when I do another ultrasound. Are these your parents?"

"Yes. My father died a couple of years ago. Ma's a nurse in one of the big Dublin hospitals."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"No. Ma said one's enough. I think she must sometimes have thought one was too many."

"You must love her though, otherwise why have her photo here?"

"Maybe it's love. Maybe it's a reality check."

"I wish we could talk some more before I leave next month."

Ninoska came out of her room just then. "Sylvie, will you excuse me. I'll turn in early. Rogelito is restless and wants me with him."

"That's fine Ninoska. Now we know Walker will be able to bring you to the hospital, I'll expect you at eleven. Sleep well now."

"Thank you," Ninoska kissed us "both of you. What bus will you catch tomorrow Maeve?"

"I'll try for the six o'clock. That should get me to the La Sabana junction for around eight and then it's an hour and a half to San Luis."

"I'll be up to say good bye. Good night. Sleep with the angels you two."

"I'm off as well Maeve. Perhaps we'll have a chance to meet up before you go. Raul has one last event lined up at the Alliance Française. Perhaps you could make it?"

"I hope so, Sylvie." We kissed good night at the door. Sylvie's car was a Peugeot 504 estate. How on earth had she found it in Morazán? Surely there were no Peugeot dealers in La Bahía?

In the morning, Ninoska woke me, calling to me gently at the door. The children were still asleep. "I was worried you might not wake in time. Want some breakfast?"

"No thanks, Ninoska. I'll just have some coffee. What's the time?"

"Just gone five."

"Better get going. Thanks for calling me. Have a good night?"

"Not really. Rogelito was very restless. Aracely always sleeps well. They're both sleeping now. The water's on."

I had a quick shower. The water was cold and the pressure so low that only a trickle fell from the shower head, sufficient to rinse the soap away.

Having packed the night before I was soon ready. Ninoska sat at the table writing. "Here's our address in Puerto Moro. And the phone number. It's easy to find."

"Thank you. I hope the check-up is good. I'll phone you when I get back from San Luis. It's only a few weeks to Christmas now."

"I am so grateful to you, Maeve. What can I say?"

"You know you're very welcome, Ninoska. It's been good for me to have you here. I'm glad I met you and Aracely and Rogelito. Sylvie and Walker will see you all right. Try and relax and get some rest. You'll need to be well when you start work. You know you have friends who will be looking out for you."

"I do know. Yes. Have a safe journey."

"Thanks." I didn't look back as she pulled the door shut. Down at the corner on El Desdichado I stopped a taxi. As I got in, William appeared at the top of the hill above me and waved. I waved back.

The Invicta bus company is out past the main bus station. Its depot is on the ring road carrying traffic from the northern border around to the roads for Xiguasí and Puerto Moro, avoiding central La Bahía. Soldiers guarded all the flyovers and intersections. This was not unusual. But there seemed to be more of them that day. I guessed it was a show of strength for the election period.
The morning was cool and overcast. Despite the long queue at the bus depot, I managed to get a seat all right on the six o'clock bus. The waiting area was full. Several reasons made me prefer travelling with Invicta. One was the spotless cleanliness of the rest rooms. Another was the orderly boarding system.

Generally in the bus stations people just piled onto the buses pell-mell in an unruly free-for-all. That was interesting as an experience a couple of times but the novelty soon wore off. Especially after an exhausting week in the country with a bout of giardiasis or some other illness sapping all patience and vigour simultaneously. With Invicta, people queued in three separate lines. Those at the back of the bus boarded first, then the middle, then the front.

The bus pulled up in the boarding area, it's grey and sky-blue livery gleaming. Government officials were checking identity cards as people boarded. They were young, efficient and agreeable. They asked one passenger to step aside. He had no ID on him When my turn came they looked at my European Community Irish passport, "Take your seat Señora, we'll return your passport in a moment." I boarded, unsure of what was going on and worried at losing possession of my only identification. Another man was stopped and taken to one side.

The bus was due to leave at 6.00am. At three minutes to six the official who took my passport came onto the bus and asked me, "Señora can you explain briefly the purpose of your stay in Morazán?"

"I'm a volunteer on a literacy programme. It's approved by the Ministry of Education."

"Thank you Señora. We were puzzled by the entry and exit visas at San Juan de la Frontera. Are you resident here?"

"No. I return to Ireland to continue my studies next year: This is a gap year for me to improve my Spanish."

"You should really have organised residency here at the start of your visit. You're not with any organization?"

"No I came privately."

"So you are here on your own funds?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for your time, Señora. Good day."

"Thank you ."

The two men taken aside did not make their journey. This was the first time in Morazán I had felt alien, a questionable entity. The first time I'd seen the State in action internally controlling the movement of people. I assumed it was some response to the election.

Someone was reading the paper ahead of me. The headline was "Teofilo claims victory". That was El Despertar, the Conservative owned newspaper. As if in a media advertisement, beside El Despertar someone was reading El Mensajero, the more progressive Liberal newpaper "Extensive fraud calls vote into question".

As the bus headed out through the La Bahia suburbs I dozed off, waking when the bus hit a particularly deep pothole and threw me against my neighbour, "Sorry".

"Don't worry", she said, "The road is dreadful now. What will it be like when the rains are over?”

We were climbing up the tip of the Cordillera Los Angeles, so called because the Spanish conquistadores had never seen cloud forest, which in those days completely covered those mountains, and thought the beautiful landscape must be something resembling heaven. The road climbs up so far and then drops down again into the plain between the Cordillera Los Angeles and the Sierra de los Pinos. It's tortuous, with many sharp bends. The peaks of the Sierra de los Pinos are the last mountains before the Atlantic Plain.

We made good time to La Sabana, an important staging post for the main routes through Morazán. It falls just inside the departmental boundary of Xiguasí. The Invicta bus dropped me on the highway.

I had time to have breakfast before my bus for San Luis left La Sabana bus station. So I walked over to the restaurant where we'd stopped with the north American delegation for lunch that day. Breakfast was scrambled eggs and beans with fresh tortillas.

Most people don't like the taste of tortillas when they first try them. It's true they're more palatable when hot. But that restaurant made their tortillas with fresh maize ground the same day rather than from maize flour. They tasted great.

I bought La Nueva Tribuna and El Mensajero. El Despertar was just too sectarian and predictable. I was surprised to find a piece by Eusebia in La Nueva Tribuna, in the cultural section. It was a sympathetic biographical account of Sodelba Rivera Thomson, using Rivera Thomson's letters to one

of her best friends in Morazán. In the correspondence she comments on the futility of war, praises President Wilson, talks of her admiration for Virginia Woolf and about the composition of her tone poem "Goblin Market", her favourite poem of Christina Rossetti's.

Stressing Sodelba's determination to excel on her own terms, Eusebia's point was that artists in the Isthmus don't have to be provincial. Rivera Thomson, though a minor figure compared to the Nicaraguan Ruben Darío, shared Darío's engagement with international thought and affairs. In her letters she mentions another Nicaraguan writer, Salomón de la Selva, who was idiosyncratic enough to enlist in the British army and serve in the trenches in France.

Absorbed in Eusebia's article, I left myself with little time to get to the bus station for the San Luis bus. I could have waited on the highway, but that would have meant not getting a seat, standing for nearly two hours on the steep slow road between La Sabana and San Luis. It only took five minutes to go by taxi to the bus station. The extra pesos were worth it to get a seat.

The San Luis bus was a world away from the efficiency of Invicta. An old school bus imported from the United States, it was piled high with goods and merchandise for delivery along the San Luis-Concepción route. In fact, the complete route was San Luis, Concepción, Xiguasí. The journey took nearly six hours to cover a distance of one hundred and ninety kilometres. The bus had to go almost as slowly down from Concepción to Xiguasí as up from La Sabana to San Luis since the descent was so steep the bus could hardly rely on its brakes to make it down safely. So the downward journey was made in the same low gears as the ascent.

I had made some friends among the bus crews during my various journeys. One of the drivers was a brother of Eva Maria, who lived with her mother in Concepción. She never told me where she lived in La Bahía. Sometimes she stayed with Yelba. Other times not. It had never occurred to me to ask her. She would have been welcome to stay at my place if that had suited her. We had arranged to meet in the WLU office in San Luis to plan our week.

I dozed some more as the bus droned and clunked its way through the gears up the mountainside. Someone shook me. I thought it was the driver's mate taking people's fares.

I looked up and found myself being ordered off the bus by a young soldier with an automatic rifle. Everyone was ordered off. An officer supervised the security check. This had never happened to me before.

The soldiers were brusque. An aggressive sergeant came to me in the line. "Foreign? Passport. Where's your bag?"

"On the bus."

"Get it... Gomez."

"Sergeant?"

"Go with this one and bring her bag."

He moved on along the line of passengers. Other soldiers frisked the passengers while the sergeant checked their papers. Three younger men were told to go over to a waiting truck. I heard one of them say, "But my wife..." and saw him shoved roughly away.

I descended from the bus with Gomez and my bag, waiting for the sergeant to come back to me. After some minutes he did so. "What are you doing here'"

"Working on a literacy program."

"You have no work permit in your passport. You're illegal."

"I'm a volunteer. I have a letter from the Education Ministry."

"Show me."

I thanked heaven I'd taken Eva Maria's advice and always carried the letter from the Education Ministry vouching for me as a foreign volunteer. The other passengers were getting back onto the bus. I was nervous, terrified of being left behind with these thugs in uniform. The sergeant read it and looked peeved. "Why do we need foreigners teaching us to read and write our own language? Gomez, check the bag."

Gomez opened the zip and tipped everything out onto the tarmac. He found the material I was translating for Eusebia. "What's the document?"

"A catalogue for ..."

"That's ok ... you can go."

They left me to re-pack my bag. I watched them go over to the truck and order the three men up into it. The one who was protesting for his wife was slow to move and got a rifle butt hard in the back.

I shuddered, but felt completely helpless. What good would protesting do? The driver, whom I knew, came over and pulled me on to the bus. Once aboard, he explained,"You don't hang around with those guys. They're from the local Mountain Forces battalion."

When I reached my seat I asked the man next to me, "Why have they taken those three men?"

"Military conscription. Their families won't see them for months until the battalion gives them leave, if they're lucky. It's two years."

"What about their families? They'll be frantic with worry."

"The people on the bus will tell them. It's a regular thing here at this time of year. And the Conservative officers in the army are furious that Teofilo did badly in the election so they're a bit more poisonous than usual. No more questions now, forget about it and be thankful they left you alone."

It took time for the shock of what had happened to sink in. In San Luis, the bus stopped just a few doors along from the WLU office, half a block from the main square. Refreshment kiosks stood along one side of the park there. I bought a bag of fresh orange juice and drank it in one go. My fear and nerves had left me dehydrated.

Eva Maria was chatting to Maritza, the WLU branch secretary in San Luis. When they asked me how I was, I told them about the security check and what had happened to the three men. They were unsurprised.

"That always goes on at this time of year. Maybe they're being nastier this year because Cabañas has done better than expected in the election. One faction of the colonels who run the army supports the Liberals. They're the guys who supported the land reform a few years back. The faction who have power now are worried they'll lose some of their fringe benefits if Cabañas gets in because that'll strengthen the hand of the Liberal colonels they've managed to outmanoeuvre over the last few years by pretending to support US government policy in the region. Most of them are involved in drugs one way or another. Some of them even grow the stuff."

"What's happened in the election?"

"No one knows for sure. The radio's reporting all kinds of things. Looks like complete chaos. Largaespada declared himself the winner after just 2% of the vote had been counted. Then the results began to swing towards Cabañas. What's Nueva Tribuna say?"

"I don't know. I haven't read the news pages yet."

"You're a funny woman Maeve. Don't you buy the paper for the news?"

I handed her the Tribuna saying "News is what people are allowed to know by the few people who run the news business. Tried reading El Despertar lately?"

"Do me a favour, Maeve."

"If I asked a *copista* had they read El Mensajero lately, don't you think they'd say the same? It's economic interests that define taste and ideology, Eva”

"What's taste got to do with it?"

"Never mind….. I'm worried about those three guys."

Maritza said, "Well get ready for a lot more worrying. Hundreds of young men will be rounded up over the next few weeks. It's like harvest time. Happens every year."

"Why don't the human rights organizations campaign on that?"

"Maybe they're scared of the army. I once asked one of the leaders of the Communist party in Morazán that very same question. He's in exile now. He just smiled at me. You know what? I think they're still crazy enough to believe there's a chance of armed revolution in this country and they like the idea of the army giving young men military training - saves them the bother, doesn't it? And maybe they're stupid enough to think the experience of forced military service will radicalise people. They're so self-obsessed they can't see that repression works. Hit people hard enough and they won't come back for more. Both my brothers were conscripted and neither of them wants anything to do with the army or anything to do with war or violence or politics. They came out crushed by the constant brutality. Repression works."

Eva Maria said, "The report here says there's chaos in the count. People have reported finding ballot boxes dumped in the rubbish tips in la Bahía. At six am there was a queue of voting station staff in La Bahía waiting to hand over their ballot boxes at the National Count Centre. There've been many reports of voting results faxed in to the Centre from the departments that don't tally with the totals in the copies retained by the local electoral teams. I wonder how they'll sort that mess out. …… Want some coffee Maeve? We just made some."

"Thanks. Yes I would. What's the plan for today? Do we have one?"

Maritza said, "We scheduled a meeting with the local coordinators for two o clock. We thought that might give us time to go over the reports so far for the groups coordinated from San Luis."

The object of the visit was to get some narrative depth to the statistics we had accumulated, in response to a request from the funders. We also had to build up the photographic archive of the project. Eva Maria was taking the pictures.

As we went through our work plan for the week, a thin, tough looking woman came in. She was small, barely head and shoulders above the seated Maritza. She seemed to have one shoulder lower than the other.

"Hi, how are the schoolmarms doing? Changed the world yet?"

"Come off it Gladys. When are you going to give us a break? We're not all hard cases like you."

"Can't take a joke Eva? Maritza, what about the soap and the boxes of medicines you promised for the occupation at El Quebracho? We've got some kids with bad parasites and vitamin deficiency. What d'you reckon?"

"There's plenty of albendazol and soap. Not so great on the vitamins. But we wheedled some bags of powdered milk and cereal from the World Food Programme. Got anyone to help you carry them to the bus?"

"Sure. Not going to introduce me to your visitor?"

I said, "Hi, I'm Maeve," and stood to greet her. She gazed up at me, her head level with my breasts. "Jesus, they make them tall over there. How you doing? I'm Gladys Centeno. I organise for the Rural Workers Coordinating Committee. We've got a land occupation going about thirty kilometres away. Want to visit?" I looked over at Eva. She said, "Difficult, unless you stay the weekend."

"I'd like to Gladys. Another time."

"Sure," she said, sceptically. She turned and leaned out of the door, whistling down the street. In a moment, two thin young men entered, their shirts and trousers threadbare.

Maritza took them to another room. They emerged carrying four large boxes, two each. I was surprised they were able to carry them. Gladys was clearly in command. She told the men to wait for her at the bus stop. "Thanks Maritza, I appreciate it. May, is that it?"

"Maeve", I said.

"Maeve, don't get me wrong. I think you're good to do this literacy stuff. At least you're here to work and not coming around to stare at us as if we were animals in a zoo. But you might like to think about whether literacy is the most important thing for people who have to go shit in the fields and drink water from streams polluted with fertiliser and pesticides because they have just nothing. You'd understand the way I am better if you saw all that. Hope I see you again."

She offered me her hand. I took it and she smiled. I'd always thought Eva Maria was down to earth and straightforward. Gladys seemed to be made of steel.

When she'd gone Maritza said to me, "Don't take her to heart Maeve. She's one of the most radical rural workers leaders in the country. She was one of the founders of the WLU but left because she said we were too social democrat. You can imagine what she thinks of Amelia. But she's suffered more than the other leaders. She's lucky to be alive. Those Mountain Forces guys you met? They had her incommunicado for two weeks and dumped her up in the mountains one January thinking she'd die of exposure. A family nearby found her and took her in. You couldn't recognise her when she returned, they beat her so badly. You know I said repression works? Well, not with Gladys. Just seems to make her harder."

As the morning passed, I felt increasingly bemused that my sense of things could shift so abruptly. The relatively tranquil months I had spent on the literacy programme till then seemed suddenly unreal. Was this the "real" Morazán I was coming to know now? Or was the apparent radical change in atmosphere a transient mood of mine, based on one unsettling incident and that meeting with Gladys Centeno?

During our visit to San Luis, Eva Maria and I slept in a back room of the WLU office. The nights were cold, although the building was of adobe which conserved the heat so the temperature inside was quite moderate. But bathing at the concrete sink outside each morning was like throwing yourself into water from an icebox.

The days went by in a round of visits to villages around San Luis. We went as far as Concepción where I stayed the night with Eva Maria and her family. They lived in a timber house painted white inside and out with a lime wash.

A screech owl was active for part of the night. It seemed to like perching outside, right over my head. Something landed on the bed and turned out to be a bat. Some little lizardy thing, a *garrobo*, slinked under the covers and startled me.

But if it wasn't the most peaceful night, at least no mosquitoes troubled us and was more than compensated for by the morning; the bright sunlight, the smell of wood burning and coffee, the sound of laundry and water splashing while people bathed, the slap and patter of tortillas, morning rites I always found calming.

All our meetings went well that week. I felt we were measuring real progress. A couple of the women said to me that before the programme they couldn't even read the receipts they used to mark with a

thumbprint for their wages, or the account they ran up in the local store where they had credit. They helped me feel vindicated against Gladys.

As it happened the Thursday meetings had to be cancelled because the literacy promoters of that village were also the electoral team for the local Liberal Party and had been called to a meeting the same day by the departmental office of the Electoral Council in Xiguasí. By some administrative quirk the departmental capital of Maraní was Concepción , whereas the more geographically logical candidate for that status was San Luis. San Luis fell in the department of Xiguasí. The promoters had been able to warn Maritza on the Wednesday. She gave us the message when we arrived back from Concepción.

Eva said, "Fancy going out to El Quebracho? It's a four hour journey because the road's so bad. We can go as far as Tirurí on the road and then we have to walk about twelve kilometres. You up for it?"

"Yes. It'll be fun to surprise Gladys."

Maritza said, "If you're going to El Quebracho how about taking more of the cereal I promised them? You can leave it with Doña Gloria at the school in Tirurí. She'll keep it for Gladys and the others. I'll get one of the guys with handcarts in the park to take the sacks over to the stop for you."

We left our gear with Maritza and headed off to where the pick-ups left for Tirurí. The departure point looked to me no more than a footpath, just wide enough for a vehicle. A ramshackle general store served as the terminus. Some people sat there waiting. A young mother and her baby, an older woman, two men. A fine-looking saddle sat on a rail outside the store.

Eva said, "Beautiful saddle. Getting ready for the December horse show?"

One of the men answered. "That's it. Looking forward to it, too". His boots were brilliantly shined and his hat-band and belt were of fancy leatherwork. His thick white cotton shirt was carefully laundered, as were his black denim trousers. The fillings in his smile were gold - clearly one of the better off small cattle farmers in the area.

"Any idea when the pick-up will leave for Tirurí?"

"It's late. Trouble is at this time of day so few people go that way. The driver, Don Alberto, don't fuss too much about being punctual."

We sat down, prepared for an uncertain wait. The weather seemed much closer than earlier in the week. The night had been cold, but now the day was hot. A smart-looking long-wheelbase Toyota Landcruiser pick-up came up the road behind us. "At last." said the older woman.

We asked Don Alberto to wait until the handcart rolled up with the sacks of cereal. It duly arrived piled with ten heavy brown paper sacks, all marked USA in red and blue.

"Who are these for?" asked the cattleman.

Eva said, "They're for the primary school at Tirurí."

"That's good. It's good to see our gringo friends helping us."

"Sure is, " said Eva.

I remembered the study by that USAID agricultural economist; Norton, I think his name was. He had pointed out that maize cultivation was ten times more beneficial for the country's balance of payments than cattle rearing.

The journey was dusty and uncomfortable, although a cool mountain breeze made the heat more bearable. I was surprised how many cattle we passed along the way and, as usual, wondered why anyone would choose to live in such a desperately poor place. We passed several hamlets. I noticed one health post and one school over the whole journey. We passed many signs painted in white, red and blue on fences and rocks that read, "Cure your animal's wounds! Let's eradicate bore-fly!"

The views were spectacular, especially as we descended from the highest point of the Cordillera onto the small Tirurí plain. From that point, we looked over the Indigo River no more than 50 metres wide there, some hundred feet or more down below, across to the Sierra Maraní. The cloud forest above us was misty and dense. There over in the famous Maraní pine forests we could just make out the glass dish of the waters of the Maraní dam.

Eva banged on the roof of the pickup's cabin.

"This is us", she said. "Thanks Don Alberto. My grandma's paying."

I paid a grinning Don Alberto the nine pesos for the journey while Eva unloaded the sacks. The cattleman watched her approvingly. "You'll make someone a good wife." He observed

"Thanks. Could you tell that to my husband?"

He was unsure how to take that. The older woman and the nursing mother both laughed.

We had alighted at the edge of a small settlement by a building with a wire mesh fence around it. This was the primary school. With just two classrooms, its windows were also of wire mesh. A large, jolly, grey-haired woman came out to greet us, a pen stuck in her plaited hair. Some children trailed out after her to watch, but soon started playing instead.

As Eva Maria embraced her, the woman said, "So Eva Maria, you finally remembered me. How's your mother?"

"She's fine. How are you Doña Gloria?"

"Let's say I'm fine so as not to say otherwise. Have you brought my fairy godmother at long last?"

"Maeve, this is Doña Gloria. I grew up here and she was my teacher. How long have you been teaching in Tirurí now, Doña?"

"Thirty years, my dear. You on your way to El Quebracho? I guess you haven't brought all those sacks for me."

"Can I leave you just one, Doña? I told one of the other passengers the sacks were for the school. Best not to draw attention to our help for Gladys and the others. We wanted to leave the sacks with you so some of the men can pick them up later. Is that ok?"

"Yes.... Let me think now. The best thing to do is to leave them in my house. My son-in-law Jorge will be dropping off some cement this afternoon so I'll ask him to take the sacks for El Quebracho as far as the river. Gladys can pick them up from there. Tell Gladys to have her men at the river for three o'clock. You going back to San Luis today?"

"Hope to. Can we get a lift with your son?"

"Of course. Call by for something to eat on your way back. You'd better get going if you intend to return with Jorge."

"That's great Doña. We'll see you later, God willing. Shall we go, Maeve?"

We did. Doña Gloria ordered some of the older boys to carry the sacks of cereal over to one of the houses. She called after us, "You two take care now! I want you back here safe you know."

The track we took was barely wide enough for a vehicle. Outcrops of rock broke up the path in various places. Eva explained that each year local people repaired the track as best they could and each year the rains washed away their work.

The track led between fields fenced off in places and in other places walled off with well-made dry stone walling. Acre after acre of land seemed unused. It seemed to bear out what Eva and Yelba had been explaining to me for months about the irrational use of land. Eva had strong feelings on the subject.

"Morazán used to export maize and rice and beans throughout the region. Now we're importing maize so US animal feed subsidiaries can produce cattle feed for beef steers. Our agricultural life's gone crazy to satisfy policy decisions made in Washington. They subsidize their farmers and tell us we have to shut down our farm support programmes. So you get jerks like that cattleman on the pick up this morning saying how thankful we should be for having our grain production destroyed by grain dumped from Illinois or some place ….. Gladys is right in the end. We have to fight to get control of our land again. But the landowners send our own army against us. The one serious attempt at land reform back in the late seventies was a mess because the Liberal party didn't have enough support in the national assembly to make it work. Now it's worse because all the politicians are terrified of doing anything that smacks of communism. No one has the guts to stand up for Morazán. Cabañas makes some of the right noises but he's in hock to business and financial interests here and they're only supporting him because they reckon he'll clean up some of the corruption that's beggared this country for the last eight years..... Look, *huracas*."

She pointed up into the trees beside us. Some grey, blue and black coloured birds with white breasts, blue-black crests and long tails sat watching. When we looked up, they took off and glided down to the next clump of trees.

Our tramp reminded me of walking through the country near Tralee on a hot day after heavy rain; Da' pointing out lapwings to me on the road up to my grandmother's place. Here, the track was muddy under foot, the fields on either side green with scattered patches of bush. After something over an hour we turned a curve in the track and descended a short muddy slope to a river.

"It's not wide, "said Eva, "but it's deep, usually too deep for any vehicle that could get this far." She stripped off to her undewear, but put her boots back on. I copied her and followed her into the water. The flow was steady but not enough to carry us away, the water cool and clear. The river bottom was mostly made of large round stones, easy to slip. We carried our clothes over our heads. The water came up almost to Eva's shoulders. On me it just came up to my chest.

As we dressed again on the far side, Eva told me, "Gladys saved a soldier from drowning here a couple of weeks ago. He got swept away in the current when the river swelled after a heavy storm further upriver. Couldn't swim. Gladys and one of her companions managed to get to him and drag him out downstream and get the water out of his lungs. It was funny. They were on a patrol with orders to burn down the encampment Gladys has organised. It was real embarrassing for the officer. By the time the patrol made it to the camp, everyone had moved out with all their stuff. Gladys is smart. She'll know we're on our way. I'll be surprised if she doesn't come out to meet us. It's only another hour from here."

We squelched off in our sodden boots. I dried out quickly in the noon sun.

"How we doing for time Eva?"

"Just gone twelve. We're about on schedule to get back to the river for three so as to meet up with Jorge. We should have about an hour to have a look round - unless we decide to stay the night."

"I promised a friend to meet up on Saturday. It may be my last chance to see them before they leave for Europe."

"Ok. Anyway we should try and get back today in order to make the meeting we have tomorrow morning with the Municipal Education Delegation in San Luis."

A group of birds the size of a thrush, but more agile, with brilliant yellow breasts and black wings accompanied us along the way. They had a peculiar song. "They're *güis*", Eva told me. "People say when they sing it's a sign you'll get a visit."

Along the track we were passing houses every now and then. At one of these we found Gladys sitting on a rock waiting for us. "Took your time Eva. Must be getting old."

"I suppose the *güis* told you we were on our way."

"That's it and the cat was cleaning itself by the doorway too. Hey, I'm really glad you came."

She looked from Eva to me, "Both of you. You going to try and get back today?"

"Yes. We only came because the Los Llanos group pulled out of a meeting. They had to go deal with some procedure to do with the election."

"Let's get going then. Did Maritza send anything?"

"There's seven sacks of cereal at Doña Gloria's - we bought eight but someone was being nosy about it and we told them the sacks were for the school there at Tirurí. Gloria said her boy Jorge will drop the sacks at the river for three this afternoon. If things work out, we'll head back with him."

"Gloria's ok. We're down this track. Mind the wire"

She slipped through the barbed wire fence with ease, as did Eva. I managed to tear my shirt. We walked across a meadow to another fence. Through that then, we passed along a small stony creek and finally up a steep bank to the encampment.

It consisted of rough shelters made up with branches and black plastic sheeting. Some naked infants, grubby and pot-bellied, came running over to us. Some of them had yellowish hair, a sign of malnourishment. The women were cooking what turned out to be beans in large pots over an open fire. The men I saw were sitting in small groups talking or sleeping.

"How many of you are there?"

"We're 47. Twenty children. Twenty seven adults. We've been here for three months now trying to claim thirty manzanas of land. Most of these people are locals from villages and hamlets around Tirurí. They grow vegetables and basic grains."

"Who does the land belong to?"

"Originally it was ejido land, municipal land. But the cattle ranchers here divided it up among themselves and fenced it off illegally about twenty years ago. Local people have been fighting to get back their rights over this land ever since then. When the Land Reform Institute was set up in 1978, parcels of land in this area were made over to various rural workers groups. But the whole business got stuck in the courts when the Conservatives got into power in 1982. We don't have time to wait for all that legal and electoral crap. Our families need to eat now. So our only real choice is to occupy the land. We were just going to have a meeting. Will you join us? Later on I'll send some of the guys here with you to meet the pick-up. We'll send a mule for the cereal."

"Got any water Gladys? I didn't bring my canteen."

"Over there, where they`re cooking. The water's ok. We boil it good."

I took some water with Eva and had a look in the shelters. The people were sleeping on mats and brush with thin blankets. The only supplies I saw were the boxes Gladys had carried off earlier in the week and a few sacks of what turned out to be sorghum. These people were living with a complete absence of amenities or possessions.

Gladys reminded me a bit of Maribel. But she was much harder in the sense that Maribel had something of a persona to sell to the delegation. Gladys was her persona.

Their meeting was to review the week and plan ahead. The group was organized into commissions: one for health and food; one for supplies and finance; one for production; one for security, one for

oversight. The people with these respective responsibilities made their weekly report and answered questions. Gladys wrote down the minutes in a little exercise book with a pencil she sharpened from time to time with her penknife.

The planning discussion focused mainly on the crops they had sown. The production committee had received a donation of vegetable seed and some tools, most importantly watering cans, from one of the rural workers associations affiliated to the Coordinating Committee. When the group moved on to security for their crops and for the camp, Eva excused herself and me, saying "This is none of our business."

We went off to talk to the women. I was surprised to see them preparing a salad of tomatoes, radishes, cabbage and onion. "We're picking these now. We send some of the crop in to Tirurí to get cash. Some we eat."

I asked, "How come the cattle ranchers don't destroy the crop? That's what they usually do, isn't it?"

"We keep the vegetables well hidden. We let them destroy some of our sorghum so they think they're hurting us and send the vegetables for sale with a friendly local grower who pretends they're his. When we get asked where we`re finding cash to survive we tell people we're working for local farmers."

Another woman said, "The army have left us alone since we saved one of their men from the river a couple of weeks back. Don't know how long that'll last. We have to be ready to clear camp fast if we hear people coming to burn us out. They've done that a couple of times. We're not moving though. We need this land. It's our right."

The meeting wound up. Gladys came over with one of the men, short, only just taller than Gladys herself. "Virgilio will go with you to the river. So what do you think, May?"

"I think you people are incredible. I just pray you get to keep this land."

"If you can help us with stuff we need, get in touch with Maritza in San Luis. I'm glad you came. I didn't think you would."

"I guess that's why I did come, Gladys."

"We'll send one of the women along too, Amanda. She's not feeling great. We think it's anaemia but she ought to go to the health centre in San Luis. See if Jorge will take her there will you, Eva?"

"Don't worry. We'll take care of her."

Virgilio walked with us while another couple of men walked beside the woman on the mule. She was pale and weak. When we got to the river there was no sign of Jorge. Eva asked the men to stay back while we crossed in our underwear. Once we were dressed again she shouted for them to cross. The men crossed the river either side of the mule steadying both the woman and the animal as it picked its way over the slippery stones underneath.

All across, we waited. Would the arrangement work out? I worried about missing Raul over the weekend, but resigned myself to whatever might happen. I was glad to have made the journey to see the encampment.

After half an hour or so, we heard a vehicle coming slowly towards the bend up above the short descent to the river. There was just enough space on the bend for it to turn and that's what the driver did. We made our way up the muddy slope.

The driver cried out, "Hi Virgilio! Long time no see. Got some sacks for you."

Virgilio replied "Good to see you Jorge. How are you and your family?"

"We're all well, thank God. You?"

"So so. We've got our second crop in. We just need a break to hang on until next year. The lawyers reckon we'll win this one."

"Glad to hear it. These my passengers?"

"I hope so", said Eva. "I'm Eva. This is our Irish friend, Maeve. We can climb on the back. Can you take this woman in the cab? She needs to get to the health centre in San Luis."

"No problem. Let's get going though. I don't want to be on the road when it gets dark. Good luck Virgilio. Let's have a beer one weekend."

"Thanks Jorge. Safe journey."

We clambered into the back of the pick up and unloaded the sacks to Virgilio and his mates. The men helped Amanda get into the cab with Jorge.

The pick up went very slowly along the track. A false move going over some of the bigger rocky outcrops could easily have cracked the base of the engine or damaged one of the differentials. It was nearly half past four when we got to Tirurí. We called in on Doña Gloria just to say goodbye, No time to eat. Jorge wanted to move on.

When we made it back to San Luis, the light was fading fast. Jorge left the three of us at the WLU since the health centre had shut. Maritza was waiting for us in the office. "Have you heard the news?"

"No. What's happened?"

"General Benavides, the chief of the armed forces has threatened to install a military government unless the provisional results are confirmed by next Monday night. That means Teofilo gets in, because they'll cut short all the recounts."

I said, "We need to get this woman some medical attention, Maritza. Can we make her some camomile or lemon grass tea?"

Eva led Amanda to our room and helped her lie down. She looked about fifty, but I guessed she was probably only in her mid thirties. Like so many poor rural women, a couple of decades of childbirth

and hard labour had just knocked the stuffing out of her, left her with barely enough energy to make it from one day to the next. She kept apologising for causing us trouble.

Maritza made a phone call. Very shortly afterwards, an extremely well dressed, portly, middle-aged man arrived. I was astonished to see him in a suit and tie. He was the very image of the stereotypical wealthy *copista.*

"Good evening. Where's this patient?"

"Good evening Dr. Ruiz. She's through here."

Brisk but kind, he gave Amanda a calm and thorough examination. There was little privacy for her. In the small office with its rudimentary partitions we heard everything. Dr Ruiz took her blood pressure, asked her what she'd eaten lately, how many children she had, where she lived, what her normal day was like, whether she had an unusual menstrual pattern.

Later he said to Eva and Maritza, "You did the right thing to call me. She almost certainly has anaemia and she's pretty weak now Hasn't deparasitised herself for years. Too many kids. Overworked. Malnourished. What's new? Give her a good supper if you can. In the morning get her to the laboratory for a blood test and send her over to the health centre. Tell her to ask for me. Here, I'll write her a note."

He scribbled something illegible on a pad and tore off the leaf to give to Maritza. "I don't like your politics Maritza but I'm glad you take care of these people. They're the salt of the earth." He looked at me and said in perfect BBC English. "Out visiting the natives, ma'am?" he offered me his hand which I took, warily.

"I'm from Ireland, I work with Maritza on the literacy programme."

"Good for you, young woman. My name's Ruiz. My family owns anything that's worth owning in San Luis. I studied at King's in Camberwell. Had digs in Brockley. Never forgot the landlady. She was Irish too. Mary Madigan. That was in the days when London landlords had signs at the door saying "No Blacks. No Dogs. No Irish." Mary took me in thinking I was a penniless Bengali. My fellow lodgers were all labourers from Mayo and Galway. I played hurley with them on Sunday afternoons. They said I brought them luck. I'm probably the only person in Morazan with a hurley stick. I suppose you're either a Christian or a Communist or both, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Though I suppose you could be undercover for the CIA. Good luck to you in any case. For God's sake stay out of the way of the army - they hate everybody. I have a dinner party to get back to. Good night."

"What on earth was he saying to you?" asked Maritza.

"Just putting me in my place. Why shouldn't he? Who the hell is he anyway? If he weren't such a good doctor he'd be certifiable."

"Rodrigo Ruiz. Director of the health centre. Black sheep of the Ruiz family. They own pretty much all the municipality. His fights with his father are part of local folklore. He's a great doctor. But he loves a drink. He's been director of the health centre here for over twelve years now regardless of who's in government. He often goes overseas to lecture on tropical medicine. He's really famous and doesn't

give a damn about anything. Unless he's drunk, he'll always turn out to a call for help. People have learned not to abuse that though, he's got a temper fiercer than a thousand devils."

Eva asked, "What shall we do about supper? Fancy some roast pork and rice from the park?"

I loved Eva for loving her food. She went in to Amanda to see what she wanted. I contributed some beer and wished it had been pints of stout, which was just about what Amanda needed. She took an age to eat her supper, leaving almost half of it. She simply wasn't used to eating enough and really was very weak.

Maritza made up a bed on the office worktable that I insisted on taking so as not to disturb Amanda and Eva while I worked on the translation for Eusebia. It worked out well. By eight o'clock they were asleep.

I'd been working late all week, writing out a fair copy of the translations. By ten that night I was finished and happy with what I had done. I was glad to be on the table in the front office. In the back room where Amanda and Eva were, Maritza kept the stores. I'd slept badly every night there, for the sound of the mice rustling away among the sacks and bags of seed.

In the morning Maritza took care of Amanda while I went with Eva to the Education Ministry. The meeting was a formality to comply with national literacy standards reporting requirements. In fact the Ministry contributed next to nothing to the literacy work we did. They let us use school facilities where these were available and vetted our teaching plans. That was about it.

This wasn't the fault of the Ministry staff. The education budget was pitiful. They barely had sufficient staff to carry out even routine supervision. Most of the education officials were sympathetic to our program. The only opposition came from die-hard Conservative supporters who believed all rural workers organisations were communist. Such individuals regarded the WLU as doubly satanic for promoting women's rights too.

In San Luis, the local Ministry staff were too overworked to worry much about ideological battles. The municipal director quickly reviewed our report. He asked a couple of questions, one about desertion levels and another, surprisingly to me, about gender balance. "Sounds good", he remarked. "I wish we had some of the resources you seem to have."

Eva asked him when the school year ended.

"December 5th. And the new school year starts on February 2nd. Have you heard about the programme extension you were telling me about last month?"

"We won't hear until January."

"When you do, let me know will you? The Spanish government is doing an appraisal of literacy needs for next year and we have to give them a complete list of our partner programmes. Going up to La Bahía today?"

"I am," said I.

"Leave early if you can. There's been talk of a curfew."

By then it was nearly eleven. Eva agreed with me that I should leave for La Bahía straight away. It was a short walk to the WLU office. Maritza and Amanda were still not back from the health centre. But Maritza had given Eva a key. I packed my few things. A bus was due to leave at eleven thirty. That would get me to La Sabana before two and back in La Bahia easily before five o'clock.

"I'll stay and mind the office." said Eva.

"Thanks for everything Eva Maria. See you next week."

"God willing."

Her cautionary phrase felt natural and right to me. Things I'd dismiss back home in Ireland made more sense in Morázan: religion, politics. Those things so devalued by abuse and hypocrisy back home, all the easier to dismiss with a full belly, good healthcare, social security and stable civilian authority.

I sat at the bus stop round the corner from the office for just five minutes before the bus from Concepción drove up. I had a choice from plenty of empty seats and chose one where I could slump against the window. I bought some sliced fried plantain from one of the girls selling food. Her plastic bowl was full of enchiladas and *papas rellenos*, roast potatoes stuffed with melted cheese. With her apron full of deep pockets stuffed with pesos, she called to mind the market women celebrated in the Yoruba gelunde. This girl, like most of the others, was barely in her teens, but already had the hardened ways of women many years older, mistress of the repartee laden with sexual innuendo in order to cope with the men on the bus.

The journey to La Sabana was uneventful. We passed an army checkpoint. They were busy going over a truck they had stopped. I looked forward to getting back to the apartment and the few props that made it home, remembered Ninoska and Aracely would be gone. At least Marcel would be happy, Asunción too perhaps.

In La Sabana I took the first bus for La Bahía The Invicta expresses let people off at La Sabana but never took on passengers. Other express company buses sometimes stopped, sometimes not. I felt safer taking one of the kind-of-stopping buses between La Sabana and La Bahía. So the journey to La Bahía took nearly three hours. It was mostly downhill. I just managed to get a seat. The buses on Fridays to and from the capital were always busy. With the rumours of curfew, everyone was trying to travel early. The bus radio was tuned to Maravilla.

"The political crisis deepened this afternoon, when Enrique Cabañas presented a writ in the First Cicruit Court of La Bahía, accusing General Ramón Benavides, the head of the armed forces, of violating the constitution with his call for the Supreme Electoral Council to ratify the election result by next Monday. The judge will take submissions in the next couple of days. A judgement is expected on Tuesday. This move by the Liberal party presidential candidate virtually throws down the gauntlet to the armed forces to define whether they submit to civilian rule or not. Constitutional analysts agree that even if the court rules in favour of General Benavides, which they regard as unlikely, Dr. Cabañas will be able to appeal to the Supreme Court, a process that will take at least three weeks prior to any

judgement, thus giving the Electoral Commission time to process the numerous electoral disputes pending following last Sunday's election. We were able to contact the Organization of American States representative Dra Reina Fiallos. We asked her whether she was concerned at the constitutional crisis here. Here's what she said:

"Of course all responsible observers are anxious to see a peaceful and constitutional resolution to what was obviously a very close and hard fought election. It's normal in such circumstances for the contenders for political power to take all the measures available to them to get the result they have worked so hard for."

"Does that mean you regard the armed forces in Morazán as legitimate political actors in their own right?"

"Of course, the armed forces are right to insist on the need for stability. And no one would argue they are wrong on that. On the other hand, it is certainly legitimate for the Presidential candidates to defend their rights under the electoral law. It's easy to get excited under these circumstances. I have spoken to both candidates, Sr. Largaespada and Dr. Cabañas. They are clear that this is a process, a difficult process and one that needs to be allowed to work itself through."

"So you don't agree with those who argue that in effect the army is threatening a coup?"

"Of course not. Such speculation is totally irresponsible. Morazán is clearly a country with very strong democratic institutions. The army is playing its part in ensuring that those institutions receive the protection they merit. Thank you....."

"Dra Reina Fiallos of the OAS. Football now. This is a big weekend for Atlético La Bahía's Guatemalan international defender José Peña...He's in the line up for their World Cup qualifying game this weekend with the United States. It promises to be a crucial game for the United States who are desperate to qualify for next year's World Cup. Here's Edgar Mairena with a preview...."

Edgar had a great deal to say about the USA-Guatemala match. I fell asleep on my bag, only waking to discover the bus passing the University. I had forgotten the stopping buses passed through central La Bahía instead of taking the ring road. I had an aisle seat and was able to squeeze through the standing passengers in time to get off just by the Republic Rotonda. As I alighted I asked the driver what time it was. "Just gone five" he said, "Thanks, have a great weekend."

"You too, sweetheart."

Soldiers patrolled the Rotonda, especially numerous around the National Palace, the President's residence. The combination of the traffic fumes, the muggy weather and the crowds of people made it occur to me to think seriously of moving down to San Luis for the rest of my stay. I had never thought of that before, probably because Raul was more accessible in the city.

I wanted to get some bread from the bakery by the cathedral. They did sticks of French bread and excellent wholemeal loaves as well as their delicious cakes and pastries. On the way, I phoned Raul from a kiosk at the Independence.

"You OK'?", I asked him.

"Fine. Still.....?"

A truck went by. I couldn't hear, "Missed that..."

"Still ok for the dive tomorrow?"

"Sure, looking forward to it."

"That's great. See you tomorrow on the quay."

"See you."

I got a taxi straight away. Back home I found Marcel serving in the shop. "Hi Marcel. Still angry with me? I'm really sorry I upset you, you know."

"You're ok, Miss Maeve. You did the right thing. It's these neighbours here. They drive me crazy. I've got nothing against that Ninoska Vileda. Poor kid. If I'd been in your shoes I'd have done the same. Trouble is, with a family you have other responsibilities. You know?"

"You're very good to me Marcel. Got any milk? Six eggs too."

Asunción had brought him round. I was glad.

Upstairs, in the empty flat, even my own presence there seemed ghostly. I thought of Gladys Centeno and her group, camping out under plastic up on the Tirurí plain in the cold of the Cordillera.

There on the table Aracely had left me a drawing of myself. This time in the cherry red dress she had seen me in on the day of Graham's wedding. Ninoska had written beside it, "We can't wait to see you in our home in Puerto Moro. Keep well. Rest. Love from all of us."

I put on the radio so as not to miss any announcements about possible curfew and fell to thinking about the family of the man protesting at his forcible conscription, that rifle butt driven so fiercely into him for loving his family. I unpacked my bag, threw the dirty washing in a heap at the foot of the stair up to the roof and placed my work folders on the table.

Marcos Castaneda, the Maravilla anchorman for their election coverage was interviewing Victor Carrasquilla, the Christian Democrat National Assembly candidate from San Juan La Frontera. I listened as I copy-read my translation for Eusebia.

"Dr. Cáceres, the departmental secretary of your party, told us earlier today that he expected a decision from the electoral council on Monday. Will you accept that decision if it goes against you?"

"I really can't answer that at this stage, Marcos. We're all very tired right now. Should the decision go against us now that the voting papers are all in La Bahía, it'll mean a vote by the national party executive as to whether we appeal that decision or not and insist on a further recount, which we are entitled to do. We're pretty sure the decision will be favourable to us because all our electoral officials have copies of the voting summaries from every polling centre in San Juan La Frontera and those figures show a clear majority for my candidacy. But I'm not going to gainsay the National Electoral

Council in La Bahía. We`re a constitutional party. It's in our interest to promote due constitutional process."

"Do you have any comment on the declaration made by General Benavides during the week? Do you think it was legitimate for him to make it?"

"Of course not. General Benavides knows very well the Conservative party did badly in this election. His announcement was completely out of line. I disagree with Enrique Cabañas on many things. But I do agree with him we have to get clear in this country that the civil power has precedence over the military. I think General Benavides needs to think very, very carefully about the wider regional and international implications for Morazán of actions by the army that might jeopardise trade and debt negotiations currently under way. The days are gone when the army could automatically count on backing from the United States. The Cold War is over. We need a new mentality in this country."

"Some people say General Benavides is a kind of dinosaur, a survival from a time that's passed. Do you agree?"

"I don't think that's fair to the army. General Benavides and his high command are very intelligent, very practical men. Times have changed now and I think they will realise that and act accordingly."

"Thank you, Victor Carrasquilla, who will know on Monday if he has been elected to the National Assembly as representative of San Juan for the Christian Democrats... a break now, we'll be back in a moment with continuing coverage of the constitutional crisis, stay with us..... "

I went up to the roof patio to put my washing to soak. It was a beautiful night. The stars seemed more numerous than ever. As I looked out over the city I saw and heard military helicopters circling, their intense lights scanning the city below. One passed low over the house, heading towards the docks. I could see crouching silhouettes in the hold behind the light as I screwed up my eyes to avoid the glare. The machine beat away seawards. The sense of menace made me shiver.

I went quickly downstairs and managed to distract myself tinkering with my system. I increased my lexicon with three new words, güis and chacalaca, another bird I came across with Eva on our journies around San Luis; tiguilote, a berry the size of elderberry but white or clear green. And I'd kept cuttings from the newspapers, especially precious to me was Eusebia's article on Sodelba Rivera Thomson.

Now the translation was done I had to figure out how to deliver it to Eusebia or Urania before heading back down to Xiguasí on Monday with Yelba and Eva Maria. It would be a similar week to that spent in San Luis. But we had more groups to cover in the Marañon area which for our purposes stretched down to San Juan La Frontera in the west and from Guajiniquil across around Lake Momotoa to Walilika.

For a moment, I wondered if I could ask Raul to drop the translation over to Eusebia for me. Then I realised how much I wanted to see Eusebia again. In any case, it would be necessary to explain some points in the translation to her or to Urania, despite the notes that I had added as an appendix.

I heard the helicopter circling again. It seemed inexplicable as any kind of security measure. The city seemed quiet. No disturbances had been reported at all. The display of force by soldiers on the streets and military hardware in the skies made sense only as intimidation. The sound of the rotors faded again. Mundane normality had never seemed more desirable to me.

I went to switch off the radio as Maravilla was giving its nightly weather forecast. " .... for Bahía to Moro, winds light, east to north east, rain in most places in the afternoon. Outlook for Sunday and Monday, changeable with possible heavy rains and high winds, be prepared for very sudden change due to a tropical storm currently south of the Yucatan Peninsula...."

The night was cool. I threw an extra blanket on the bed and drank a large rum. The whistles of the vigilantes sounded in the street, as if in admonition. For the first time in years I said prayers. For Ninoska, Aracely, my mother, Raul, Gladys Centeno, Amanda, Yelba and Eva Maria, Asuncion and Marcel.....I wanted them all to be well and untouched by the crisis around us all, the frightening menace of those helicopter crews, the Mountain Forces troops.

I slept deeply, dreaming of Dr. Ruiz and Doña Gloria helping me put up a very complicated tent on the roof of the apartment, the Peeping Tom looking on, shouting advice across from his roof.

The morning was welcoming, bright and cool. I pulled a skirt on over my bathing costume and wriggled into a T-shirt. Raul loved fried egg sandwiches with garlic and basil. I made some to take out on the boat with us.

The clock by Simone said seven as I headed out. No one was about, apart from a couple of shoe-shine boys doing their rounds, blacking shoes with their hands, arguing with each other as they slapped and rubbed them to a shine. Up to the top of El Desdichado, from there down the steep stone paved streets to the quays.

A goods train moved slowly out from the docks, its flat bed wagons empty. A medium size bulk merchant ship cast off. The fishing boats were long gone. As the train passed, I walked across the tracks over to William' s mooring. Raul was already there, the two of them sitting with their backs to me. I greeted them from the quay and they looked round.

"Hi, sorry I'm late. How we doing?"

"Fine Maeve. We're just wondering about the forecast. William reckons we should head out to one of the nearer sixty foot dives in case the weather turns bad earlier than expected. The forecast this morning was for storms around lunchtime. Still want to go?"

"Sure. It's our last chance, no?"

William caught my hand as I jumped aboard. Raul helped him cast off. It took about an hour and a half to reach the dive, out along the reef towards Puerto Moro some four miles from shore.

"What a great morning, Raul. I'm so glad you were able to make one last dive."

"So am I. It's one of the things I'll really miss back in Paris. How was your week?"

"Mixed. It started off really badly when I got pulled off the bus for San Luis by the army. They took three guys away for military service. They were very sinister Raul. It was the first time I've been really scared just going about my work here."

"Did they rough you up?"

"No. But it was that kind of feeling. They knew they could do whatever they wanted. All the passengers were frightened, but I guess they're more accustomed to that kind of thing than me."

"Well, it's the time of year the army generally chooses for its forced conscription drives. What about the literacy project. Is that going well? How are Eva Maria and Yelba?"

"Yelba was here in La Bahía all week. I was working with Eva María and Maritza Molina, the WLU rep in San Luis. They're such good people Raul. We had time to go out to a land occupation at a place called Tirurí. Have you ever heard of Gladys Centeno?"

"No."

"She's one of the Rural Workers Coordinating Committee organizers. I was glad I went. It taught me a lot about the land question here. I've never seen people living in such poverty. Coming back to La Bahía was like entering another universe. Hey, Tell me what a *güis* is."

"I've no idea."

"*Tiguilote*?"

"Got me again."

"*Chachalaca*?"

"Something noisy because that's what Rita calls her boy when he makes a racket."

"I reckon that's two Rubias you owe me, what do you think William?"

"Sounds like a fair deal to me"

"That's why I love going to the country Raul. La Bahía's ok, but so much of Morazán is hidden away in the villages and the countryside. I'd go crazy if I had to stay in La Bahía to work. Anyway, how about your week? Is your delegation behaving itself? What do you make of the electoral mess?"

"My week's been good Maeve. The European Community delegation is here mostly for talks about trade and development assistance in the rest of the Isthmus. The election fiasco is certainly a bother since we don't know who the next government will be. We're certainly not very interested in talking with the current administration. The delegation go to Nicaragua and El Salvador next week. If things sort themselves out here, they may be back for a couple of days around the tenth or so. I have one last event to organise this coming week. Will you be around?"

"I'm down in Momotoa next week."

"Too bad. The subject is André Chénier. He lived in Carcassonne for some time you know. Interesting fellow. His mother was Greek. Lost his head in the Terror for supporting the monarchy. I'm calling the talk "Poetry and Truth in a Time of Revolution". Chénier is a favourite of Beatrice. She's something of an authority on his political writings... She did some research while she was teaching at the university and discovered an interesting local connection. But tell me, William mentioned an incident with an unmarked car ….. I'm glad you weren't hurt. That car might easily have hit you."

"I was lucky I suppose. I was glad William's brother turned up. I wondered whether you hadn't asked them to keep an eye on me. Those people in the car were vile. What they said got me thinking about Eusebia Roa."

"Ah, Eusebia. How's the translation going? I think she may be taking you for a ride there."

"What do you mean?

"That price she told you. What was it US$400?”

"Yes."

"Well she almost certainly paid the artist only US$200, US$250 at most. So she's not doing you any great favour"

"Don't tell me that, Raul. In any case..."

He winked at me and touched my leg. William had his back to us at the wheel. "I'm just being realistic, Maeve. Remember she's a businesswoman. She's not going to give away something for nothing."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I thought she was genuine."

"What were you thinking about Eusebia anyway? What was it those men said?"

"They shouted something about "rich niggers" and later I realised how unusual it is for a black woman to be wealthy in Morazán. Where does she get her money from? Her family in Brazil?"

"Who knows. With someone like Eusebia it's hard to pin down the facts. You can be pretty sure it's not entirely all above board. Some people say she has contacts with Cubans in Miami. Some say she was set up by a sugar daddy in Brazil, one of the right wing politicians there who found her an embarrassment and paid her off on condition she moved away. Some say she's laundering drug money. Who knows? But she does have money, there's no doubt about that. I've had some contact with her but she's not someone you could really trust. She's just interested in money and status."

"We're there, folks." William dropped anchor. We got into our gear.

I looked quizzically at Raul. Something wasn't quite right. He put his finger to his lips. "No sign of stormy weather here, William."

"Can come up on you out of no where, quicker 'n you can blink. I got a feeling about this weekend. We're going to get some real bad storm. Seems fine for now, but can we keep it to twenty minutes? You'll need to make your way up after fifteen. Come up steady."

"You're the boss."

Raul helped me into my gear. I spat into my mask and rubbed it. My air was fine. Half an hour's worth. Heels over head I went into the clear blue water. Raul appeared beside me moments later.

Diving was great therapy for me and Raul. We coasted among the brilliant colours of the reef, among delightful fish of all sizes and varieties. The dive William had brought us to took us down through passageways in the coral, through a small tunnel and out onto the sandy desert beyond. We'd been swimming for about fifteen minutes when William appeared about thirty feet above us with his snorkel. Gesturing to us to come up. Since we'd been down at the bottom, we made a steady ascent to avoid any chance of an embolism. When we surfaced we saw straight away what he'd warned us of. A solid dark wall of rain loomed on the horizon to the north east. I was last out.

"Sorry folks. Can't take any chances. We should be back safely about an hour or so before that gets to La Bahía, but we need to go now. See what I mean about how quick it can come up on you?"

"Thanks William."

"Thanks." We heartily meant it.

On the way back, eating our fried egg sandwiches, I asked Raul, "So what's this local connection to Chénier?"

"A young lawyer from Puerto Moro, Manfredo Garcia. He was accompanying a delegation to the Court in Madrid and was sent as part of a secret diplomatic mission to intercede for some families with Spanish connections gaoled during the Terror. Beatrice came across his papers in the university library here. No one had looked at them in years. García was a minor literary figure famous for some articles he wrote prior to Independence. Later in life he was a fierce opponent of Francisco Morazán. Garcia was promoting an independent republic with Catholicism established as the official faith and bishops in the National Assembly. But in the 1790s he was an ardent democrat until the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. He met Chénier in Saint Lazare prison about a week before the poet's death. García was very affected by Chenier's execution and returned to Madrid a convinced conservative. He accompanied the Spanish forces at the battle of Las Ramadas.

"The university has a manuscript copy of his translation of Chénier's Ode to Charlotte Corday and a contemporary copy of the 1789 Society bulletin with the Avis aux Peuple Français sur Ses Veritables Ennemis. Chénier was brave but hubristic - he couldn't really believe the worst could happen to him. Maybe he thought his brother being a deputy would save him. When the worst came, he seemed more perplexed than anguished. It's a shame he's mostly remembered through that silly opera. Few people make the effort to understand the relationship between his politics and his poetry. He was a more sophisticated Keats. My argument in the talk is that much contemporary history is replete with that Romanticism.

"García corresponded with a couple of the prisoners who survived the Terror. Chénier's father struggled hard to get his son released from gaol while his brother, a deputy in the National Assembly, contrived to

keep the case at the bottom of the pile. Two days after his execution the Terror ended with the arrest of Robespierre.

"The terrible irony is that if his father had kept quiet, Chénier would most likely have survived. We can never control the consequences of our actions. Garcia's reflections on this are in the university archive. It's an interesting historical footnote, gives great insight into the way events in revolutionary France affected Latin American independence movements both for and against."

"Shame I can't make it. Have you fixed up your flight yet?"

" Saturday the twenty-first.."

"Well, maybe we can do something the weekend before if you're not too busy. When does Sylvie leave?"

"Two weeks after. She likes you very much you know. You should be flattered, she's hard to please."

"I liked her too. For a senior consultant she's very natural. She was great with Ninoska and the children."

We fell silent, watching the distant advance of the rainstorm. Before long we came into La Bahía, passing the buoys that marked the entrance channel to the harbour. William shouted to a mate of his on a dredger as we went passed.

"See you at the match! Viva los Porteños!"

The man on the dredger cried back,"They roast 'em an 'ate em! Roast 'em an' ate 'em!"

William laughed out loud.

"What's all that about?"

"Oh, that's José, someone I go to the football with. I support the Moro team whenever there's a match here in La Bahía. He an' the other guys always chant that line when the La Bahía scores because the story goes that in the days when the British done piratin' along the coast, they encourage local people to draw merchant ships onto the reef there by the Sierra Moro. An' one day the Spanish army guys, they climb aboard one of those wrecks. No sign of anyone aboard alive or dead, an' all they find is this red macaw, cryin', "They roast 'em an' ate 'em!" So that's what they chant whenever La Bahía score against them there Porteños. Them Porteños don't like bein' reminded of their wrecking ancestors."

The sky began to darken as the bad weather approached. William had been right. It was still some way out, but closing in fast.

Raul accompanied me up from the quays. As we walked through the park I waved to three of the youths who had kept watch over me the evening the unmarked car was parked opposite the apartment. They were playing basketball while other knots of young people sat about. Some family groups were making their way through the park over to the bus stop.

Suddenly, a couple of army trucks and two jeeps came up the Desdichado hill and took position around the park blocking all roads out. A platoon of soldiers fanned out, grabbing all the young men and shoving them along violently over towards the trucks.

"What is this!" I cried "What's going on?"

"Stay calm, Maeve. It's a conscription round up. None of our business."

The three I had waved to were getting knocked about as they refused to climb into the trucks.

"Raul, I know those guys. They helped me. Can't we do something?"

Raul stared at me and pulled me back as I started instinctively toward the truck.

"OK. Stay here. Don't move and don't say anything. Got it?"

I stopped still, sat on one of the benches. Some of the children were crying, frightened by the brutality of the soldiers. I watched Raul go over to one of the jeeps where an officer sat observing the operation. Raul saluted. The officer lounged in the jeep, gazing at him with contempt.

Raul spoke to him, apparently with much courtesy. The officer sat up. Raul handed him something from his wallet, as if presenting identification. The change in the officer's demeanour was immediate. He stood to attention and saluted. I thought I was imagining it.

They began talking and slowly walked over to the soldiers, who stopped manhandling the three youths as their officer approached. Raul pointed to them and carried on talking to the officer. The soldiers mounted up in the trucks. A sergeant took the names of the three youths, one of them had blood all over his shirt and dabbed his mouth with it. The officer shook hands with Raul, said something to the youths and then he and Raul saluted each other. Raul spoke briefly with the youths who nodded their heads and went off, two of them helping the third along. They held his shirt to his head, trying to staunch blood where the soldiers had beaten him.

Raul came back saying, "Not a pretty sight, but we may have helped save them from a worse going over." The jeeps drove off, followed by the trucks. They must have taken over a dozen youths. Raul smiled and waved at the officer as he drove by. The officer waved back, straight faced - as if to say, "all in a day's work".

"What did you tell him? He seemed impressed with your ID."

"Well I told him I'll be having supper tonight with Colonel Mayorga, General Benavides' Chief of Staff, which is true, and that the three lads work for the Casa Thomas project, which wasn't true until a moment ago. Then I asked him to let them go since losing them would be inconvenient for the project. He seemed a reasonable kind of guy. Your three friends were lucky we were around."

"But how can they do that? They can't just take people away in broad daylight like that, can they? This is central La Bahia not some out of the way rural dirt road…."

"A couple of things are going on Maeve. The army is showing its hand right now, so no one makes the mistake of thinking they aren't perfectly capable and willing to take over on the pretext of a constitutional crisis. It's part of the horse-trading between Cabañas, Largaespada, the army, the current administration and the US ambassador. Cabañas is no fool. He'll most likely settle for the presidency with a strong Liberal minority in the assembly. "

"What about the election? You make it sound as if it's a charade."

"Not a charade, Maeve, just one more part of the equation; not the principal part, but not a negligible one either. Are you angry?"

"Yes. But more than that I'm shocked I've let myself be seduced by the signs of normality here for so long. Now I know for myself what Ninoska's up against. I feel stupid, so bloody stupid.…."

"Don't Maeve." He looked at his watch and said, "I have to go. There's one thing I wanted to explain and I have a favour to ask."

"Go ahead."

"It was important for me to speak badly of Eusebia today. You may think I'm crazy. But I don't like William knowing too much about the people I know and what I think of them. La Bahía is a small place and word gets around fast. It suits me for people to think I don't like Eusebia. I do, in fact. I like her very much. Apart from being an acute writer she's been a good friend to me, helping me with advice. She's saved me from situations that might have caused me trouble at work. It's not just William, Maeve. It's best to play your cards close to your chest here. I know that's hard for someone as open hearted as you. Anyway the favour is, can you be wary of talking about Eusebia to people? It's difficult for her here as you said earlier, she's black - part of her public persona has to do with that. She throws her sexual openness in peoples faces because they expect her to conform to their image of a wanton black woman, you can almost hear them, "What can you expect? She's black after all...." so she plays with that, it gives her a certain licence and of course the other thing that opens doors for her is her talent, because she makes the other cultural commentators here look like the mediocre provincials most of them are. Of course both those elements cause problems as well as creating space for her. I suppose really I'm asking you to take care of her in a way. She's worth taking care of Maeve. "

"Is she the reason Beatrice left?"

The sky again became much darker. He looked up, "No. Not that at all. Not in a sentimental way at all. Perhaps on the ideological level ....but that's all supposition. I really don't know. I must go. We'd both better go. Here's the rain...Thanks for the morning, Maeve, I loved the dive..."

He flagged down a taxi..."Bye now", I said, kissing him on the cheek, "See you soon....thanks for helping those guys."

He smiled at me and was gone. As I started down my street, the rain broke. In the minute it took to reach the door of the flat, my clothes, my bag and everything in them were drenched.

The rain continued all afternoon. I changed into dry clothes and hunted among my books for my anthology of French Eighteenth Century poetry to read what there was of Chénier. I found a tantalising, disappointing selection: nymphs and forlorn love mixed with fierce political polemic. But I was glad to find the Ode to Charlotte Corday - a salutary antidote to the propaganda of David's "Death of Marat".

In Carcassonne, on one of my dutiful attempts at literary history, before I met Soulange, I had come across a childhood portrait of Chénier in the museum. From the biographical note, it had stuck in my mind that his mother was Greek and one of his classmates Baudelaire's father; not Aupick, the step-father, but the real father. In the middle of remembering that, someone banged loudly at the door. It was Walker.

"Thanks," he said, as I let him in out of the rain. "Wasn't sure you'd be here. Some rain this. Cold too."

"Want a hot drink? I've taken to camomile tea with honey. There's lemon grass as well. I brought some back with me from San Luis."

"Coffee. Thanks. Any grog?"

"There's the bottle. Grab a glass. Coffee won't be long. What on earth brings you over on a day like this?"

"Well, another favour, I'm afraid."

"Uh-oh...."

"No a personal favour. No more politics. I'm worried about some personal papers and stuff I need to leave behind. I'm heading back to the States for a meeting with one of the outfits that fund me and for some time with my mother. Can I leave them with you? I just don't feel comfortable leaving them unguarded in my place. What d'you think?"

"They don't contain blueprints for revolutionary overthrow in Washington?"

"Sure they do. Who else can I trust?"

"Come on Mike, I'm serious. Are they in any way compromising?"

"Absolutely not."

"Can I read them?"

"Sure you can. It's all good salacious stuff. ... "

”Mike..."

"Yes, you can read it. I'll drop it off tomorrow. My flight's on Monday, early."

"Any word from Ninoska?"

"I phoned her Thursday. She was fine. Says the job with the Jesuits is right up her street, working with unemployed women."

"Can I ask you a favour in return for mine? Take sugar? I forget."

"Yes, two. No milk. Thanks. What can I do?"

"Well if it's not a big deal, I'd like to deliver some work I finished for someone. She asked me to translate some stuff for her and I'll be going away on Monday for the week. I want to get it to her before I go."

"Is it far?"

"Let me get the address." I fished Eusebia's card from the system. "Avenida Las Rosas. Number 52. Colonia Thomson. Vieja Carretera Moro."

"That's some swish address. Who's the friend?"

"Eusebia Roa, the writer."

"Are you kidding me? You working for her?"

"Ever listen to her radio programme?"

"No. Read her venomous articles though. Will that do? Hey...it's none of my business. Sorry. Do you mean now?"

"Why not? Rain's in for the weekend, so they say. We go. Yes?"

"Yes, we go. Can I have some more rum?"

"No, you're driving. Let me get organised while you drink your coffee."

It took me a while to be sure I had everything in order. I packed the papers carefully in three layers of plastic bags to keep them dry and fetched my waterproof jacket, down from the roof. The city looked bleak under the rain. Water streaming in rivulets into blocked gutters and gullies, forming little lakes for cars to get stuck in. The Rio Hermoso looked no different. Still the same old tacky trickle, the yellow grass along the sides of the riverbed looked a bit greener maybe. I almost mentioned the incident in the park to Walker, but thought better of it. Raul was right. It did no harm to keep quiet about things of no concern to others. "Ok, ready when you are."

Walker went first and got the car started. I shut and locked the door as quickly as I could in the relentless rain. The wipers on the Mustang could barely sweep away the torrent cascading across the windscreen. He drove slowly. We were almost the only vehicle on the road.

Colonia Thomson was one of the older residential areas built during the 1940s by business people who wanted to move out from crowded central Bahía. It sat on the old road to Puerto Moro, overlooking the sea in the foothills of the Sierra that started about ten kilometres south east of La Bahía and stretched as far as Puerto Moro itself.

That old colonial port town nestled in the most south-eastern part of the coastal valley formed by the conjuncture of the Sierra del Pino and the Sierra Moro. In the last ten years its fortunes had revived with the building of a deep-water facility when Transamerican invested in heavier bulk tankers to carry

the bauxite out. I was pleased about having the chance to go and stay there for Christmas with Ninoska. There were some great beaches further along the coast.

The old Moro road was in fairly good repair but a couple of times the car dropped ominously into deep potholes covered up underneath the rainwater. The sea was strangely calm. Sudden lightning striking down into the choppy waves startled me, the tremendous rolling thunder too.

I said, "Oyá is angry. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea."

"Oyá?... We're ok. Nearly there anyway. See? That looks like the entrance there"

The Colonia was walled off from the main road and badly signposted within. It took a while to find our way to the Avenida Las Rosas. We had to drive back to the entrance and ask the security guard for directions.

Avenida Las Rosas curved around the highest point of the Colonia. Number fifty-two was a plain looking two storey house set back from the road, virtually indistinguishable from its neighbours, the front lawn planted with cypresses, red bougainvillea along the carport, at the door, a pair of blue and mauve azaleas on sentry duty.

I rang and waited. The house was well protected with strong security grilles on the windows. The front door itself was behind a sliding steel mesh screen. A short dark mestizo woman came. She had a pretty face, wore her hair up in a knot. "Yes?"

"My name's Maeve, I have some material for Eusebia Roa."

"Wait".

After some minutes she returned and opened the door, looking out behind me. "Are you alone?"

"No, can my friend come in?"

She looked out at the car with the demeanour of a curious little girl. "OK. Tell him to come."

I waved to Mike who squeezed the Mustang into the carport beside Eusebia's Toyota so as to avoid getting out in the rain.

He came in and the woman motioned us to a sofa in the entrance hall, closing the metal screen and door behind us. "Sit down. Wait here, please." The house was deep. From the entrance hall we could see through a large central salon out to a well-kept patio full of plants. A wet-looking toucan came hopping into the house. Putting it's head to one side to see us better over its huge yellow beak. The woman only went as far as the entrance to a corridor, saying loudly "Señora.!", never taking her eyes off us.

A couple of paintings there in the entrance hall puzzled me, a banal seascape and an equally uninspired tropical landscape. Why would Eusebia have them at all?

She appeared, shooing the toucan back out, "Who said you could come in, Troocoo? Outside and make your mess in the patio. No more banana. You've had enough.... Thank you Ondina. Maeve, what a surprise, and what a day to come out! You can't have finished that work already, surely?"

She walked with athletic vitality, as if she had springs in her legs. Her plain white dress, tight above her breasts, left her shoulders bare. I was struck again at how strong she seemed, her body was hardly that of a spoiled, wealthy woman.

I handed her the packet with the translations, saying, "I did, yes. I'll be away all week. I wanted to hand it over and thank you."

"Thank me? You've done me a great turn by taking those translations off my mind." She turned to Walker and offered her hand, "Eusebia Roa...glad to meet you."

Walker took her hand. "Mike Walker. Thanks."

"Can I show you a couple of things in the translation? I hope we haven't called at a bad time."

"It's awkward right now, Maeve. If you don't mind, let's leave it to another time. Tell you what, I'm having some people over tomorrow evening, nothing formal, I'd love you to come. Will you? We'll have time to talk then certainly."

"That's kind of you, Eusebia. I'd like to. I'm sorry we called at a bad time. I was just anxious to hand the translation over."

"And you came all this way in the rain…. But at least you know the way now. Forgive me if I don't offer you anything, I'm really very busy. Thank you for being so conscientious about the translation."

"What time tomorrow?"

"Oh,….come early, six or so."

As we moved to the door I pointed to the paintings I'd noticed, "I didn't think these were your kind of thing, Eusebia."

"I hate them actually, they intrude on my egomania, so I exiled them to the entrance. I bought them as a fundraiser to help the defence of Orlando Bosch and Posada Carriles."

"Who are they?"

"Maeve, how refreshing you are..."

"They're a couple of gangsters from the Miami exile scene," said Walker, I guess he just couldn't contain himself.

"That's very ill-mannered and provocative, Mr Walker. Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles are men of action, men of honour," said Eusebia, standing up straight, as if to attention.

"What's honourable about blowing up an airliner with 70 people on board?"

I said, "Steady on, Mike."

"That's all right, Maeve. Unproven, Mr Walker."

"Bosch was already on the run from Florida on a murder charge. Maybe you think Guillermo Novo's a hero too. But then he was convicted of blowing up only two people, Orlando Letelier and that researcher, Ronni Moffit, so maybe he doesn't quite make the hero category."

"Conviction overturned on appeal. Don't you have faith in the impartiality of your United States justice system? You sound like a communist."

"No I don't have confidence in the US justice system. And I've been a socialist since 1952. Took it in with my mother's milk."

"How droll. We must have a long chat about Kolyma one day. Perhaps by way of Katyn forest. Not today however. I have a very complicated dinner party to prepare. Reds not welcome. At least not in battle-dress. Might be fun to see the face on ambassador Blackbridge if I placed you opposite, though. What do you say?"

"Give me a break, ma'am ."

"How polite North American Communists are. Can't interest you in a job as a waiter can I?"

Walker burst out laughing. Eusebia said, "What a strange beast - a communist who laughs against himself. Ondina! ...Ondina will show you out." She smiled at me, "Take it easy, Maeve. Don't be shocked. Sparring is good for the soul. Not having one, Mr Walker wouldn't know. See you tomorrow. Thank you for doing that work for me."

She kissed me quickly, turned, ignoring Walker, and disappeared through an arch off the main salon. The mestizo woman appeared and showed us out, I thought she seemed to reserve a slight sneer for Walker.

"I think you met your match there, Mike, if you don't mind me saying so."

"The bad opinion of anyone who thinks highly of characters like Orlando Bosch isn't going to bother me Maeve. You angry with me?"

"Surprised. I thought you had more cool."

"I'm surprised you have the time of day for someone like Eusebia Roa."

"She helped me and she's a great writer."

"She's an elitist, right-wing bitch……Sorry."

"No you're not. But it doesn't matter Mike. Let's head."

We drove in silence back to La Bahía. I remembered those unbearable silences at home in Cabra and said equably, "The US is playing Guatemala today. Think they'll win?"

"I didn't know that. What at?"

"Football. In Guatemala City. they had a preview on the radio yesterday. I heard it on the bus."

"I didn't know Guatemala had a football team. You sure?"

"I mean soccer, Mike, soccer football not gridiron football."

"Wow. I didn't even know the US had a soccer team. What's the competition?"

"Elimination rounds for the World Cup next year."

"News to me. Shows how narrow my horizons are, I suppose. I'm sorry about what happened back there. Really. Forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive. I'll remember if we ever go visiting again though. Diplomat you are not."

"Keep those compliments coming. I need building up..... This rain's pretty serious. I hope folks up country aren't going to be flooded out."

"The forecast was for storms lasting till Monday. I wonder what the roads will be like around Marañon."

"Probably isn't raining down there. We often get heavy rains in La Bahia while they stay bone dry in the south and west. Can I still leave my stuff with you? It's just documents and cassettes of interviews. I don't want to cart them around with me and I don't want to leave them in an empty flat. I would have asked Sylvie, but she'll be going next month and I'm not sure when she has to be out of her apartment. My house mate leaves on the 15th."

I looked over at him as he peered through the driving rain, that Alexandrian profile of his, the glossy brown curls. "No problem. The flat's quite secure."

He said, "My place isn't that far and I've plenty to do tomorrow before my flight on Monday. Why don't we go by there first so I can give you my stuff today?"

"OK."

The rain eased, becoming more a heavy drizzle. Walker shared a small house out past the University Hospital on the Xiguasí road, with a geographer from Wisconsin called Nathan. Walker left us chatting. Nathan was in Morazán on an exchange programme organized by the University of Wisconsin to make better use of satellite images for land measurement purposes. His work was part of a catastral programme designed to improve land titling in Morazán. He believed it would lead to greater security of tenure for the poor. Walker came along carrying one of his boxes and suggested as he carried it out that the main purpose of the USAID funded program was to guarantee more secure collateral for the banking system.

There was something tedious about his knowing cynicism. Had he lived so much to warrant it? His stuff consisted of just two medium sized cardboard boxes full of papers and cassettes. I helped him fit them into the trunk of the Mustang. By then the rain had eased right off.

When we reached my flat again, it was getting dark. Walker only stayed to put the boxes away in the room I'd come to think of now as Ninoska's. I said to him, "Don't worry about your papers, Mike. They're safe here for as long as you like."

"It should only be until early November. I have to be back then to meet a woman from Amnesty International in London. She's following up a couple of cases, including the disappearance of Ninoska's husband. In any case, I don't want to be back later than the sixth because Sylvie leaves on the seventh and I want to see her off."

"That's good. Well, hope to see you then. Good luck. "

He recognised the slight coolness in me and made no attempt to offer a goodbye embrace. Our relationship was a tenuous one, based more on friendships with other people, than any warm affinity between the two of us. I wouldn't have chosen him for a friend. Still, I lost nothing by keeping his boxes safe for him.

The evening was fresher after the rainstorm. I went back to my reading with the radio on. Maravilla was covering a football match. I tried Radio Morazán.

They had a profile of Teofilo Largaespada whom they repeatedly referred to as the likely President-elect. It was interesting enough. Interviews with former business colleagues, his early days as a junior officer in the army, his training at Fort Benning in the United States, the death last year of his wife from cancer, his devoted children, his generosity to the poor, his devout Catholicism. Who would not have voted for Teofilo Largaespada?

No reference was made to the shameless nepotism and rifling of the La Bahía municipal budget for his presidential campaign war-chest and to smarten up his ranch up in the Maraní foothills. Nor was any mention made of the millions of pesos he received for his campaign from the Cuban exiles in Miami, in blatant violation of the electoral campaign rules.

The program did highlight the public works he had overseen in La Bahía: the opulent fountain on the Republic Rotonda illuminated at night by laser beams; the fine ring road connecting Las Chanillas and its adjacent marginal barrios to the free trade zone and the roads to Moro and Xiguasí. The ring road was built with money from Japan negotiated as part of a deal with the Inter-American Development Bank before Teofilo became mayor in La Bahía. A casual observer would hardly have known that from the huge signs proclaiming, "Let's get going with Teofilo!" And in tiny letters beneath, "Project financed by the government of Japan."

Largaespada had campaigned on defending the family and the promise of jobs, but his campaign hadn't caught on and Cabañas had capitalised single-mindedly on that lack of credibility. Cabañas himself had a mediocre record as Minister for Trade in the previous Liberal administration. But even I could see that his impeccable business record, deadpan sense of humour and relentless denunciation of corruption, the Conservatives' perennial weakness, had played better in the end with the electorate than Largaespada's factitious bluster.

The profile ended with a recording of Largaespada proclaiming himself victor in the small hours of the day after the election and later going to offer thanks at the grave of his dead wife. It was all a kind of canonisation or anointing by radio, deliberately made to sound official and formal, creating an expectation among Teofilo's supporters that their man was bound to get in. It was the most barefaced

sophisticated deceit I had ever heard, worth listening to in order to get a flavour of the unashamedly arrogant political culture of the Conservatives.

The profile was followed by a news bulletin with a storm warning. "The storms currently affecting the Atlantic seaboard of the isthmus form part of a tropical depression which has developed in the southern Gulf of Mexico over the last couple of days. This depression may turn into a tropical storm or even a hurricane in the next 48 hours. Vessels should stay in port. Southern Mexico and the Northern Isthmus are the areas likely to be worst affected, although heavy rain can be expected in all areas. Drivers should be especially careful in these very wet conditions and drive slowly with headlights on. More information on weather conditions in later news bulletins."

I went up to the roof to see what the weather was like. A steady drizzle fell from low cloud that filled the sky. In the city below, life was back to normal after the explosive storm of the afternoon. But I watched with much less interest than I might have done some weeks before. La Bahía had lost its novelty for me.

Raúl's departure certainly enhanced that sentiment. Life in a small country town had become an attractive proposition. A place like San Luis, for example, would be much cheaper than living in the capital. I felt suddenly cold and went downstairs to find a woollen jumper.

Re-reading Eusebia's article on Rivera Thomson, I ended up reading the whole cultural supplement. On the upcoming events column I found Raul's talk " 'Poetry and Truth in a Time of Revolution' Alliance Française, Wednesday 6.30pm." I wouldn't find events like that in San Luis.

As I read, I let myself tipple steadily from the bottle of rum. The glow of the spirits was pleasant, but went to my head. Da' used to say to me when he was worried about me in my first year at Trinity, "Don't waste money on spirits thinking they'll warm you up. You'll do better buying a packet of potato crisps..."

His experience came from numerous bouts of unemployed penury between jobs in the great cities of England. When in work he used to send banknotes in the post to me and my mother. I remember once her perplexity when she got one of those letters from him with the usual crisp twenty pound notes. It began, "My dearest Xanthippe...."

"Who in feck is Xanthippe?" she said.

"Socrates' wife" says I.

"I'll never understand your father, Maeve"

Good job she never followed that one up; one row less for me to endure. I went to bed happier than I would have been with a bag of potato crisps.

Another storm broke in the night. The tremendous blasts of thunder woke me, brilliant lightning flashes illuminating the room. I lay watching, listening to the wind as it rattled the glass persianas, whistling under the eaves. The worst violence passed before dawn when I fell back to sleep, happy at the thought of seeing Eusebia again.

Whatever her politics, I felt strongly drawn to her. What, if anything, might she think of me? And I wondered too what springs of loyalty had prompted Raul's strange request. Surely Eusebia was more than capable of taking care of herself? He was hardly encouraging me to have an affair with her, was he? Did I need to be encouraged? That was absurd. I hardly registered with her. But then, had she not invited me over? Yes. She had.

I woke up laughing to myself. What must I have been dreaming of? It was light. But far from finding the bright morning I expected when I went up to the roof to do washing, the sky was still overcast. Hopeful the clothes might dry, I did them anyway. My Peeping Tom neighbour appeared on his roof patio and waved across. I scowled at him, pegged the clothes and sheets out with my back to him. "Some storm," he called across as if we saw each other and exchanged greetings daily.

Another reason for moving away from la Bahía.

I set myself to cleaning the flat after breakfast. I hadn't wiped the persianas for months. They were covered in dust where the rain hadn't reached. Ninoska had cleaned the floors upstairs but the steps down to the front door had been neglected for over a month.

I left the front door ajar to allow me to mop down the stairs to the street. Someone knocked at it.

"Hi, *gatita.*" It was two of the youths Raul had helped the day before.

"Hi, you two OK? That was quite a roughing up you got."

"We're ok. Ricardo had to go to hospital. They kept him in because he said he was dizzy."

"We wanted to thank you and your uncle for helping us. He seems a genuine guy. We were lucky you were there."

"Roped us in to help repair a building the Casa Thomas has bought for the street kids. Beats square bashing in the sun for some bastard NCO."

"What did he say to the officer? I was afraid he might get into trouble himself."

"The captain was real polite to him. And when they let us go he saluted your uncle and said "At your service, Colonel". Your uncle must have some real high up friends to get treated like that. Good job he does or we'd have been cold toast."

"Yes, " I said. "Yes, he does have influential friends I suppose."

"Anyway, *gatita*. Thanks. We won't forget it."

"You're very welcome. I'll tell my uncle."

"Take care now."

"Sure, you too....."

They went.

Raul, a colonel? What kind of cultural mission is headed by a colonel? Funny how some information given offhand, just a few words, can completely upset you. I tried to carry on cleaning up the flat and found myself stopping in the middle of what I was doing to puzzle out what the two youth s had just told me.

Who had I been sleeping with all year? What was his relationship with Eusebia? What was he up to?

By turns I felt perturbed and quiescent. What business was it of mine? I had no politics to speak of. What if he was some kind of military person? Did that affect my relationship with him? How? Hardly at all. We enjoyed each other's company. What more was there to it?

Then again, had he deceived me? Why had he asked me to be discreet about Eusebia? I felt unhappy and uncertain. I finished cleaning and showered, tried to read but my concentration failed me. I had to talk to Raul.

I pulled on my waterproof and went out to find a phone box from where I could phone him in peace. The phone at the park was almost always busy. I found one half way down El Desdichado and called. It was nearly lunchtime. His housekeeper answered.

"With Señor Pec, please....my name is Maeve."

He came to the phone, "Maeve? Are you all right?"

"Kind of. I'm fine. Raul, I'm worried about something. Can I talk to you? Is it convenient to meet up?"

"I'm free right now. But I have an important meeting at three. Why don't you come over and have lunch. Just something light, a salad. What do you think?"

"That's great. I'll be over in about half an hour."

I had things to prepare for the morning and wanted to look ok for the evening at Eusebia's. It suited me to meet Raul quickly.

It should have been a short drive out on a Sunday, but took longer than I'd thought because the taxi took a diversion to avoid areas where flooding prevented transit by anything but big trucks or buses. Teofilo's public works - fountains and roundabouts and a giant statue to the Virgin Mary - were great for show, but the storm water drains and sewers under La Bahía were falling to pieces

Raul lived in a smart district out past the university on the southwest side of the ring road connecting northern La Bahía with the main trunk roads to the rest of the country. The houses were all bungalows with high metal railings separating them from the road and from each other. The pedestrian gate was unlocked. I paid the taxi and entered.

Having arrived there I felt stupid. What melodrama had me in its grip? I almost turned around and went. That made me feel even more stupid. It was Raul who opened the door.

"Maeve, what's up?"

He embraced me and I kissed him, looking into his eyes. He was completely natural and tender to me.

"Raul, I'm sorry. You're going to think me very stupid."

"Come on in and let's sit down. Will you have some lunch?"

"Not right now, thank you. Can we talk in private?"

"Of course, here."

He opened a door off the hall area into his large living room. We sat in separate chairs at a low table by the window.

I said, "Raul don't be angry with me. I met a couple of the guys you helped yesterday and something they said has me confused."

"Tell me."

"They said the army officer addressed you as Colonel when he saluted you at the end. And then I got to thinking about a couple of things. Why Beatrice left. Why you're so attached to Eusebia. I just feel confused Raul. I know it's none of my business. But I'm not a secretive person myself. I do love you and I trust you. I'm just so puzzled about what that young guy told me."

He was quiet for a moment and then said kindly, "Maeve, of course it's your business. It's true I'm in the military, in the reserve. Part of my duties at the embassy includes input into assessments of the political and military situation in the Isthmus. So I do have some contact with the high command of the armed forces here. In telling you that I've already told you too much. This is the area of my life and work that Beatrice came to find intolerable. Coming here was a promotion for me. But it put a lot of strain on our marriage. Especially since our sympathies are naturally with the civil opposition. Eusebia and Sylvie and you have all helped me come to terms with my circumstances in different ways. You know Sylvie is a close friend of Beatrice. She's helped me see things more from my wife's point of view and to think more clearly about what's best for me, for Beatrice, for the children. Are you angry with me for talking so selfishly about this to you?"

"You know I love you as a friend, Raul. I need you to talk like this to me."

He paused again. "I haven't known Eusebia long. To begin with, I was taken in by the character she projects for public purposes. But she's much more interesting than just another right-wing propagandist for the status quo. She has acute insight into the way people operate, especially here in Morazan…. I remember you said to me once. "Nothing ever happens here. The army has everything sewn up." Or something like that. In a way you're right. The army does have everything under control. But only just. And they know that. At times over the last few months I've made poor analyses of events and found Eusebia's criticisms very illuminating. She has one of the sharpest critical minds I've ever known. I don't want to talk in any detail, Maeve. It all has to do with my work. But I can say that I need to keep a broad range of contacts and Eusebia is one of them. Perhaps the best of them. Anyway, towards the end of last year, before you came to Morazán, things got to the point where I was managing the contradictions in my life very badly. I started drinking heavily. Beatrice got fed up and in the end had

enough....I said to you recently I couldn't have got through these months without you. I was telling the truth. You saved me from myself Maeve. What more can I say? ..."

He was far from telling me everything. He hid behind his job. I hid behind my tenderness for him. A fight with this enigmatic man who had loved me so well was the last thing I wanted. Who was I to intrude into what he wanted kept private. Just his floozy? He mine? Something more all right, but, after all, the relationship was opportunistic for both of us.

"Thanks, Raul. I could manage some lunch now. Shall we eat?" As we stood I took his hand and kissed him gently, falsely, for my trust in him was far less than before. He seemed not to notice or perhaps it didn't matter to him one way or the other.

I continued, "Good job I'm not the romantic type isn't it? I could so easily have fallen in love with you."

He looked sad, then, "Let's eat", he said.

I was sad too, that Morazán had made this hardness of me. Had it? Or was it some childhood resource long unrecognised in my emotional repertoire coming to me when I needed it?

Lunch was scarcely more than a snack: sweaty Brie, green salad, Chablis, courtesy of the diplomatic bag. Raul thought the storms would blow out before Tuesday. "We've often had bad weather at this time of year. It's true Hurricane Joan hit Nicaragua last year. But Morazán hasn't had a hurricane for decades. Still, you never know. Let's keep our fingers crossed."

It was still only one thirty by the time I left. It had started to drizzle again.

"Take good care Maeve. Will you phone me next weekend?"

"Of course. Say hi to Sylvie if you see her."

It was a short walk to the main road. I soon caught a taxi and was back at the flat in forty minutes. Of course that was not the end of my emotional involvement with Raul. But it was an end of some kind.

As I put together my bits and pieces for the journey down to Marañon I remembered Eusebia's programme and switched on to catch the end of it. An interview with Helen Umaña, the Honduran critic. She was talking about the creative writing workshops she gave in San Pedro Sula, their importance for women. I was sorry to have missed the complete programme, since Umaña was someone I had read about since arriving in Morazán.

I changed channel to Maravilla in time for the news. "The heavy rains caused by the tropical depression over the last couple of days have now been upgraded to a tropical storm. The storm appears to be moving directly to the north of the isthmus. The National Centre for Geological and Meteorological Studies predicts a strong likelihood that it will acquire hurricane force in the next forty-eight hours. Although it is thought improbable that the worst of this phenomenon will reach La Bahía or the rest of Morazán, all parts of the country can expect very heavy rains and severe flooding.in low lying areas The National Civil Defence is putting its emergency plans into effect immediately as a precautionary

measure. The army and the Red Cross are on stand by to aid the civil authorities. The Transit Police are advising private motorists against travel unless absolutely necessary."

I went up to the roof and looked at the sky all around, just a steady drizzle, some blustery wind, nothing unusual. My washing was still damp under the canopy.

Downstairs Marcos Castaneda, the Maravilla political editor was analysing with guests in the studio possible outcomes of the following day's decisions expected from the Supreme Electoral Council. The guests turned out to be Celia Rodriguez, the human rights lawyer and Roberto Maduro, the best man at Graham's wedding.

".... of course of the thirteen outstanding recounts, seven stand a very good chance of going to the Liberals. That's depressing news for Largaespada who himself is far from certain of securing the Presidency. If he does lose the Presidency, of course he automatically gets a seat in the National Assembly as the losing Presidential candidate. But it may well mean he'll have to bargain with the Christian Democrats in order to dominate legislation."

"And the leading Christian Democrats have already signalled that they prefer a coalition with the Liberals, haven't they? It's hard to see them wanting to work with Teofilo Largaespada after the long history of personal animosity between them. Although perhaps ideologically the Christian Democrats are closer to the Conservatives than to the Liberals."

"Would you agree with that, Sra. Rodriguez?"

"Yes. That's true on some issues. But on a key issue like relations with the army, for example, or on human rights, they're probably much closer to Enrique Cabañas."

"What do you think the Electoral Council will announce tomorrow?"

"I think they'll declare Enrique Cabañas President and fudge the recount issue as long as they can while they try and cope with pressure from the army and from the US ambassador."

"Will the army intervene? Professor Maduro?..."

"No. It would be too embarrassing for the United States."

"Does that mean we've left the bad old days behind?"

"Perhaps." Celia Rodriguez cut in, "But perhaps only to enter a new kind of bad old days....."

"You're the eternal cynic, Celia"

"We'll leave it there. Thank you Doctora Celia Rodriguez and Professor Roberto Maduro. Well that's the view of two well-known advocates of radical social and economic policies. After the break, we'll continue our analysis of the electoral crisis with representatives from the two main trades union federations and the head of the National Chamber of Commerce to get their view of the effects of the crisis on the economy. Julia Lopez' music programme has been re-scheduled to start at four pm. Stay tuned....."

Just as the advertisments began, the electricity went off. The first power cut for days. I unplugged the fridge. It needed defrosting anyway.

Nothing formal, Eusebia had said. I had better be clean, at least. Fortunately the shower had water. I managed to get cleaned up and discovered I needed some sanitary towels. It was still wet outside. I went to the corner in my waterproof. Asunción was serving, a handkerchief in her hand. Her nose was red and she sounded full of catarrh.

"Hi Asunción, that's a nasty cold. You ok?"

"So-so. On my own. Marcel's sleeping off his session last night after the football. My little girl's in bed with 'flu. Think I'm getting a bad dose too....You?"

"I've been quite busy this weekend. Tonight I'm going over to a friend for supper. Got any Femsafes?"

"No Maeve, only tampons or Reglites. They do?"

"Sure. Give me two packets of Reglites. Think we'll get the hurricane here?"

"Who knows? I hope not. They say it'll stay well to the north of us. Heard from Ninoska?"

"No. But a friend said she seems ok back home in Puerto Moro. I should phone her. I'll see you. Take care of that cold."

I had forgotten to phone Ninoska. The clock by Simone said three fifty. I decided to take a bus to the end of the route along the old coast road and a cab from there on. That meant leaving the flat at around four thirty to give myself time to phone Ninoska. The buses were fewer on a Sunday. I had no idea of their frequency.

Uncertain what to wear, I pulled on my favourite cotton summer dress over a T-shirt. It was colder now. I took my grandmother's cardigan to go under my waterproof; realised I had only my boots and my sandals for footwear. Boots on feet, sandals in bag. Money? I took a couple of fifty peso notes and some change for the bus and the phone. Passport? Nowhere to be seen. In the system? No. Think worst.

In the wash? Panic. Dash to the laundry sink. Relief. Not in the wash. Unrelief. Still not found. Do I really need it? Certain to if you go without it. System again? Table? Kitchen? There I found it under the books I'd been skimming looking for Chénier. By then it was time to go. Key? In my pocket. Ninoska's number? I had the piece of paper folded in my notebook in my bag. Notebook in my bag? Yes. Away then....

I realised how much I wanted to talk to Eusebia. It was like my first couple of dates with Soulange. Foolish. What had I to offer someone like Eusebia Roa?

The rain persisted, not heavily, but enough to make me take the long way down to the bus stop avoiding the steep, badly-paved streets that would have got me down in half the time. The stop was on the quays. I found a phone kiosk on the way and tried Ninoska's number.

An older woman answered, "Three four two four...."

"Hello, my name's Maeve, I'm a friend of Ninoska's. Is she in?"

"Who?"

"Maeve, I'm Ninoska's friend. She stayed with me last week."

"Ninoska is out. Who shall I say called?" I realised I was talking to her mother and gave up.

"Her Irish friend from La Bahía. I'll call another time. OK?"

"Oh!.....no.....Ninoska said if you called to tell you....what was it?.....yes to call any day after eight. She works late at the church."

"Is she well?"

"Now I know who you are. Yes. Ninoska will be sorry she missed you."

"Are the children all right?"

"Yes. All of us. We're all well. You must come to see us. I want to meet you. Will you come?"

"I promised Aracely for Christmas. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Christmas is all right. What shall I tell Ninoska?"

"Tell her I'll phone during the week. I'll be in Xiguasí."

"Such a long way...I'll tell her. God bless you……."

The wind was stronger down on the quay. My waterproof was too light to give much protection. Fortunately, a bus appeared within about ten minutes. I was surprised how full it was, standing room only. Quite a few people got off at the stadium, where I got a seat. The bus went much too fast, given the wet conditions. Morazán bus drivers were notorious for their gross recklessness. Other vehicles kept well away from them. Perhaps that explained why there were so few accidents.

Much of the surface water that had caused Walker to drive so slowly the day before had drained away. So the bus quickly reached the terminus out by the city rubbish tip at the junction with the ring road. A fixed route taxi service ran from the stadium all the way out past the Colonia Thomson, serving a couple of poorer districts further out along the coast. If I had realised that I could have walked down to the stadium and just taken a taxi all the way.

I had to wait quite a while for a car with space for me. The rain had eased but the wind gusted strongly. The driver seemed unsurprised when I asked him to drop me at the Thomson. So many of the Colonia's servants, gardeners and security staff used that route. It was agreeable to find myself accepted as part of the crowd.

I walked up the main road through the Colonia. Many of the houses were walled off, invisible from the road. A couple of times I was startled when fierce dogs sprang against the gates, barking furiously as I went by.

The few people about looked at me oddly. I guessed it must be unusual for a foreigner to be walking through such a wealthy area, especially so obviously having come some distance on foot in the rain. At one junction I was unsure of the way. There was no one to ask.

I waited a while and a security guard with a pump action shotgun came over to the gate. "You lost?"

"Yes. I'm looking for Avenida Las Rosas."

"Everyone gets lost looking for that one. Keep walking straight. The road curves. Don't take the first on the right. Take the second. That's Avenida Las Rosas."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. You shouldn't hang around here. People don't like suspicious strangers. They call the police."

"Thank you. You're very good."

"You get going now, before it gets dark."

I headed up the street and soon found Avenida Las Rosas. None of the houses on Las Rosas had walls or railings, The houses were so far apart, it took me over ten minutes before I reached number 52.

Ondina let me in straight away. She smiled at me warmly.

"Eusebia is expecting you. You wet? Let me take this."

She took my waterproof and was going off with it when she admired my cardigan.

"It was my grandmother's. My father gave it to me."

"Good for this time of year. Come on through."

A lilac apron covered her chest and her wide hips. She wore her hair up again, with a wooden peg through it. Her flip flops slapped against the floor as she went. "Eusebia! She's here!" She called Eusebia more like a sister than a servant. I wondered what to make of the way she said, "She's here!"

The walls of the interior rooms were covered with portraits of Eusebia. It reminded me of that Andy Warhol exhibit of Marilyn Monro, except this collection was of many different Eusebias, younger, dressed, nude, serious, gay, asleep, reading, in gardens, by the sea - a plethora of Eusebias by many different artists.

"What do you think of my egomania?" She embraced me and kissed me gently, her hand artlessly brushing my breast as she released me. She wore no make up. I wanted to caress her beautiful smooth skin, the shape of her high brow, her short auburn-dyed hair held back from her forehead with a simple dark orange headband, her seductive dark-coffee eyes.

"I'm so pleased you came. If I had thought, I would have sent someone to collect you. I'm so used to everyone I know having a car. How long does it take by public transport?"

"What's the time now?"

"Ten past six"

"I left the house around four thirty. An hour and half I suppose."

"The others won't be here until seven or so. Shall we have a look at the translation?"

"Sure."

"Drink? Coffee? Alcohol?"

"Coffee thanks."

"We may as well work here..."

The corridors were bright and wide, the rooms open, furnished plainly with well-made furniture, many cushions, few ornaments, no sense of clutter. The ochre tiled floors were covered with well-placed colourful rugs and patterned mats.

We sat at a heavy round table with shapely teak chairs, their backs rounding down into comfortable wide arm rests. Eusebia wore a similar dress to the one I had seen her in the day before. This one was light orange. The style suited her, showing off her smooth but muscular shoulders, suggesting her lithe hips and thighs. She moved with great fluidity. Her legs still reminded me of a woman sprinter's, just as they had done that first time I saw her.

We went through some notes I had made on my work. She corrected a couple of errors in the passages on Yoruba culture, which I had only part understood. I had got most of it right. Just after seven, people arrived. Eusebia went to greet them. We congregated there in the main salon. Ondina cleared away the papers.

Apart from her portraits Eusebia also had some items of sculpture, mostly in wood. I had plenty of time to admire these. The other people conversed freely since they all knew each other. One was Gabriela Urcuyo, a well-known woman TV chat show presenter, whom I recognised. Diffident, self-confident, in a smart blue suit, quite heavily made up, she looked as if she had just come from the studio.

Two other guests were introduced to me as Saúl García and Gregorio Ramirez. Both in their fifties, Saul was a thin fellow, with a genial avuncular manner; Gregorio, fat and loud, seemed something of a bully. They could hardly have been more different, as if drawn for a cartoon.

The last to arrive was Liberal politician Ramón Zamora and his wife Alejandra Sanchez, a doctor. Ramón was a big, outgoing man, in his late thirties. Eusebia congratulated him on getting elected. His wife Alejandra was slight and quiet, but sharp and aloof. I couldn't help remarking that they were all white except Gregorio who was slightly mestizo.

Even so, I felt like the fly in the milk. These were very smart people and me there, in my gran's cardigan and sandals. I found myself talking to Saul García. He seemed quite taken with me. He had been educated in the United States. We spoke in English.

"My father said to me when he knew he was dying, "Son, you follow whatever career you want, but promise me you'll never become a lawyer..." So I promised him and then almost straight away after he died, I got the chance of a scholarship to Harvard Law School. So I did Ok and I'm a lawyer. My Dad was right though... I should never have become a lawyer. I've written a couple of books, that's why Eusebia has me in her house. Admittedly, one was a law book. "

Alejandra cut in and said to me "He always sets up people he doesn't know this way, May."

"Maeve." I could take being misnamed by Gladys Centeno, not by Alejandra.

"Maeve, Ok. His other book was famous here in Morazán because Saul was the lawyer who went after Sofonías Moncada, this is years ago now, nineteen seventy eight. Sofonías Moncada was a big-shot rancher up in the Maraní. He kidnapped a teenage girl and kept her prisoner, abusing her terribly before he killed her and dumped her body. Saul took the case for the parents of the girl, illiterate indian peasants, for free. It dragged on for months because no one could find the body and Moncada said she had gone off with one of his farmhands. But eventually a body was found and then a couple of witnesses came forward. One was murdered before the trial. But Saul managed to make the case. Made a lot of enemies too, in the church, among the Liberals who were in power then. Moncada was a Liberal... Before the court delivered judgement Moncada blew his brains out. It`s a great detective story....."

"And all true. Terribly true," said García.

"That kind of thing still goes on though", said Alejandra., "And it's not just out in the backwoods and in the countryside these things happen. Some of my patients come in with accounts of abuse that would make your hair stand on end, women and girls from some of the wealthiest neighbourhoods."

Eusebia spent the first part of the evening deep in conversation with Gregorio Ramirez. She was very attentive to him, which he clearly found gratifying. I heard her say at one point, "What ironies and double-crosses history throws out, Carlos Prío Socorrás funding Fidel Castro to overthrow Batista only to find his protégé setting up a police state."

Later, after too much rum and orange, I found myself listening to Gabriela Urcuyo, Alejandra and Eusebia discussing women writers who were important to them. Eusebia remarked, "Rosario Castellanos wrote an essay once that was decisive for me. It was on Juana Inez de la Cruz, the Mexican nun. Castellanos' line was that Juana Inez de la Cruz was a woman who had the backbone to write as a woman. For me that was a revelation. I had never thought I could write as a woman or even be a woman as I was and am. I thought I had to live someone else's script or screenplay, if not by a male author then by some woman who believed everything had to be as it was..."

"Careful, Eusebia, you're beginning to sound like a revolutionary..."

Alejandra mentioned "A Room of One's Own" and went on to enthuse about Clarice Lispector.

Eusebia asked me what I thought of Virginia Woolf. I had to admit I'd only read "the Waves" and said, "Not my kind of pint, all that high falutin' navel-gazing."

"Oh dear, you'll probably not enjoy Clarice Lispector then."

"What's a pint?" asked Alejandra.

"A pint's what I'll drink when I get off the plane in Dublin, a long cool dark one."

"You Irish women, I've heard you're savages. Is it true?"

"Of course it's true. Last year I sent my soldiers off to Ulster to rustle a bull I fancied, we lost five thousand men before I got it…..but it was worth it just to see the look on my husband's face…"

Gabriela and Alejandra stared at me for a moment before Alejandra, said to me sardonically, "Very funny, Maeve…."

Eusebia watched me impassively.

Gabriela remarked, "So. We must take it as true….".

I mentioned how starved of books I felt for lack of a good library and they all lamented the poverty of choice in the La Bahia bookshops. We agreed even the university library was hopeless for contemporary literature. Eusebia said quietly to me, "Why not go into the study later and see what you can find?"

Gabriela began, "Of course books are all very well but cinema and television are what really count these days. Last week I was interviewing the director Miguel Lambert. He's filming on location in La Virgen at the moment....."

I escaped and found the study. It was off the main salon at the far end of the house. Long and narrow, at its end a high window ran up to the ceiling from the floor. Wall lamps threw light both up and out just above my head. I set myself to skim titles and authors along shelves running the length of one wall from floor to ceiling. A wooden step-up doubled as a reading seat.

Glancing over a couple of the shelves quickly. Eusebia seemed to have them arranged haphazardly, some grouped by nationality, others not, - the Puerto Ricans Edgardo Rodriguez Julia, Rosario Ferré, Luis Rafael Sanchez; the Mexicans, Maria Luisa Puiga, Octavio Paz, Elena Poniatowski, Carlos Monsiváis, Sergio Pitol, Carlos Fuentes, Rosario Castellanos, Juan Jose Arreola; from Colombia, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alvaro Mutis, Policarpo Varon; some Brazilian writers, there, Clarice Lispector, Jorge Amado, Moacyr Scliar, Joao Guimaraes Rosa, Nelida Piñon; Cubans, Virgilio Piñera, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Luis Rogelio Nogueras, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Antonio Benitez Rojo, José Leyama Lima; then a mixture, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gioconda Belli, José Donoso, Claribel Alegría, Manuel Puig, Angel Rama, Julio Cortazar, Augusto Monterroso, Jose Maria Areguedas, Sergio Ramirez, Rafael Hinostrosa, Luisa Valenzuela, Mario Benedetti, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, Salvador Garmendia and "Prision Verde" by Amaya Amador.

Around such riches, I felt like a dragon curling up around its hoard of gold, my eyes began to fill with blood and my teeth suddenly felt longer, my toenails tearing at the inside of my shoes..... books I'd

longed to read while studying for my degree but never had time to, nor opportunity, I pulled out "Prision Verde", Rodriguez Julia's "A Night With Iris Chacón" and José Leyama Lima's "Paradise".

After some minutes, I felt someone watching me. Eusebia leaned in the doorway, smiling at me.

She said softly, "You like reading?"

"This is an amazing collection of books Eusebia, it must have taken a lifetime to accumulate. Have you read them all?"

"Some several times, I don't have to worry about eating or sleeping much, Ondina takes care of me."

She moved to my shoulder where I knelt on the floor, I felt her hand on my shoulder as she bent over me to examine what I'd chosen. I wanted it on my breasts, those firm fingers; wanted them exploring me.

"Interesting choice, my darling."

The warmth of her dry, level voice feeding seduction like an alchemist's philtre into my ear.

"Borrow them," she said, "You certainly have the foolish honesty to return them, unlike these smart Morazán friends of mine."

I ignored her taunt, if that's what it was, and turned my lips to hers, "Can I? Really? That would be great..."

She said, slowly narrowing her eyes, "Can you really? What, my baby?" and I kissed her mouth tenderly and warmly. She was still for a moment, her eyes closed.

Then, "You have bewitched me..." in one move, she stood up turning and turning back at the door, she looked at me as if puzzled at something in my face, shook her head quickly, with a flick of her long eye lashes, and went back to her guests. I couldn't help myself from admiring her beneath the dress she wore. I stood and went slowly after her. She said to everyone

"We have to get out from under all this dead weight Zea, Borges, Bioy Casares, Rodriguez Monegal, Uslar Pietri...for God's sake, these boring old pricks with their bogus "authority" and "gravitas", we need to break out from underneath them. We need to be dynamic and fresh!..." She sprang up onto her dining table and flipped in mid-air in front of us landing precisely and neatly by the door to the kitchen. "See? Easy! Let's see how the food is doing. Anyone not want soup? We have fresh croutons and pâté anyhow...." and she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Bravo Eusebia!...." cried Gabriela, and the others laughed out loud at her performance.

"That Eusebia…" they said to each other, shaking their heads as if at the antics of a naughty little girl.

She was this startling mixture of gaiety, knowledge, provocative horseplay, and that extraordinary athleticism.

I knew I would be hers.

I remembered Raul looking sad earlier in the day. What was that sadness?

The meal was chaotic, but fun and delicious. To help Ondina, I carried plates in from the kitchen for her, to the condescending amusement of the others. She was a great cook and had prepared several dishes. I found myself next to Gregorio and Gabriela.

Gregorio said, "Maeve, the Irish have a reputation in Latin America, some for making trouble, some for keeping order. Which camp are you?"

"I teach people to read."

"Sounds like communism," said Gabriela.

"I was pulled off a bus last week by a soldier near San Luis. He complained about foreigners coming here to teach people to read. What level of development will Morazán ever have with illiteracy at more than 40 per cent?"

"You travelled on a bus?" asked Gabriela, her mouth hanging open at me, "Eusebia, you collect the most singular acquaintances……"

"But Gabby, you come here precisely because it's your only chance to meet with real life outside the studio. This young woman sees more of the real Morazán in a week than you do all year."

"Definitely, a troublemaker," said Gregorio.

"It's true though," Ramón Zamora intervened. "We'll never develop the economy without more investment in education. Cabañas won the vote on that."

"You think he won?" asked Garcia.

"Come off it Saul. You know very well he won. You want to be Attorney General for another five years? As the token Mr. Clean among the Ali Babas I can't believe you haven't had enough by now."

Gregorio scoffed.

García replied "Well Ramón, thank you for that vote of confidence. Maybe Eusebia gleaned something from the General and the Ambassador last night? What do you think Eusebia? Will Enrique make it?"

"Maybe, yes. They have to decide how to share out the Supreme Court and the Electoral Council. But the army will play ball so long as Cabañas agrees to leave their budget alone, keep quiet about forced conscription and deal flexibly with the United States on the gringos' ridiculous anti-narcotics plan. The General believes the Conservatives are a liability because they've gotten too greedy. If he thinks that, then Cabañas is certainly the next President, as far as I can see, no matter what the ambassador says. Why ask me, Saúl.? Gregorio's sitting right next to you. What does the outgoing President's brother think?"

I could hardly believe the company I was in. These were some of the very élite of Morazán's political class. Gregorio smiled and said with preposterous smugness, "Enrique will squeeze in, we're resigned

to that. We'll get a good deal in the National Assembly. Business as usual minus the fancy perks of office. We can live with that."

"That's very sanguine of you, Gregorio," said Zamora.

"We can afford to be sanguine with three army brigades on our side, Ramón. You may have the southern army units, but we have the Maraní, La Bahía, Moro and Xiguasí. Who cares what happens in La Virgén and Bikuka? As for the artillery in Momotoa, well, it's a long way away on the wrong side of the mountains strung out along the frontier. This pork is pricelss, Eusebia. Can't I borrow Ondina for a week or two?"

"What? And leave me to starve? You're out of your mind Gregorio...."

He turned to me again, like a cat returning to torment some prey it had caught and forgotten about for a while. "Why educate people with nothing to offer but their labour? You should take a leaf from your compatriot Leopoldo O'Donnell, young lady. Leopoldo O'Donnell – Captain-General of Cuba during the 1840s Escalera uprisings. No one really knows many slaves he had killed. But it was certainly several thousand. Now, he had the right idea. Likewise General Sheridan. Who misses those Indians he did to death on the so-called Trail of Tears? What contribution to human knowledge or civilization did they make? Who misses them? No one. Detritus of history….. O'Donnell and Sheridan were giants. They made their adopted countries great. Ireland can be proud of them. Here too, even a pygmy like Enrique Cabañas understands strength. He may talk liberal claptrap to win votes, but the Liberals know as well as us, a strong hand has always done best in Morazán. And that's how it'll stay, please God. Ramón, tell me I'm wrong."

"You're not wrong Gregorio but strength alone may not always be enough."

They began to argue the merits of the 'Seventies Land Reform over dessert. I wondered what Gladys and the others had eaten for supper up there by Tirurí. Faking a trip to the bathroom, I slipped away to the kitchen. Gregorio was more than I could take and I just wanted to punch Gabriela in the mouth.

I cleaned dishes for Ondina as we talked, closer to her than to the people she was feeding. She laughed gently when I told her what I thought of Gabriela and smiled like an Aracely when I admired the lapis lazuli earrings she wore.

After half an hour or so Eusebia found us. She observed me for a moment.

I said, "Forgive me, Eusebia. I think I drank too much. If I'd stayed out there I'd have said something outrageous for sure."

"I told them you were feeling unwell. It's ok. They`re good clients, So I'm glad you held your tongue..... Don't worry, for them you were an amusing change. They never meet real people, only varieties of frauds, like themselves. They're going now."

She left.

Ondina said, "I hope you'll visit more often. Eusebia spends so much time doing business with these rich folks. She needs to spend more time with young people like you. Here, leave that now. ....let me."

She took over the sink.

So I went out and began clearing the table. Everyone had gone. Only Saúl García and Eusebia were chatting at the door.

Garcia called over, "Feeling better?"

"Thanks, much better."

"I can believe it now Gregorio's not around. We're not all as crass as him. May I give you some advice?"

More advice.

"Sure..."

"You did a good thing taking care of Ninoska Vileda. But don't get in any deeper with Gladys Centeno. She and her kind are a different proposition completely. You mean well and the education programme you're doing is ok……. I'm just trying to help. You might care to tell Mr. Walker the same."

It was as if he were a teacher offering tips to an errant student. How could he know so much and dispense his admonition so casually? The privileges of power, presumably.

"Thanks, Mr García. I'll remember that."

"You're welcome. Good night. Good night Eusebia, it was a great meal, as usual."

He kissed her cheek.

She sounded sincere.when she said, "Goodnight Saúl. Drive safely."

Eusebia closed the door and came to the table, where she sat down and watched me clearing plates and bowls and glasses. "Could you stop that, Maeve, and come here?"

Of course, I did. She slipped her hands around my waist up under my shirt. I didn't resist.

"What shall we do? Are we to be lovers? You kissed me and for the first time for years I feel on trial."

Her touch had my skin tingling. The conscious part of me said, "I have to get home Eusebia. Tomorrow I leave early for Marañon. I can't let my colleagues down. I want to stay, but….."

She let me stroke her beautiful face, those high cheek bones, the oriental eyes, her svelte dark skin.

I said "Your eyes are tired, Eusebia. You work very hard." She looked at me, into me, gentle, neutral.

I met her gaze and said "I've never met anyone like you ever."

She laughed. "You talk as if you were a hundred years old, my baby."

She gently slapped my behind and stood up, pulling my face to hers for a long kiss. The strength in her arms was electrifying. We separated. I felt dizzy from her. "Come on, let's clear up and decide what to do...What did you think of what Garciá said? He means well you know...are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes I'm fine.... I guess he wouldn't have told me unless he wanted to help. I was surprised he knows so much though. Is that through the police?"

"The police here couldn't run a bath, Maeve. No. Garcia has his own people. He's on the State Security Committee, one of the committees that work as liaison between the army and the President. They get information from all over the place. If Saúl is telling you to be careful it means at least one of the security outfits - there are many here in Morazan - is keeping a close eye on you. The Maraní is notorious for gun running activity for the foreign guerrillas. So is the frontier past Marañon You really do need to be careful who you get involved with."

She spoke kindly. I was still half pole-axed from her kiss, her voice floating deliciously around me like a perfume.

We cleared the table and took everything into the kitchen. Eusebia and Ondina truly did treat each other like sisters. Ondina was only a few years older than me. This was yet another Eusebia, the practical housekeeper. I dried the dishes and pots. Eusebia put them away. It was quick work.

Eusebia put her arm around Ondina's shoulder, kissed her, "Ondi, thank you for another wonderful meal."

"That's what I'm here for, my sister. Want some coffee? Maeve?"

"I'm worried about getting away in the morning. I'm packed. But I need to make the six o'clock bus."

Eusebia said, "It's ten thirty now. It'll take us half an hour to get to your place in the car at this time of night. We have time unless you're falling asleep."

I wasn't falling asleep. I was trying to fight off the urge to throw myself at her, stay the night and forget about Marañon and evaluations and literacy class. She knew it.

"Let's listen to some music for half an hour or so."

She led me from the salon through an arch to a smaller room with a large easy chair and a couple of low stools in front of shelves of cassette tapes. She put on some classical music I didn't recognise, a violin concerto.

"Is this ok, Maeve?"

"Yes, I'm very ignorant. Who is it?”

"Sibelius. The violin concerto"

I had sat down in the chair. She came over. I made room for her.

She sat over me, her arm around me, "We have a lot to talk about, my angel. Perhaps now isn't the best time. Did you think this would happen?"

"I wasn't sure. I kind of hoped it would. You're just so.....well, gorgeous."

She laughed, "I hoped it would happen too. Ever since that day we met in the gallery. Do you remember how you startled Urania?"

"I'd forgotten. Now you mention it, yes."

Ondina came with the coffee on a tray and left it on one of the stools. She smiled at me, left us. Eusebia sat forward to pour out two cups. She did everything with the natural ease of a child.

"Urania is very sensitive to people. No one fools her. Here..."

"Thanks."

"Are you afraid of me? "

"Only by how much you seem to know."

"Do you find me exotic?"

"I'd spend a long time finding someone like you in Dublin, that's for sure..."

"Did it occur to you that for me, you too might have a certain allure? This beautiful young white woman, eligible, available..."

"No Eusebia. You're only the second person who's ever told me I'm beautiful."

"Of course you are. It's funny, isn't it? How physically beautiful people are often so unaware of themselves. And you do hold an allure for me. Even if you weren't sweet-natured and talented. You have this charge about you. That's what struck Urania."

She sat cupping her drink in her hands, sipping now and then, enjoying the music.

She said, "I have a busy few days ahead. I suppose you'll be away all week."

"Yes. Back next weekend."

"Maybe that's good. It'll give us time to think about each other and what we want. You'll move on next year?"

"In theory. I have the chance of doing a Masters in London. I'm not enthusiastic about it though."

She looked at me. "We have time. Oshun, our African Venus, is smiling on us for now. Let's enjoy it."

"Will you stay here long term?"

"Perhaps, Maeve. It's foolish to plan too far ahead. Business is good for the moment. I've cut out a niche for myself here. What would your friends say if they knew you were here like this with me?"

"Let them say what they like. My life's mine not theirs..... I wish I wasn't going away tomorrow."

She smiled at me. She seemed happy, contemplative. She took both our cups, put them aside and drew me to her. I wanted to kiss as much as she did. We were oblivious to anything outside us.

Next thing, Ondina was saying gently from outside, "Eusebia, It's nearly eleven thirty." "Thank you, Ondi....Maeve, you decide.....I want you to stay. But maybe it's better we spend a few days apart."

"I'd better go. I'm sorry. This trip's important"

Ondina had gathered my stuff. She kissed me goodnight as I headed out with Eusebia to the car. I suddenly felt part of someone else, something like the way I had with Soulange. Something I hadn't felt with Raul. But this felt like a beginning. Soulange and Raul were, pretty much consciously, interludes. This with Eusebia was more like a complete surrender.

A light drizzle fell. Eusebia drove quickly. I apologised for putting her to such inconvenience, late at night in the rain. "Don't be silly Maeve. It's my pleasure. Love is so ...."

She pulled over to the side of the road and turned to me, ".....Kiss me.....I want some joy and love in my life, Maeve. Who knows when it may be too late any more?"

We kissed again, drunk on each other. If she'd said "let's go back", I'd have gone with her. She pulled away from me. "We'd better get going or I won't be able to drive." She looked at me as she turned the key, "I've never felt this way about anyone, you know."

I lay in the seat watching her at the wheel. I remembered William. And Raul's warning. As if she read my mind she said, "Do you mind if I leave you at the foot of El Desdichado? Plenty of taxis go up there. Give me a quick kiss. Otherwise we'll never get to bed. One important thing, Maeve, if we talk by phone say nothing compromising. We need to be careful. Those people tonight, they're clients, not friends. Saul and Gregorio get information on all the phone surveillance. I just assume they keep tabs on me. Let's be discreet."

"OK".

And we were there. We managed to part with a brief embrace. She left quickly. As she had said, I almost immediately caught a taxi. No sign of William, a whistle some blocks away. In the flat, the clock by Simone said half past midnight.

I wasn't sleepy. Still dazed from what I'd started with that kiss in Eusebia's study, how unthinkingly and spontaneously I'd unlocked this mysterious woman. Panic grabbed me. I almost pulled on my coat to go back after her. Was I mad not to have stayed the night for the pleasure of waking to her, watching her asleep, enjoying the trace of her features, her breasts and hips and her magnificent legs?

Mechanically, I set out some clothes to wear for the morning. Looked at myself in the mirror. Beautiful? Me? Tousle-headed, sunburnt, gatita-eyed tomboy. I changed my pants and put on another Reglite.

I don't remember falling asleep and woke well before five. Up on the roof I found it was raining, not heavily but steadily. On the radio, the morning news covered the weekend football, the draw between the United States and Guatemala, some coverage of the Electoral Council's likely decision on the election results, due for the afternoon. Someone from the meteorological office reassuring people that

the tropical storm although intensifying had stalled along the isthmus coast, to the north of Morazán, unlikely to hit La Bahía. I showered quickly, made some tea, took up my bag and left.

Arriving at Invicta in plenty of time, I had no trouble getting a ticket, the bus was half empty. I remarked to the driver "Not many people for a Monday morning."

"It's the weather. Good excuse for a long weekend. The election stuff too. People want to wait and see what's going on. No one wants to be away from home if there's going to be trouble."

I took a seat at the back, still full of Eusebia. But at least the yearning to turn around and go straight to her had receded.

We got into Xiguasí on time, just after ten. As Walker had said, the rain stopped after La Sabana, turning to showers, the sky heavily overcast. Xiguasí was newer than La Bahía. Most of it had been developed in the 'Twenties and 'Thirties during the time when Transamerican was buiIding up its operations under the Ponce dictatorship. It was laid out in neat square blocks with wide roads, plenty of trees and regular street signs.

But the outskirts of the city were depressingly like those of the capital; extensive areas of spatchcock housing with little infrastructure or services, all those rows of rough timber and cardboard walled boxes under rusting zinc sheeting and black plastic. Then, sometimes right nearby, sometimes set apart by scrub land or one of the deep drainage canals that carried away flood water in the rainy season, came smart-looking residential colonias.

Xiguasí had none of the claustrophobia of La Bahía. It seemed a bigger place, but in fact it's population was less than half that of the capital, at something under eight hundred thousand. It's rail link sent a constant flow of produce up to the deep water port at Puerto Moro and to the older port at La Bahía. It's large livestock market served not just southern Morazán but Morazán's southern neighbours too.

Xiguasí had plenty of light industry, including one of the main breweries and a free trade zone for South Korean, US and Taiwanese pack-and-wrap and clothing businesses. It was easy to forget amidst this activity that the motor for it all in many ways remained the big bauxite operation of Transamerican Zinc, based in the hills to the north and south of the city.

The Invicta depot was the north side of town right next door to the old *art deco* railway terminal, now a museum with a couple of old steam locomotives on show outside. The rail yards were still in plenty of use, rows of bulk freight cars lined up with flat beds, some livestock cars, their dirty diesel locomotives distinctly plebeian-looking in comparison with the shiny paint and brass of the museum pieces.

I took a taxi to the southern bus terminal. From here buses left every thirty minutes for Guajiniquil, and San Juan La Frontera, all passing through Marañon on the way. The main route to Bikuka was also out of Xiguasí, but turned off for its destination before Marañon.. They were all regular country buses with the usual mixture of people carrying produce back to their villages, a couple of foreign backpackers heading for the border, some school children in uniform. As my bus pulled out it began to rain hard again.

The road for Marañon goes across the plain running through sugar cane and banana plantations that stretch from Xiguasí across to Lake Momotoa and then down to the south-western frontier. Marañon itself is not much bigger than San Luis. It sits on the western tip of Lake Momotoa, opposite the volcanic island of La Gavilana, with its permanent aureole of cloud, rising up towards the eastern end of the lake. Marañon's population is only around seventy thousand, but it is still Momotoa's departmental capital

I was looking forward to this journey because it probably meant a trip out to Walilika that afternoon. If I had to be away from Eusebia, at least I could enjoy the country along the southern shore of the lake. In the WLU office in Marañon I was surprised to find Yelba alone. I had expected to find Margarita, the WLU coordinator for Momotoa, and Eva Maria too.

"Hi Yelba, great to see you!"

We embraced. I was glad to see her looking well.

"Thanks, Maeve. You too."

"Eva Maria turned up yet? Where's Margarita?"

"They've gone to Unitel to phone La Bahía, just to let them know we're here. The radio is saying the tropical storm has turned into a hurricane and may move inland. "

"Oh my God. What's that mean?"

"It won't hit La Bahía, at any rate. But they're predicting heavy rain and high winds for the next two days."

The WLU office in Marañon was just the front room of a small house with a table and a filing cabinet. A new-looking electric typewriter sat on the table. To the rear were two smaller rooms with beds. The kitchen was a lean-to at the back, just a roof, covering a clay oven. A zinc sheeted latrine stood at the far end of the patio and beside it a concrete sink with a standpipe. Piglets were snuffling around a sorry looking vegetable plot. Yelba ran out into the rain to shoo them off.

When she came back she said,"I don't fancy sitting around here for two days. The rain isn't too heavy. Margarita and me were hoping we'll be able to split up and cover San Juan, Walilika and Guajiniquil. What do you think?"

"I'm looking forward to going to Walilika if I can. What's Eva Maria say?"

"That's really what she wanted to talk to Amelia about."

We stared despondently at the steady rain. "How about you Yelba, How was your week in La Bahía?"

"OK. My little boy had a cold but he was better by Friday. Amelia behaved herself in the office. She seems less wound-up now we've nearly finished this review. She told us the donors are talking positively about funding an extension for next year. We met with Mary Douglas to give her a progress

report. She said she saw you at a wedding a couple of weekends ago and what a great dancer you were."

"Did she? Well, I hope so, after all the hard work I put into my salsa classes."

Eva Maria and Margarita returned then. Eva asked me how my weekend was. "La Bahía was very wet when I left. I managed to get a dive in on Saturday morning. Saw an incident when the army was rounding up some young guys for military service. The soldiers don't take any nonsense do they? It was shocking, to tell the truth...What did Amelia say?"

"She wasn't there. I just left a message to let her know we were here and carrying on as normal. Are you game for Walilika?"

"Sure."

"OK, if you do that, I'll go down to San Juan and Yelba will do Guajiniquil. We reckon we should be able to meet back here Thursday lunchtime, write up the material we gather and send it back with you Friday. That gives me and Yelba the weekend with our folks. What do you think?"

"Fine with me."

We confirmed together the information we wanted from interviews with the students and the literacy promoters. The program would wind up in early December. If the project extension for next year were granted, the information we were gathering now would serve as the baseline for the new programme.

I left my passport and bankbook in safekeeping with Margarita, just carrying the Education Ministry letter to show any official who questioned me. Everyone knew me between Marañon and Walilika. I hated travelling with my passport in case I lost it. But I took the photocopy I always kept in it.

For lunch, we ate enchiladas together in one of the comedores on the park. Despite the unremitting rain we were happy about the week ahead. Yelba asked Margarita what the road was like to Guajiniquil.

"It's in good shape they say. I haven't been out there since it started raining yesterday but the bus drivers say it's fine."

"I'm glad you like going out to Walilika, Maeve" Yelba remarked. "It's the bugs there that drive me crazy. Those clouds of *sayules* that blow in off the lake..…..My sister in Guajiniquil had another baby last month and I still haven't seen her. I'm looking forward to it."

"What did she have?"

"Another girl."

"She still hear from her Enrique?"

"No. When her cousin in Miami told her Enrique was seeing someone else she told him to either come home or stay there for good. She's living with another guy now, a teacher. He seems ok."

Eva Maria too had family in San Juan and many friends in the border communities. A cousin worked with the Customs and got cheap perfume, toiletries and other luxury goods from business people for

whom he did favours. Yelba and Margarita put in orders for soaps and deodorants. Before we headed off for the bus station, Margarita gave me a small parcel of medicine she had promised the promoters in Walilika.

"Take care now. If the rains get heavy don't take any chances crossing those rivers. We can leave it all till next week if we have to."

The first afternoon bus for Walilika was the only daily service to communities along the Walilika road to Bikuka. It left before the buses to Guajiniquil and San Juan. Buses on that route were always nearly empty as they left the terminal, filling up steadily over the first few kilometres of the journey. The drivers all knew me, as did many of the other passengers. It was a nice feeling of belonging, something like being the resident *gatita* to the Desdichado Park neighbourhood.

Bus may need some explanation, since the buses from Marañon along the Walilika road were all trucks. The trucks that only went as far as Walilika were the old Toyotas. But the one for Bikuka was a newish Mercedes truck. With its auxiliary gearbox and four-wheel drive, it was one of the few vehicles capable of managing the slopes between Walilika and the Bikuka interior. I had never done the trip that far, but I fancied being aboard this high-platformed beast if the rivers were going to rise.

The rain continued as we pulled out of Marañon. I recognised a couple of the shopkeepers from Walilika. As we got talking they explained they were stocking up because flood warnings had spooked people into buying extra supplies in case the town got cut off. So they had come in to Marañon to re-stock. The truck headed down the San Juan road to the turn off for Walilika where some dozen people climbed aboard..

From the turn off we quickly reached the bridge where the soldiers had their checkpoint. A couple of them came round to the back of the truck, hardly more than children, looking even more like infants in their head to toe green ponchos, their soft olive green hats poking out from under the hoods. One of them said to the driver's ayudante

"Can you leave a message with my aunt there at Cangrejas? Tell her to go stay with Danilo for a couple of days, until the rains are over. The colonel's got everyone on standby 'cos they reckon we'll get it bad here. The river's higher than we've ever seen it and they say more rain's on the way."

"Sure."

"Got a cigarette?"

The ayudante, short, well-built, from one of the local indigenous groups, gave him the end of a pack.

"Thanks. You take care now…"

As we rumbled over the long bridge, the heavy reinforced concrete slats rattling beneath the weight of the truck, everyone remarked on the spate of the river below us. The rolling waters brown with mud, carrying brush and driftwood rapidly along in the current.

We were protected by a heavy yellow tarpaulin. But rain still seeped in somehow, so the floor of the truck was soon soaking wet. On a bright day, I loved the drive through those forested hills above the lake, looking across to the great green slopes of the volcano rising up from out of the water. Today, the lake was still as a pond. The woodland along the shore seemed desolate, overwhelmed by the rain. La Gavilana invisible, as if someone had cast a mantle of rain over the whole lake.

The journey to Walilika generally took a couple of hours, a steady slow drive over the stony road, taking in several streams and two river crossings, Cañas Gordas and La Babosa. The Cañas Gordas crossing came at the bottom of a steep slope. There the water level seemed little higher than normal, though certainly the water lay wider across the bed. But the truck struggled through mud on the other side. On the long descent from Cañas Gordas, all the surface dirt had been washed away. The truck had to negotiate gullies washed out like gashes from the stony roadfill.

At Cangrejas, a hamlet right down on the lake shore, the ayudante delivered the soldiers' message and we waited while the aunt and some other women and children clambered onto the truck with us. The men and women staying behind stood in the rain waving goodbye. They had horses grazing in among the trees above the lake. I noticed the water was right up to the forest, whereas normally its highest point lay well back from the tree line.

The La Babosa crossing, on the way in to Walilika itself, consisted of a long raised concrete pad over a series of culverts with short fords at either end. We arrived there and the driver stopped. The men all got down to have a look. I joined them. Water covered the whole crossing. The flow was steady, not fast.

"Don't like it," said the driver. "Adiac, check out the causeway, can you? I don't fancy getting half way across and dropping into a hole."

The ayudante made a wry face and waded across the first ford. The water only came up over his knees. Across the causeway the water came up to below his knees. He moved from side to side. About a third of the way across he stopped to his right as if he had found something. Then carried on. Nearly at the other side he stopped again and poked in the water with his foot.

He came back across.

"We'd almost be better off without that stop-gap job they did there," he said as he came up to us again, "Those repairs they did in July have pretty much washed out, but the rest is ok. No problem."

"Come on then. Let's give it a go."

We climbed back up. The truck passed easily over the causeway, only having to squeeze past the damaged area at the far side.

"Good old Roberto," someone said, "Steady as a rock."

Roberto sounded the truck's horn loudly several times as we headed along the track into Walilika. The coconut palms bending as the wind had picked up. We stopped up by the comedor in the central park.

Families were waiting to greet relatives as they got off the truck. A few people were waiting to head on to Bikuka.

I jumped down and headed over to the school to see if Carolina, the directora, could put me up in her house for a couple of days. The sandy streets were mushy with all the rain that had fallen and been unable to drain away. People huddled under eaves watching the steady downpour.

The school was shut. The neighbouring house belonged to Amparo, a seamstress. I sheltered from the rain under her porch. A wooden shuttered window at the front was open. "Hi Amparo?"

"Hi Maeve.You back? Chose a bad day for it, my dear. You'll be stuck here for days if it keeps raining like this."

"Good excuse for a rest. Seen Carolina?"

"They closed the school because too many children stayed away. Hardly surprising. I guess their mothers wanted them safe at home. Try her house."

I did and found Carolina making cheese at the back of her house in a big green plastic tub. All the chickens were huddled at one end of the back porch. An enormous sow and her litter snuffled about in the sandy back yard. The lake beyond was indistinguishable from the grey sheet of rain drawn down on it.

Carolina's children, Marlon and Maria Luisa sat at a low table doing homework. Maria Luisa stood to greet me and then went over to the edge of the porch where the rain cascaded down off the roof. She pulled up one leg of her baggy trousers, pinched her vulva together and urinated with great elegance into the flooded rain channel. Then she went back to her books beside Marlon who never even looked up.

"Juicha, how many times have I told you about that?"

"Come on Señora, you want me to go out to the latrine in this lot?"

That odd combination of formal respect and plain speaking was something I still found hard to get used to. I liked it.

I said to Carolina, "Neat trick. Can you get her to show me some time?"

"Maeve, don't encourage her. Forgive me if I don't greet you, I have to get this cheese done tonight."

She leaned towards me for a token embrace, keeping her arms submerged in the whey.

"Am I ok to stay tonight, Carolina?"

"As if you need to ask….. Of course you are. But I think you've come on a wasted trip, you know. You'll have a job doing anything at all if this keeps up. The radio was saying earlier the whole region's affected from Guatemala right down to southern Nicaragua and we'll be like this for a couple of days."

"What are they saying about the election? Anything?"

"No idea. We're saving the batteries for the flashlight."

"I'll go get some more. Need anything else?"

"Coffee and sugar."

"OK. See you."

Like so many women in Morazán Carolina ran the house alone, surviving on her salary of eighty dollars a month. The other teachers earned fifty a month. Carolina's husband worked in Costa Rica. He sent her a hundred dollars a month and wrote to her every week. They were evangelical Christians, but easygoing in their faith. I hardly noticed it during my stays with them.

Carolina and her family lived very well in Walilika, managing to save steadily. Their only expenses were food and clothing. They got eggs from their chickens. Carolina's brother brought them milk from the cooperative he worked for. Every so often they sold a young pig. The ones they reared they slaughtered periodically to sell the meat. From the milk her brother shared with her, Carolina made cheese, which she sold in the town.

Her day started at four thirty. But she was always in bed by eight. She used to say, "Sometimes I dread the day electricity arrives here. It'll just mean more hours to work. Be nice to have a fridge though, and television."

She and her husband were looking forward to buying some land and a few cows. In return for staying with them, I gave Carolina English classes. She had plans to study English at the regional university in Xiguasi and graduate so as to teach at secondary level.

The nearest general store by Carolina's house was run by Don Perfecto Sanchez. Perfecto was an ancient fellow whose youngest daughter Julia was just sixteen. Her mother was hardly thirty. Perfecto was rumoured to have over twenty children, some allegedly in their sixties. His current wife was his fifth.

But he was a quiet, kind man. People came to him with their troubles before they'd go to the local priest. He had a reputation as a healer and his mind and senses were as alert as anyone's. Perfecto also maintained the local diesel pump that lifted drinking water up from Walilika's main well to the village water tank.

"You come in Roberto's bus?"

"Yes. Got in about half an hour ago."

"He go on to Bikuka?"

"I think so."

"Wish he hadn't. Worst rains I've ever seen. He's a good driver ok, but in weather like this it doesn't matter how good you are. Wish he'd waited it out. What was it again, batteries?"

"Yes. A bag of coffee and five pounds of sugar."

In the gloomy shop, he reached up to the unpainted shelves, got the coffee and sugar and placed them precisely on the counter, beside the jars of boiled sweets, coconut fudge and home made toffee. He looked at me with his impassive face, white bristles visible on his unshaven jowls and double-chin. In his slightly rasping voice, he said, "No batteries. Sold out. At least. Got four of those fancy priced ones no one here ever buys. Want 'em?"

"How much?"

"Fifty pesos the four."

"What are they made of? Gold?"

He sighed gently and raised his eyebrows. "Gold or not, they're fifty pesos."

"Take a cheque?"

"Don't wind me up, *gatita*. Forty two and that's it. I guess I'll never sell them if you don't buy them. Been up on that shelf for nearly a year. But you can't ask me to lose money, please."

"Thanks, Don Perfecto" and as I gave him the money and he gave me my change I leaned over the counter, kissing him sweetly on his cheek. "*Gatita loca*. Get away with you," he said, quietly, going red and chuckling.

His wife called out from inside where she sat doing crochet work in the late afternoon gloom. A square of light from the rainy day silhouetted her head in the window. "Hey Perfecto, got your eye on number six already?" Only half ironic.

I found myself splashing up the middle of the street with no sign of a let up in the rain. Back at Carolina's a couple of people in yellow ponchos were talking to her by the round white clay stove she had lit, warming it up so as to bake some bread.

I recognised one of the two as the mayor. The other turned out to be Consuelo, the nurse who ran the health centre.

"Get them?" asked Carolina.

"Yes. They were the last Perfecto had"

"Juicha!… Juicha, bring out the radio!"

The mayor had been going round the village trying to find someone with a radio. Everyone else's batteries had gone flat apparently, or else, like Carolina, they didn't want to use them up when they might need them for their torches. We stuffed Perfecto's batteries into the radio.

"What station?" Carolina asked.

"Try Radio Morazán. Maybe the government or the army is making announcements." The mayor, Hilario, was a Conservative, but people said only because no Liberals would ever get elected in Walilika. So local Liberals who wanted to get ahead politically joined the Conservative party and got elected that way.

Hilario was a relaxed man, in his thirties. He worked as a freelance chainsaw operator cutting timber in the local forests. As the mayor he was also responsible for liaison with the Natural Resources Ministry on tree felling permits.

Radio Morazán was playing music.

"What's the time?" I asked, "Maravilla has news on the half hour. Morazán's bulletins are on the hour aren't they?"

"Five twenty five. Let's try Maravilla then."

We caught the tale end of a programme on the consitutional crisis. Marcos Castaneda summing up, "… indications of perhaps the most fundamental sea-change in Morazán's political history since the 1948 crisis? Perhaps. What we can say is that the Electoral Council has declared Enrique Cabañas President elect. The outstanding recounts for the thirteen undecided seats in the National assembly will be declared on Thursday. That's all for now. Join us later tonight for all the national and international news in our news roundup at ten. After the break, Delia Moreno with the five thirty news bulletin….."

"Clinica Fajardo - the best in medicine for you and your family. At a price you can afford……."

While the commercials played Carolina and the nurse looked at each other, obviously wondering if they could decently celebrate the news without embarrassing the mayor. He grinned at them, "Hey, you think I wanted that bastard Largaespada to win? Do me a favour…"

They burst out in laughter and smiles, shaking hands with each other..

"That's one in the face for those son-of-a-bitch colonels," said Carolina.

Consuelo said, "Maybe we'll get some medicines in this health post down here at long last,"

Hilario hushed them, "Listen, listen, ….."

"The news at five thirty on Monday October second. Your newsreader is Delia Moreno. In a landmark resolution to the two-week long constitutional crisis, the Supreme Electoral Council today declared Enrique Cabañas of the Liberal Party the winner of the September 16th Presidential election. In the equally highly contentious National Assembly elections, Supreme Electoral Council President Manuel Gonzales announced today that the final result of the thirteen outstanding recounts will be given on Thursday. All parties have accepted the Electoral Council's decision. A statement from Dr Teofilo Largaespada called for his supporters to show calm and maturity despite the disappointing result for his Conservative Party. Winning candidate Enrique Cabañas hailed the announcement as a coming of age for Morazán and promised to be a President of reconciliation. Both candidates called for everyone to join together to overcome the developing natural disaster presented by Hurricane Maureen. Enrique Cabañas has called on the government to activate the National Emergency Plan. General Benavides, Chief of Staff of the Army High Command has ordered all Civil Defence volunteers to report to their local offices. The army is on stand-by throughout the country. Currently, rains continue to fall throughout the national territory with further heavy rains forecast through tomorrow Tuesday easing off through Wednesday. The main force of the hurricane, with winds of over 110 kilometres per hour, is

moving through the northern isthmus. Thousands of people have been evacuated from the low-lying Chanillas area of La Bahia. All communities near rivers are being urged to arrange emergency shelter in schools or churches for possible evacuees. The National Geological and Meteorological Centre also urges communities located on hillsides to be aware of the danger of landslides. Maravilla will broadcast situation reports every hour for the duration of this emergency. We will broadcast contact messages as a social service during these broadcasts. The number to phone is: La Bahía double three zero double zero. Other news will be broadcast in our later news bulletins." After the break, join Linda Duarte for our Monday look at news from the departments, tonight, La Virgen….."

Hilario said, "Let's switch it off to save the batteries. We can try Morazán at six. Let's get the council together at the school and agree what we ought to be doing. Consuelo, will you go and call Danilo and Jorge and Jaime? I'll go and look for the others. Can you open up the school Carolina? It'd help if we could have the radio over there to keep up with what's going on." He and Consuelo left and Carolina shouted as she pulled on her cape "Juicha! …Keep an eye on this oven! I'm not here now!….." Maria Luisa emerged from behind a curtain in the interior and out into the rear porch. Carolina continued, "Marlon can get more firewood in from the shed. Keep that oven hot, now, and make the dough. I'll be back in an hour or so. I'm in the school."

It was almost dark. I went with her over to the school. She opened the gate and the office, fetched out a Coleman lamp and pumped it before carefully lighting it. It's bright white light illuminated the whole room. She set the radio on the desk. We tuned it in to Radio Morazán, switching it off until six.

Hilario arrived quickly with a couple of other men in stetsons, men from the cattle cooperative. Consuelo came slightly later with Cristina, who ran the pre-school, and a man I didn't know called David. By then it was dark. Insects buzzed around the lamp. Consuelo asked after Jaime.

Hilario replied, "Jaime's gone with Lourdes to Bikuka. She wanted to stay with her mother there before going in to Xiguasí at the weekend. She's due in a couple of weeks and has to have a caesarean. No sign of Mauricio?"

"No, his wife said he was in Xiguasí, selling a couple of bull calves."

"It's nearly six. Let's see what Radio Morazán's saying."

"…..Radio Morazán. The Voice of Morazán. The news at six. With Ricardo Arguello, …. Following turbulent scenes today at the Supreme Electoral Council's chambers in central La Bahía, Dr Manuel Gonzalez, President of the Supreme Electoral Council announced that, for technical reasons, Dr Teofilo Largaespada failed to win the Presidential Elections held on September 16th. Dr. Largaespada has appealed for calm and assured the people of Morazán that despite this unprecedented electoral anomaly, the Conservative party of Morazán will undoubtedly form the majority party in the National Assembly and, as President of the Assembly, he will lead the country from the legislature. In his statesmanlike acknowledgement of the decision of the Supreme Electoral Council, Dr Largaespada congratulated his opponent, the leader of the Liberal Party. Outgoing President of the Republic Dr. Noel Ramirez congratulated the Supreme Electoral Council for having discharged their duty courageously and impartially. Dr. Gonzalez assured the nation that outstanding National Assembly

election results will be finally declared on Thursday, October 5th. Dr Ramirez met today with United States Ambassador Blackbridge and in a joint press conference hailed today's declaration by the Supreme Electoral Council as a sign of the maturity of the democratic process in the free countries of the Isthmus. Dr Ramirez called for a sprit of national reconciliation and will meet Señor Largaespada and General Hector Benavides later this week for talks on the transitional period before the inauguration of the new legislature in 1990.

"Other developments through the day focused on the heavy rains provoked by Hurricane Maureen. Dr. Noel Ramirez, President of the Republic, has called for calm. General Benavides, head of the armed forces, has ordered all Civil Defence volunteers to stand ready. Preventive evacuations have been carried out in some areas, principally in the north-western barrios of the capital. Dr. Ramirez rejected calls by the leader of the Liberal Party to declare a State of Emergency. Dr. Ramirez described the proposal as "unnecessarily alarmist". The main brunt of Hurricane Maureen is in the north of the isthmus, away from Morazán. Rains should begin to ease from tomorrow. People should remain calm and avoid unnecessary journeys.

Sport now, La Bahía born quarterback Edmundo Gomez played a sensational role in his team's victory yesterday over the Baltimore Ravens in New York……"

Hilario switched it off. "We could do with our president playing a sensational role down here, I reckon."

Danilo, a tall, thin man, head of one of the cooperatives tipped his hat back from his brow and remarked, "Well I don't know what you others think, but I think we should be bringing people in from the other side of the river while we still can and get them in the school for the night. I don't remember rain like this since 1974 and we lost seven people then washed out into the lake. I don't want another day like that. I'll get some of the men with horses and we'll go fetch 'em in. Agreed?"

They all said, "Yeah."

"Do it then, Danilo," Hilario said, "I'll come with you in case anyone refuses to cooperate. Jorge, you mind helping Carolina get the classrooms ready? You gatita, you gonna help Carolina?"

"Of course I will."

"That's good. Consuelo you and David collect blankets from people in the town OK? Cristina can you get some women working in the children's comedor and get some coffee going and tortillas? We'll probably have about fifty people to take in from across the river. And there'll be more, if people start coming in from round the shore and down from the hills in the night."

The rain got heavier as we opened up the classrooms. I helped Jorge and Carolina clear the chairs, the characteristic Central American schoolroom chairs with wide writing arms on one side. The school building had three classrooms connected by a long porch that ran the length of the building. We stacked the chairs at the far end of the porch, leaving some in each classroom along one wall so as to make space for people to sleep.

Each classroom held about thirty students each. Across from the primary school was the pre-school, which had space for about sixty children. The latrines were set apart, over by the fence away from the classroom buildings. Carolina said, "Maeve can you go call Marlon to help us?"

I left and found myself wading down the street with water well over my ankles. I thanked God it was flowing away down to the lake. Marlon came immediately, Maria Luisa, kneading dough, said, "Hurry back one of you, I don't like being here alone."

The first people began arriving around seven thirty. Consuelo and Carolina had collected towels as well as blankets and were able to dry off the children. Some of the women went over to the kitchen in the pre-school comedor where Cristina had boiled up water for coffee and was busy turning out tortillas. I helped one of the women from across the river carry over a big pan of coffee to the school.

"What's the river like now? Can you still cross the causeway?"

"When we crossed you could still wade through with the horses to hold on to. The water was up to our chests and the flow was real strong. The houses in our hamlet are all under water, up to the windows. We'd got our animals out to higher ground earlier but we had to leave them when we decided to come over here. I pray they'll be all right. They're all we have."

They had grabbed what they could carry. Soaked through, she wore a thin cotton dress and a good woollen sweater..

Jorge and Carolina were separating the men and older boys from the women and children, putting them in separate classrooms to give the women some privacy so they could get out of wet clothes. These were sent out to the comedor and to Carolina's place and one or two other houses that had their ovens lit. They may have come back full of smoke, but at least they'd be dry.

Some of the men sat staring gloomily into space and a couple of the women would occasionally burst out sobbing, the children staring about them, wondering what was happening. The smaller ones would start crying too if one of the women broke down. Other women just lay in the blankets they'd been given cuddling their children to them. A couple of young girls played games with some of the toddlers.

At one point, Carolina came in, her yellow cape, longer than she was, dragging on the floor, and said, "We need to pray. Let's go over to the pre-school and have a service so as not to disturb the kids who are sleeping."

Almost all the women got up and followed her and about half the men. She lit some candles in the pre-school. From the main classrooms I looked across to see them standing there in the half-light. Jorge led the prayers.

Hilario rode up as they began to sing. Clapping their hands in rhythmic unison. One hymn went:

"Oh Lord, you will find us Though we stray

Oh Lord, you will remind us Of our way

Oh Lord, you will forgive us So we pray

We know that He loves us every day"

It was one of the favourite evangelical hymns in rural Morazán. On other occasions, I'd heard the uninspiring lyrics and monotonous beat and thought the attraction must be the simplicity of it. Given the relentless adversity of life for most people in rural places like Walilika, the lyric was a wistful victory of faith over reality.

As Hilario dismounted and came up to me they had begun the chorus clapping in time together, "We know that He loves us, We know that He loves us, We know that He loves us every day…"

Hilario looked at me and saw the tears gather in my eyes as I watched. He put his arm around me. It felt like a steel band. "It'll be fine. You'll see." I was taller than he was. It made me feel even more foolish.

The impromptu service went on for an hour or more. Every half hour we listened to the radio bulletins. By ten o'clock even Radio Morazán had begun grudgingly to report the accumulating disaster. What vested interest the government had in pretending all was well was a mystery to everyone. The Conservatives seemed incapable of accepting the need to work together with their Liberal enemies for the common good. To save the batteries, we agreed just to listen to Maravilla every hour on the half-hour.

" …a message from Concepción Jimenez in La Sabana for her mother Elvia in Xiguasí, Concepción says she's safe and well and staying with her sister; Rodrigo Mendoza phoned in to tell his family in Gemelas, La Bahía that he's ok, Rodrigo phoned from San Luis. We're now getting so many calls we have arranged with Unitel to set up a special number for listeners concerned about relatives or anxious to let their families know they are safe. That number is La Bahia three two double zero two. Callers to the double three zero double zero number will still be put through. So you can ring either of those numbers now…..just to repeat the warning from the army and the Civil Defence coordinating office here in La Bahia - if you're thinking of travelling anywhere tonight or tomorrow. Don't. Conditions on the roads and especially at bridges and river crossings are just too dangerous now. So put your vehicle keys in your pocket and stay put, please. That's the message from the Army and the Civil Defence….News just in from Xiguasí, the bridge between Marañon and San Juan la Frontera has been closed. And we can confirm that here in La Bahía the Rio Hermoso is in flood. Transit through central La Bahía is impossible. More emergency news at eleven thirty….after the break, Caribbean music with Ana Maria Hawkins. Stay tuned with us here on Maravilla, we'll be bringing you news on the emergency through the night…"

Consuelo leaned in through the office door, and said quietly, "Hilario, Jorge, can you come for a minute please? Something's happened."

I went with Carolina to have something to eat at her house. I was looking forward to some of her delicious freshly baked bread. As we went out of the school gate and splashed into the flooded street in the rain we saw Hilario and Jorge standing in Amparo's doorway next to the school. "Let's tell Hilario to come on over and eat," said Carolina.

We found them listening to Adiac, the ayudante from Roberto's truck, covered in mud, clothed still in just his t-shirt and jeans. His shirt bloody from a gash in his shoulder and arm. He was pale, presumably from loss of blood and shock.

Hilario was asking him, "And Roberto?…"

"I don't know, Hilario. When the road gave way I just jumped clear as fast as I could. I fell bad on the rocks and was out of it for a while. When I came too I figured the best thing I could do was get help. I've really no idea who's alive and who's dead….I'm sorry."

"You did well Adiac, You did the right thing."

"Come on," said Consuelo, "Drink this coffee. Let's get you cleaned up over at the health post."

Hilario said, "Ok don't let's tell anyone what's happened yet. We don't want people upset unnecessarily. We need to get out there and see what we can do. Jorge, can we borrow your cooperative's tractor and trailer?"

"Sure, but we haven't got any diesel for it. Mauricio was going to bring thirty gallons from Xiguasí."

"Maybe Perfecto will have some. We can pay him back later."

I looked at Carolina and saw she was crying. She said, "Poor Lourdes. God have mercy on her…" I took her and went with her to the house.

Sat in Carolina's back porch, I remembered Eusebia's sandalwood scent, the smoothness of her skin. I had the sensation of her scent mingling with the smoke there from the oven.

Carolina pulled herself together quickly, "Consuelo will be needing help. Maria Luisa. Marlon. stay in the house and keep that fire going. Where's the pig?"

"We put her in the back room with the tools and the saddles, there was nowhere else dry."

By then the back porch was awash. The chickens were all asleep on top of an old cupboard laid on its side under the porch roof. Earlier, Marlon had tried to dig a channel to take the water away and down to the lake shore. He seemed have had some success. Maria Luisa swept water from the porch out into the patio. Carolina said, "Good. I'll be back in a while. We have to go and help Roberto. His truck's broken down."

We found the tractor parked outside Perfecto's place. A gang of maybe a dozen men already sat aboard the trailer, looking sinister in their capes and ponchos. Rain running off the stetsons of the men who wore them. My waterproof kept water off my upper body, but my trouser legs were wet through. I was glad I had a pair of good boots, but wished I had a cape like Carolina's.

The men loaded up a five gallon container of diesel. "OK. We'll go by David's and pick up his chains and wire rope. Can you tell Consuelo we'll be over in ten minutes to pick her up? Are you coming Carolina? We'll need first aiders."

"Of course I'm coming. See you at the health post. Where's Hilario and Jorge and Danilo?"

"They've gone ahead on horseback."

We tramped through the floodwater in the dark, past the church and across the park towards the dim glow of candlelight in the small healthpost. Consuelo was packing an old brown suitcase with bandages, alcohol and painkillers and a bottle of aguardiente. The room was spotlessly clean. A couple of posters adorned the walls, one promoting breastfeeding, the other from an old anti-malaria campaign. The shelves were completely bare. Consuelo's entire resources packed into one small case.

We heard the tractor draw up outside. We needed the men to help us up. They sat us down on the ropes at the front of the trailer behind the tractor. The tractor's headlights shone out into the steadily falling rain attracting crazy moths out of the surrounding dark, the night-green forest on either side, alive with singing frogs and toads, even above the noise of the tractor, a steady, hardworking, oddly reassuring chug-chug chug-chug. Everyone was silent. Sitting their doing nothing, I began to feel cold; enduring, like the rest.

The road out of Walilika for Bikuka runs up into hills that border the lake, some thirty or forty feet above the lakeshore. Streams run down to the lake at many points, either crossing the road over wide flat concrete channels, or running underneath, through culverts under the highway. The slopes above the road are well forested, with rocky outcrops in several places where decades of rain and wind have washed and blown the covering soil away.

Someone asked, "How far is it?"

"Adiac said they hadn't reached Zapote. Can't be far now."

We came up and passed Hilario and Danilo and a couple of others on their horses.

Still we bumped and trundled into the night, the unceasing rain making us feel colder and colder. Carolina and Consuelo and myself huddled together and managed to warm up a bit. The men standing resolutely upright, balancing against each other as the trailer bumped over the lumpy road. Water drained to the front of the trailer as we descended slopes, and sloshed away out the back, as we went up the other side.

"Jesus. This must be it for sure." I looked round and saw in the headlights a long hole ahead on a curve where the road had been. Trees had fallen into it from above. Someone cried, "My God….. the truck must be down in the lake!" Someone else cried. "Hey! There's someone!…."

A figure covered in mud-soaked clothes came into the headlights and waved down the driver as we drew near the damage in the road. The men jumped down and gathered around him. It was Jaime.

Someone gave him coffee from a thermos. He was stiff and trembling with the cold. The rain washed mud from his hair down his face as he drank the coffee. He grimaced and held his side. People shone lights around him as he talked.

"I knew you'd come…" he said. The truck's down in the lake. On it's back. Some of us are ok. Lourdes is ok, she's complaining of pains. It got dark before we could find everyone. Most of them are injured.

Roberto must be dead, drowned in the cab. He didn't have a chance. Adiac jumped clear. Have you seen him?"

"He made it back nearly two hours ago. He said when the road gave way, the truck went over backwards down the slope. It's a miracle you're alive. Where are the others?"

"We're down under shelter just by here, there's an old house down there." He gestured to a gap in the trees. He was holding his side again, obviously in pain. He had a bad bruise below his right temple. Someone had brought a Coleman lamp and got down under the trailer to light it.

"You going to be OK, Jaime?"

"Yeah, my ribs don't feel too good. Lourdes is in worse shape than me. The others too."

Jorge kept the tractor engine running, I went to look where the road had fallen away. Something like thirty feet of the road had just dropped away into the lake, leaving a third of the width of it intact, enough for people on horseback to cross. The trees and bush on the slope above the road had just slipped down the hillside. A steady slurry of mud slithered and trickled into the gap in the rain.

Down the track Jaime had indicated, we found the survivors sitting and lying inside an old abandoned house. Half the roof was missing. The other half, of old red fired-clay pantiles, despite several holes and drips, provided some cover from the rain. Consuelo and Carolina went around in the lamplight.

They found one older woman had died. The others thought she had been asleep. She was so small, her wizened face unexpectedly childlike, the mouth slightly open. Consuelo covered her face with the wet headscarf from the woman's head. In fact Jaime and a young lad from past Zapote, the next small hamlet some way further along the road, were the only two able to walk unaided. They had all fallen out onto the rocks before the truck landed in the water.

I went with some of the men to the lake to see if we could find the truck, maybe partly hoping too that we might find other survivors. The flashlights showed us the truck lay on its back, the front wheels and the front part of the chassis entirely above the water. The bottom half of the rear wheels were just visible. Anyone still in the truck would have been either crushed or drowned.

Many of the men crossed themselves. "God have mercy on them."

"Amen"

"Amen"

We had nothing. No resources worth the name. This was no post-graduate semester escape, but life as grim as it could get. We spread out, wading along the flooded shore, shining lights up into the tree line in case someone might have made it up there to safety.

Suddenly, I tripped, fell face first into the water. Someone, it was Danilo, grabbed me and lifted me up by my collar, as if by crane.

"Thanks", I gasped.

He shone the light where I had fallen. We saw the body of a child lying on her back in the water.

"Hey David. Over here, help me. *Gatita,* take the light will you?"

I did and shone it on the child. He grabbed her under the arms and David came along taking the legs. I was in shock all this time, working automatically.

I saw the tears streaming down David's face in utter silence. They made it up into the trees and there laid the lifeless body down. David fell against Danilo's chest. The tall, thin man holding him for a while before taking him away back up to the house.

Hilario came down and took us all back into the water again. "Let's keep looking. We'll have to come back in daylight to be able to get the bodies from the truck. Let's recover what we can for now and head back with the survivors. We can't do anything for the others now."

A couple of men had gone up into the tree line, where they thought they had seen something. Jorge was near me. "Who was the child?" I asked, shivering.

"Albita Ubeda, David's niece. This is a bad day for us. A very bad day."

One of the guys in the treeline called down, "Hey, there's someone alive up here! It's Celia, Albita's mother! She's unconscious! But she's alive!"

Hilario shouted up from the water, "Ok, don't move her! Cover her up with your cape until Consuelo gets there. Chico, you up there?"

"Yeah!"

"Go get Consuelo, will you? Lead her to where Miguel is! You stay with her, Miguel! Guide them over!"

We scanned the water for a few more minutes but found no one else and headed back to the house. I was really cold by then. We all were. The rain kept coming. There was nothing else we could do down there in the lake.

Carolina gave me coffee from a thermos. I said, "Carola, can I try some of that *guaro,* please?" She brought me the bottle, I poured a good cupful into the thermos top and took it down in one.

"This is unbearable," I said.

"God is great, Maeve…."

Her way of shutting out the excess reality we were all in just then. My way, the *aguardiente,* warmed me up.

Hilario came into the house and said, "We'll have to try and get everyone up to the trailer."

Carolina said. "Lourdes is bleeding. Not badly but Consuelo says we need to get her to hospital as soon as we can."

"How can we do that? The nearest hospital's in Xiguasí. We can't even get her to the health centre in Bikuka the way the road is."

"I don't know Hilario. We need to get her to a hospital."

"Let's get the others up to the trailer and see what Consuelo has to say."

It took us nearly an hour to help everyone up to the trailer. We laid the two bodies to one side and covered them with capes from a couple of the men. Consuelo came back with Miguel and Chico carrying Celia on a makeshift stretcher.

Jorge asked, "Will she live?"

"Perhaps. Who knows what internal injuries she has. She's breathing more or less ok. The sooner we get her back to Walilika the better. What's really got me worried is Lourdes. We have to get her to hospital somehow."

The lad from Zapote who had stayed with us said, "Don Aloysio has a van with four wheel drive."

Hilario looked at him. "Aloysio? That van hasn't left his shed for years."

"Excuse me, Sir. Don Aloysio took my father to Bikuka in it just a few months ago when my dad had appendicitis."

"Well, I don't know….. I guess it's better than her staying here and we can't do anything for her back in Walilika. Danilo, you know Aloysio's place don't you?"

"Sure. It's the track before Zapote up along the creek there, as if you were heading straight for the frontier." "That's it. Can't be more than half an hour's ride from here. Want to go?"

"Of course. Can I take Miguel with me?"

"Good idea. Jorge, you going to take tractor back? The only people that need to stay are me and one of the women to take care of Lourdes."

Carolina said, "I have to go back Hilario, I can't leave the children alone and I'm responsible for the school."

"Me too", said Consuelo. "Who's going to look after these people once we get them back? Celia's mother's going to need real close attention if we're going to pull her through."

Hilario looked at me. They all did.

"Well, *gatita*…?"

"I'll stay. Can you tell me what to do?"

Consuelo explained to me I just needed to change the towels to try and control the bleeding and to keep Lourdes as still as possible. Lourdes herself knew what she needed. Although she was in pain she seemed lucid. "She'll need to drink as much as possible. Here's what's left of the coffee. Try and top it up with warm water when you get to the next village. These are the last of ibuprofen. They're 200

milligrams each, so give her 3 every six hours or whenever she has real pain. Don't give her more than 12 in the next twenty four hours unless she's in absolute agony. OK?"

"OK."

"God bless you Maeve."

I found myself thinking of Eusebia, of Yemaya, keeper of the seas and of childbirth, of Oshun, keeper of sweet waters, orisha of sensual love. Whatever was going to happen, I wanted to be able to look Eusebia in the eye. That stopped me curling up into a ball and waiting for it all to go away. I closed my eyes and felt myself kissing her beautiful lips again, feeling her tongue inside me.

Consuelo said, "You OK?"

I came to and said, "God bless you too, Consuelo. Good luck."

Jaime tried to bend down to kiss Lourdes good bye, but it was beyond him. They touched hands briefly and parted. Hilario said, "God is great, Jaime. You know we'll do everything we can." Jaime, looked at us kindly and left, saying nothing.

Hilario and I sat there with Lourdes. We heard the tractor reversing back along the track to a point where it could turn safely with the trailer. Then the diminishing chug-chug chug-chug, as it headed back to Walilika.

Chico and Miguel had left us the stretcher they had made to carry Celia. Hilario passed the time improving it with saplings from the woodland outside. Lourdes' head was aching, I gave her some ibuprofen. After a bit, she relaxed, fell asleep.

"Hilario, any idea what time it might be?"

"No, *gatita*…. I'm just praying the rain stops." But it didn't stop. It seemed to get heavier as the night wore on.

We were all dozing when Danilo came back. "Hey, Hilario, you ok?"

"Hi, Danilo, yeah, any luck?"

"Well, Aloysio's here with the van. Seems to be working ok. It's one of those Russian vans José Diaz was selling a few year's back, remember?"

"Does the four wheel drive work?"

"Sure does and the auxiliary gear box. Lights aren't great but the fuel's direct, he's got it rigged up from a jerry can in the cab."

"Terrific. What's the road like?"

"From here to Zapote's ok. Beyond, who knows. The big question is whether the bridge at Jocote Renco will be up."

"Let's get Lourdes up there then and see what Aloysio thinks. Is he sober?"

"Seems to be. You never know with him. The man's a sponge. I've never seen him under the table though. Have you?"

"No, come to think of it. He's got a reputation though, hasn't he?"

"Hey, Hilario, you've got a reputation with the women. Don't you wish it was true?"

"Come on, let's get going."

I added it up: setting off in flood conditions; in a vehicle that's been in a shed for years; with a critically ill woman and the driver with a reputation for drink. God had better be great.

We carefully manoeuvred Lourdes onto the stretcher and the two men carried her up the track through the trees onto the road. At the top the horses stood, faithful and patient in the rain. Miguel, watched anxiously, shivering from having to stand still.

I led the way with a flashlight. Hilario carried a flashlight too. We crossed over through the slurry, still streaming down the slope, past the damaged stretch of road to the other side, where the van, with just one headlight, waited.

Aloysio was a small stocky man. I could hardly make him out really. He had turned the van around so the back was towards us. He opened it up for Danilo and Hilario to get Lourdes in.

With some foresight, he and Danilo had rigged a cot along one side of the van with a mattress doubled over on top of a bench that ran the length of the back. They laid Lourdes on that and tied up ropes to the roof of the van so she wouldn't roll out. We covered her in a blanket. She said, "This is better than my bed at home…"

It was great to be in out of the rain. Aloysio had brought some dry clothes. Drunk or not, his mind was on the ball. Hilario shook my hand, mine felt like wax in his great big fingers.

"Thanks for this. Danilo will go with you, I'm going back with Miguel "

They shut the back doors on us.

Danilo stood at the passenger side and Aloysio at the driver's side.

I asked, "Can I change into some of these clothes?"

"That's what they're for. I'm Aloysio. You're must be the Irishwoman the people in Walalika talk about."

He had a funny accent. I couldn't put my finger on it. I wondered why they weren't getting in.

They started pushing. The vehicle got rolling and Aloysio jumped in, did something all at once with his feet and the gears and the key in the ignition and the engine jumped into life. Danilo climbed in and we were away.

However far we got, I was determined to be grateful for a spell out of the rain and the chance to get into dry clothes. I changed my slacks and top, then checked on Lourdes. She was still bleeding slightly. I changed the towel for her, trying not to stick my elbow into her huge belly.

"How's the pain?"

"Not too bad. My headache's gone. Any more coffee?"

After she had taken some I offered it to Danilo and Aloysio. Both declined. I took some myself.

We passed through the handful of houses in Zapote. In normal times Bikuka would have been another three hours drive past Zapote, although I had never travelled that route myself. The road seemed good.

A metal jerry can rigged up behind the driver's seat fed petrol into the engine, which sat high up between the driver and the front passenger. Dry and warm in the relative comfort of the van, I noticed what looked like two little plastic jars fixed to the dashboard. Wondering what they were, I fell asleep.

When I woke up we had stopped. It was dawn. I checked Lourdes. She was awake.

"You OK?"

"It really hurts Maeve. Can I have some painkillers? I gave them to her with coffee, wishing we had some water too.

The engine was running, but neither Aloysio nor Danilo were in the van, I could see nothing through the windscreeen for the rain on it. I tried the back door but there was no handle. So I pulled on my waterproof and wet boots, clambered into the front and fell out through the passenger door. The two men were standing by a low concrete culvert watching the torrent driving over it.

As I came up to them I saw to my astonishment that I was looking at the image of my Kerry grandfather. Aloysio was Irish, or else Irish American. "Conas atá tu?" I tried on him.

He looked surprised and then in English, "Sure, I'm grand" then into Spanish, "Whether good or ill befalls me, I give thanks equally to God, who taught me to trust him always unreservedly…" He winked at me.

"We're at this crossing here and we reckon we need to load more weight into the Wasita to stop it from being carried off by the torrent. We've been watching the flow for a while now. It slackens from time to time. So Danilo and myself think we'll load up the back with rocks and wait for a lull in the flood before heading over."

Danilo asked, "How's Lourdes?"

"Not great, She's in some pain, I gave her the ibuprofen and that seems to work pretty fast. Want a hand to load up with rocks? I guess the Wasita is this van, right?"

"That's it. I'll bring her closer."

After explaining to Lourdes what we were doing, I worked with Danilo and Aloysio loading the back of the Wasita with rocks from the roadside. We filled the spaces beneath the benches, leaving the centre clear. Once loaded, the two men pushed the van forward again to get her started. Then we sat at the edge of the culvert waiting for the torrent to drop. Aloysio switched to the low auxiliary gears and

engaged the four wheel drive. He said, "We can't sit here waiting forever, let's give it another ten minutes".

I was curious about Aloysio, but he said nothing to me, so I respected his reserve, although it puzzled me. Maybe he had been too long in rural Morazán to have kept up conversational skills. Perhaps he was there precisely to get away from inquisitive brats like me. Maybe he was inhibited by the presence of others. Or maybe he was on the run, in hiding for some reason he didn't want people to know about; some obscure offence from decades back before I was even born. Whatever the reason, he said nothing and I wasn't about to moither him. He was so like my granda', I couldn't help but be curious.

Lourdes touched my hand. I asked, "What's up?"

She beckoned me closer so she could whisper, "I'm sorry, I've…I've made a mess."

I was bemused for a moment before I realised what she meant.

She said again, gripping my wrist, "I'm sorry, I just couldn't help it."

"Relax, you're not to worry. That's what I came with you for. You take it easy." I rolled the blanket back from under her feet and legs, and slipped her dress up. It was awkward cleaning her up in that space, but she did what she could to help even though it hurt her to take her own weight even a little. I wrapped the shit up in the towel and managed to get a dry shirt under her to keep her dry where the mattress was wet.

"Don Aloysio? Can I tear up one of these shirts? It's for Lourdes."

"That's what they're for…Sorry, got to go now…." We lurched forward with a crunch of the gears and moved slowly into the water. It covered the wheels and the van almost rolled a couple of times, if we had gone over nothing would have saved us. I sensed Danilo tense all the way. Aloysio just gazed straight ahead.

He said calmly in Spanish, "After a little while, I heard a voice say, "Look, your ship is ready" ".

The crossing took no more than a minute, the van crawling through the water. Submerged branches and debris banging against us, making me start. As we made it to the far side, Danilo crossed himself and looked round at Lourdes.

"We're doing fine Lourdes. It's going to be fine."

"Can you stop so I can get her comfortable. We need to get rid of this too, if we can."

Danilo looked at the wrapped up towel I held up. Aloysio took it, opened his door and threw it out into the side of the road.

I finished getting Lourdes comfortable. "Have we time for me to wash my hands?" I asked.

"You'd better," said Aloysio, getting out. He opened the back door.

I went to the stream and knelt to wash my hands in the muddy waters. Behind me Danilo said to Aloysio, "Another hour of this rain and we'd never have got across there. I didn't think we'd make it as

it was." I threw some water on my face and heard him answer "I give constant thanks to God who kept me faithful in my day of trial, ….."

What he was quoting from. St Paul?

Dawn was not far off. I felt better. We resumed the journey through the unending rain. I had no idea what time it was. It got lighter. By then maybe it was around six.

As we progressed I noticed Aloysio was having trouble with the gears, sometimes taking several tries before being able to get them to engage. I asked him, "Aloysio what's that lever down there by your right foot?"

"It's the winch. The Wasita has a winch at the front bolted inside into the chassis. I use it to pull out tree stumps and suchlike. These are good solid things these Soviet vehicles."

That was about as talkative as he got.

We were passing the tip of the lake, heading up into hills between the lake and the great Llano Atlántico, the Atlantic coastal plain, almost impenetrable swamp and forest as far as the ocean. We came to one part of the road where another landslide had blocked it. There was no way through.

Danilo climbed out and looked around. On one side lay the slope down to the tip of the lake: on the other, the hillside sloping steeply above us down to the road. "There's no way around."

Aloysio said, "Let's have a look at this landslide, Danilo, is it clay or gravel?"

They both went over. I watched them poke and scratch at the material in the road. Then they climbed up on it. At its lowest part by the edge of the road it was still as tall as they were. They disappeared over the other side of it and came back laughing.

Opening the back, they pulled out a shovel and a mattock. I thought they'd gone mad. They worked in the rain, hacking and shovelling. They were making a ramp up onto the landslide. Surprisingly quickly they did so. With a machete they slashed down small trees and branches off larger ones to make fascines, laying them down as tracks for the van to get a grip on.

After what must have been nearly two hours work, they came back to the van. Danilo explained to me we'd have to move the bundles of branches from the back of the van to the front in order to carry it over the landslip. They had faith in their work. I just did what they told me.

This time we pushed the van backwards. I found it light enough to get moving. Aloysio jump-started it in reverse, pulling the Wasita back to be able to get some speed up. He then drove quickly onto the makeshift wooden tracks and got the van up to the top of the ramp they had made up the landslide. Danilo and I dug the bundles of branches out of the ramp where the wheels had driven them in and carried them one by one ahead of the Wasita. The vehicle rolled easily down the other side just catching its rear as it dropped off the branches into some muddy rock beneath.

I was wet again and covered in mud. But we were on our way and by now not more than two hours from Bikuka. Lourdes had developed a temperature. The headaches had stopped but she complained

occasionally about abdomenal pains and pains in her chest, despite having had another dose of ibuprofen. Her towel was bloody. I changed it for her.

At times she seemed oblivious to anything. At other times, I could see she was enduring acute distress. But we were helpless. The next town of any size was Jocote Renco, about the same size as Walilika and about an hour from Bikuka.

We had taken a curve in the road and suddenly found ourselves sailing through deep mud, the van pitched and yawed its way through, the four wheel drive working. But the mud, thick and black, was full of large stones and rocks. We heard unwelcome bangs and grinding sounds on the underside.

We must have driven nearly fifty metres of that before we made it through. Lourdes was protected in her makeshift cot. Beyond the mud, Aloysio stopped the Wasita on a slight gradient and climbed out. He spent some time cleaning mud off the underside to check for leaks while Danilo filled the jerry can with petrol out of a drum I struggled to hand to him from the back.

Aloysio, wet, covered from head to toe in the black mud, climbed back up from under the vehicle saying, "We've lost our brakes. The rear brakeline was smashed off. Not leaking oil anywhere though."

The pungent fumes from the petrol roused Lourdes.

"Everything ok? Where are we?"

Danilo said,"About an hour from Jocote Renco. We should get you to Bikuka for the afternoon, please God."

The two jump started the Wasita again. We seemed to be going fine. At the beginning of inclines Aloysio changed down into the lowest gear and let the engine brake our speed, just like the buses did descending from San Luis.

The rain came down harder again. Danilo said, "Let's pray the bridge is ok at Jocote Renco."

I asked, "Aren't there any communities between here and Jocote Renco. Can't we switch Lourdes to a truck or bus further along the road?"

"There are only hamlets between here and the river at Jocote Renco. And Jocote is the far side of the river. The only truck on this route between Walilika and Jocote Renco was Roberto's."

We were just climbing to the top of one of the longer inclines and Aloysio had to change down a gear to first. He missed it.

"Oh no, " He said.

He tried again. It wouldn't go in. In a second the van began rolling backwards. No brakes. No handbrake.

Danilo looked back at me and at Aloysio and then back again, we both watched the bottom of the road coming towards us faster and faster. To one side was a steep drop and on the other the hillside above us.

I looked at Aloysio. His eyes were fixed on the wing mirror, him saying gently in that lovely Kerry accent I remembered so from my grandparents, "What return can I make to Him for all the goodness He has shown me?…"

As he prayed, he kept the van as straight as he could, though we veered sharply from side to side. We must have been going at over twenty miles an hour, backwards. We had surely to turn over and head down that drop.

But Aloysio kept us straight, hurtling backwards down that lethal slope and we ran at the higher side of the road into a mess of slurry and mud at the bottom of the slope above us, as if we had run into bed of sand. We hit something hidden underneath that threw the van up underneath me so I fell over Lourdes and banged my head hard. We stopped. And we were ok.

Aloysio leaned forward to rest his head on the steering wheel for a minute, continuing to talk to himself in Latin and English, "propter promissa caelorum, quia iactavi me ipsum in manus Dei omnipotentis…. on account of his promises I cast myself into the hands of almighty God …"

He recovered and looked around, smiling at us. With his muddy face, he looked like an overgrown silver-haired urchin. "Better see what the damage is."

He and Danilo got out. Lourdes looked up at me. "Are we all right? Is the car damaged?"

"I don't know. They're checking it out now."

They opened the back and pulled out the toolbox. I climbed down to have a look. The rear of the van was thrown up to one side. The front seemed to have collapsed. The wheel splayed at an angle outwards from the axle. We looked banjaxed to me.

Danilo said, "We were lucky. Some bolts sheared on a flange fixing the wheel to the axle. We just need to jack it up and rebolt the flange."

"Have you got any bolts?"

"We'll steal 'em from other parts of the van. Should be enough to get us to Jocote Renco anyway."

They worked for forty minutes or so. I prayed our luck would hold. I felt hungry. We had nothing to eat. They finished their work. Again we loaded up. This time Aloysio put it into the lowest gear at the bottom of the incline and we made it up to the top without difficulty.

Further on, as we drove through one small hamlet a couple of men at the roadside waved us down. Aloysio slowed to a stop, winding his window down. They leaned in. They knew him.

"Good day, Don Aloysio. Have you seen anything of Roberto Masis? His truck was due through here last night but it didn't show. My sister was supposed to come on it. Are they still in Walilika?"

Aloysio switched the engine off. He and Danilo got out. I could hear them talking a bit away from the van and then silence. And then a burst of cries and sobbing from one of the men. People came out from

the other houses. I'd been so focused on the journey I'd screened the horror of the night before from my thoughts. It threatened to engulf me, until I saw Lourdes, sweating with fever.

I jumped out, anxious to get liquids for her. People were quizzing Danilo. Aloysio sat to one side, staring at the road. A large, fat, grey haired woman holding a plastic sheet over her head against the rain, took my hand. "Are you all right? Were you in that terrible accident too?"

"Me? No. I just helped with the rescue. Can you help us please? We have someone really sick in the van. We need to get her to the health centre in Bikuka but she needs plenty to drink. Do you have water? Some kind of tea would be good too with plenty of sugar."

A couple of other women came over. One of them was a cousin of Lourdes' husband Jaime and went over to the Wasita, climbing inside to talk to Lourdes. I found myself alone and joined Aloysio at the side of the road, we were so wet and worn out, the rain made no difference any more.

"It's a terrible blow for them"

"It is so," he replied.

"You know them all, don't you?" I said, looking at his silver hair and his pale, weathered, muddy face. He had the kind of complexion that never tans in the sun.

He quoted from somewhere, "I don't know what more to say or speak about those departed children, that the sword cut down all too harshly…. How's the woman?"

"Bearing it. But we need to get her to someone who can take proper care of her fast."

"Yes….. Excuse me."

He got up and went to the back of the van, took some wrenches and a hammer and wriggled in underneath between the wheels. After some minutes banging and grunting, he reappeared with two lengths of bent up fractured brake line. One of the men from the hamlet asked, "Need a hand?"

"Got any beer?"

"Beer?"

"Yeah, you know, beer. Rubia, Tigre, Real, Heineken. National or foreign. Doesn't matter."

"Maybe Doña Anna does. Shall I ask her?"

"Please. I really need it."

The man went off, not entirely sure of the legitimacy of the request. Aloysio knelt down by a stone and beat the brakeline, then bending it to and fro' until it snapped. Then he doubled it over and gently beat the end of it flat before crawling back under the van. The man reappeared with a bottle of beer, standing patiently, waiting.

Eventually, Aloysio came back up and began fiddling with the jars on the dashboard that I'd wondered about when we first set out from the accident back on the lake.

"Don't you want the beer?" the man asked him.

"I do now. Hey Danilo. Can you help me with this?"

He began pouring the beer into one of the little jars. He really was crazy, I thought. Danilo seemed to think it all perfectly rational.

When Aloysio disappeared again back underneath the van, I asked Danilo, "What's going on?"

"We lost brake line to two of the wheels, but we can seal them. The beer will do for brake fluid just to see us to Jocote. We just have to bleed the line and make sure it's sealed."

Aloysio cried from beneath the van, "Pump!"

Danilo pumped away on the brake pedal with his foot. I left them to it.

The grey haired woman shouted to us to come over. I fetched the thermos from the Wasita and followed her over to her house. Lourdes' cousin came out from it carrying a cup of something hot. It was chicken soup. She took it over to the van

Doña Ana said, "Here, this thermos of broth will do her more good than coffee. There's coffee here to fill your thermos. You eaten? No? 'Course not. There's beans and cheese here. Eat. You need all your strength, this rain chills the life out of you…"

After a few minutes, Aloysio came in and sat down on a low wooden stool there in the woman's kitchen, wiping his hands on his trousers. He ate the plate of beans on his knees. "Thank you," we both said. I ate standing up. Aloysio had scraped his knuckles, the raw grazes blood red against the mud and grease on his fingers.

Danilo came in and took a plate too, the woman handing us fresh tortillas from the hotplate beside the oven. The kitchen roof and upper walls were black from years of smoke, but the oven had just been coated with immaculate white lime wash. A pair of infant boys, naked but for their food stained T-shirts, played with little plastic cars on the dirt floor.

We finished eating quickly, Aloysio gave me a gallon container to fill with water while he finished the brakes with Danilo. Doña Ana ordered a boy to fetch water for me from the communal well at the side of the road. It sat under a zinc canopy inside a wire mesh fence, a galvanised metal lift pump with a long handle. The boy pulled hard on the lever to get the water flowing. Then gave it just two or three more pulls and left it as water spurted out into the bucket he'd set beneath the spout.

With that we filled up the water containers. Aloysio was satisfied with the brakes. We were ready to move on again. Danilo gave the beer bottle back to the man, who smiled "We learn something every day…"

Danilo said to Aloysio, “Jaime's cousin's coming with us. She's a midwife."

"That's good."

The people from the hamlet stood around us as we got into the Wasita again.

Aloysio said, "Thank you Doña Ana. God bless you."

"You too, Aloysio." Several voices said, " Safe journey."

Jaime's cousin climbed up into the back beside me. She wondered at the rocks piled up beneath us. Someone shut us in then. A gang of men shoved the vehicle easily along and the engine started. We were away again.

Through the back window I watched the people waving us on our way. Surely the worst was behind us? It was good to have someone competent caring for Lourdes.

The rain continued all the way. The road went down now. We drove slowly, relieved we had some brakes. The land flattened out, abundantly thick woodland on either side. Danilo said, "Can't be far from Jocote Renco now. Wonder how the bridge is?"

It seemed impossible we could complete our journey without a puncture or some other malfunction. But we came to the bridge without mishap, nearly an hour after we had stopped, round a bend past some houses. We drove up to join some other vehicles parked at random, blocking the road.

The bridge was gone. The river looked a hundred yards wide – it may as well have been an ocean.

Aloysio looked around and said to me in English, "Doesn't look great, now." He continued in Spanish, "Lourdes? You OK?"

"I don't know. It hurts real bad sometimes."

We looked at the midwife.

She said, "Who knows? It may just be reaction to the shock of the accident and the injuries to her chest and back. Could be onset of labour. I can´t say."

"Lourdes," continued Aloysio, "We're just going to stop here for a while and wait for the river to go down. Just like we did earlier on, remember?"

"Yes."

"That's good. You relax now. Take some of that chicken broth if you can. Danilo and myself will go and keep an eye on the river."

They did. I clambered out over the front seats after them.

We followed the river bank. The water was flowing fast, carrying tree trunks and other flotsam. It started at the lake and flowed some ninety kilometres more, south west into the Atlantic. We stood together in the rain watching the progress of the torrent. The remnants of the reinforced concrete bridge lying smashed into huge segments, well visible above the water. Across on the far side, we could see small knots of people standing watching too.

It seemed hopeless. We were just going to have to wait until the waters fell. The rains showed no sign of easing off. We could do nothing for Lourdes as we were. As we moved despondently back to the van, Aloysio said, "Come on, let's go see what people in the houses say."

He walked back towards the houses. There was no one with the three vehicles parked in the road. One was a Morazán army jeep with a canvas canopy, one a smart four-wheel drive Toyota all terrain jeep, the other a farmer's pick-up. The smart Toyota had no licence plate. What it did have was a car sticker, "The world is an asshole. Fuck the world."

We found the occupants in a small store in one of the houses. After reading the sticker, I was unsurprised to see three white men, obviously gringos, all in military fatigues. I dismissed them straight away, since they fitted the stereotype U.S. GI: six foot something, one hundred and eighty pounds, brains under their foreskins. I remembered that joke: why Jewish men are mostly smarter, their brains get more oxygen.

They were drinking Coca Cola while the Morazán Army soldiers sat out through the back door on the patio, eating at a couple of tables. The man who must have been the farmer sat out front of the store on a wooden bench.

The store was a typical country general store, a long room with a cement tiled floor, groceries and hardware mixed together on the shelves. Seeds and fertilisers and grains for sale sat along one wall in sacks. Horse harness and ropes hung from the roof beams.

Aloysio said "Good morning."

"Good morning" said the shopkeeper.

The white men looked at me and then at each other. It immediately felt bad.

Aloysio asked, "When did the bridge go?"

"In the night, it sounded like the end of the world. The river was even fiercer than it is now"

"Any idea what it's like downstream? What's it like down by Duck Island?"

"Don't know. No one's come in from that part so far today. Can't be much better than here, that's for sure. Though I guess it's wider there."

One of the gringos got up and came over to me, grinning. He said to me in a southern United States accent. "Hi."

"Hi."

"What you doin' here, little lady?"

"Taking someone to the health centre in Bikuka."

He smiled, "Don't think there's much chance of that today now, do you?"

"Don't know yet. We'll see."

He put his hand on my shoulder and began to say, "Well, why don't…."

I was just too tired for it, "Get off me, you…" I said, sweeping his arm off me.

His mates laughed. He turned very red.

"Well now that's not very nice, me just trying to be friendly. Why don't you and me just step out here and…."

He tried to take my arm and lead me out. By then I wasn't even thinking, fury and the adrenalin of exhaustion took hold of me. Hardly realising what I was doing, I slipped into a hold Raul had made me practise repeatedly until he'd been happy I'd got it right, practising on him. His words in my head, "Do it right and they'll have to spin. Either they spin or they break their arm." This man was easier than Raul because he was taller and I took him completely by surprise.

I side-stepped, lowered my centre of gravity, taking the man's arm with my hands placed just right, levering and turning myself just right, twisting my hips, all at once. The man span as if in a somersault with a cracking sound at his elbow. He cried out with the pain as he went and I cried out too just as Raul had taught me to, focusing all my effort into the throw.

His friends were on us fast. A punch to my kidneys made me sink to my hands and knees on the floor. Silence. I managed to roll over to look round.

Danilo was standing over me with a machete he must have grabbed from the wall display stuck gently at my assailant's throat, pushing him away from me.

The soldiers came running in from the back. One of them, an officer, shouted. "Stop that! Put that down now. What the hell's going on? Who are you people?"

Danilo said to the gringo, "You want a fight. You fight me."

But he lowered the machete and spoke to the officer without taking his eyes off the white men. "We're taking an injured woman to the health centre in Bikuka. There was an accident in Walilika last night, quite a few dead. Roberto Masis's truck fell into the lake. Most of the survivors we sent back to Walilika. But the woman we have in our vehicle needs medical help."

The shopkeeper crossed himself. "Poor Roberto. Everyone wondered what had happened when he didn't come through last night. Is he ok?"

"We're pretty sure he drowned in his cab. But we couldn't find all the bodies last night. I guess they're getting them out of the lake this morning."

The third white man said, "What they saying John?”

John said, "How the fuck should I know…?"

In perfect American English, the officer said, "Gentlemen, I think you should go now. Take your friend please."

"Hey, that bitch broke Macey's arm! You gonna let her go just like that?"

"Take your friend back to the jeep, Sir. We'll deal with this."

"You go to hell Mister!"

Behind him the officer's men raised their weapons. I heard clicking sounds and guessed it was the safeties coming off. I managed to pull myself up by the door frame. My back was really painful. I felt sick.

The officer said, "Please remember gentlemen, you are in Morazán now. This is our country and, for you, it's a very long way home to your families. Now, please, take your friend back to your jeep."

Without a word, looking fiercely at Danilo and me, the two men walked out and picked up Macey, He moaned as they lifted him. I thought to myself, "Morazán - so violent, so sweet…"

The officer looked at me. "Did you really break that guy's arm?"

I said, "It was his fault. He fell badly."

The soldiers behind the officer grinned widely, making safe their weapons.

Aloysio said to him, "I'm sorry for this trouble, Sir. We're really worried about the woman we have with us. She's pregnant and was badly hurt in the accident last night. A midwife is with her. But we've been told the hospital in Xiguasí was planning a caesarean for her. She needs to go to hospital. Is there no way across the river?"

"Not until the waters go down. Across in Jocote we're in touch with battalion up in Bikuka by radio. Here we have no communications at all. You know yourself there's no phone line past Jocote."

"What about our friends from the United States?"

"Them? They're advisers down here on a training programme. We're their escort. We've been stuck here since dawn, when we discovered the bridge down. They don't have communications either."

"Do you know Duck Island?"

"Duck Island, sure, used to fish there when I was little. You think there may be a crossing there? It's possible, I suppose. Want us to come with you and check it out? We can't do anything here."

"That would be good."

Aloysio took my arm. "You OK? That was a killer punch you took. What on earth possessed you?"

"I don't know. He just made me feel so…so dirty, just touching me like that."

"Come on, let's see if we can find the track downriver, it's only three kilometres to the island."

We went back to the jeep. The soldiers came after us. The rain seemed to have eased slightly. Aloysio explained to Lourdes and her cousin what we were doing. They agreed. Aloysio filled up the jerry can with the last of the petrol and we push started the Wasita. I watched the officer through the rear window of the van, talking into the big Toyota jeep.

The track to Duck Island was muddy but passable. We drove slowly. Lourdes still had a fever. Her cousin feared she had some infection. We just had to keep going and get her to Bikuka somehow.

The track along the river passed several houses. In parts, some had been built too low down the bank. Now they were flooded, only the top of the doors and windows showing. As we went further, the river widened even more and the flow was less fierce, as Aloysio had hoped. We came to a part where the bank sloped right down to the water. He pulled up at the top of the slope and stopped the engine.

Ahead was a long island in the middle of the river. It was too high to see the far side. The water here was flowing steadily but nothing like as fiercely as up by the bridge. Still, the water seemed deep all right.

Aloysio went down to the water, waded out in it for a while, up to his waist. He looked as though he intended to walk across the whole way. But he walked down a way, then back a bit. It came up to his chest. Finally, he came back to the water's edge and knelt. Sitting back on his ankles, his hands in his lap, his eyes closed, the rain washing the mud off him.

He was like that when the army jeep drove up and, behind it, the big Toyota. Danilo and I were leaning against the Wasita waiting for Aloysio. The officer asked, "What's up? He OK?"

"He's praying," said Danilo.

"Praying? Who is he anyway?"

"Don Aloysio, from Zapote. He's lived there ever since I was a kid. He's a healer. Some people don't care for him. He can be sharp with his tongue, right enough. He's kind of a special person round our way."

"Yeah, I heard of him. Didn't think he was still around."

I was eyeing the Toyota nervously. The officer said, "Don't worry, when I told them about the accident and what was going on they did an about turn. They're sorry about what happened."

"I'm sorry too."

"It's ok. They should have known better."

"We've got ibuprofen if they need it for their friend."

"They're ok. They've got a first aid kit."

Aloysio got up and came back to us. He took Danilo round to the back of the van where they talked for a while. They opened up the back and pulled out the tool box.

The officer said, "What you gonna do? Think you can get to the island?"

"I think so. We can't sit here with that woman the way she is."

I said nothing. If Aloysio wanted me to do anything, he'd tell me.

They worked away. Danilo got under the vehicle and dismantled the exhaust. I saw Aloysio take off the engine cover and start working there. The officer was talking to John and the others in the Toyota. John, the one who punched me, got out and came over.

"Listen, ma'am. I'm real sorry about what happened back there. Will you let me apologise? I'm not used to seeing my men fly through the air like that."

"Sure, forget it."

"You from Ireland?"

"Dublin."

"Ma'am, is that old guy serious about taking that heap of junk into the river?"

"He knows what he's doing."

"That was some bad accident in the lake, huh?"

"It was the most terrible thing……"

I couldn't keep the tears back. I just felt worn out by then and my back hurt where he'd hit me. The fatigue came in a wave and caught me at my weakest. I was cross with myself, which made it worse. "Jesus…"

John had no idea what to do. He just stood there in his fatigues, getting soaked for nothing. I was wet through anyhow. The officer came over and took out a bottle from his tunic. "Drink this…. Go on drink it." It was rum. The shot warmed me up straight away. John moved away saying, "If we can do anything, tell us, y' hear?"

Aloysio asked the officer. "Sir, would you or the gringos have any tape or wire?"

"We don't. I'll ask the others."

He came back later with a couple of rolls of duct tape. By that time Aloysio and Danilo had rigged a stump of the exhaust so it came off the engine up into the roof. Danilo said to Lourdes, "Lourdes, we're going to make a bang in the roof of the van. Don't be alarmed. OK?"

He got up on the roof with a hammer and chisel and punched a hole through into the cab over the engine. They sawed off the exhaust pipe they'd taken off the bottom of the van and ran it out through the roof. Aloysio took the battery off from under the cab and sat it on the bench opposite Lourdes. He and Danilo wired it back up.

Then they started bandaging everything electrical in the engine in tape, using rags and their own clothes to clean the grease and oil away to make the tape stick. They took off the air filter and taped a plastic container with the bottom cut off over the top of the carburettor, cutting and heating up the mouth of the bottle with a cigarette lighter and stretching it to make it fit. Finally, Aloysio took the fan belt off.

The officer said, mostly to himself, "The gringos have to see this."

He went over to the Toyota and brought John back.

Aloysio said to John, "Thanks for the tape, it may just get us across to the island. Can we put our patient in your jeep until we get to the middle? I'm assuming you want to try and get to the other side too, rather than sit here for a couple of days."

"That's true. I guess you're figuring to winch one of our vehicles to the island, if you make it, right?"

"Right"

"What happens when we get to the island?"

Aloysio gazed at him with blue-green eyes. "my brother, et ibi volo expectare promissum illus, qui utique numquam fallit, I want to wait there for the promise of He who never fails us…"

To his credit, John burst out laughing. "Hey, a 24-carat crazy Irishman!….OK . Let's wing it. Let's get the lady into our jeep. What signs will you use to effect the tow?"

"Well, I had been considering that little star up there, now, that one in the east there…."

"Hey…"

"Standard rigging signs, John."

"Let's do 'em." And they stood there waving their arms at each other and squeezing their fingers in the air. "OK", John said. He also agreed to take care of Aloysio's tool kit.

The soldiers carefully got Lourdes out of her cot, onto our makeshift stretcher, covering her in their ponchos to keep the rain off. When they carried her to the Toyota, John's men got out, Macey with his arm in a bandage. Lourdes'

cousin stayed with her.

With Lourdes out, we were able to load more rocks and stones into the Wasita to keep her from getting carried away in the relentless flow of the river. I asked Aloysio, "Do you think the front wheels will be OK without all their bolts?"

"I've a feeling it doesn't matter at this stage. We'll get as far as we're going to and that's all we can do. Will you two stay here now?"

"No", we said.

The soldiers push-started us, laughing together. Even the officer pushed, though he needn't have done. The van started as easily as ever.

Aloysio turned it round on the slope above the river and then took it down into the water in reverse. He stopped, got out and undid the winch hook. Handing it to one of the soldiers who took it over and hooked it to their jeep, ready to try hauling us out if the worst happened

Aloysio got back in and took the Wasita slowly backwards into the water, using the low range and the four wheel drive. The flow of the water made it hard to keep in a straight line. It wanted to shunt us over. Aloysio said, "Wind down the windows, or we won't be able to get out if we go over."

The first twenty or thirty metres were easy. As we entered the deeper part, the water came flooding up around the engine, but still didn't reach the sparkplugs or the distributor. It came right up to Danilo and Aloysio's knees.

I thought it impossible for us not to get stuck.

We got further and further from the bank, lurching every now and then as we rolled over a stone or the water took us. The soldiers shouted to us, pointing, but we couldn't hear them. Danilo looked out to see what they were shouting about.

"Aloysio, I think we need to take a sharp left here…"

"Very good Danilo… Danilo!"

A long tree trunk sailed past us right in front of the windscreen, its branches scraped across the glass as it went by, ripping off the wipers.

"Told you we should have turned left……"

I sat in the back, the water over my feet, watching the island get steadily closer. The water moved up over the plugs and the distributor, but stayed below the plastic protecting the carburettor. Danilo started saying the Our Father. The water was up to his and Aloysio's waist by then, Aloysio saying quietly, "Please, please Mary, Mother of God. Please…."

And then we were coming up out of it. We were coming up, out of it, and … Oh …we were out of it!

The Wasita bumped up onto the stony beach of the island, out of the water and we looked across to the river bank, the soldiers jumping and shouting and waving at us. They seemed as delighted as we were.

John drove the Toyota down to the water's edge. He and the others were fixing something on their exhaust and tying it to the spare wheel on the back door. They took the cable and wired it up to the chassis of the jeep.

Aloysio and Danilo dug holes in the gravel in front of each wheel. We found the biggest stones we could and lodged them into the holes to keep the van from moving with the winch once it was sat in the holes we had dug. Aloysio waited for John to give the sign to take up the slack, squeezing with his fingers, his arm upright.

John did it, then got in the jeep, making a circular motion in the air with his forearm out of the driver's window. The officer and a couple of his men climbed in with the two gringos. The big Toyota edged slowly into the water, as Aloysio put the winch into gear, gently increasing the revs on the engine to keep the wire tight as the jeep drove over.

"They're diesel, they'll have fewer problems than us," said Danilo, thinking out loud. "Their engine's higher than ours too and the doors are airtight."

After the first twenty metres, the Toyota entered the deeper water, but came steadily towards us, coasting through the muddy current like the conning tower of a submarine through a farmyard pond. Its rear swerved away downstream a couple of times. Despite the extra passengers, it may still have been lighter than the Wasita, and its load of rocks. So John ended up on a slightly different path than the way Aloysio had taken.

As the Toyota emerged into slightly shallower water near the island, it must have sunk into some mud, but the winch wire was tight and kept it from slipping back and down.. The Wasita wanted to pull up and out over the stones in front of its wheels, but they held, and the Toyota came on and up out of the water, crossing more quickly than the Wasita.

Aloysio pushed the winch into neutral and sat down on the stones by the water. The officer and his men got out. John looked over from the driver's seat of the jeep at Danilo and me and Aloysio, covered in mud, pale and tired as we were. The rain fell steadily. We hardly noticed it.

The officer understood what John was thinking and said it, "Come on men, these people have doen their bit. Let's see what the other stretch of river's like."

Macey came over with the other gringo. "I'm real sorry about what I did, ma'am. I was an asshole."

He seemed to mean it.

I said, "I'm sorry too. I was just… too tired…"

The other one said, "Whoever taught you that throw, sure is a real good teacher."

"Yes. He is. He's a great teacher."

"Let's go see what's happening, Macey." They left to join the others.

Aloysio got up and switched off the Wasita's engine. We climbed in so as to be out of the rain.

The officer came back after a while, saying to Aloysio, "We're lucky, the river the other side of the island is flowing more slowly, not much, but some. And it's not so far to cross. But I remember this side is muddier too. We want to send the van over, the way you did before, but we want to unwind the cable completely and leave it so it's easy to undo in case it gets stuck and we can send someone over with it to the other side where we can get another vehicle to it if we need to. Two of the gringos are swimming across already to go get help from our unit stationed in Jocote. We don't have any big trucks here but we can radio for one to come down from the battalion at Bikuka. Do you want to wait or shall we try and cross?

"How's Lourdes?"

Over at the Toyota, her cousin said, "Lourdes is running a really high temperature. A hundred and one. I took the thermometer from the gringos' first aid kit. I'm really worried."

Aloysio said, "Ok, we can't wait. Let's get to work."

The soldiers dug out the Wasita and push-started it. Aloysio ran it over the riverweeds that covered the little island to the far side, which was almost flat, the surface of compacted sand and gravel as good as any of the roads we had travelled over. He stopped the engine again at the top of the slight slope down to the river. The soldiers ran out the cable from the winch, treating everything they did like children out playing, under the vigilant eye of their officer.

It was amusing in a way. But I remembered what some other soldiers had done to Gladys Centeno and felt glad that these, at least, were on my side. My back hurt badly from the punch John had given me. I think another one would have killed me.

They fixed the wire round the winch axle so it could be easily released if necessary. Danilo and myself climbed in with Aloysio. Again the soldiers started us. We reversed back down into the river, heading for a clearing in the trees on the far side. The water didn't come up so far this time, but as we came to within about thirty feet of the shore, we bogged down.

All too quickly, the van tilted right over on Aloysio's side. Danilo threw open his door and climbed out into the water, reaching back in to me, "*gatita*, out, fast ,out! Before it goes right over, come on!" Tired as I was, I flew out of that door. Aloysio came out after us, getting a foothold on the pipe sticking out through the roof.

The flow of the river seemed suddenly faster as it quickly built up around the stationary obstacle created by the van. In seconds it took the van right over onto its side. Danilo and I were up to our waist in it, Aloysio up to his chest. Danilo went round to the front of the van and managed to unhitch the winch cable as the water raced around him. It took him over underwater, but Aloysio and I managed to grip the wire and Danilo, hauling on it and us, pulled himself upright.

We got away from the whirling eddies rushing around the van and the three of us waded onto the slope up out of the river. More than once we fell on all fours with the rapid current and the sticky going underfoot.

Now all we needed was another vehicle. On the island, the group had the jeep down at the water's edge, the wire looped again around the towing hook.

We sat and waited. finding some shelter from the rain under a particularly leafy tree. There was nothing else to be done. Just wait.

Danilo said “It'll be dark before we know it." Aloysio looked sadly at his Wasita and lay down to try and sleep stretched out on the dead leaves and twigs beneath the tree. We had nothing to cover him with. He had been right about the time. As Danilo had said, the light soon began to go - another half hour and night would be upon us. I heard something, "What's that noise?" I said.

It became clearer. Chug chug chug chug… Another tractor. It came along a track through the trees, John sitting up behind the driver with another jeep full of soldiers behind. They drove right up to us, the jeep pulling over behind us.

"Hey, that's bad luck, " said John, looking at the upended van.

"But you got the wire over. That's great."

Danilo said, "If you keep well over, up river more, the bed's firmer."

"Well, let's try it. We'll need to get them over quick now while it's still light. This tractor should get us across just fine."

He and the soldiers set about their work. Once they had the wire hitched up to the tractor's tow bar, the tractor driver took the strain and pulled away into the trees. He couldn't take a straight line. But it didn't matter. He easily pulled the Toyota across, a welcome anticlimax for all of us.

As darkness fell, the officer came over with the lieutenant from the other jeep. "We've radioed up to battalion. Trucks and heavy machinery are on their way down from Bikuka right now. One of our ambulances too. The gringos say they'll drive up the road with the woman to meet the ambulance half way and save time. We're in radio contact with the ambulance so we can tell them to keep a look out……"

Aloysio and Danilo decided to wait for the trucks from Bikuka to see if they could negotiate to get one to go back with them to Walilika. I went in a jeep that was to escort the Toyota for its rendezvous with the ambulance. The officer said he'd ask the battalion to get me back to Xiguasí. I wanted to get back to report to Eva Maria and the others. There was more chance of doing that quickly via Bikuka.

In the dark forest, by the river, I said goodbye to Danilo and Aloysio. We promised to meet again before Christmas. It felt very lonely as I left them.

Our jeep met the ambulance about twenty minutes out of Jocote Renco. An army doctor took charge of Lourdes with her cousin. There was room for me up by the driver.

Just quickly, John came up as we were driving off.

"Don't worry about your friends. We'll get them a truck to Walilika."

"Thank you John. Good luck. "You too, sis."

Sis? Better than a punch in the kidneys….

The journey to Bikuka was quick. Where the rains had caused landslides, army bulldozers were already clearing them. People in Bikuka were lucky an engineering unit was stationed with the local infantry battalion. Bikuka itself was bigger than Marañon, in sugar and cattle country. On the way in, we passed an area of rice cultivation too; drying and storage plants marked the entry on that road into the town. I asked the driver the time. Eight fifteen.

I'd been going for nearly forty hours by then and hadn't really slept since leaving La Bahía at five the previous morning. But I didn't feel sleepy. My clothes were almost dry on me after an hour or so out of the rain.

The drive into Bikuka is dominated by its its football stadium. Bikuka's goalkeeper, a big *garífuna*, originally from Porto Moro, is also the 'keeper for Morazán's national side. An icon for the youth of Morazán, Celeo Gonzales, the fans call him "SuperHule" - SuperRubber - for his incredible stretches. He has an advertising deal with the Tigre brand of national beer.

As we drove through the town, I noticed far more of the people around seemed to be from indigenous ethnic groups; short and strong like Adiac, Roberto's ayudante. The health centre was opposite the stadium, next to a park. A giant poster outside the health centre showed Celeo smiling with an elongated arm stretching around someone's back to sneak their beer from them. "Tigre…worth stretching for." It cheered me up to get back to that frivolous sign of normality.

The health centre seemed well-equipped with good staff. They took Lourdes in to the small ward they had there for emergencies. The doctor from the ambulance consulted with the duty-doctor. They said they'd get Lourdes X-rayed to see what her injuries were. Both agreed it was important not to move her any further. When we left her there with her cousin, they were waiting for an obstetrician they'd called in.

Outside, the army doctor, an officer, told me to go back to the battalion with him, "My orders are to get you cleaned up and fed and on the next transport to Marañon. We've a convoy leaving at zero four hundred hours tomorrow morning." He was not consulting me.

It was still raining heavily as we drove into the battalion, about ten minutes out on the road from Bikuka to Xiguasí. The doctor took me over to the clinic, got some rice and beans and tortillas sent over for both of us and some coffee. The duty nurse, Luisa, ate with us.

They asked me about the accident with Roberto's truck in the lake. As I tried to tell them, I found myself choking my emotions again when I described falling over that little girl in the water. The nurse comforted me, saying, "Don't worry, anybody would feel like that. It must have been horrible for all of you."

The doctor stood up and said. "Luisa, show her where to get showered up will you, give her some of the nurses gear to change into. I'll sign for it in the morning. I'm off duty now until seven hundred hours. We've some busy days in front of us if this is anything to go by." To me he said, "You rest, young lady. Luisa will wake you half an hour before the convoy leaves. I guess you won't need anything to help you sleep ….And look. Thank you for what you did."

He left. Would he have said the same if he knew I was with the WLU?

Luisa took care of me. It was wonderful to get the mud out of my hair and wash the feel of the endless rain away. I prayed that Danilo and Aloysio were being looked after so well and wondered how Carolina, Hilario, Consuelo and the others were coping. Sleep took me the minute I closed my eyes,

lying on one of the beds in the clinic, with just a sheet over me and the thin green vinyl lined mattress. It was as comfortable as any bed I ever slept in.

Luisa woke me, wiggling my foot in the dark. "It's three thirty. Better get ready. Coffee?"

"Thanks", I said, still asleep.

She brought it to me and switched on the light. I was wondering where my clothes were.

"I sent them over to be washed by the boys on fatigues. We dried them in the night in the cookhouse. But keep those if you want to."

"That's so kind of you Luisa."

"Gave me something to do in the night. Hurry now. They won't wait, you know."

It was wonderful to get into my own dry clothes. Pulling on my pants and bra, I went to wash my face. Looking at myself in the mirror. I looked no different than a few days before. How could that be?

Luisa said, "What's that great bruise on your back?"

"Oh… Something hit me on the journey."

"I noticed you rubbing your back last night. I thought you were just tired. Listen to me now. Get someone to look at that when you get to Marañon. You might have damaged your kidney…. Finish getting dressed and I'll take you over to the gate and get you up front in one of the trucks. Don't want you in the back with the boys."

She came back shortly after, with her poncho on, holding one out to me, "Want it?"

"That'd be great….", my light waterproof, torn and useless after the journey.

Outside, the trucks stood with their engines idling. Their lights illuminated the barracks square, its perimeter marked with stones painted white. Luisa took me through the rain to the second truck. I looked up as she stepped onto the footplate by the driver, "Donaldo, this is the one from Walilika, where they had the accident on Monday night. You take good care of her up here in the cab, you hear?"

"Where's she going?"

"Marañon."

"OK. Hey you, come on round and get up here, we're going."

A jeep drove past us to the head of the line of trucks and sounded its horn.

Luisa hugged me, "You see about that bruise now, you hear?"

Even as I climbed in the door, the truck pulled out. Apart from the driver the only other one in the cab was a corporal. Above the noise of the engine he quizzed me, who I was, what I was doing. I carefully left out anything to do with the WLU.

I asked him what the news was about the flooding. "Not good. Plenty dead. You know how the poorer people build their houses near rivers for the water, right? So lots of people were caught in the floods. Plus bridges down. The big bridge on the way to San Juan is out and the bridge just south of Xiguasí too. Radio says La Bahía's wrecked, the Hermoso swelled up and washed out a load of the centre. Las Chanillas is under water. It's bad. They say even the Heroes Bridge may go if the rains keep up."

"What's the forecast?"

"Supposed to ease down here later today. Funny, Dulce Nombre and Porto Moro have hardly been affected at all."

"What about this road, to Xiguasí. Is it clear?"

"Machinery's been working all night. Should be clear."

It was, after a fashion. The road from Bikuka to Xiguasí is asphalt, many parts of it were destroyed and had been made good by army machinery. We passed one spot where great pale blue and pink rocks the size of churches had fallen into the road, blocking it completely until army engineers dynamited a way through. A machine was still clearing rock rubble beside one of those stone behemoths as we drove through, the dull "Whooomph!" of an explosion behind us, once we'd passed.

At another point, a river parallel to the road had risen and washed away a strip of highway for a length of half a kilometre. It was so neatly done, as if some giant tailor had taken a pair of pinking shears to it, cutting a jagged line along the asphalt. The water boiled along beside us, still nibbling away at the ballast beneath us as we edged along what was left of the tarmac.

We reached the Xiguasí highway as it became light at about five fifteen. My half of the convoy headed down to Marañon. Another detachment was heading up to Xiguasí. The whole battalion had been mobilised into emergency repair and rescue units.

Our truck arrived on the outskirts of Marañon to find the bridge just north of the town intact, but a stretch of road beyond it washed away. The river had subsided enough for machinery to get in and repair it. Soldiers had rigged a pedestrian bridge made from two telegraph poles lashed together which they lowered into place every so often to let people across.

I said to the driver, "This is the end of the line for me".

"OK"

"Looks like you won't be waiting long. Thank you for helping me. Safe journey down to San Juan"

"You too. Watch out now."

Crowds of people stood waiting patiently at either side of the bridge. People anxious to get across to find out about relatives or to make it home after getting stranded by the floods. An air of suspended normality prevailed: no one was expected to turn up for work, no one sure where their loved ones might be exactly, no public transport.

I joined the back of the crowd on the bridge. We waited another half hour before they lowered the poles into place. I was glad of the poncho Luisa had given me because the rain never stopped, though it was lighter than it had been in the night. The soldiers let people cross from the town side first. Then it was our turn. We must have been a couple of hundred waiting there. The crossing was orderly and friendly. The soldiers helping older people who had trouble keeping their balance on the rounded poles.

I made it on to the concrete of the bridge and started walking with everyone else along the highway into Marañon. A gentle voice beside me said, "I was so worried about you. I can't believe I'm here walking beside you." I stopped and looked. Someone bumped into me from behind, "Hey!"

"Sorry," said I.

They walked on.

At first I couldn't recognise the campesino woman in front of me. She had a sheet of plastic over her head, just like Doña Ana on the way to Jocote Renco. She lifted the edge of the sheet a little and peeked up at me. It was Eusebia.

She melted into my embrace. Looking up at me from under her sheet like a naughty girl. "Shh… careful. Let's keep walking."

We did so, just two more among the crowd, anxious to move on and get out of the rain. She said, "When you jumped down from that army truck, I thought I was seeing things. There was a report on the radio of an accident in Walilika. They mentioned a foreign woman. It was so garbled, I feared the worst. Come on, let's go to a house I know here. It's this way."

I was full of questions. But she evaded me. Laughing and squeezing my hand, saying more than once, "I can't believe I found you."

We reached the petrol stations sited where the highway enters Marañon and turned off right, taking us past the hospital into one of the barrios on the edge of town. We walked for twenty minutes as if we were heading out to meet up with the road to Guajiniquil. On the way, I told her some of what had happened.

She listened keeping her eye all the time on what was going on around us.

Someone greeted her, "Hi Doña Maria. How's La Bahía?"

"I don't know. I've been stuck in Xiguasí. You ok?"

"Here we were lucky. It's the barrios by the river that got it bad."

I said, "Doña Maria?"

"A little practical joke of mine. Come on. This is it."

The house was a typical low lime-washed adobe building with an old red tiled roof, set back from the road in a dirt patio well apart from its neighbours. Guinea fowl and chickens and a pair of turkeys

picked and pecked around the bushes in the front, some yellow avispa, a small lemon tree in blossom, a bright mimosa, flowering little red and white brushes.

The house was open. A young Tolti Indian girl greeted us, her straight black hair down to her shoulders. She put her hands together and bowed slightly "Doña Maria, welcome. My mother's at work in the alcaldía."

"Hello Xochi. This our friend Maeve. She'll be visiting from time to time… is my room at the back open?"

"Yes, I was cleaning it earlier."

"We'll be in there. Could you make us some lemon fresco please?"

"Of course, Doña."

"Thank you, Xochi. Come on through Maeve."

Some stones had been thrown down to make a path around the side of the house to the back patio. A small dog was tied up at the back, in the shade of an avocado tree. It jumped up wagging its tail and barking happily at the sight of Doña Maria.

"Osito, you tied up again? Been wandering off when you shouldn't?…."

A round red brick well, covered with old zinc sheeting, stood in the corner at the back beside a smaller house, of identical construction to the main house. Thick tall cactus, grew together to the rear providing an impenetrable fence. Between the two houses stood a latrine, one of the ubiquitous concrete sinks for washing clothes with a stand pipe and an open cubicle with a black plastic sheet for a curtain, for bathing.

The main house had a lean to where the clay stove was sited for cooking under a zinc roof. By the latrine a white, orange-billed goose stood, washing itself in a small pond. It cried out as it saw us approach and go into the house.

"Hello Rosita", Eusebia called, "Miss me?" And the goose called back.

It was like any other house belonging to a working family in rural Morazán. The lot on which the two houses were built was deep, maybe 50 metres. The fence of the nearest neighbour too was probably some 30 metres off. Fruit trees, orange and avocado, a couple of mango trees and several banana chagüites secluded the house from the neighbouring lots. The common white and purple bougainvillea ran down into one corner. The place was peaceful, spacious and well-kept.

"This is gorgeous, Eusebia", I said, when we got in out of the rain into the smaller house. It had a cement tile floor, with a white covered bed and a low table between a couple of chairs. A wide blue sideboard stood against one wall by the bed, a shelf with a few books hung on the end wall.

The interior was painted with the same lime wash as the outside. A single window with a wooden shutter was open by the door. It was beautifully simple and clean. An oil portrait of a campesina Eusebia hung over the bed.

We kissed as soon as we were inside. I'd been thinking of nothing else since I saw her there at the bridge. She pulled back and put her fingers to my lips, "I know my angel. Me too. Let's wait for Xochi to bring us the fresco. Take a seat."

"Who's Doña Maria? What have you done to your hair?"

"Only plaited it tight." She took off the orange headscarf she was wearing.

"Doña Maria is the woman who owns this house. She lets it to Xochi and her mother. In return they look after the place and send on mail. Maria lives in La Bahía where her family have a business. No one knows what kind of business. She appears every few weeks, stays a day or so in the back house here and returns to La Bahía. She's kind and loves children. Through a rich Canadian friend she helps a local pre-school …. It's my escape from the metropolitan falsity of La Bahía"

"I'll have to be careful what I call you. How did you manage to get down here? The soldiers said the bridges between here and La Bahía are all down"

"Maybe, but the road out to Las Ramadas is fine. From there I took one of the freight trains down to Xiguasí last night. None of the railway bridges are down. The Transamerican engineers, back in the Thirties, built for keeps. The only bridges standing in La Bahia now are the Twin Bridges built back then. The Heroes Bridge went yesterday. This morning I left Xiguasí early. The army have a raft system ferrying people and materials across the river there. From Xiguasí I hitched. I got to the bridge there just twenty minutes or so before you did."

Xochi came in with a plastic jug full of lemon fresco and two plastic beakers..

"Thank you Xochi. We've been travelling all night. We're going to rest now. Don't let anyone call us, OK?"

"Yes Doña" and she slipped away

Eusebia closed the window, leaving the door just slightly ajar with a chair against it. She took off her sweater while I slipped out of my clothes. Bending over to make it drop off, my T-shirt fell over my shoulders, Eusebia said, "What on earth have you done to your back, Maeve, that's a huge bruise you have there…"

I told her what had happened.

"My impulsive baby. Surely it must hurt?" she asked "Only when I stretch. It's sore ok, but not bad. It looks worse than it is"

She was stroking me, gently undid my bra. Her fingers on me set me trembling. She started kissing my breasts and we fell on the bed. We were lost in each other, delirious for one other.

When we calmed down, she caressed my face, gazing at me the way I had always wanted someone to, and only my Da and Soulange had ever done; tenderly, as if I were the most precious thing in the world. "I really feared something terrible had happened to you. I just had to be with you. To know what had happened, my beautiful Irish wanderer…. Do you know what you're doing to me? You've driven me mad. On Sunday I lay awake all night. Ondina says she's never seen me like this. You know what she said?"

"Tell me Eusebia." I kissed her first on her lips. "Tell me my darling…"

She rested her head on my breasts, "Ondina said, "I am glad for you, but I fear for you too, because this kind of love can make you happy beyond every happiness but it may destroy you as well." Will you hurt me, Maeve?"

"Never. You're the most incredible person I've ever met." A surge of emotion took hold of me, I said urgently, "Look, I love you. Come here…." I rolled over onto her. My back hurt, "Aah!… Damn that John…"

Eusebia frowned and stroked my back, "We'd better get that looked at."

We passed the morning like that, talking, making erotic assaults on each other, sometimes frontal with nothing in reserve, sometimes sneaky ambushes. We laughed and played like children.

Once I found myself saying, "I don't want to go, Eusebia. I want to be with you always…"

Her eyes filled with sorrow. She just said, "my beautiful darling…."

At one point, when we were being especially enthusiastic, Eusebia stopped, looked around. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"We have a visitor". She looked toward the door. I started. It was the goose. She came over to the bed and stared at us, calling politely. Eusebia threw a shoe at her, "Get out Rosita, you know you're not allowed in here…. Ush! Ush!…." The goose turned and waddled to the door, hesitating before leaving us a watery green present on the floor.

"Oh, Rosita, you bad girl…." Another shoe and we were alone again.

Neither of us had a watch or clock. I was hungry. We guessed the hour and dressed. Outside, the rain had eased to a steady drizzle. Xochi sat in the back door of the front house sorting red beans out of an apron in her lap, tossing them into a pan.

Eusebia, put a couple of sticks of firewood into the embers under the hotplate of the oven,. "Xochi, leave that now. Go to Don Julio and bring us a guajada, there's a good girl. Here…" She gave Xochi a ten peso note… I sat on a bench by the back door.

"A long way from Colonia Thomson, Doña."

Eusebia smiled. "Not so far to my home in Brazil though. Later on I'll tell you."

She found some beans already cooked in a frying pan. "Let's heat up these leftover beans to have with the cheese. There's a small table in the back there, fetch it out and I'll make some tortillas…"

She took a pan covered with a blue towel down from the shelf above her It held bags of maize flour, sugar and coffee. She found a bowl. From a covered plastic bucket she baled some water into it and mixed in the flour. "What's your plan now?" she asked, as she worked the dough.

"I want to find Eva Maria and Yelba. I guess I'll go over to the WLU office. Before I decide what to try and do I want to be sure they're ok. I want to phone Raul too if the lines are still up and let him know I'm OK. And I want to contact a friend to send a message home so my mother and friends don't worry."

"The lines between Xiguasi and La Bahía were still up, or they were last night anyway. I have a friend here with a phone, so you won't have to queue at Unitel. We can try after we eat, if you like."

"Thanks. Can I do anything?"

She'd taken a circle of plastic and was patting out the tortillas on it at the table. Without looking up she said, "Not really. Maybe love me like just now for the rest of my life…."

I was going to kiss her, but Xochi came back. I sat down again. Xochi put the cheese on the table, offering Eusebia some coins, "Eight pesos fifty, Doña…."

"Keep it Xochi. Buy a pencil and an exercise book for your schoolwork."

"Thank you Doña." the little girl reached up to Eusebia, who bent down so Xochi could kiss her.

"Is your mother well?" "

"Yes. She's very well. But we're worried about my uncles and aunts."

I watched and puzzled about this woman I had so quickly capitulated to and, perhaps, conquered, at once. What was it she had over me? Decision, flair, exuberance and, hidden from everyone else, this tenderness I was watching between her and the girl, and the love that was mine, between just her and me. What did the Doña Maria masquerade mean? I was peeling away layer after layer of life in Morazán, reeling through images and script and soundtrack in my forever-overwhelmed head.

We ate. Xochi had a radio tuned to the constant pop music of Station X, Yelba's favourite. We left the house just after noon to find Eusebia's friend, who turned out to be a doctor in the centre of town. The sign said "Bernardo Corea, Paediatrician. University of León. Nicaragua."

The main door was closed. But Eusebia went to a side door and rang a bell. After a while a man's voice said, "Who is it?."

"Doña Maria. Is Dr. Bernardo home?"

The door opened. A short, fat man beneath an umbrella greeted her sincerely with a respectful embrace.

"Maria, how on earth did you get down here?" He looked at me and smiled, closing the door behind us, saying "Come, come, you're very welcome." He offered his hand, "Bernardo Ruiz."

"Thank you Doctor. I'm Maeve O'Siochru."

"From the States?"

We were following him through his garden to the back of the house, "No, Ireland."

He stopped and turned, "You're not the woman from Walilika? Good God!" He embraced me. "God bless you! Are the others all right, Don Aloyiso and the other guy, the guy from the cooperative? Someone from Walilika made it here on horseback yesterday morning. They were telling us Aloysio had left in the night for Bikuka on Monday with a badly injured survivor from an accident together with an Irishwoman. How on earth could you have got through? We thought you must surely have been caught in the floods…Come, come in out of this wet….Have you eaten?"

He took us round to the back of the house. He used the front for his medical consultancy. Eusebia asked Bernardo if the phone lines were open from Marañon to La Bahía. They were.

Bernardo freely offered me the phone. "Take as long as you like. Call who you need to. There's an extension in the kitchen there, please talk freely…This house is yours…"

He and Eusebia sat at the table in his living room. His receptionist came through telling him he had a patient. "Please ask them to wait one moment. I'll be with them shortly."

I went out to the kitchen, a woman was washing clothes in the sink at the back of the house. She smiled at me through the open window, saying "No drying in it today, but they have to be washed…"

I phoned Rob Barnes first and got Evora, "Maeve? Where are you? Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm ok. I'm down here in Marañon." "

Rob said people at ICSO had heard a report about an accident at Walilika. Eight people killed. We thought you were hurt. Thank God, you're all right."

"I'm sorry you were worried Evora. But listen, have you been OK?"

"Everyone we know is OK. But the damage here is frightening. In the marginal barrios around the city, more than a hundred people died in the floods early yesterday. It would have been much worse if the Civil Defence hadn't prepared people and evacuated the places most at risk. It's calmed down here now a bit, though the rivers are still in flood. But it's still raining and the lower parts of city are underwater. Everyone's worried about cholera now. What are things like down there?"

"Still raining here but not so heavy. All the bridges have been damaged, but the army has got machinery and engineering units out doing repairs and clearing roads. This morning, the muncipal engineering office down here had their machines repairing the road into Marañon and the road's clear to Bikuka. I met a friend here this morning who travelled from Las Ramadas to Xiguasí yesterday on the railway. So the railway line's up…Listen, can you get Rob to do me a favour?"

"Tell me."

"Can you ask him to e-mail my old tutor in Dublin so my mother and friends know I'm OK?"

"Of course I will. Has he got the address?”

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"No, Evora, just take care of yourselves for me and save me a beer for when we meet up again."

She laughed. "OK, Maeve. You take care too. Bye."

I rang Raul at the embassy. It was lunchtime but I hoped to leave a message. I just wanted him to know I was ok. It was engaged.

The woman came in from the sink and asked if I wanted a drink of fresco. I was glad she did. It was my favourite, banana blended with milk. She took some in to Eusebia and the doctor.

When I tried the embassy again, I was put straight through to Raul. "Maeve, where are you?"

"Marañon. How are things with you?"

"Never mind that, are you ok? It was only this morning I badgered news from the army that they'd picked you up safely at Jocote Renco. You see, after the reports on the radio I thought you had been hurt or worse. Sylvie was very upset. Thank goodness you're ok."

"I am OK, Raul. I'm staying with a friend here in the town until I can make contact with my colleagues in the WLU. I'm worried about them because they both went off to places badly affected by the flooding. Please give my love to Sylvie and tell her I'm sorry she was worried. Forgive me for causing you uncertainty, Raul. I thought about you a lot over the last couple of days, you know. It helped me."

"Listen, Maeve, the embassy has an emergency relief fund. Do you have your bank book with you?"

"It should be in the stuff I left at the WLU office on Monday."

"If you need money for food or medicines for people, phone me before three. You're with Banco Confianza, right?"

"Yes."

"They shut at five. So if you let me know by three I can get the money into your account for the morning. I'll need receipts for anything you buy. OK?"

"Of course. Raul that's really great of you. I'll phone you as soon as I know what's going on here."

"Good. … Things are hectic here. The situation is bad from La Bahía right down the centre and western areas of the country. Maeve, please take care. Please. It was one of the worst feelings of my life when I thought something had happened to you."

"I love you too, Raul. I'll be careful, I promise."

I went back out to Bernardo and Eusebia. Bernardo asked, "Everything OK?"

"Yes….thank you. But I should try and find out what's happened to Eva Maria and Yelba Rosa. Forgive me, Doctor. Do you have an idea what the situation is in the rest of Momotoa?"

"I have a very good idea, I'm on the emergency committee working out of the alcaldía. Where do you think your friends are?"

"They left on Monday afternoon, one for San Juan and one for Guajiniquil."

"Well, San Juan's cut off. Long stretches of the road have just been washed away. The sub-soils there are almost pure sand. The floods just melted it all away as if it were salt. The town itself seems to have been relatively unaffected. People have made it through on horseback. So far there's no transit for vehicles. We've had many reports of people being caught out and drowned by the rivers rising so quickly, mercifully still under sixty so far. Over in Guajiniquil, we've had no news since Monday, The alcaldía here sent some of the municipal machinery through to clear the road while we wait for the army to get their heavy machinery through. But we're overwhelmed.

"The government won't declare a state of emergency, because that would mean letting outside agencies in to manage the relief effort and they want all relief aid channelled through the Ministries. Of course none of the foreign donors will agree to that with the reputation Noel Ramirez and his Ministers have got. In any case, the north of the Isthmus has been even harder hit than we have.

"So for the moment anyway we're on our own with only the local army units to rely on. If your friends were in the urban parts of San Juan and Guajiniquil they'll certainly be ok. But if they were out in the communities, who knows? After your experience at Walilika you'll know yourself what it's like."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Anyhow, I'll be over at the alcaldía for a meeting of the emergency committee at four. Come over if you like. We may have more news by then. Reports are coming in all the time."

His receptionist looked round the door, "Doctor, Señora Jimenez, she's got her little boy to see you and he's very restless …"

He stood, "If you'll excuse me…Doña Maria, I'll certainly call over as usual to the pre-school on Friday. Don't worry on that score."

We left by the side door. "Why does Dr. Corea invite a campesina like Doña Maria into his house?"

Eusebia laughed aloud, "Because Doña Maria's Canadian friends send her money to pay for medical care for the children in the pre-school and Dr. Corea gives that medical care, every other Friday. That's why Dr. Corea has time for Doña Maria….. He's an exile from Nicaragua and people in Morazán don't like Nicaraguans at the best of times, so he's glad of a few extra dollars. But he's a nice man. Loves the kids. A good doctor too."

"This Doña Maria, she's quite a woman isn't she?"

"She doesn't think so, my angel. You must tell her so yourself."

"Well, I might just do that." She held my hand from time to time as we walked and looked at me, "You make me feel like a lovesick teenager, Maeve… I have to leave you now. I've things to do at the pre-school. In any case you want to get over to the WLU right?"

"Yes. Eusebia, may I stay with you tonight?" "

My darling, we can live together for the rest of our lives, if you want…. I'll wait for you. Please, be discreet about Doña Maria. Don't bring people to the house - at least for now." She turned to me on a corner near the central park.

"Better not kiss my lips…I'll see you later. No more adventures. Promise?"

"Promise." I kissed her tenderly on her cheek. She turned without looking back and walked off. In her plastic flip flops, plain dress and well-worn sweater, she passed easily for a woman from the coast up around Puerto Moro.

I headed across the park to the WLU.

I found Margarita sitting alone, writing at the office desk. She was older than the rest of us on the literacy program. In her late thirties, she was already a grandmother. I had met her daughter's two children in the office once. They were sweet and quiet when I was around, unused as they were to tall white women.

Of Margarita's three boys, the youngest had just started a job with Transamerican as a trainee machine operator, the oldest lived in Houston, the other in Guatemala. Margarita reminded me very much of Asunción; smart, resourceful, youthful energy and optimism clinging on through the domestic wear and tear of economic survival and childrearing. Like Yelba, she was a single mother. Her husband had gone to live in La Bahia with a younger woman who worked in the free trade zone up there.

She jumped up on seeing me, "Maeve! I thought you'd got caught in the floods!"

"I was, with some other people from Walilika. But we managed to get through to Jocote Renco and from there to Bikuka. You won't believe it. The army took care of me and gave me a ride all the way from Bikuka to here."

"You're joking! Did they know you were with the WLU?"

"Don't think so. And I didn't tell them."

"Someone came through from Walilika yesterday morning. They couldn't say what had happened to you. Oh Maeve, I'm so glad you're safe. I've been stuck here on my own since you all left, wondering when I'd ever see you all again. I've been working in my barrio, collecting what people can spare for the families who lost their homes. We're cut off north and south, so nothing can get through."

"Nothing from Eva Maria and Yelba?"

"Eva Maria phoned Unitel here from San Juan this morning. They're posting messages for people worried about relatives in the alcaldía. Nothing from Yelba yet. The phone lines are down to Guajiniquil."

"What's going on here?"

"So far around four thousand people are living in schools and churches around the town, mostly from barrios down by the river from Monday night and yesterday. But nearly a thousand came in from outlying villages through the day yesterday. Conditions are bad, there's barely enough food for them all. The health centre has no medicines. Some of the bigger local farmers and cooperatives are helping with grains from storage and the church is helping too. It's been pretty chaotic"

"Can we find out what the needs are?"

"From the Alcaldía. The mayor's got staff organised into different task groups. We just need to find out who to talk to there. Shall we go over?"

"Why not? Can you give me my stuff from the drawer there? Maybe tomorrow we can get the Education Ministry delegate here to give me another letter. The one I had fell to pieces yesterday in all the water."

At the Alcaldía we found the official responsible for supplying the needs of the displaced families. Her name was Marta Muñoz, a small, cheerful, tubby woman. She had a secretary called Paquita who filtered people arriving with requests for assistance. Thin and worried looking, her eyes prominent from a thyroid problem, Paquita hadn't wanted to let us through. But she'd relented with a look of surprise when we explained we were offering to help with money.

Marta's office was long and narrow with a green chalkboard along one wall. When we entered she was writing up requirements for the different refuges around the town. She looked round, "Can I help?"

"We came to find out if we can assist buying food and stuff for the victims of the floods."

"You can if you've got any money."

"I can get some for tomorrow morning if you lend me your phone."

She said to Margarita, "You're with the WLU, aren't you? Margarita, right? I thought I recognised you." Then to me, "You with the WLU too?"

"Yes. But for the moment we're working with one of the embassies in La Bahía. They asked us what we needed down here. Can you tell us?"

"Right now? Soap and disinfectant, bleach for water purification, milk powder for kids. By Friday we'll be out of maize flour, rice, sugar and cooking oil. We're ok for coffee and beans. We have about five hundred infants who need milk and diapers. We're ok for toilet roll. We're short of about twelve hundred blankets."

"Can I use your phone?"

"Sure."

It took a while to get through. When I did, Raul wasn't there. I left a message with Rita, his secretary.

She said, "I'll phone you in half an hour. Will you be there?"

"Yes."

We sat on a bench opposite Marta's desk. All over the floor, boxes and sacks of supplies sat piled in roughly ordered stacks and heaps with just enough room for a person to squeeze past. The back door from the office led out to a covered yard where men were loading pick-ups to make deliveries to the refuges.

On the chalk board Marta had drawn a table listing a total of nineteen refuges around the town; all the schools and churches and a couple of businesses with free warehouse space. The table showed the number of people in each refuge and their respective needs. A man came in from the back with a clipboard:

"No more soap now, Marta."

"Who's not got any?"

"All the schools on the southside, the Sacred Heart, Our Lady of Succour and Saint Martin's."

"How's our credit with Distribuidora Luna?"

"They say they can't let us have any more without another IOU from finance."

"What's the accountant say?"

"We're cleaned out. He won't issue any more notes today because he needs to guarantee fuel for the vehicles working out in the rest of the department. And he's waiting to hear what the deal is from Guajiniquil. We sent a truck out to Walilika but the army turned it back at the bridge saying the road was closed. But I don't want to touch that in case we need to load up for Guajiniquil in a hurry"

The phone rang. Marta answered it, "Who?….". She looked round at me, "You May?…"

"Yeah."

It was Rita. "Maeve?"

"Rita. Yes."

"I spoke to Raul by phone. He's out of the office but rang to see if you'd called. He authorised me to deposit eight thousand dollars in your account. But there's a condition."

"Tell me."

"Only you are to make purchases. Do not hand a lump sum to anyone under any circumstances. Clear?"

"Clear."

"And keep all your receipts. OK?"

"OK." "What's your account number. It's Banco Confianza, right?"

I read my bankbook, "Twenty-six, forty two, double zero, zero twelve dash two." She read it back to me correctly, "I'll deposit that now in cash so there's no delay. Check before the bank closes to see if it's in their system. If not try again tomorrow when they open. I'll get them to speed it up if I can."

"OK Rita. Thanks a million. Say thanks to Raul too, please."

"Of course. Take care down there. And ring us every day around this time so we know what's going on, understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Talk to you tomorrow."

Marta's eyes nearly popped when I told her how much was coming. I explained to her I'd have to do the buying. "Great! Think I have time for all that? Let me give you a letter. You'll need to take it into the mayor's office so his secretary can stamp it."

As she wrote she explained, "Margarita will tell you. There are three main wholesalers in town, Luna, Carazo and the Momotoa. Luna is the biggest, but their prices are all pretty much the same. We're keeping an eye on them and the retailers to make sure they don't hike their prices on people. Margarita will be able to tell you if they're trying to rip us off. What they don't have, you'll have to buy from retailers around the town. Here's a list of what we need in order of importance. Thank you for this. Get back to me if you need transport. In fact, wait here…."

She went out to the back and quickly returned. "If you wait twenty minutes you can go in one of our pickups. It's Jaime, Margarita. You know Jaime Rodriguez, don't you? He'll meet you at the front of the alcaldía in twenty minutes. He has a drop to make first for one of the schools."

We went to join the queue of people getting documents vetted and stamped by the mayor's secretary, Leonora. Margarita seemed to know everyone. The secretary saw her waiting, "What's up Margarita?"

"Hi Leonora, we need a stamp on a purchasing authorization from Marta."

"Got the accountant's stamp on it?"

"It's not alcaldia money it's a donation. It's just so the wholesaler knows it's for emergency relief."

"Let me have it." The crowd around the desk opened politely to let Margarita through. I heard the welcome sound of a rubber stamp landing. As we went off, Margarita said wryly,

"My sister marrying her no-good brother was worth something at least."

Margarita did all the talking with the wholesalers. Another of Yelba's sisters turned out to be the administrator at the Momotoa. She gave us credit on the spot. We loaded up with milk powder. None of the wholesalers had any baby bottles. Margarita took me to a supermarket where one of her aunts worked. They gave us credit too. We cleared out their complete supply of bottles, just forty. But the

aunt rang up a cousin who had a stall in the market. He gave us another seventy five and promised to come up with another hundred for later in the evening. He was glad of the business.

It was just gone four twenty when we arrived back at the alcaldía with the first load. My back became very sore as we unloaded in Marta's clearing area.

Bernardo Corea came out. "Marta told me the news. It's a great help. Good for you."

"What are things like now? Any news from Guajiniquil?"

"We're still waiting to hear. The news from La Bahia and Xiguasí is bad. Over four hundred people are reported dead in those departments alone. Concepción, San Luis and Jiñequao are all cut off by landslides. The president still won't declare a state of emergency. But Cabañas, as President-elect is pleading with foreign organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance. Everything is politics in Morazán. Worse than my own country I sometimes think. And that's saying something. Need a lift anywhere?"

We went with Bernardo to the bank just before five. Its women cashiers sat looking completely bored. I'd never been in to find the bank without a single customer. It was an odd feeling, like being the only person in town with any money. Margarita and I entered leaving muddy, watery footprints across the immaculate white tiled floor.

I went to Nadia, generally the friendlier of the two women. She said, "Oh hello. Didn't recognise you in that poncho. Thank goodness someone has business with us. The place has been empty since Monday. How you doing?"

"Very wet even in this gear I'm afraid. Could you confirm the balance in my book, please, I'm expecting a deposit."

She checked her screen, "Yes, there was a deposit today." She ran the booklet, a card folded into four, through the printer. The balance read ten thousand and eighty. Two thousand and eighty of that was mine. I'd rested my arms on the counter and tried to wipe it dry with my shirt from under my poncho. Nadia laughed, "Leave that. Here, have a tissue…."

I asked Nadia whether she thought the bank would run out of notes. "Don't think so, the Central Bank has an office here which supplies us. They always keep a good supply of notes in reserve. I don't think we'll be cut off from La Bahia that long, do you?"

I wiped the counter dry and drew out one thousand five hundred dollars in pesos. Bernardo took us around the places we owed money. I was careful to get receipts.

Bernardo said, "I go around the refuges at nine each night to make sure they're OK as one of the oversight group for the emergency committee. Each of us is responsible for four refuges. Want to come?"

"Yes. I'd like to."

"Where shall I pick you up?"

"I'll call over to your place."

After we made sure the second load of supplies from the wholesalers had been collected and received by Marta in the Alcaldía, Bernardo dropped us at the WLU.

Margarita said, "We'd better make up a bed for you, unless you want to stay at my house. It's pretty crowded. But you're very welcome."

"It's ok, Margarita, I've found a place over near the Guajiniquil road. Belongs to a friend in La Bahía. I'm staying there. It's quiet. I've got a room of my own."

"OK, then. See you here tomorrow? We should ring the office in La Bahía to report in."

We agreed to meet at eight the next day and go over to Unitel together.

My back was hurting. Although it was only fifteen minutes to walk to Doña Maria's, I saw a taxi and took it.

I said to the driver, "Hardly any of you are running today, what's going on?"

"The emergency committee's restricting fuel sales from the petrol stations. We're all licensed by the alcaldía so what they've done is authorise taxis by licence plate numbers, some numbers one day, other numbers another day. They're right I guess. Makes sense not to use up all the fuel at once. But it's hard on us and our families. The mayor says if we don't get fuel by next Monday no vehicles except essential services will be allowed to circulate. Sure hope it doesn't come to that."

At the house, Eusebia was sitting with Xochi helping her with school work. I gave my love a light kiss on her cheek. "Eusebia, forgive me, I must go and rest. My back's hurting. I was lifting some sacks this afternoon. … It was stupid of me…"

"I'll come and look after it. Xochi, see if you can finish that sentence on your own now."

She followed me to the back house. The light was going. She lit some candles.

"I'll get some comfrey from the garden and put a poultice on that bruise."

As darkness fell, she came in with Xochi's mother who seemed little more than a girl herself, though she must surely have been in her early twenties. She said, "I saw you in the alcaldía this afternoon. I work there cleaning. Doña Maria says you will stay here. You're very welcome. I am Carmen. Xochi is my daughter."

"Thank you, Carmen. Xochi's a lovely girl. You must be a great mother."

"She's never any trouble. That's some bruise. What happened?"

"I hurt my back crossing the river yesterday."

"The river's are treacherous when they flood. People don't realise how quickly they can find themselves in danger. It's good you're safe. Come and eat when you're ready. Excuse me, Doña."

Eusebia said, "Go ahead Carmen, thanks."

Eusebia rubbed the herbal mixture into my back, where the damage inflicted by John's punch was really hurting. I had strained it lifting sacks. As she worked, Eusebia told me, "Carmen is pure Tolti. She's from La Virgen. She'll take good care of you whenever you're here. Her family is well-known there for their knowledge of medicinal plants. The patio here is full of them."

"…..Ouch."

"Sorry. If this isn't better in a couple of days we really should get it looked at…. How was your day?"

"I was talking to Raul. He sent me eight thousand dollars to use for families displaced by the floods."

"That's great news. In a way, he must be glad you're stuck down here. He knows he can trust you to do a good job……. you have beautiful shoulders, Maeve….lie down like that for a while. Shall I bring you supper?"

"I'll get up in a bit. I promised Doctor Corea I'd visit some refuges with him at nine.""

I fell asleep, of course.

Whatever Eusebia put in the poultice calmed the pain. I woke to find her sitting beside me on one of the chairs, reading by candlelight. She wore spectacles.

"Hello, my angel." She leaned over and kissed me. "Hungry?"

"Yes. Yes I am, what's the time?"

"You're ok, it's only eight thirty. I'll heat tortillas while you dress."

Carmen was sitting in a rocking chair inside the front house, listening to ranchera music on the radio plugged into a socket on the wall. It seemed to be the only power socket in the house. Xochi lay asleep, cradled across her mother's lap. A simple curtain divided the house along about one third of its length. Behind it, Carmen and Xochi had their sleeping area and private space.

The rest was open. A plain table and chairs stood to one side of the door and at the far end, beneath a long narrow mirror, a treadle sewing machine. By the division, sat three smart rocking chairs and, against the wall, an attractive, varnished dresser where the radio on it. The white walls had no decoration. From nails in the render hung plastic bags, harness and a coil of rope. A sack of sorghum for the chickens sat by the back door, beside it, a broom and a long handled pointed shovel.

Outside, I found the rain had eased right off to a fine drizzle. Still, I took my poncho.

I sat with Eusebia at the table while I ate supper. "Remember the way?"

"Yes."

"Bernardo knows the house here. Let him drop you back. It's not safe to walk here alone after dark. Especially if word gets about that you have money. Where is it?"

"I left it in the back there on the table under your book"

"Safe there as anywhere."

"Thanks for supper. I'd better get going."

We had fallen suddenly into domesticity. It felt like happiness. She kissed my cheek as I went, whispering. "Relax. Social kissing's accepted. You're my friend, remember?"

"I love you."

"Go on now…"

Bernardo was sitting in the cab of his pickup, an old red Mazda, waiting for me outside his house. He looked glum. "Been waiting long, Doctor? Sorry if I held you up."

"You're early if anything. I just got back from picking up those baby bottles. The store owner said you can pay him tomorrow."

"Thanks. You look upset. What's going on."

"I'm just gutted at the news from Totomoya. Have you heard?"

"No, what happened?"

"After I dropped you and Margarita, I was called to another meeting of the emergency committee. Someone from your outfit, the WLU, came in with Manolito, the mayor of Guajiniquil. You must know her, Yelba Rosa Murillo."

"Please God she's all right…."

"Well, physically she's ok. But she's badly shaken up. She was caught in a series of landslides in the communities below the Totomoya escarpment, that's about eleven kilometres north of Guajiniquil. Three whole villages were completely engulfed just before midnight last night. The whole hillside just slid down on top of them She and some other survivors made it into Guajiniquil this morning. They had to wait for the big army bulldozers to clear the road before they could get back to Marañon. Phone lines are down along the road. That's why they couldn't get any news out. It means we may have as many as five hundred people dead out there, buried in the mud."

"What can we do? Where's Yelba?”

"She has a sister here, you met her today. The manager at the Momotoa. She's looking after her. But I don't think Yelba will be up to seeing people right now.….. As for Totomoya, We need to find out what survivors there are. They're going to need food, shelter, clothes, medicine…..everything"

He started the engine, "The army are working out there, rescuing survivors, getting in by helicopter. But the relief supply operation is just too big. It's all beyond anything we can manage. We want to help but we've more than we can cope with here in Marañon."

It was impossible to take in, five hundred people wiped out like that. That kind of thing only happened in a war, didn't it?

We drove over to a refuge in one of the schools. It had two modules of four classrooms each. One of the modules had been turned into a kitchen. It reminded me exactly of the flood victims in the school at

Walilika. Several women were mopping floors and porches, Men unloaded supplies from a pick-up. I saw some of the milk powder we'd bought that evening. Bernardo handed over about thirty baby bottles and got a receipt to give Marta.

One of the refuges was in a bad way for lack of proper sanitary services and just one tap for nearly one hundred people. Bernardo took the refuge coordinators to one side, spending some time with them to organise men to dig some pit latrines. We drove round to the Alcaldía to get spades and shovels.

The entrance hall was full of soldiers, police, civilian volunteers and alcaldía staff. Everyone was wet from the endless rain and drizzle. A few were in waterproofs. The water from the clothes of everyone else steamed off them from their body heat. Some were drinking coffee. All looked very tired from their efforts and lack of sleep.

A soldier in a poncho came up to me, held out his hand. I could hardly see who he was. One of those soft green hats covering his face. He held out his coffee to me. "Go on, take it…" I did. He tipped back his hat. It was the officer from Jocote. He said in his educated American English, "Still working hard huh?….Are all the Irish women like you? Have to get one for myself." Someone called him and he was gone. Bernardo said, "They're waiting for transport for Guajiniquil."

Marta was there still, with the time getting on for ten. She wrote out a docket to release the tools from her stores. "Get a receipt and tell them to drop them back when they've finished. We're going to need them when we get the repair gangs out. Should start that tomorrow with any luck. Forecast is for the rain to stop tomorrow."

We left her the rest of the baby bottles, which she immediately sent out to refuges on the other side of town.

"Could do with another hundred of those. Can you come in early tomorrow so we can do a shopping list? Everything's changed since we heard from Totomoya."

"Sure."

We went back out. I looked for the officer. Maybe he had news of people in Walilika since he surely had come through there. But the entrance hall was empty. Outside the alcaldía, as we loaded the shovels onto Bernardo's vehicle, a convoy of army trucks, trundled past us in the darkness, heading out along the road to Guajiniquil. Bernardo crossed himself, "I don't envy them."

Later, as we drove, he told me, "Marta's been there since seven o'clock yesterday morning. I doubt she'll finish before eleven tonight. Paquita and she have run that place as if they were made of iron since the disaster broke."

We dropped off the tools at the warehouse and left for another refuge in the community hall of St Martin's church, out along the Guajiniquil road on the edge of town. Hardly anyone there had blankets. Children huddled up against their parents for warmth.

Three children lay asleep on newspaper on the hard floor covered by a sheet of plastic. Their mother had made three little pillows for them out of plastic bags stuffed with sawdust from a nearby sawmill. Bernardo sat down with the priest for a while talking.

About everyone in the refuge had bedded down for the night as best they could. An elderly woman told me almost all of them came from a street alongside the river where every single house along one side had been washed away in just twenty minutes on Tuesday night. Thirty families. Some found shelter with relatives elsewhere in the town, most were there in the church. She said, "But God is good. We're alive after all. They say in Totomoya the earth swallowed hundreds…."

I wanted so much to see Yelba.

When Bernardo dropped me back at Doña Maria's. Eusebia and Carmen were waiting up for me. They had heard the news on the radio. Eusebia immediately asked after Yelba. I told her what I knew.

"There's nothing we can do now. Come. Rest…. Good night Carmencita. Thank you for waiting up with me."

"You're welcome, Doña. Good night. Sleep with the angels, Doña Maeve."

She was so formal with us. But it was completely natural and sincere.

As we undressed, Eusebia asked "And your back?"

"Sore, but it doesn't hurt quite so bad." She caressed my hips, sitting on the bed, pulling me onto her "Let's see how it looks in the morning."

Eusebia seemed calmer as we played and kissed, as if she had really begun to believe we would be lovers, that she needn't squeeze all the love out of me at once before it disappeared.

When it occurred to me to kiss her from behind, working her with my mouth and tongue, as Soulange had first done with me, from the clitoris to the nape of her neck, she started slightly, . "No one's ever licked my ass before," she said.

When eventually we put out the candles, she cuddled up against my back, cupping my breasts in her hands. Sensing me unquiet, she asked, "Worried about Yelba Rosa?"

"She's not as tough as Eva Maria. She must be in bits."

"She'll be glad to see you tomorrow. Perhaps Eva Maria will return as well."

"Won't people be missing you too, in La Bahía?"

"No, my angel." I turned round to kiss her. "Ondina and Urania are telling everyone I'm away for a couple of days visiting friends. But I'll have to think about getting back after the weekend…..Shall I tell you fairytales from Brazil?"

She rolled onto her back and let me rest my head on her chest. The smell of her sweat and her sandalwood scent aroused me again. But she calmed me, "You need to rest, Maeve."

She pulled the covers up around me and began. Sometimes she broke into snatches of Portuguese, as if into samba, her dry, soft voice caressing me too, as she stroked my temples with her fingers, "Where I come from they call the *sertao*……it is the driest, most terrible, most beautiful place… Here is my father riding home to the house. He's armoured in leather against the terrible thorns of the *caatinga* and the cactus. He's young and strong. He calls me and I run to him. It's the time of year I leave to accompany my mother while she goes cutting cane on the plantations and it's time to say goodbye for a few weeks……"

She unfolded her tale, the rhythmic stroking of her fingers and her melodic voice lulling me to sleep.

I woke next morning to find her doing sit-ups in the middle of the room. I watched her, her great thighs and muscular back, the vertebrae showing as she arched down forcing her head to her knees, her legs tensed straight, taut. She turned over, doing push-ups, her arms pumping her up and down. I counted over seventy. But she could have gone on forever, it seemed. No wonder her embrace crushed me when she forgot herself in passion. She worked for over half an hour, her back to me, the grace of her movements, fluid, fast and strong.

She stopped, sweating, bent to pick up her dress, dropping it over herself so it fell down around her, before she looked round. "Did all my puffing wake you, my love?"

"No…. You're the most gorgeous woman, Eusebia."

She smiled at me. "You must truly be in love, ….. Too early to eat?"

"No. I'll get up and shower."

"Me first." She said, taking a towel from the cupboard.

The rain had stopped. It was incredible to find the sun shining outside, as if nothing had happened. Carmen was washing laundry at the cement sink. Xochi came out with a bowl of sorghum for the birds who ran up to her, bustling each other, clucking. "How d'you sleep, Doña?"

"Like a stone. And you Doña Carmen?"

She looked at me, as if to say, I should hardly address her with such respect.

"I always sleep well, Doña Maeve. I have my baby to keep me warm."

Xochi was getting ready for school. As Eusebia came out of the shower, the towel tied up around her, Xochi ran to her and said, "Doña, look, here's the exercise book I bought. It's got a map of our country on it, look!"

The goose Rosita came and pecked at her foot. Xochi kicked her gently off. The bird moved away, calling crossly. "And I bought a pencil sharpener too. A silver one!"

Eusebia picked her up taking her over to the kitchen to look at the map on her little book. I noticed the goose was limping and mentioned it to Carmen.

"Rosita has always had a limp. My mother gave her to me to bring here because the other birds at home used to pick on her when she was little. Now she bullies the other birds here."

I washed myself behind the black plastic sheet, washing Eusebia's strong scent off me, wondering if Carmen had noticed it, baling water over me out of a large plastic bin with a small bowl. The morning was fresh and dry. So wonderful to find it dry.

Xochi went skipping off to class with one of the neighbour's children. I felt keenly the contrast between this pastoral idyll of Doña Maria's and the cruel horrors of the disaster all about us.

After breakfast, I came out from the back ready to leave with Carmen for the Alcaldía, Eusebia was at work with some navy blue material on the sewing machine. I went to kiss her goodbye

"What are you making?"

"It's a pleated skirt for Xochi for school. She's growing so fast now. They insist on this uniform." She looked up at me. "Good luck today. I hope Yelba is all right."

Carmen was putting up her hair in the mirror. She smiled at me in the glass, then turned and came over.

She too kissed Eusebia goodbye. "I may be later today, Doña. The mayor has asked us all to stay on late for the rest of this week."

"Don't worry."

Carmen walked quickly with me. She asked, "Why do you call me Doña?"

"You're a mother. I'm not."

"Is that the way in your country?"

"Kind of," I lied. "But mostly it's not like here. Life is less formal, Carmen. Why do you call me Doña? I'm sure you must be as old as me."

"Because you're a close friend of Doña Maria."

"It would be nice if you just called me Maeve. Please may I call you Carmen?"

She looked at me, her smile as beguiling as her daughter's. "Yes, Maeve, you can."

As we waited to cross the road to the alcaldía, Carmen said, "I'm glad Doña Maria has a friend. She never tells me about her life, but I can see her life is full of sorrow. Xochi brings her some joy andlight. Now you do too. That's good."

The Alcaldía occupied a whole corner opposite the central park, a colonial style church occupying the block in front of it. A service was in progress for some of the flood victims recovered the day before, their coffins visible at the end of the aisle. The sight made me want to go to Walilika. I wanted to see Carolina, Hilario, Consuelo; all of them.

I left Carmen, went to see if Marta was in her office. Paquita welcomed me, "Marta's expecting you. Go on in."

"May! Hi. Have a seat."

"What do we know about Totomoya? Is there much can we do?"

"Not much. Manolito, the mayor from Guajiniquil asked us for all the same stuff we are using here. Our finance officer has allocated the last of our reserves to purchase food for them. The army is providing tents for survivors. We need to buy medicine more than anything. Acetominofen, ibuprofen, difenhidramine, dextomorfane, ampicillin, trimetroprim or cotrimoxazole, we should get some doxycycline in case of cholera, clotrimazol and miconazole for fungal infections…"

"Marta, won't the health ministry have all that stuff?"

"In theory. But this is Morazán. The director of the health centre here is a die-hard *teofilista.* He's never got on with the mayor here, because Marañon is Liberal. We're pretty sure he's got stuff in his warehouse, but he says he hasn't got anything he can spare for Totomoya."

"What about the health centre in Guajiniquil?"

“Guajiniquil's hardly much bigger than Walilika. The health post there is supplied from here in Marañon. Did you see the health post in Walilika? Yeah? Well, Guajiniquil's just like that…It's a tough one, I know."

"Why don't we do this. We've got eight thousand five hundred in the bank. Why don't we split it between Totomoya and Marañon?"

"I thought it was eight thousand the embassy sent."

"There was more in the account already. It's all for projects one way or another and they're bound to send more money so we can reimburse what we take beyond the eight they sent."

"Good job we don't have an accountant staring over our shoulder. Ok. Let's do that."

We agreed our shopping list for the day and she gave me an authorisation to present to whichever chemist gave the best price to our negotiator, Margarita. I went off then to find Margarita at the WLU office. Perhaps we'd have time to see Yelba. It was strange outside in the sunshine. I was still not used to the rain having stopped.

The door of the office was locked when I arrived. In the shoe repair shop next door, they said it was still a few minutes before eight. I sat on the step to wait. Some boys in the street took advantage of the absence of vehicles to play football, their game a movable one from one end of the houses to the other. Three lads chased each other into a tackle on top of me.

I grabbed the ball and ran off crying "Superhule! Superhule!"

They chased after me, some crying, "Superhule! Let's get 'im" and some crying gleefully "Roast 'em an ate 'em ! Roast 'em an' ate 'em!"

I dropped the ball as I ran into a surpised Margarita coming round the corner. The boys charged off after their game again, back down the street.

Margarita said, "Where do you get all that energy from?…. Shall we go straight to Unitel? I don't need anything at the office."

On the way I asked Margarita, "Do we tell Amelia about the money?"

She looked at me and grinned. "Is it WLU money?"

"No."

"No business of hers then, is it?"

The Unitel office in Marañon had seven phones, four through the operator in her booth and three coin phones. We joined the queue for one of the coin phones. Margarita got through first time.

"Hi, it's Margarita from Marañon. Is Doña Amelia there?…..Hi Amelia? Yeah, it's Margarita. How are things with you?……I'm sorry to hear that. ….No……Well, Maeve is here with me. She managed to get back from Bikuka yesterday morning…What?…It's a long story..Did you hear the news about Totomoya? Yelba was there when it happened. It's a miracle she's alive……Yeah….No, we haven't seen her yet. She's at her sister's. She only got back from Guajiniquil last night….. No. Eva Maria phoned to say she's ok but she still hasn't made it back. She's in San Juan and the bridge and the roads down there just got completely washed away…..OK, here's Maeve."

"Amelia? …No, I'm fine. We're worried about Yelba though. ……You want me in La Bahia?…the bridge is down north of the Bikuka turn off, south of Xiguasí. Word is it'll be out for weeks….Look Amelia, we want to know what to do about the information we were supposed to get from the communities. It's a dead loss right now with this emergency. We need to know if we can prioritise support for the relief work. …..That's good. In any case, if we're going to write up a relief and reconstruction proposal we're going to need data from the municipalities …..yes, I promise I'll get back when I can…….no, let me fax stuff up to you , the Alcaldía here have a fax machine. I can't do better than that right now…..Ok. Yes I'll tell Eva Maria….. You take care too….Bye."

"What's she say?"

"She wanted me to go back and help draft and translate a funding request for relief and reconstruction funds. I guess that's important, but there are other people who can help her with that, don't you think?"

"If you go, who's going to manage the money you're getting from up there? We can make a big difference to people with the resources that money will buy. Amelia always leaves us the crumbs from any funds the office in La Bahía gets. Now its our turn for a change."

"Let's find Yelba Rosa."

Yelba's sister's house was up on the northeast side of town two blocks from the highway to Xiguasí. They had started building a second storey on it. Like everyone else in Marañon that day, the family had washed all the dirty laundry accumulated since the weekend to take advantage of the sunshine. The second floor was bedecked with sheets and trousers and shirts and probably every other item of laundry the family possessed, after so many days of rain.

We called through the steel barred security grille over the open front door, "The house was deep and long, it's narrow frontage concealing the size of the interior. Yelba's sister came to greet us from the very back of the house. As she opened the security door, we asked, "Can we see her?"

She kissed Margarita whom she knew well. "Yes. She'll be glad you came. She was asking for you last night. But it was better for her to rest."

She led us to the rear and indicated one of the rooms of the long porch between the house and the narrow garden, which also ran the length of the building back to the large dining and kitchen area at the rear.

She leaned in the bedroom doorway. It was dark inside because the persiana window was closed and the curtain drawn. "Yelba? Margarita's here to see you. I'm not here now. I have to go to work. Chilo is here if you need anything."

We heard Yelba say quietly, "You back for lunch?"

"Yes, maybe late though, two or so." She left and we went in.

Yelba was in bed. She looked pale and very tired.

Margarita embraced her. I took her hand. For a moment her eyes filled with tears. But she kept them back. Margarita asked quietly, "Can you talk? Want to tell us?"

"I'm just so glad to see you. We all thought we'd die……Why don't you go to the kitchen, Chilo will give you coffee. Let me get up. I can't stay like this. I need to get back to normal."

We waited while she showered and dressed. Auxiliadora, her niece, a slim attractive teenager with long black hair, behind which she tended to hide, gave us coffee. Everyone called her Chilo. She said, "My aunt is like another person. She was talking so strangely last night. She frightened me. You eaten breakfast?"

"Yes. But Yelba should eat something."

"She didn't eat a thing last night. She seemed to be in another world"

Yelba came eventually. Dressed in a too-big pair of her sister's trousers and a T-shirt.

She took some coffee, picked at a plate of scrambled egg and beans, finally pushing it away uneaten.

"No news from Eva Maria?" she asked.

"Only that she's ok. She's stuck in San Juan."

"That's good. Thank God we're all ok. It was the dumbest thing to leave for the campo on Monday. Still, I suppose we weren't to know."

Margarita said, "You should rest Yelba." "Yes. I guess so. …I saw my new niece you know. She's gorgeous. My sister's very happy."

"Great…"

"How about you two? My sister says you're helping the flood victims here."

"Yes. The French Embassy sent some money yesterday afternoon for the relief work. We're working with Marta Muñoz and the emergency committee in the Alcaldía." Margarita said, "We were wondering if you could give us some idea of what people needed in Guajiniquil."

She stared at us and suddenly sat forward, reaching across to me as she spoke quietly, "It was the earth, you see….. " and then she struck down on the table "the very earth…. It stood up, all around us……as if it were alive and raging…charging down on us…"

She got up, started outside, stood staring at the sky with her hands together, then closed her eyes tight into the sun, pleading at it, "Please! Pleeease…., pleeease….."

Margarita, reached her, embraced her, as if to give her shelter, taking Yelba's face to her bosom.

This desperation, the man with his dead niece in the lake at Walilika, that other man on the road before Jocote, Yelba now….. she snapped out of it. But the fright of the memory had left her drained again, pallid, exhausted.

Chilo was frightened too. She looked at her aunt as if Yelba were a wounded beast that might lash out without warning. I took the girl down to the front of the house and told her softly. "Chilo, don't be scared. Yelba's terribly upset by what happened to her. She needs us to take care of her and make her feel safe again."

She nodded, but said, "Please don't leave me alone with her. She does. She scares me. She seemed fine this morning when my mother was here. She was up very early, washing laundry. Then she said she felt tired again and went back to bed."

Margarita talked Yelba into coming with us to see a woman doctor who worked with the WLU on health education. Her clinic was the other side of the Alcaldía across the central park. As we crossed over we saw Eva Maria sitting on the *alcaldía* steps talking to Paquita, who saw us, nudged Eva Maria and gave us a friendly wave.

Paquita must have warned her about Yelba's ordeal because Eva Maria hugged her for a long time, talking quietly to her as Yelba buried her face in Eva Maria's shoulder, Yelba's beautiful chestnut hair hanging untidily down her back.

Eventually Eva greeted us. It was a heartfelt reunion, unnoticed there among the bustle of relief activity, so many people going in and out of the municipal offices.

Paquita told me, "We have transport going out to Guajiniquil at two."

"Fine. We'll get the medicines to you before lunchtime anyhow." "

If you need a vehicle tell me. I'll get Jaime or one of the other drivers to go with you."

"Thanks Paca."

As we walked round to the clinic. Eva Maria explained how she'd been cut off in San Juan by the destruction of the roads north of the town. The town itself was undamaged. The highway on the other side of the frontier suffered minor damage to an important bridge. But the bridge this side and eight kilometres of the highway up to Marañon was completely washed away where it passed over sub-soils almost entirely of sand.

"The river just took over the road. It was scary. A lot of people are without food down there. Some relief is supposed to be coming through from across the frontier organised by the World Food Programme and the Red Cross. But they can't get through to a lot of places because the road just isn't there any more and the waters are still too deep. The army's working hard, but they have to wait for the waters to go down before they can really make the highway safe."

"How did you get through, Eva? Did you just walk out?"

"Yeah. A group of us made it out once the river dropped some this morning. Once we got to the undamaged part of the highway it was easy. We soon got a lift."

Margarita took Yelba in for the consultation. Eva said, "The best thing we can do for Yelba is get her back up to Xiguasí with her little boy and her family."

"Eva, we have to get some supplies ready for the transport to Guajiniquil at two. Can we leave Yelba with you till lunchtime? Margarita is negotiating prices. I just hand over the money. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Hey, Marta was telling me you had quite an experience too. You OK?"

"I am. We've been very lucky Eva. What happened to Yelba and all those people who died in the landslide doesn't bear thinking about."

"Makes you give thanks for being alive… I'll take care of Yelba. You get and do what you need to."

The doctor prescribed tranquillisers for Yelba and recommended we get her up to her family in Xiguasí as soon as possible, as Eva had said. Yelba seemed calm, but she was worn out. Eva Maria took her back to her sister's and Margarita came with me to visit a couple of the larger pharmacies in the town. We took Yelba's prescription with us.

Some products were cheaper in one pharmacy, others cheaper in another. We were fortunate most of the products were available in generic form, often nearly half the price of the branded medicine. Once we'd got the prices, we went to the bank. It was still almost deserted. Only one other customer appeared while we were there.

From the bank, we checked in with Marta to see about a vehicle. She asked us to buy three hundred blankets to add to those supplied by the army for the Totomoya survivors. That wiped out seventeen hundred dollars at one go, even buying them from one of the market dealers.

Margarita was an astute buyer, hardly surprising with the lifetime of experience she'd had bringing up four children on fifty or sixty dollars a month. Having the letter from the Alcaldía also encouraged suppliers to help us. On the whole, they were glad of the business, although one or two seemed to

resent Margarita's unyielding negotiating style. She said to me after one encounter, "You've no idea how good it feels to be arguing with money behind you, instead of wheedling for credit all the time and then struggling to make the payments."

Buying the blankets meant another trip to the bank. It was nearly midday by the time we'd handed everything over to Marta. We went to give Yelba her prescription and ask her and Eva Maria to lunch with us in one of the comedors in town.

Over lunch, we worked out the best arrangements for getting Yelba home to Xiguasí. Reports were that the river was slowly falling there, making the raft crossing easier. Machinery was standing by to secure a crossing as soon as conditions permitted. Yelba seemed encouraged at the thought of seeing her family, "At least we can get across. I just want to see my little boy and my parents."

Eva Maria agreed to go with her, since she too wanted to get back to see her parents in Concepción. She was weary herself after that early morning start. The two of them went off to rest. We'd meet up at the WLU office in the morning.

Margarita took me to look at the barrios wrecked by the floods on Monday night and Tuesday. The river had cut out a channel deep and wide where it curved through the southeastern part of the town down to the lake. Broken drainage and drinking water pipes stuck out of the banks, sewage from the higher barrios discharging there into the river. Further downstream we found children playing in the water in the sunshine and women washing clothes at the water's edge.

"They've been told not to," said Margarita, "They take no notice."

Whole streets had been washed away, the cobbled paving cut through as if some giant had rough-sawn a section through it. A couple of vehicles, one upside down, sat half-submerged in the still fast-flowing water. Massive tree stumps, their roots washed clean of soil, also lay upended in the water. At another, deeper part, two streets were submerged, only the rooftops showing. We walked down one street that looked completely normal, until through one of the front windows we looked in to see the river, now a flood plain nearly a kilometre wide where it met the lake - normally it would have been no more than sixty metres across at that point. Margarita told me, "This morning the radio was saying we've had the equivalent of a whole year's rain in just three days. It's the worst hurricane to hit the isthmus for seventy years."

We made it back to Marta's office just after three and reviewed the latest needs with her before I phoned the embassy in La Bahia. I got through to Raul. "Maeve, how are you getting on?"

"Good. We've must have helped thousands of people since we got the money."

"Who's we?"

"The emergency committee here in the Alcaldía They're very well organized."

"How many people are they looking after?"

"In Marañon itself about five thousand. Maybe more. But they're sending resources out to neighbouring municipalities too. Did you hear what happened in Totomoya?"

"Yes. Terrible news. Are supplies getting through?"

"A convoy left last night and another smaller one headed out today at two. The army has been using helicopters as well. We spent over three thousand dollars on blankets and medicine this morning. We're waiting for supplies from the World Food Programme and the Red Cross. But the roads are out north and south."

"What's the food situation like."

"We just looked at that. With the money currently available to the emergency committee we can meet food needs here until Saturday night. But that's without buying more blankets and stuff for sanitation and hygiene and fuel for cooking. Fuel for vehicles will be a problem from Monday on. From next Tuesday the Alcaldía says food will be a problem in the whole area because food wholesalers stocks are low all round. Cooking oil will run out in the town by the middle of next week, sugar too. There's no maize, although there are stocks of maize flour. Rice, beans and sugar seem ok. But milk powder will run out early next week and so will wheat flour for bread."

"That should change by Saturday because the relief organizations are supposed to be sending a convoy round via Las Ramadas, Dulce Nombre and Bikuka today, including a couple of fuel tankers…Look, can you fax me up an account of what you've spent so far, how much is it?"

"Just over five thousand." "How much will you spend tonight and tomorrow morning?"

"About four and a half?"

"Four and a half?…Maeve, are you spending your money on this?"

"Of course I am. You should see the way people are living down here."

"Look, fax me up an account of what you've spent. With that I can justify another disbursement. Send me a brief description of what conditions are like and what you're likely to spend today and tomorrow. I should be able to get another payment of eight thousand down to you. You keeping all the receipts?"

"Yes. I can account for every cent."

"Got the fax number?"

"No. Give it to me."

"Three double two one nine…Got it?”

"Thirty two, twenty one, nine."

"That's it…Things here are pretty bad too. We lost a lot of people in the Chanillas area on Tuesday and the centre's unrecognisable. Did you know the Heroes Bridge went?"

"No. It sounds unbelievable."

"Well it's true. Please take care down there Maeve and don't exhaust yourself."

"OK Raul. Will you take your own advice?"

"Sure…See you up here soon I hope"

"Me too, bye."

It was already for good.

"What's up?"

"Nothing. Everything's fine, Marta. I just have to write up an account to fax them and they'll send us another eight thousand tomorrow."

"Wish I had friends like yours. Need Paquita to help you?"

"Can I write it up by hand and ask her to type it out? I can't type to save my life."

"Sure. Here's the shopping list for tonight."

It was a simple job for Margarita and myself to write up the report for Raul. Paquita took it to type. I gave her the fax number and headed for the bank with Margarita. We met Bernardo on the way. He asked after Yelba Rosa.

We had all been so lucky to have escaped the worst. Yelba might easily have been killed. She avoided death only because she was on the very edge of one of the villages hit and had time to run for her life as the collapsing hillside engulfed them. Most people I met, far from complaining, counted their blessings: they were alive.

Margarita and I continued visiting wholesalers to buy soap, disinfectant, bleach, milk powder, toilet roll, washing powder, salt; everything in quantities of hundreds. It was a sobering experience, being responsible for the needs of so many destitute families; impossible not to admire the indefatigable Marta and Paquita, keeping everything working around the clock despite constant snags, the limitations of their transport resources and the constant bureaucratic requirements for two or more copies of everything they wrote out.

Soon after six Margarita and I went home our separate ways. I had added a line in the account to Raul for administrative costs to cover a payment to her. She was working full time on this and the WLU only paid her sixty dollars a month. I included Yelba's tranquillisers in the cost of the medicines we bought too.

At my beloved Doña Maria's, Carmen greeted me, standing at the oven cooking. Xochi came to me for a cuddle from the table where she was doing schoolwork. During the day, I'd bought her an eraser shaped like a rabbit.

This was as much home as anywhere I had lived since that bleak Easter when my father left my mother and myself in Cabra for good. Looking at Xochi, I wondered again about that question to De Beauvoir

from her philosophy tutor, ""Do you really think, Simone, that a woman can find fulfilment without love and marriage?"

Maybe that should have been love and children. Did I want a baby of my own? The spectres of my feuding parents grinned at me, a daunting presence from a revenge drama. My mind changed the subject and I concentrated on helping Xochi with her writing.

Eusebia returned soon after me, "I had a meeting with parents of the pre-school children. You must come and see it tomorrow if you have time."

I asked her what she thought of the help I'd given my WLU colleagues using the money from the embassy. She was astonished it even occurred to me as a concern. "Have you any idea what those relief agency people get paid, Maeve? And you're worrying about forty dollars for Margarita? And fifteen dollars for Yelba Rosa? Only you would be so conscientious?"

"I was only wondering. I've never been responsible for so much money before and I want to get it right. How was your day? D'you finish Xochi's skirt?"

"My day was good. I finished the skirt and managed some study. You going out with Bernardo again tonight?"

"Yes."

"You should rest then, I'll do another poultice for your back. How is it?" She lifted up my T-shirt, "Has it been less sore today?"

"Yes much less. It only hurts when I stretch too much."

"That's good. Go and lie down, I'll come in when I've prepared the comfrey."

While she cut the herb, I went to the back house, undressed, hid under the sheet from a wandering mosquito.

As she worked the preparation into my back later, I asked Eusebia for news of the election results. "I heard on the radio. The Electoral Council announced a decision leaving neither main party with a majority. Largaespada has thirty deputies and Cabañas twenty nine. The Christian Democrats have the balance of power with six."

"Wow. That makes life interesting. Are you pleased?"

"Pleased?…." She said nothing for a while. Then lay down beside me, stroking my face. She kissed me "Maeve, I don't want politics to come between us. Do you think it might?"

"No, I don't."

"Aren't you bothered your university friends think I'm more villainous than Medea, the infanticide witch?"

I couldn't help laughing. I got on top of her and kissed her. "Hey careful with that stuff on your back…", she bench pressed me off her.

"I can't believe you're so strong, Eusebia…"

"Loving you gives me strength. Come on, let me out from under you, Carmen's cooked us indio viejo and pipian stuffed with cheese. I'll bring you some in a while, after that stuff's had a chance to work on your back."

After supper, I dressed again shortly before nine to go join Bernardo.

Things seemed better in the refuges. People felt more secure in the routines they had established. Distribution of supplies had been efficient and reasonably precise. We came across some health problems that were developing, older people and children with chest problems, fungal infections.

As we drove around, Bernardo talked to me about Nicaragua, its troubles, his early support for the revolution there, his disenchantment. He seemed a gentle man, nervous of his position as an exile in Morazan. "I have to admit one reason I'm anxious to help here is to get some acceptance from local people. That's also one of the reasons I help out in Doña Maria's pre-school. People here can be very cruel to strangers if they take against them, you know."

One refuge had run out of milk powder. Another had run out of cooking oil and soap. Another needed maize flour for tortillas in the morning. We went back to Marta to get what was needed. Paquita had to wake her to get her signature. I was happy to be doing something useful.

That night, Eusebia lulled me to sleep again with tales of her life in Brazil…"we are walking, now we are out of the sertao, crossing into the recôncavo…Here is the sugarcane, here are the *fazendas,* here the *engenhos*. I know these from earlier years….. But this year is different, this year we keep going, we take a lift right down to the coast, to the city….. Here it's all new for me, everyone is African here. We are staying with my aunt, Sabina. She is a *baiana*. She sells *acarajé*, *carurú*, *moqueca*, and *vatapá*. My mother leaves me …..she doesn't want me with her cutting cane this year. My aunt and her family take care of me. My cousins take me to watch clandestine *maculelê, capoeira*…. I learn the rhythms of the *atabaque* and the *berimbau*….. My aunt is a powerful woman there in the Liberdade. She is *filha de santo.* …I go with her to the festivals. We go down to the ocean, cast sweet scented flowers far out into the waves to Yemaya…..She teaches me African words, teaches me in the kitchen, on the street as she cooks there, while I keep her company, helping her cook, listening to her tales of the Revolução dos Sastres, the Sabinada, of the Hausa Malês… at night she cradles me as I do you. She tells me the stories of the orishas, of Yemaya, Oshun, and Oya. She calls me her little sister, daughter of Oshun……. When the cane is cut, my mother comes and we go back, back to my handsome father, the *vaqueiro,* back to the cattle and the *caatinga*, to the cruel beauty of the *sertão*……..."

My love for Eusebia was complete then. I wanted nothing but to be with her, couldn't imagine life without her.

Next morning, before heading off with Carmen for work, I promised to visit the pre-school. Carmen went on to the alcaldía and I to meet the others at the WLU. They were waiting . "Sorry I'm late."

Eva Maria said, "We've only been here ten minutes. Margarita said you found a place over by the Guajiniquil road."

"Yes. It belongs to a Doña Maria Garcia. She rents it to an Indian woman Doña Carmen. You probably know her. She works in the Alcaldía. What's the plan? Have we got one?"

"Paquita told us yesterday the Alcaldía is sending six trucks up to Xiguasí at nine this morning to load up with food the army have brought across on the rafts. We'll go with them."

Yelba Rosa said, "I feel much better today, Maeve. Those pills I took yesterday helped me sleep and I don't feel as though I'm going to panic all the time."

"That's wonderful Yelba. You need to get as much peace and quiet as you can."

Margarita spoke up "I'm worried about what we should agree for next week. The way things are now, it's crazy to think we can just carry on as usual. If we're going to have any say in how the union defines its role in the reconstruction work that'll start once the relief phase is over we need to start arguing now. If we don't, we'll just find new rules imposed on us from the office in La Bahia, with maybe some bogus consultation meetings to dress it up for the donors. There's Amelia in the office now, writing up proposals, trying to railroad Maeve into going up and helping and she hasn't the first idea what's going on in the departments."

Eva Maria said, "It's hard to know where to start without finding out what other people think. I want to know what people in the communities around San Luis and Concepción want us to do."

"Why don't we leave it for a week," I said, "tell Amelia and the others in la Bahía things are too confused right now. Besides you all need to get your own lives sorted out and make sure everything's ok with your families. We can tell the office in La Bahia we're doing needs-appraisal, based on requests from local communities. They can't argue with that. And we can propose a meeting for a week next Friday, two weeks from now. Amelia will do a little dance and insist we meet on the Monday and we can back down and she'll feel in charge and it'll still suit us just fine. What d'you think?"

Eva laughed, "You've been working with us too long."

"I think that makes sense," said Margarita, "Yelba?"

"Yes. It does make sense. But we can't be sure how much we'll be able to get done so soon after the disaster. Plenty of places will be cut off for another week at least. "

I said, "That's true but we can make a start."

We decided to meet up again in Xiguasí the following Friday morning. Margarita agreed to be the intermediary with Amelia.

The rest of my day followed the same pattern as the day before; meetings with Marta Muñoz, buying expeditions with Margarita, visits to the bank. People had begun to treat me as a fixture. I began to think seriously about giving up the apartment in La Bahia and making Doña Maria's my base for the rest of my stay in Morazán.

At lunchtime I went over to the pre-school. The children were asleep on mattresses on the floor for their daily nap. Eusebia sat under a spreading *ceibo* tree with two of the teachers and, judging by her apron, the cook. A couple of brightly painted swings and a slide stood nearby. I sat myself in the shade on one of the swings.

"Hi. Doña. See I just missed lunch."

"There's some left. Want some?"

"No, thank you. This is lovely. How many children?"

"Forty altogether. Not all of them come every day. We have thirty one today."

"Maeve, let me introduce you, Maria, Candida, Azucena."

"Good to meet you."

"You're very welcome," said Candida.

"Candida is the director but she also teaches. How are things at the Alcaldía?"

"Not bad, Doña. They sent some trucks up to Xiguasí this morning to load up supplies the army has been ferrying across the river since Wednesday. They've a huge area to supply with that. Still, it should keep everyone going until the convoy arrives that's coming down via Dulce Nombre and Bikuka. They say that should get here some time Sunday morning…. You've got this place looking great Candida."

"Thank you. We've been here nearly four years now. But we'd have had to close if Doña Maria hadn't persuaded her friends in Canada to help us. You see we couldn't afford to pay salaries. None of the aid agencies will fund salary. It's stupid. How they expect us to sustain informal education services without wages I just don't know. So the money Maria got for us was a godsend. It also means we can give the kids regular health care. Dr. Corea comes every other Friday to check the children are ok and we can take them round to him free of charge if any of them fall sick. It's a waste of time going to the health centre. They just give us prescriptions for medicine they know we can't afford to buy. It's much better just having one doctor who knows the children, takes his time with them and prescribes medicine we can afford. Dr Bernardo is a good paediatrician too, better than our doctors here. They make his life difficult sometimes because he's Nicaraguan. But we've no complaints."

The two classrooms were housed in a low, simple building. The zinc roof was obviously in need of repair. But the outside walls were freshly painted an easy-on-the-eye light blue and the furniture, child sized chairs and tables and rows of shelves, looked almost new. The children's work hung on the walls inside. Soft toys, bears, rabbits, a gorilla, a couple of elephants, a cuddly tiger, all stared benignly from the shelves above the sleeping infants.

The women under the tree were sitting at the children's dining tables. The whole area was surrounded by a wire mesh fence. A latrine was sited in the far corner away from the classrooms.

I took a look at the children as they slept. They were obviously from poor families, many with badly mended clothes, most without shoes. Would they get even two meals a day if they weren't at that

school? As if she read my mind, Candida said, "These kids would be on tortillas and salt if we didn't feed them. This barrio is one of the poorest in town."

Eusebia fitted in so naturally here. She was a real social chameleon, moving with apparent ease between the La Bahía élite and the very poorest people in a place like Marañon. It was hard to figure out what drove her. Was it just a mischievous refusal to conform? Those stories of her childhood, she called them fairytales. Would she be able to tell them so convincingly if they were?

The anxiously awaited convoy Raul had mentioned came into Marañon early Sunday afternoon; its vehicles lining the streets around the Central Park. I counted seventeen big trucks, some articulated, from the World Food Programme and the Red Cross, and a motley of vehicles from different aid agencies.

Margarita and I sat watching on the steps of the Alcaldía with Paca and Marta. Paquita said, "Maybe we can have a day off now."

The mayor came past us to receive two Japanese who had accompanied the convoy, a slender middle-aged woman and a taller, solid-looking young man. The woman smiled at us as the mayor beckoned to Marta, introducing her "Señora Muñoz is our supplies coordinator. Marta, these visitors are from the Japanese Embassy. Their government paid for much of the food that's just come in. Can you help me explain how things are right now….. ?"

I wanted to spend the rest of the day with Eusebia. Margarita wanted a break too. Paca was resigned to another afternoon in the office. "But the mayor has promised us a slap-up meal tonight in the Brisas del Lago. That'll be a first, for me anyway." Brisas del Lago was Marañon's smartest restaurant.

At the house, Carmen was resting while Xochi played in the patio with a couple of the neighbours' children. Eusebia sat reading in the shade by the back house. I kissed her, "The convoy arrived."

"That's wonderful news. You must be so relieved."

"Everyone is. But I'm wondering now what to do with myself. I really don't want to get stuck up in the office in La Bahía for any length of time and I know that's what'll happen if I go back there."

"You know you can stay here if you need a base."

"Will you still leave in the morning?"

"Yes, my baby. I have plenty to do in La Bahía."

"I'll probably go up next weekend. I'll miss you."

"Me too. Being with you this week has been heaven….. A lifetime wouldn't be enough to explain …." I touched her shoulder. She took my hand.

I said, "Let me make some fresco for you and Carmen. You two have been waiting on me all week. What are you reading?"

"Sartre, Les Mains Sales."

"That Doña Maria, she's certainly full of surprises……"

I picked some lemons from the tree, Osito tugging at my trouser leg. They kept him tied up all day letting him loose at night. He was an excellent guard.

I washed the fruit, cut the lemons and squeezed them into a jug. Xochi asked me if I wanted ice from the store down the street where they sold ice by the bag out of a freezer.

"Good idea, Xochi. Looks like we need some sugar as well, can you bring two pounds? Get some caramels to share with your friends too." She took the pesos I gave her and went off, negotiating in whispers with the other children what sweets to buy.

Carmen came out, began to iron some clothes and sheets piled up on the kitchen table. Rosita the goose kept Eusebia company, talking to her occasionally, poking her to get attention. Eusebia said to Carmen, "Doña Candida has a kitten she wants to give away. Interested?"

"That would be good. We need a cat here. We're getting too many mice. You'd think the rains and the floods would have drowned them all."

Xochi returned. I took Eusebia and Carmen a drink and went to lie down.

Later, between bouts of kissing and play, I told Eusebia I wanted to stay with her, not leave Morazán. She said, "And if I felt like moving on, back to Brazil? Somewhere else maybe?"

"Can I come with you?"

"Of course. What about your studies?"

"They're not important. I can learn more here, find work and study here. I still have enough money back home to last until the end of next year. Anyway, you speak French, maybe we could move to Europe…."

She was silent.

Then she said, "So many things might happen. Let's just enjoy each other and see…."

"Will you get bored with me?"

"Maeve, after this week together I can't imagine not sharing my life with you." She rolled over onto me and I gave in again to her kissing.

When Bernardo dropped me back at the house that night, Xochi was already asleep, as usual. Eusebia was showing Carmen how to fix a zipper into a dress using the sewing machine. It was hard to picture her back in her role as smart, controversial woman-about-town in La Bahía.

I kissed them both good night. Carmen saw I was thinking of having to say goodbye to Eusebia. She touched my hand, "Don't worry, Xochi and I will take care of you." I wondered if she knew Eusebia and I were lovers, if she cared.

Marta had promised a lift for Doña Maria on one of the trucks she was sending up in the morning to Xiguasí. They were going to leave at seven. Neither Eusebia nor I were looking forward to the separation. She tried to make me sleep with her stories, that night she told me Yoruba legends of the sea, the sun and the moon, of the lakes and rivers.

The sun and the moon invited the waters to visit. The waters came to the compound where the sun and the moon lived and slowly filled it up to their knees "Is there still room for us all?" asked the waters. "Of course," said the sun proudly. So the waters kept on flowing until the sun and the moon had to climb on the roof of their house. "Is there still room for us all, O Sun and Moon?" "Of course" said the Sun and the Moon, anxious not to break the rules of hospitality. But by the time all the waters had entered their compound, the Sun and the Moon had taken to the sky in order to keep dry. And that is how the Sun and the Moon came to live in the sky.

Still, we couldn't rest.

I told her one of my favourite stories, of the youngest son whose brothers lower him down in a basket to another world. There he meets a beautiful woman who turns into a horse and carries him across the sea to an island where he can win eternal happiness from the king. But first he must find the king in different hiding places on three successive days on pain of forfeiting his life should he fail.

The first day, the king hides in the eye of a needle in the room where all the courtly maids sit sewing. But the boy finds him. The second day, the king hides as an apple seed in an apple high up in a tree in a large orchard full of apple trees. But still the boy finds him. The third day, the king hides inside an egg within one of a group of swans swimming far out on the lake. And still the boy finds him. Each time he is saved from the death he would suffer should he have failed, by the love and wisdom of the maiden in the form of a horse.

I stopped there. The story was long and we were no nearer falling asleep. So we spent the night talking about how we might make a life together, finally dropping away into sleep in the small hours.

The departure in the morning was hectic. We had slept later than we should and only just reached the trucks on time. Our goodbye was a quick embrace in the door of a truck's cab with a promise we'd meet on the Saturday.

I went into the Alcaldía to talk to Marta Muñoz. We still had two thousand dollars to spare in my account, apart from my own money. "What should we say to the embassy today?"

"Not sure, really, May. Let me do a couple of sums."

She tapped away at a calculator on her desk. The paper ratcheting quickly through the printer as she went.

"In theory, with the journeys we're making every other day now to Xiguasí, even if they don't open a crossing on the river up there, we can meet all the needs in Marañon. The convoy yesterday brought us enough food and supplies for people in Guajiniquil and Totomoya. So I guess we should really be looking at how to help folks down near San Juan and along the Walilika road."

"Can vehicles get through to those places now?"

"The bigger trucks can get through to San Juan, ok, they're high enough out of the water so long as they don't sink into the sand. The army have re-established the Walilika-Jocote Renco-Bikuka road. Late yesterday, we got a request for help from people who'd come here from communities up in the Los Angeles on the way to Concepción who are still cut off from there. But we're just too stretched ourselves, so we sent them up to Xiguasí this morning with the trucks. It's much closer for them in any case. I'm surprised the army hasn't got to them yet."

"D'you think I could get to Walilika tomorrow?"

"Sure. In the meantime, let's hold on to the money we still have in the bank in case something unexpected happens. On Saturday I sent a message to Hilario in Walilika asking him for a list of needs. He'll almost certainly get that to me this morning."

"Thanks Marta. See you after lunch then…."

Over at the WLU office, Margarita had visitors, a couple of women. They looked unhappy and stopped talking when I entered. Margarita said to them, "Don't worry. She's with us. She's ok."

Then she told me, "These women are from Güiscanal, a village up by the Bikuka-Concepción crossroads. They're worried about this woman's husband. He was arrested by the police on Saturday night. She thinks it's to do with the Orozco case."

"What's that?"

"It was on the radio on Friday. I'm not surprised you missed it. It hardly got a mention. The police and the army found a truck with boxes of mortar rounds hidden in its load waiting to get across the river at Xiguasí. The driver was a man called Simon Orozco. The woman's husband is his nephew. We hope it's just the usual intimidation of relatives associated with anyone they arrest. But they may decide to fit him up if they can't find the ones they're really interested in."

"Can we do anything about that?"

"These women are in our local group there, you probably haven't met them because they're in Eva Maria's area."

One of the women, the detained man's wife said "Our village is poor. We can't afford a lawyer. We don't know who to turn to. Eva Maria has always helped us. But we can't get to Concepción where she is because the road is blocked. We don't even know if she's there. So we came here to Margarita. We just don't know what to do."

"Seems to me you need to find out where he is so you can get a lawyer to see him."

"Easier said than done, Maeve. But you're right and we're unlikely to be able to do it here. The most likely place they've taken him is Xiguasí. But it's possible they may have them in the army base at Bikuka. We need to get the lawyers in La Bahía on it. I'll go over to Unitel and ring the office. Amelia may be able to get Celia Rodriguez to help. Can you mind the office, Maeve?"

I had thought there may be less to do now supplies were finding their way in. But while Margarita was away, WLU promoters arrived from three villages that had been cut off from Marañon until the weekend. They all needed help of some kind, mostly food, medicine and tools to repair tracks and roads washed away in the floods. I wrote everything down, explaining we needed to wait until Margarita returned. She came back some time later, delayed by the long queues for the phones.

So the week was even busier than the week before. Raul agreed to disburse money to assist the villages and hamlets around Marañon, down to San Juan and along the Guajiniquil road. With Marta we built up a reserve of tools - wheelbarrows, steel bars, picks, mattocks and shovels - to help get road communications back to normal along the numerous damaged tracks between remote communities and their nearest roads. Marta devised a food-for-work scheme to encourage people to help with the repair work.

In the end, I got out to Walilika on the Thursday in a truck from the alcaldía. Carolina and Consuelo took me to the graves of the people who had died that night in Roberto's truck. The cemetery had a row of coconut palms along one side. They swayed in the strong breeze that blew off the lake. A bricklayer, trowel and straight edge in hand, was preparing the memorial. He and his labourer stopped work for us, so we could pay our respects

I was sad to see that Celia, the woman they had found up above the lake, was among the dead. Consuelo said "There was just nothing we could do for her. She was only barely alive when we got her back to the village."

"Lourdes?" I asked.

Carolina said, "She made it. She's in hospital in La Bahia. The army took her out in a helicopter. The doctors operated on her to save the baby. A little girl…….Jaime spoke to her over the weekend by telephone. They're going to call the baby Maeve."

Consuelo added, "Danilo told us about that journey. Nobody knew you and Aloysio were from the same country. I want to go there one day….. "

I missed Hilario. He was out visiting hamlets up near the border. The others were there, Danilo, Jaime, David. They told me enough supplies were getting through. I made sure Consuelo got enough medicines to last her a couple of months or so.

In Marañon that night, I called in on Bernardo to beg the use of his phone to ring Raul at the embassy. It was seven, but Raul was still at work. Margarita and I had used up all the embassy money the day before.

"You've done a good job Maeve. Everyone here is very pleased. You coming back this weekend?"

"Yes Raul, I just wanted to confirm that. Did the mayor fax you a letter of thanks today?"

"Yes he did. Several of the embassies here have been working together so as not to duplicate effort. Madame Ikuku of the Japanese embassy said she saw you. She said you looked tired but well. The mayor's assistant said our intervention saved lives. Do you think that's true?"

"Sure, conditions were very bad the first few days, Raul. Anyway we did the job. It's time to move on."

"Can you come into the embassy on Monday? We need you to bring all the receipts and your bankbook and any other documents you may have relevant to the payments we made. Can you do that?"

"Of course Raul. I kept everything. What time?"

"Eleven thirty would be good. I should be out of meetings by then."

"Ok, see you then."

By Friday, the overall situation around the Momotoa department was clearer. All the roads were open. Where necessary, crossings had been established over rivers where bridges had collapsed. A supply route had been opened up along the undamaged Transamerican branch line that crossed the river upstream from the damaged bridge south of Xiguasi.

Transamerican had opened a road through to the Concepción-Bikuka road so freight could travel by rail to the end of the line and transfer to trucks before setting out for the highway down to Marañon. This was much quicker than the long route around bad roads through Dulce Nombre and Bikuka and more efficient than the raft crossing at the damaged road bridge It was the route I took with Margarita on the Friday morning in order to make the meeting with Eva Maria and Yelba.

Yelba seemed completely better although still pale. After we had exchanged news and greetings. Eva Maria asked "What's the news from Amelia?"

Margarita had been in touch with the Bahía office the previous evening, "She wants the three of you in on Monday without fail to review funding requests she's written. Sounded reasonable though. Says she agrees we need to get concrete data to back up the request. But leaving it another week was too long. I spent the week working with Maeve on the departmental information for Momotoa. How about you two?"

"I covered what I could of the villages in Maraní." said Eva, "Couldn't get out to the Tirurí area. That road's still blocked."

Yelba said, "It's a bit easier in Xiguasí as a department. The bridge being down made it hard to get information south of the city but they cleared the way into San Luis on Tuesday so I was able to get up there a couple of days ago."

"OK, " Eva went on, "So let's say we agree we're going to ask for seeds and tools to expand the patio vegetable programme and for supplies to improve small scale irrigation. I still think we're making a mistake asking for these fancy diesel water pumps."

The water pumps had been a constant theme with the communities. They wanted to produce vegetables, but asked how they could do that efficiently without secure irrigation resources.

"I'm not sure either Eva. Maybe you're right the people will fight over them. But we can't get a pump for everyone. How else can we get them enough water for the increased area of vegetables they say they want to sow if they won't share the pumps?"

"I don't know, Maeve. Maybe it's one we should try and work out more carefully. Trouble is, Amelia's going to put pressure on us straight away on Monday. It'll end up being a trade off we have to make in order to get the programme approved. Amelia will like it because she can give the technical advice work to her agronomist friends from the university."

Yelba said, "I think you're right about the social problems we'll have trying to get people to use the water pumps collectively But if we get the agreements properly drawn up on a public escritura - none of this "oh we know you, we trust you" nonsense that's caused us so many problems in the past - we should be able to keep problems to a minimum. Most people will understand we'll just take the pumps back if they try any tricks."

The meeting went on till one. I decided not to lose time having lunch since the route to La Bahía was longer now. Buses were travelling up to Las Ramadas and heading into the capital on the airport road, instead of on the La Sabana road. Three bridges had been damaged between La Sabana and the capital. One river crossing still needed to be completed before buses could use the normal route.

It was strange riding through the country up to Las Ramadas and on to the airport and into the city. It was completely untouched by the savage destruction in the north and west of the country. In La Bahía itself things were very different.

Passengers for my side of town had to get off at the ring road and take urban buses or taxis to our destinations. Over the Twin Bridges, the scene along the Rio Hermoso was astonishing and frightening. The floods had washed a great gash straight through the centre of town. Even part of the foundations of the huge Unamuno Theatre had been exposed.

Where the river had been culverted over, all was open to the sky. A deep muddy ravine ran across the edge of the Republic Rotonda. Most of the road between the Republic and Independence roundabouts had disappeared.

Pipes, wires and drains stuck out from the banks of the river. Where streets had been parallel to the river, pavements hung in the air, barely supported on the exposed red clay beneath. The damage seemed to stretch all the way down to the Indigo River.

The taxi stopped at the bottom of El Desdichado. I said, "I wanted the park at the top."

"You've been out of town, I guess. Most of the street up there is mud and rock right now. This is as far as this taxi goes."

I started up the street. The light was beginning to fade. It must have been nearly six.

It was true, after the first hundred metres around the first bend the road surface had washed away. I stumbled over the rocks and gravel and loamy soil the tarmacadam had overlaid. At the shop on the corner I greeted Asunción, "Hi."

"Maeve! Jesus! You're back!" She came out and hugged me. "Last we heard of you was nearly a week ago. Didn't know if you were OK or not. Hey. You should have phoned us, you know. You know who phoned us? Your uncle. Just phoned up one afternoon to tell us you were ok down there in Momotoa.

Wasn't that terrible that landslide down there? Imagine, all those people dead in their homes. God have mercy on them. We've had things bad here too, over in Las Chanillas. But the port's ok. Supplies have been coming in fine. The main problem's been distribution outside the city with all those bridges down and everything. You back for a while?"

"I don't know. A lot depends on a meeting I have on Monday at the office."

"You're looking great anyway."

"You too. Marcel?"

"Same old Marcel. Griping about the football fixtures being postponed. The kids are ok too. We're all fine. I guess you want milk and bread. Want anything else?…"

I bought a few things, some eggs, onions, tomatoes. "Hey", she said as I left, "It's really great to have you back."

"Thanks Asunción. I'm glad to see you too. Is the electricity on?"

"Sure is. Good job too."

The flat seemed strange. Simone and Jeanne Moreau and Arletty gazed out at me from their poster limbo there on the wall, trapped in those moments of cinema. I was stepping back in time to a former life of mine now gone for good. I surveyed the dials of this apartment, my time machine. The clock said six. I switched on the radio for the Radio Morazán news

"…. President Noel Ramirez confirmed today that the United States will send an engineering battalion to assist in the reconstruction of the bridges destroyed in the recent floods. The deployment will be delayed until the army here can ensure the complete safety of United States service personnel following reliable intelligence reports of threats to attack them from left wing subversives still active in Morazán…… A spokesman for General Benavides today linked the recent discovery of mortar bombs in Xiguasí to preparations for this kind of attack. The armed forces spokesman also welcomed today's statement by the new attorney general, Dr. Guillermo Montoya, urging the Supreme Court to reject the writs of amparo lodged on behalf of members of the Orozco gang by lawyers acting for relatives, since the suspects have been detained under the anti terrorism provisions….. Government reconstruction work continued successfully today with the opening of a secure crossing to the border town of San Juan la Frontera and the clearance of roads out from San Luis toward the Maraní valley… The total death toll to date is one thousand four hundred and seven. International agencies have congratulated President Ramirez for the prompt civil defence measures taken which, they confirm, prevented far greater loss of life……."

I switched it off. Then changed my mind and tuned it to Maravilla. It was a programme of songs by one of my favourites, Mabel Duran. As it ended, the announcer said, "and that's the end of this tribute to Mabel Duran who died so tragically in the floods that devastated La Bahía on October third. Everyone here at Radio Maravilla joins all her fans in sending condolences to Mabel's family. We all share their

grief for the loss of someone who was a truly special person and one of Morazán's outstanding international music stars.……After the break, news headlines on the half hour at six thirty……."

The news of Duran's death really affected me. The rich, beautiful and famous also die unexpectedly, memento mori. I made some coffee while the commercials came on and realised I still had some rum. I poured some and drank to Mabel.

"This is the six thirty news with Delia Moreno on Friday, October 13th. President-elect Enrique Cabañas today joined President Ramirez to welcome news that United States army engineers will arrive in the coming weeks to assist in works to restore bridges and other infrastructure damaged during Hurricane Maureen. The two men met today to discuss preparations for the handover of ministerial portfolios in January nineteen ninety. Following the meeting Dr Cabañas refused to comment on this week's resignation of Attorney General Saul Garcia over what Dr. Garcia describes as the irregular detention of individuals involved in the Simon Orozco arms smuggling case. Orozco and other detainees have been held incommunicado for ten days. Lawyers for relatives are awaiting the result of their petition to the Supreme Court demanding the detainees be presented before a magistrate….. International relief agencies today met with government officials to resolve administrative delays in the release of relief supplies from the docks in Puerto Moro and La Bahia. Aid agency representatives described the talks as friendly and positive….. Health Minister Doctora Adelina Sanchez rejected accusations from the mayors of Xiguasí and Marañon that local departmental officials have been stockpiling medicines. Doctora Sanchez described the accusations as "absurd and contradictory"…..Finally, thousands of people attended a memorial service in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart today for singer Mabel Duran. Mabel Duran was drowned when her car crashed into the Rio Hermoso on the night of Tuesday, October third. …More news at seven thirty…..after the break, Edgar Mairena looks at the weekend's national and regional sport."

I switched off. It was extraordinary Saul Garcia had resigned. And I was sharply amused at the Health Minister denying what everyone knew. Her people were hoarding medicines sent in for the relief effort so as to sell them later for a hefty profit. Maybe Garcia was jumping ship early so as to be able to say his hands were clean if and when any revelations might emerge of the inveterate corruption of the governments he had served.

Missing Carmen and Xochi, wondering what Eusebia was doing, I put on one of Da's Ray Charles cassettes, set myself to making an omelette. As I sat down to eat. Someone banged at the door. From the top of the stairs I shouted unenthusiastically, "Who is it?"

"Mary Douglas."

What on earth was she doing here? I opened. "Hello Maeve. I'm sorry to call in unexpectedly. Amelia told me she thought you might be back tonight so I dropped in on spec."

"Come on up. How can I help you? I was just eating, want some?"

"No thanks… Don't mind me…. Look. We may have got off on the wrong foot, Maeve. I'm sorry. I've heard you did a good job for the WLU down in Marañon."

"I'm glad."

"I won't waste your time, have you been following the Orozco case?"

"No. While I was down in Marañon I met the wife of one of the men detained. Margarita was trying to get some help for them through Amelia. I've no idea what happened. I was amazed to hear Saul Garcia resigned over it. Why is it of interest to you?"

"Well there's more to that than meets the eye, I can tell you…But the reason I'm here is I remember you're close to that French embassy guy, the one you were dancing with at Graham and Zenaida's wedding. I wanted to ask you to mention the case to him. He may be able to help them, if they're still alive. People say he's in touch with the army high command. He's supposed to be in touch with the right wing clique around Garcia and that dreadful Roa woman.

I chewed my omelette, managing not to choke.

"Mary, perhaps because I was able to help Ninoska Vileda, I've created the impression that I'm some kind of radical. I'm really not. I've taken a lot of trouble to steer clear of the politics of the rural workers movement. I don't like those guys. I don't like the way they use people. I'll be seeing Mr Pec on Monday as it happens, and I can certainly mention the case to him. But he's going back to France next week. I don't mean to be unkind. Do you really think the army high command take any notice of what outsiders say?"

"Maybe not, but anything's worth a try. You're right to be sceptical about the rural workers' leaders. But sometimes they do the right thing when others don't. My main concern is that the people arrested get a fair trial. A couple of them are individuals who worked with some of my programmes in the past. I don't think they're terrorists. I think the army is using the arms find to pull in a number of people they want to harass and intimidate because they're effective in promoting rural workers' rights. So if you can ask your friend to put in a word on their behalf I'd appreciate it. How long did you say you were here for?"

"Until March."

"Too bad, good people are hard to find here….. I remember at the party after Graham's wedding, Evora Barnes told me you did some translating for Eusebia Roa. Are you really apolitical? It's so unusual to find someone taking that position here."

I felt my skin goose-pimple. Douglas was touching too close.

"I did some work for Roa. She's sharp all right. But her radio programme's worth listening to sometimes…. She seems to have quite a reputation."

"She's an arty-farty right-wing opportunist bitch. I'm not surprised if she screwed you on the work you did for her….. I'd better get going. Sorry to drop in unexpectedly. I'd appreciate it if you could tell me what your friend at the embassy says."

"Sure……."

As I locked the door behind her I heard the whistles of the vigilantes down the street.

That visit from Douglas, where had that come from? Raul in the park that day he tackled the army press gang, "…She's worth taking care of…." I didn't quite get how branding Eusebia a dodgy skinflint would take care of her.

Was it just as my Da' used to say? Me not even a teenager, "Never let your left hand know what the right hand's doing, listen to me now….." And that was the cause of much of the fighting at home. "I'm just sick of your endless lies!" my mother used to scream at him. "It's not lies," he'd say, so calm it used to drive her even wilder. "I'm entitled to keep some things to myself, that's all….You women do that all the time…." It was as if they spent their lives working out how best to beat each other about with their caricatures of each other. Listening to more Ray Charles and some Ornette Coleman, I remembered their music was about the only thing my mother and Da' never fought about. They both loved the mellowness of it.

I resisted the temptation to head out and grab a taxi over to Eusebia. I sat down and began to write letters to my mother, to Soulange, to my uncle Pat. It was nearly eleven before I set things aside. I could think of little except seeing Eusebia again at the gallery in the morning. As I put some water to boil for tea, I heard the door rattle. It was the slightest noise, but too much for the wind to have made. I went down, "Who's there?"

"Doña Maria…."

She came in, dressed in the same clothes as the week before. Only her hair was different, unplaited. She took off her headscarf. "I couldn't not see you," she whispered as we embraced.

The water on the stove boiled away before I remembered it.

Eusebia looked about the flat. "You live as sparely as I do…..Great posters, Maeve. That's a nice one of Jeanne Moreau….. Raul told me once, seeing "Jules et Jim" in sixty-one after his demob from Algeria was an eye-opener for him, a liberation…. Arletty's a fascinating woman too. I don't know this film of Simone Signoret….. I suppose they're icons for you."

I took her hand, "Not any more. Not now I've got my very own."

Before we slept, I recounted to her the visit from Mary Douglas and told her for the first time of the conversation in the park that day with Raul, the weekend before the floods. I confessed to her my confusion at the secrecy with which he had concealed his military status from me, the mystery I felt about his relationship with her and about her own double life. "Why do you cultivate the image of a wanton wealthy promiscuous ideologue and then disappear to help run a pre-school in one of the poorest barrios in Marañon? I was too deeply in love with you last week to be able to talk to you about it. But I feel closer to you now. I want to understand you….."

Even as I said it, I heard my mother saying in one of the calms between her and Da', "You think it's a laugh being married to someone I know I'll never understand? You think that's what I want? Never knowing what's going to happen next?…."

I recanted instantly, "Eusebia, that's not what I mean. Oh no..... that's not it at all….I love you…"

"Shh… Be patient, my angel. Can you? Life here isn't easy for me, Maeve. I am so in love with you too. We had a beautiful time in Marañon. There'll be many more times like that, I promise you. Let's talk ….. about Morazán. I can't talk about Raul. That's his business. Do you mind?"

"No."

She told me how she'd come to Morazán from Brazil at the invitation of some wealthy friends to whom she'd been introduced by business contacts in Rio de Janeiro. How she'd managed to make a name for herself with her writing, establishing a persona that found her a niche in the establishment, "…. a bit the way someone like Condoleeza Rice fits into the junta around Ronald Reagan and George Bush, a rich, ambitious black woman. Do I believe what I write? Not necessarily. Do I enjoy upsetting the left-wing cliques who shout all the time about their concern for the poor and who live very comfortably with foreign money to fund their right-on pseudo-radical antics? Yes, I do. So I trim my sails to make money and I use that money to fund Doña Maria. Is that so bad, Maeve? ……The vehicles we use for who we are depend on the terrain we move on. Where you come from, you have nice roads and they're hard and smooth and you can drive in a straight line at a hundred and eighty kilometres an hour to get where you want to go. Here it's different. There are no roads. If you do suddenly chance on one, it generally won't go where you want to and absolutely nothing is in a straight line….You know why I love you so?"

"Eusebia, I have no idea….."

"You give me a very special kind of tenderness and energy. It's a really beautiful thing you give me….Will you still love me when I'm old? ….forgive me, see how foolish you have made me…..?"

I said, "I can't imagine not being yours…."

We fell to kissing for a while. She astonished me later, when she said, "I've never met anyone like you." And then, I felt the same about her. Perhaps she too asked herself, "How can this be?"

Next day she left late, after nine. We had a lazy breakfast. Up on the roof, clear of my neighbour, drinking our coffee, we surveyed the devastated city. The long channel driven by the Rio Hermoso through the centre was over two hundred metres wide down by the Indigo River. The Heroes of Verclaro Bridge just wasn't there any more. The National Assembly building and the Banks district where the La Bahía alcaldía stood were untouched, being on higher ground. But the low lying Chanillas area across the river had been flattened.

Eusebia explained she was busy all weekend until Sunday night. "I'll meet you at the cinemas at the Plaza Bolero, the other side of the Twin Bridges. Can you be there at nine?"

Of course I could.

She left and I passed the day walking to see the damage inflicted by the floods, taking a taxi out along the ring road. Some land out along the La Sabana road had been set aside for displaced people, more than twelve thousand people were homeless. At a couple of sites they were sheltered in well-ordered

square white tents. At one place, I saw less well organized encampments, structures sheeted in black plastic, the tracks between them muddy from waste water; people washing, themselves, their clothes, their dishes.

The army had rigged a temporary steel bridge across the Indigo River to connect the ring road, with its free trade zone, to the road across the Maraní, to the north side of the Indigo River, where so many of the trade zone workers lived..

There was no coast road north of La Bahía. The area was impassable mangrove swamp, important to the economy for the increasing exploitation of shrimp farming. Big commercial operations were displacing the artisanal shrimp farming of the indigenous communities living in the mangrove itself. The swamp was what had made the Verclaro fortress so difficult to attack. Hostile troops and artillery could only approach from the west along the river.

The flood devastation had left behind an even more curiously disparate city than before. The poorer barrios had always been a contrast with the wealthier parts of town. Since they were also the most low-lying, or else built precariously on the slopes of the hills around La Bahía, those same poor areas were the worst affected by the floods. The low areas were inundated, the sprawling agglomerations of flimsy construction simply swept away. The higher shantytowns slid and slithered down their hillsides in the rains; houses and families crashing down on top of each other like reckless demons chasing each other down a slide. Given the chaos of it all, it was sheer good luck so few people had died.

In other parts of the city, the big shopping centres were untouched. The main residential areas looked completely normal. Although, wherever the roads had been badly made, the asphalt surface had washed away. Many of the streets and roads around town were a mess, but not intransitable. Only in the very centre, where the Rio Hermoso had run amok, was there significant damage. There it was catastrophic.

I managed to walk around to where the market area had been in Las Chanillas. Flood water still lay where the central bus station and the covered market area had stood. Beyond, Our Lady of Mercy had a dirty brown tidemark up above its great doors. I looked up from it to the implacable white stone walls of the Verclaro Fortress.

Against the blue sky white gulls circled the fortress, looking for something to scavenge. Inside the church, I found women cleaning the Stations of the Cross. Maybe one of them was Rita. The same dirty tidemark stained the inside of the walls. It would take weeks to clean and paint.

Outside, bulldozers were clearing wreckage, rubble and mud. Diggers scooped it all up to load onto barges on the now placid river. It was hard to see how they could rebuild the market there. Who would put money into a site liable to be wiped out in another hurricane?

I was delighted to see the little blue and white ferries were operating, a quick way back to my side of town. The Alcaldía had quadrupled the fare with the excuse that they needed revenue for reconstruction. I paid my two pesos at the office on the wharf and sat on the concrete wall to wait, looking around at the totally changed townscape around the church. A fellow passenger remarked,

"Some people are saying it's a chance to modernise the city. Doesn't seem right to me. They should put it back the way it was."

A couple of cormorants skimmed past as we boarded. The boat was full of passengers and sat even lower in the water than usual. But it went quickly, passing through where the muddy fresh waters of the river mixed with the salt blue green of the sea. Nearing the little stone jetty on other side, I looked back across. The simple cupola of Our Lady of Mercy, previously hardly noticeable against the clutter of the market, now dominated the area below the fortress.

Alighting from the ferry, I turned east and made for the docks, wanting to see if William's boat had been damaged. Remarkably, the docks seemed untouched by the mayhem in the city. After all, Morazán had not taken the hurricane winds that had battered the more northerly parts of the Isthmus. In Morazán, it was the unprecedented rains that had provoked such destructive flooding. The docks area looked untouched to me.

I found William's boat. He was on it. Busy painting, he didn't see me come up.

"Hi William. I'm glad you're ok."

"Maeve! Hey, man, am I glad to see you." He came up to take my hand.

I was genuinely pleased he was well. He too seemed sincere in his greeting.

"I see your light on there last night. Several folks askin' about you, you know. Did that old lady find you? Came up to me real late sayin' she was looking for you, maybe around eleven. Didn't know your house."

"That was Doña Maria. Someone I know down in Momotoa. I told her she should visit me if she ever came up here. She's a nice woman. Runs a pre-school down there….. The old city's pretty beat up, isn't she? What's it like where you are behind the stadium?"

"Not bad. Road's damaged, but the house is ok. Feel sorry for those people campin' out on the ring road…. Spoken to Mister Raul?"

"Yeah he's fine. He'll be going a week today."

"That's too bad. I'll miss him."

"Me too….I'll let you get back to your painting. See you around William."

"You too, Maeve. Take care now….Don't you go forgettin' I rent this here boat now…"

Eusebia, the nerve of her. I looked forward to making her and Ondina laugh with William's "old lady".

I phoned Evora and Rob from Unitel on the way home after posting my letters. They invited me out for supper that evening. I agreed.

They too had been caught up in relief work during and after the floods. Rob said, "The weird thing was, no one seemed to have a clue what was happening to us. I sent an e-mail to the office in London early

Tuesday morning, they didn't bother to reply until the Friday. By then Totomoya was all over the international news. The local radio back home rang me before our office in London got back in touch."

Evora recounted how she had provided first aid in a makeshift health post attached to the refuge opened up by the owner of the Hotel Andalusia, "Remember the ballroom? They put mattresses on the floor and had over a hundred people in there. I used to go around with some of the medical staff from the university hospital. It's amazing so few people were seriously hurt here. Most casualties were from people being careless, like the guy driving Mabel Duran. That was just so foolish. Tragic…."

Rob said, "Things could have been much worse. The Civil Defence were very good. Ramirez made things more difficult by refusing to declare a State of Emergency, which made it harder for the relief operation to get going. You know, things like supply trucks being forced to sit for hours in queues of motorists desperate for fuel, businesses not cooperating with the relief effort, relief supplies piling up because the customs people insisted on forcing them through normal procedures, all that kind of stuff. Government officials may have got more in kickbacks in the last two weeks than they've made all year. The top ministers must be licking their chops at the reconstruction money coming in. They'll want to make hay before the handover in January."

"How about you, Maeve?"

"It all seems so long ago now."

I told them briefly of the relief work in Marañon. I didn't feel like telling them about the night in the lake and the ride to Jocote Renco. It occurred to me to tell them about my visit from Mary Douglas. "It was so unexpected. We hardly know each other. She seemed to think I had some special influence with Raul."

I could sense Evora biting her tongue.

Rob said, "That Orozco case is a funny business. There's so much going on we never hear about. One thing's for sure, I'm glad I'm not in those guys' shoes. Their families are right to be worried about them."

"Mary Douglas thought the army were using the case as a pretext in order to drag in rural workers activists and give them a hard time."

"That's plausible," said Evora "The army are good at feinting so people don't realise what they're up to somewhere else."

Rob added, "And another thing is that the army are putting pressure on Cabañas to trash his human rights agenda. Lots of things are going on."

"I was surprised Saul Garcia resigned."

"He's a canny bugger that fellow. My bet is he'll turn up in the Cabañas administration. People are cutting all kinds of deals right now trying to see themselves all right after the change of government in January. That's another reason there's so much corruption in the relief effort. All those officials know

they'll be out of a job when Cabañas gets in, so they're getting as much money in the bank as they can now, while the going's good."

Rob had work to prepare for Monday. Evora walked with me to the end of the road to catch a taxi. I made it home around ten.

In a week Raul would be gone. I would indeed miss his friendship, his solidity. Had he consciously passed me on to Eusebia? Was it demeaning? Vanity is for fools. Before falling asleep I prayed silently for all to be well between Raul and Beatrice and their daughters.

I rolled over, felt something uncomfortable beneath me. Switching on the light by the bed, I found it was an amber bracelet Eusebia had mislaid. I put it on. Tomorrow, housework.

On the rooftop patio, washing laundry late next morning, I barely heard the door below when Sylvie called. She too had devoted herself to disaster relief work. The deceit and corruption in the Health Ministry left her outraged, as did the indifference of so many of her colleagues to people suffering around them.

She told me Ninoska and the children were really very well. They had arranged to meet up in Puerto Moro next weekend. Sylvie wanted to drive over after seeing Raul off at the airport, "Would you like to come?"

"Yes, Sylvie. I'll look forward to it."

"I heard from Walker during the week. He phoned from San Francisco."

"Is he OK?"

"Oh sure. Worried about people here of course. He's a good man…."

"But?"

Sylvie laughed, "He's a strange mixture of confidence and timidity. He knows so much about so many things and then you discover almost total ignorance of something you know yourself……."

"Raul can't stand him."

"Raul can be very uncharitable you know. Walker has helped a lot of people here. You can forgive him a lot for that…. I'd better go. I'll pick you up next Saturday then…oh no, you'll be at the airport, won't you?"

Yes, I would be at the airport, kissing goodbye to a chunk of my life. Sylvie and I agreed we'd leave for Puerto Moro straight from the airport. I was glad of this. I wanted to see Ninoska and the children again, safe and happy this time.

After lunch I looked for Radio Morazán to catch Eusebia on "Make It New". I wasn't disappointed.

"Good afternoon. Welcome to the programme. This week Dr. Henry Martinez of the University of Georgetown and Maria Lezcano, the novelist, just back from a conference in Madrid on "Race and the Twentieth Century Novel", will discuss with me in the studio the legacy of slavery in our contemporary literature. We'll also have a look at the new Unamuno Theatre production of French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's "Les Mains Sales". Saul Garcia, former Attorney General of the Republic, reviews this trenchant anti-communist parable. First as usual, our weekly poem in translation: Gloria Suarez reads "A Christmas Childhood" by the Irish writer Patrick Kavanagh in a version by the Argentinian poet Deyanira Vasquez…."

It was a surprise and a joy to listen to Vasquez's version of Kavanagh's poem, how close Catholic rural Ireland was and is to the people in the campo in Morazán. A couple of the words Vasquez used were new to me, Argentinian country colloquialisms, I guessed. But she had caught the sense and tone and lilt of Kavanagh's verses and Gloria Suarez read them with sensuous magic.

Eusebia went straight into the studio discussion with a provocative jibe, "…..After all there is such a creature as the orthodox radical. We all know what a certain type of person is going to say about the Five Hundred Years commemorations before they utter a word. You, Henry, may well represent that type. Surely the bottom line is, what happened happened and then the most interesting question is, not some absurd fuss about irremediable historical wrongs, but how to get the best out of what our history has left us ..…"

Martinez, a patient fellow, clearly well used to this kind of discussion, made a cogent case for rejecting the official celebrations of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus reaching the Americas, in favour of a perspective from the forgotten, hidden point of view of the victims of those five hundred years. Somewhat unwisely, he chose to enter Eusebia's home ground, citing the influence of Euclides da Cunha's novel of the Brazilian sertão, Os Sertões and its account of the Canudos uprising led by Antônio Conselheiro in the eighteen nineties. This set Eusebia off.

"Yes. Many liberals mention da Cunha's novel in this context. What they invariably fail to mention is the ambiguity da Cunha himself felt about the indigenous and slave heritage of Brazil. He was after all a modernizer. So it's very disingenuous, isn't it? To suggest that the only or even the principal "correct" reading of the five hundred years is your own. One has only to see how populist dictators like Fidel Castro hijacked symbols like the Demajagua Bell for example, using a very culturally specific and highly historically conditioned event as a myth to rationalise his communist totalitarian state and in doing so, pressing a figure like De Cespedes, essentially a late hero of the Enlightenment, into service of a narrow, self-serving, Marxist account of Cuban history. Needless to say, this has created a debilitating schizophrenia in writers foolish enough to fall for this kind of historical manipulation. Would you agree, Maria?"

Maria did not. "Depends what you mean by schizophrenia, really, Eusebia. Literature by its nature is an arena for conflicting versions of our history, conflicting attempts to manipulate our reality in support of a particular ideology or hegemonic group. However much writers may protest they're apolitical, in the end we all push our own view of things out into the world. As often as not that view is self-

contradictory. Although the contradictions may not be obvious to us or others at the time. It's interesting though that you should have mentioned De Cespedes and Demajagua. It seems to me very obvious that that is the pivotal moment and the iconic gesture around which so much of our own contemporary thinking on culture and race turns. At least as much as, for example, our tendency to depend on borrowed, as it were, icons, like, say, Martin Luther King."

Despite the convoluted lit. crit. style, I thought Eusebia made the most of her two guests. She had a gift for knowing what might prompt them into standing their ground and refused to let them wriggle out of defining what they meant.

Then, a recording of the part of the Unamuno production of "Les Mains Sales" where the young assassin Hugo's target, Hoederer, knowing Hugo has a gun, turns his back on the would be killer, who then lacks the spirit to take his chance.

In what was an indirect attack on the army and President Ramirez, Saul Garcia offered his reading, "This is the story of a confused young man, tricked through his immaturity into blind obedience to the Communist Party. The play is about how he comes to murder a leading communist accused by others in the Party of treachery for holding secret negotiations with monarchists and conservatives. In the end, the assassination is confusing. Was it political?….. In the play, the killer receives imprisonment on the grounds that his act was a crime of passion, for the victim had courted the young man's wife to form a classic triangle…..What is unmistakeable is that the people who ordered the killing find the assassin, when he comes out of prison, an embarrassment, because by then they too are negotiating with the monarchists and the conservatives…… So they have the assassin killed….. I came away from this play convinced of its legal orthodoxy. It is a powerful argument for the rule of law. It says, "we cannot judge others except with reference to the law - not to our own consciences, nor to whatever government happens to be in power at a given time, but to the law, however imperfect it may be." Denying that, setting some institution, be it a political party, the church, the army, the State even, above the law, strips protection away from all of us. Leaving us to live or die at the whim of whoever may be holding the trigger at the time. Sartre's play, probably unwittingly, given its author, offers a profound argument for the rule of law."

It was a short, but unmistakable, attack. Garcia had just about kept it within the confines of the Conservative Party ambit; a review in an arts programme on Radio Morazán after all. But it was obviously a preliminary skirmishing move prior to the inevitable leadership battle inside the Conservative Party following their election defeat.

Eusebia was somewhere near the middle of it all. Where did that leave me?

Eusebia wound up the programme, "And we should congratulate the Unamuno management for ensuring the cultural life of La Bahía goes on at the Unamuno, despite the damage caused by Hurricane Maureen. That's it for today's programme. We hope you'll join us next week for another edition of "Make It New". "

I rested most of the afternoon, then rooted out my copy of "Les Mains Sales" which I hadn't read for years. I read until just gone eight. My heart beat more quickly as I headed down El Desdichado to catch

a taxi. On the way, in the cab, I was imagining Eusebia's embrace and the grip of her legs around me. I must have moaned slightly, the taxi driver asked, "You all right?"

"Yes. Fine."

At the Plaza Bolero people were already leaving the cinemas from the seven o clock performances. I waited near the car park watching the queues file in for the nine o'clock showings. A car, not Eusebia's, pulled up some way off. I saw Urania get out and wave. I went over. She greeted me, smiling, with a gentle kiss. Eusebia was in the passenger seat.

In the back seat, I asked "How was your weekend?"

"Very busy, we have so much work at the gallery. The disaster has slowed everything up, and our clients insist everything should run as normal. But it's all fine. I asked Urania to drive because I had too much to drink at a cocktail party with colleagues from Radio Morazán this afternoon."

"I heard your programme. It was excellent."

"Thank you my darling." She reached out to me, sensed my uncertainty. "It's ok. Urania's family."

I took her hand and leaned forward. "How about you Urania? Is your husband well? Mateo, isn't it?"

"You have a good memory. He is very well. He travels widely for his job. He's sales manager for a wholesaler. They sell to supermarkets throughout the isthmus. The hurricane has caused him a lot of problems. I hardly see him right now."

We arrived at the house a little before ten o clock, delayed by the damaged roads.

Ondina greeted me warmly, "Have you eaten?"

"No. I got stuck in a book."

Urania investigated the contents of pots on the cooker. "Mm..mmm…Ondi, you knew I was coming, you did that fish in coconut oil…"

"You be sure to leave some of that, Urania. I know you. Eat enough for three if you got the chance….Here let me…."

She briskly slapped Urania's wrist. "You behave now …."

Sitting opposite me at the kitchen table, ignoring their bit of theatre, Eusebia noticed her amber bracelet on my wrist and stroked the back of my hand. Leaning forward, she rested her head on her extended arm, gazing at me, her eyes like narrow almonds, dark and white. She was tired

I said, "You must sleep early tonight, Eusebia. You're worn out."

She smiled, "And you?", sitting up as Ondina put food on the table. "Thanks, Ondi."

Urania sat down with a plate piled high with rice and the fish casserole. She saw me looking at it, Eusebia observing us.

Urania took a spoonful into her mouth and said as she ate, "Hey, I haven't eaten since breakfast, and anyway, best to eat while there is some 'cos tomorrow, who knows……?"

"It's not that Urania. It's just the difference between this image I had of you as this beautiful aloof African priestess and the down-to-earth person you really are."

"Priestess? Me? Mind passing the salt? Chilli too. Thanks."

Stroking Urania's hair behind her, Ondina said, "The only thing special about this one is the amount of my cooking she can put away. Should take it as a compliment I suppose. Come on. Tell me. How did it all go today?"

I craved it, this companionship and familial domesticity. It was of a kind I'd known only fleetingly as a young child. So much of being with Eusebia seemed a redemption of my childhood.

Urania stayed the night. Mateo was away in El Salvador.

In bed, Eusebia examined the bruise on my back. "It's almost gone. That's good."

"I hardly notice it at all now."

I confided to her how little I was looking forward to the meeting in the WLU in the morning. She said, "I've been thinking about that visit from Mary Douglas and everything else that's going on. Remember, if you do want to move away from all that, you can always work with the people in the Alcaldía in Marañon. Carmen tells me they're really fond of you there. And you have a place there with her and Xochi. You can come up at weekends to stay with me and Ondi. I go down there once a month. You decide, my angel. You're wise to be wary of the people in the rural worker's movement. Some are ok, some aren't. I don't need to tell you that."

We talked about her programme that afternoon and I asked her to explain to me the Demajagua Bell.

"On October tenth 1868, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a plantation owner at La Demajagua near Manzanillo in south-eastern Cuba, rang the bell at his sugar ingenio and called together his slaves. He told them they were free, called on them to join him to fight against Spain to win independence for Cuba. Later a group of fighters, including Cespedes, attacked the town of Yara. It was the start of the first Cuban War of Independence, ending ten years later in 1878……"

She was like Raul with that enviable capacity not just to retain information but to express and explain it with passion. The story of Demajagua must have had a special resonance for her. She was able to recite the speech Cespedes made "….Cuba needs all her sons and daughters to win its independence. Those who want to follow me can do so; those who want to stay here can do so. Each person will be as free as the next……"

We talked for a long time, me putting questions to her like a child, her with her unfailing answers, until I let her be. Each night I spent with her was a rewrite of my young life, scribbling over Dublin and Da' and my mother, making of them a script less and less distinct.

I was overjoyed to wake up in the house there with her that first time. She left me dozing while she went running up in the hills above. She must surely have been an athlete when she was younger. We showered together when she came back, larking and fooling. We were happy, a happiness that spread into the banter in the kitchen over breakfast with Urania and Ondi.

Urania dropped me in town.

The meeting at the WLU proved less difficult, but no less unsatisfactory, than Yelba or I or Eva Maria had feared. Mary Douglas participated, asking pertinent questions about conditions in the communities in Maraní and Momotoa, the departments outside La Bahía worst affected by the floods. We went through drafts of the reconstruction funding requests, stripping out what was inappropriate, re-doing budget calculations on the basis of information gathered the previous week.

It was the first time Amelia had shared that kind of work with us. We got the impression events following the hurricane had caused a shake up in the aid and development organisations in Morazán. It was Mary who explained, "People in Europe have responded hugely to the disaster appeals. It's important we get in plausible requests based on what's really going on out in the communities. The problem is time really. If we can get several of these small scale pilot proposals in now before the bureaucracy moves completely out of the relief phase, we stand a better chance of getting money and we can then argue for larger scale funding to consolidate these relief-type projects in the reconstruction phase. There's a big European Commission budget line coming on stream in May next year. These pilot projects will be an ideal base from which to break into that medium and long term development money."

Yelba said, "You seem to be saying we aren't going to take these draft proposals back to the communities to make sure they agree with them." Amelia said, "Don't be naïve, Yelba Rosa, there just isn't time. What we're presenting is a lot more grounded in community needs than what other organizations are submitting, I can assure you."

I began to explore the longer term objectives, suspecting they had more to do with securing the salaries and perks of people like Amelia and Mary than it did with building up viable rural infrastructure. Eva kicked me under the table. I shut up.

She was right. I'd be moving on. What was the point?

Mary ended the meeting, "Well, thank you everyone. That was a very constructive meeting….."

But it was a false satisfaction. She surely knew we'd all kept quiet because the agenda had already been fixed. The discussion was mostly about making the projects more plausible, not whether they met people's needs. Perhaps this feeling was a measure of my inexperience. I just couldn't see how they expected to do good development work if the people concerned were frogmarched into it, despite all the disingenuous pap about participation and transparency

I made it to the French embassy before eleven thirty. Raul was still in his meetings. Rita took me through the accounts of the relief expenditure in Marañon. She was satisfied on the whole, but unhappy with three hand-written receipts I'd accepted for purchases from retailers in the market.

"Make a note of these three, Maeve. Can you try and get the address, telephone numbers and, if possible, the National Identity numbers of these people? That'll make it easier for us to satisfy our accounts officer. I'd like to have that information by the end of the month. You can fax it to me if you like. I know the total is comparatively small, but even so, we need to keep things as formal as we can."

Raul came in at twelve fifteen. "Sorry, Maeve, couldn't get away. Rita taking care of you? Good…… I have to go for lunch with the ambassador's wife today at one. Can you excuse me? There's so much going on this week…. perhaps you could phone me tomorrow? I'll be doing admin work with Rita here, unless something else intervenes."

I almost said, "Can't I phone you at home?" He left.

Rita thanked me for not causing her awkward accountancy problems. I said, "Won't you miss him?"

"Of course. We all will. But it's good he's been sensible and is going home to his wife. Morazán is disastrous for foreign couples that come here to work. The husbands seem to go mad."

I couldn't help myself and said, "Go mad or wake up?"

Rita's smile weakened distinctly.

That afternoon, I sat with Eva and Yelba, writing up the final version of the various projects, translating some of them into English so as to be able to send them to the United States as well as to the European agencies. After thinking for a while, I finally blurted out, "Eva. Yelba. Would you be cross if I packed this in? The WLU I mean….. I want to go and work more freely down in Momotoa, out of Marañon. But I don't want to mess things up for you two."

Eva said, "I wondered how long it would take before you'd had enough. From my point of view, it would be good if you could hang on long enough to get these projects sorted out and wind up the literacy program for the year. Say, the third week of November. The literacy work's down in Momotoa in any case."

"I don't want you to go, Maeve," said Yelba, "But if I were in your shoes, I would. Eva's right though. It'd help if you could hang on until the end of next month."

They had mixed feelings about the meeting earlier that morning.

Eva said, "Things end up turning around money, not around people. I hate it. But what can we do? You can take the line Gladys takes, but even she ends up depending on resources people like Amelia and Mary can get out of the foreign agencies. It would be different if we could look to our government. But everything is moving to cutting out the government from the very work it should be doing, defending the needs of its people. So we end up depending for our community work on people in offices on the other side of the world. It makes you feel helpless."

I took until Wednesday to make up my mind completely. Amelia made time to see me. I explained I thought I'd come to the end of what I could usefully contribute to the WLU, that I wanted a break from the end of November for the last few months of my stay in Morazan. I think it hardly mattered to her.

She thanked me for my work, told me how well thought of I was. I asked her for a letter confirming I had worked for them for that time. It all took less than ten minutes.

That night I stayed over at Eusebia's again. We had worked out a routine. Her busy times were from Thursday through to Sunday afternoon and from Monday through to Wednesday afternoon. So we agreed to make Sunday and Wednesday nights sacred to Oshun.

"You've done the right thing deciding to move on from the WLU. Will you keep in touch with Eva and Yelba?"

"Yes. Would you mind if they visited me at Doña Maria's."

"No. It probably won't even matter if they turn up while I'm around. In the past I've met people down in Marañon who know me here in la Bahía. None of them recognise Doña Maria It's interesting how a few simple changes can completely fool people. They expect to see you as they picture you. We can all so easily be duped. Certainly no one recognises you if they hardly know you and they're not expecting to see you."

Before Saturday I tried several times to contact Raul. It was impossible to get him, either at home or in the office. His last week in the embassy absorbed him completely. I finally caught him on Friday afternoon for the briefest of conversations, "I'm sorry, Maeve. I'd hoped to have one last drink with you. We've been so busy here. Maybe we can have a beer in the airport? Sylvie told me yesterday you're both planning to leave from there for Puerto Moro."

"You all packed?"

"Mostly. The things I want from the house will follow in the diplomatic bag. I'll finish putting my books in boxes tonight. Don't expect I'll sleep much. …I've a call on another line Maeve, see you tomorrow?……"

I had mixed feelings that weekend. It would be adieu to Raul, to Ninoska, to Sylvie. Is parting sweet at all when the chances are you'll never see the person again? Raul may have made a stab at answering that question as he sat with Sylvie and me at a table in the airport bar.

He had checked in. We had maybe half an hour to wait before he boarded and had fallen to talking about goodbyes. He started talking about his aunt Sophie, his parents. I heard my Da' talking through what was probably some complicated homage Raul was making to his Resistance family back in Auvergne. The beer seemed to have worked like a truth serum. I hadn't expected him to be emotional about leaving. But he was.

"You can pretend to yourself you take no side, but we all do one way or another - everyone makes choices, you just have to decide, are you someone, or no one in particular - if you are someone, who are you? What are you? Power encourages us to disguise and forget who or what we are, and the knowledge that death may be just a moment away. Death needn't frighten us. We can survive it in what we give to others. Is our legacy to be just things? Or do we leave behind love and encouragement and knowledge to conjure up solidarity when we are gone? …… "

Sylvie had a couple of letters she wanted him to post in Paris. He took them. We drank up, headed for the departure area and kissed him farewell, Sylvie saying au revoir and me the goodbye he and I both knew it was.

Sylvie said to me in the car park, her arm around me, "Don't be sad, Maeve. You'll see him again. If you want to." As we set off to see Ninoska and the children, I said, "It's like finishing a book you've come to love…. But with people you can't re-read just the bits you enjoy. When you meet them again, you have to start a whole new book, however familiar it may seem to start with."

The drive is very pleasant along the coast to Puerto Moro. The coast road was in good repair for the most part, although Sylvie had to drive very slowly over one stretch, nearly two kilometres long, of continuous potholes and desiccated tarmac. The road passes several small *garifuna* fishing villages. Children sat at the roadside, jumping up and waving fish for sale as we drove by.

The day was hot. For shade, I put a towel in the car window where the sun beat in. Sylvie wore sunglasses. She told me about her friendship with Beatrice. How they'd shared a flat in Paris as students together and stayed friends after Beatrice married Raul. I got her to tell me about her work and it occurred to me to ask her if she'd come across a woman helicoptered in from Bikuka during the floods.

She had. She suddenly said, "Of course…that's what that name was…she told us she wanted to call her little girl Mayiv. That's you, isn't it? How lovely…… If Ninoska has a baby girl, that'll make two little Maeve's running around Morazán. She told me when she was in for her check up before she left for her mother's."

Puerto Moro sits at the end of the Sierra Moro and at the top of the Llano Atlántico. The old town is surrounded by modern residential districts, with shanty areas edging out along the highways to La Bahía and Las Ramadas. The San Vicente district in the northern part of the city is famous for its local *garifuna* culture, rooted in the West African origins of the people there. Most of the houses are of wood, many set up on stilts, with long wooden steps up to the living area.

Boats were drawn up and nets hung out beneath the houses, children and youths playing football everywhere in the late afternoon. The sound of the tranquil sea, a greedy incoming tide lapping and washing in the background. An easterly breeze had begun to blow, making the afternoon somewhat cooler.

Ninoska's mother lived in one of the southern barrios of the old town. We drove from San Vicente into the old colonial port. Above us, the upper-floor balconies of the old houses nearly touched each other in the narrow streets. Off the main streets, the city had a confusing one-way traffic system, with hardly any signs. Sylvie guaged which way she should turn by the direction in which cars were parked.

We had to ask the way to Ninoska's. The very first person we asked said "Oh, that's Adelina Vileda's place. Sure…." We were just three blocks away.

Aracely was uncontrollable when she saw me and Sylvie. She jumped up into Sylvie's arms and threw herself across at me, while Ninoska embraced us. Rogelio hung on quietly to Sylvie's dress. She pulled him up to sit on her hip. Ninoska seemed thinner if anything, her pregnancy much more visible now.

The house was in the middle of a block of single storey buildings. Sylvie had to leave the car in the next block, in a parking lot operated by a business selling tyres and lubricants, a large Castrol sign over its office. Parking was cheap, just ten pesos a day

Adelina, Ninoska's mother, was a small woman, busy and alert, impeccably dressed. They had two green parrots in their central patio that sang out and cried almost continually to each other and to anyone listening nearby, "Araceeeeeehli! Araceeeeeeehli! Granma?, Granma?, Granma? ……..Araceeeeeehli! Rogelio stop it! Rogelito. Rogelito. Rogeleeeeto! Granma? Granma? Granma?"

Ninoska said, "Those birds drive me crazy sometimes."

She seemed in good health, much calmer and more good-humoured than she had been while staying at my place after the explosion. Adelina too was genial and amusing, full of tales of the Moro coast. A photograph of her husband hung on the wall in the front room, beside it a photograph of Adán Rivera.

Adelina remarked at one point, "I truly believe the best men die young. Isn't that what they say, "whom the gods love die young?" Here we are, two widows minding the young ones who'll end up fighting the same old battles all over again. Still, the fight's worth it. A whole people can't be made to live in desperation indefinitely, can they?"

We both read stories to Aracely and Rogelito that night. They fell asleep beside us. We sat up late then, talking to Adelina and Ninoska. They talked a lot about Pepe, Ninoska's father. Adelina showed us a couple of photograph albums, young Pepe leading one of the first UTI marches, a pale and ill Pepe in a group with Omar Torrijos in Panama in 1977 for the signing of one the Carter-Torrijos treaties, Pepe the tourist in front of the Eiffel tower, Pepe shaking hands with Fidel Castro at a conference in Caracas…..

Other photos, more poignant, of Pepe with Ninoska and his other children, a wedding photograph of Pepe and Adelina, both young and beautiful, their faces bright with hope, a similar wedding photograph, this time of Ninoska and Adán, a tiny Aracely smiling on the beach with her father.

Adelina, touched Ninoska's hand. But Ninoska was quite impassive. She took her hand away and put it on top of Adelina's. Neither of them seemed to notice what they were doing.

Sylvie and I shared a room that night, our beds opposite each other. As we waited to fall asleep in the dark. I asked her, "Heard any more from Walker?"

"Yes…… He rings me every few days."

"I've never figured out how you two get along. You seem very close. I'm surprised."

"He and I have an unusual relationship. You probably haven't noticed, but I'm quite a dominating kind of person. Walker and I get on because he's very submissive, very mixed up about his sexuality. In a way I'm a kind of therapist for him, I suppose. He opens up to me. We talk a lot. He's completely lost faith in the roles written for him as a man but the roles written for him as a woman he interprets as ones of submission and deference. I help him play at cross-dressing occasionally. He carries his masculinity like those pink triangles the Nazis used to force homosexuals to wear - something he doesn't want on

display but is forced to wear by his oppressor. It humiliates him. He wants to tear it off. Arrest the identifying smirks of passers-by. He wants to cry out "I'm me, not what you think of me!" But he is what they think of him, at least in part: So he rejects the roles of official manliness assigned to him and seeks out women prepared to accept that and take him on as a servant. Frankly, that suits me. And he can be smart after all and he's pretty. I'll really miss him when I go next month. He's a very tender lover. Shame I can't pack him in my suitcase."

"You're very nonchalant about it, Sylvie …….. I always felt there was something uncomfortable about Mike, like he wasn't happy inside his own skin. What'll he do when you go?"

"I don't know. He's obsessed with the isthmus. I don't think he'll ever completely move away. He's coming back early from the US anyhow. Should be here this Wednesday."

"That's good, I'm keeping some boxes of his and I may want to move the first week in November. I've had enough of the big city, I'm thinking of staying in Marañon for a few months. Might have time to explore the coastal forest south of Bikuka. They say it's gorgeous."

"Does that mean I won't see you after this weekend?"

"Let's see how things go. When do you fly?"

"The sixth. We still have three weeks. Maybe we could have supper one night before you move to down to Marañon."

We rose early next morning to go to the beach with Aracely, Rogelio and Ninoska. Sylvie had to be back in La Bahía for three, so we needed to leave by eleven. Ninoska took us to a place round the coast to the south of the city where she had a friend who lived in a small fishing hamlet, just three houses at the top of the white sandy beach. She brought them papaya from the tree in her mother's patio.

We played all morning with Aracely and Rogelio and a gang of children from the houses there. They all loved Sylvie. She was so funny playing football with them, that roly-poly body of hers, making outrageous tomfool fouls on the older children to get the ball. After one especially blatant shirt pulling incident, they ganged up on her and she carried them off into the waves one under each arm and one clinging to her neck, falling over, all laughter and shrieks in the surf.

I left the game at that point, went to sit with Ninoska and her friend. "How are you getting on with the Jesuits?"

"Great. I'm enjoying it. I work with unemployed women and single working mothers. I get to do plenty of home visits, some advice work, counselling on employment problems. The priests are easygoing. I still keep in touch with the teacher's union but they want me to take it easy. We'll see what happens. Things may change now after the election. Life for people like me may be easier. In any case, what I have to worry about now is this little person inside me and her sister and brother. Want some coconut milk?……"

"I'll wait thanks Ninoska. I think I'll swim for a while. Are their currents out there?"

"Not here. Further out the currents are strong. But we're we're protected here by the reef."

Wading out into the warm sea, the sand suddenly dropped away some fifty metres from the beach. I swam far out, still well short of the reef, the salt water stinging my eyes. I could see the children and Sylvie on the beach. They watched out for me for a bit, then splashed around for a while themselves. Eventually, Sylvie waved to me and pointed to the house as she headed up to it herself. I swam back.

Ninoska had saved my coconut. She took a machete and lopped the tip off. Dextrous as any campesino, with the tip of the blade she poked a hole in the exposed white flesh.

Back in Puerto Moro, I made somewhat false au revoirs, since it seemed unlikely I'd make it up again before I left in March. Tearful Aracely, breaking my heart.

"Will you come for Christmas Aunt Maeve?" She was so upset that Sylvie was going.

I told her, "We'll see, my baby."

Older than his sister, Rogelio watched us go as if he expected never ever to see us again, holding on to his grandmother as Sylvie and I waved from the car, rounding the corner at the end of their street, Aracely burying her face in her mother's neck. At least I could phone them.

Sylvie had the car radio tuned to Station X. She was far more in touch with youth culture in Morazan than me, making me laugh as she jigged and bopped to the music there behind the steering wheel. No wonder Walker was devoted to her.

"Never married, Sylvie?"

"Sure. Dumped him when he said I was fat. I earned more than he did anyway. Isn't this song great? ….."

I'd strayed out of bounds, discouraged from exploring that part of her life any further, odd after her spontaneous revelation about her relationship with Walker. She got me talking about Ireland, people I knew at Trinity, my mother. It was easy to talk to her. She'd throw out bits about herself, agree, disagree, candidly, calmly. She talked some about France under Mitterand, obviously a fan of his, unlike Raul.

She dropped me off at the Twin Bridges. As we kissed goodbye, she said, "I'm so glad we were able to visit Ninoska together. Phone me before you leave for Marañon. Promise?"

"Promise. Take care, Sylvie. Thank you for a wonderful time."

"My pleasure."

On the way up El Desdichado back to my place, I bought some *pupusas* for lunch from the Salvadoran woman who sold them every Sunday from her house half way up the hill. Up in my flat, I watered my herb garden, pleased to see the rosemary was thriving. I took a shower to get the sand and salt water off me and out of my hair.

Glad I'd managed to visit Ninoska, I hadn't wanted to commit myself to another visit since things change so quickly. I was hoping Eusebia would have time for us to have another few days alone together. I wanted to make the break from the WLU, move down to Marañon and enjoy being with Eusebia. Over that weekend, staying on with her had become something I wanted badly. Would it work out?

That afternoon, I began making notes about different aspects of Morazán, drafting a plan for a series of articles, wondering how to research where to place them in the European or North American press. That evening, Eusebia encouraged the idea. A possible future for me there with her in Morazán took shape, some writing, some English teaching, some translating and interpreting. Eusebia herself seemed to be thinking of moving on in another year or so, back to Brazil, somewhere else. She remained vague about the somewhere else. To me it seemed irrelevant.

I was first in the office on Monday morning. Esteban let me in. He was as pleased as me that my rosemary was finally growing well. He took me and showed me a new rose he had grown; the tiny bud had just opened to reveal a pale lilac coloured flower. "No one else I know has one of these," he said, proudly, almost surreptitiously.

A new cleaner had started. She was mopping the back office when I went in. I went to make coffee while she finished. Yelba came in then with another woman I didn't know, "Hi Maeve, this is Juana. She'll be taking over most of the secretarial work for Amelia. Juana, Maeve." We shook hands. Shy, little more than a teenager, Juana said nothing, just took some coffee and went upstairs to start work.

Yelba said, "How was your weekend?"

"Great. I went to the beach at Puerto Moro. It was amazing. You?"

"Good. My little boy was seven yesterday. We had a party for him. My sisters came up for it. We hardly ever meet up these days, we're all so busy working to make ends meet. So it was great to have a family get-together."

We went back into our office to continue with a funding request we had been unable to finish the week before. Amelia put her head in the doorway, "Hi everyone, Eva Maria?"

"Still not here yet."

"Ask her to pop up when she arrives will you?"

But Eva Maria never arrived that morning. At lunchtime Juana was working on reception. She came and called me to the phone. I thought it might be Walker.

"Hello, Maeve?"

"Eva Maria. What's up? You ok?" She was quiet.

I said "Eva, what's wrong?"

"You haven't heard then?"

"Heard what?"

"Gladys Centeno was shot dead yesterday."

It was like news from Mars, an alien communication not on my wavelength. I remembered how close Eva was to Gladys, their fights and arguments, always from the same side of things.

"Maeve?"

"Yes, I'm here. Can I do anything?"

"Could you explain to Amelia I won't be around for a while? I'm trying to take care of Gladys's kids and things. Please break this gently to Yelba, will you? She and Gladys had a big fight over a year ago now, but she really admired her. Can you tell her I'm sorry and I'll see her next weekend? The funeral should be on Friday or Saturday up there in Tirurí. There'll be a post-mortem this week. Tell Amelia….Tell Amelia I'm busy looking after Gladys's kids and I'll ….I'll phone her another time."

Her voice began to break, but she held it together.

"I'm sorry Maeve. I'd better go. Take care of Yelba for me."

"Of course Eva. I'm so sorry……. Take care of yourself, please."

"Thanks…."

I said nothing to Juana, went upstairs to Amelia.

"Maeve? Can I help you?…"

"Amelia. Some bad news, I'm afraid. Eva Maria just phoned. Gladys Centeno's dead. She was shot yesterday."

"Ah…..Did Eva say anything? Where she was phoning from? Is she all right?"

"She was very upset. She said she'd phone you another time. She's looking after Gladys's children. She didn't say where she was. I guess she's in San Luis. It's awful news….."

"How terrible for her. Gladys was always pushing at the edges. …."

She looked at me as if to say, "anything else?"

I couldn't understand. Then she said, "Gladys and I were never very close Maeve. She always knew what she was doing was dangerous. You just have to accept that kind of thing here. It's hard, I know."

"I see," said I, and left her to her work.

As I went back to break the news to Yelba, I passed Chico Miranda chatting up Juana at her desk. I ignore his smiled as I went by, just managing a minimal "Hi".

Yelba knew straight away something was very wrong. I was worried she might react badly so soon after her terrifying ordeal at Totomoya. She gasped when I gave her Eva Maria's news.

She looked sad for a few moments. Then her face hardened. "Who did it? Did she say?"

"No. I guess it was the army." She looked at me for a couple of moments, blank and hard.

She reminded me of Ninoska, those times when I'd catch Ninoska lost in thought.

Yelba said, "Excuse me, Maeve."

She left me and went upstairs to Amelia's office. After a couple of minutes, I heard raised voices, Miranda shouting, Yelba standing her ground. I heard Amelia crying out, "This is not the time or the place! Are you both mad?"

Yelba came down after a while. I was sitting at our work table. She bent down and put her arm around me. Her face was flushed with anger I felt her heart beating fast against my back as she spoke to me. "Maeve, please forgive me. I have to leave you. Eva Maria shouldn't face this on her own. I'm going to join her in San Luis straight away."

"Hey, you think I'm not going with you?"

"Maeve, please. Help me and Eva Maria. This is a very personal thing for us, you know. You can help us far better by staying on here finishing the projects for us. They're important but this makes it impossible for us. Can you finish what's left to do? Come down on Thursday night or Friday if you want to."

As she quickly gathered her things, I said, "Yelba, I really don't like this."

She embraced me, "But you'll do it, won't you? Eva and I, we need you to. Will you?"

She won. But I hated to see her go alone.

Amelia had come down and stood near the front door as Yelba reached it. She took Yelba's arm gently and said something. Yelba brushed her off and left. Seeing me watching, Amelia came down the patio to where I sat. She was a strong woman, square featured with big arms, fit looking, elegant in a faun cotton dress that showed off her bust a little. "You mustn't think we're unfeeling, Maeve. Yelba and Eva Maria were closer to Gladys than some of us. Everyone takes these things differently. It's easy to say rash things without thinking of what we're saying when we're upset. It's normal. Did you ever meet Gladys?…"

She came in and sat down.

"Yes. I went up to a place called El Quebracho up on the Tirurí plain…."

"She had a land action there didn't she? Yes. A very successful one. Most actions like that fold after a couple of months. Gladys was always good at that….She was a founder member of the WLU you know."

"Was she?"

I was interested to see how Amelia would handle this.

"Yes, the problem I always had with her is that she was always too extreme. She saw things too much in black and white. She made negotiations impossible. Meetings with her participating were a nightmare and she carried that attitude into everything. That's why the army made her a target. I've no doubt at all the army had her killed, or the AM, probably paid off by one the big landowners round there. She was completely uncompromising. It's a blow for the popular movement here….. She had some very loyal supporters, especially around San Luis….. I know you're close to Yelba and Eva Maria, Maeve. If they're upset, it's natural that you should be too……. If you need to take time off this week, please do. This must be difficult for you to cope with. You've been working solidly since the hurricane and I guess you have personal things to sort out too if you're finishing with us next month."

She looked at me with the nearest thing approaching kindness I'd ever seen from her. Had I got her wrong?

"Thanks Amelia. I'll carry on with this proposal though, I think. It's the last one. I'll have it finished for tonight. But I'll take tomorrow and Wednesday off if that's OK. I'm trying to get organized to move out of La Bahía. Can I turn up on Thursday?"

"Of course, you are a volunteer, after all. I'm not very good at paying attention to what's going on in other people's lives, Maeve. That may make me seem hard and selfish. But I do appreciate what you've done for us. Thank you."

"You're very welcome, Amelia. I've got a lot out of working here."

She smiled pleasantly and left me to my work. I was glad she was sufficiently aware not to try and offer any physical contact. We were definitely natural enemies, although we were always polite to each other.

That night I talked to Asunción about my intention to move. I'd thought of keeping the flat until the end of November, but wondered if I should keep it for longer. Asunción said, "Take your time Maeve. We'll be very sad to see you go. You've been so nice to have around. Think about it and let us know when you've had more time to get sorted out."

I continued to work on my ideas for writing about Morazán. I put on the radio. Amid news of progress in the relief and reconstruction work, Radio Maravilla gave some coverage to Gladys's murder….

"Reaction has been slow to the murder on Sunday of rural worker's leader Gladys Centeno. Details of the incident remain confused. A spokesman for General Benavides, head of the armed forces, emphatically rejected allegations of army involvement. Leaders of the Rural Workers Coordinating Committee, the umbrella organization with which Centeno was affiliated, were unavailable for comment. We interviewed Interior Minister Humberto Debayle. "Obviously we deplore all violence, in particular when it involves loss of life. The circumstances in this case have still to be clarified. However, given the violent record of Gladys Centeno and others like her in the rural workers organisations, this incident should come as no surprise. Perhaps it will give pause for thought to those who advocate violent provocations as a means of forcing the land issue."...

Human rights advocate Doctora Celia Rodriguez issued a statement condemning the murder and calling on the government to restrain elements in the armed forces associated with Accion Morazán. In San Luis, investigating magistrate, Doctor Juana Urcuyo refused to comment until she has seen the results of the post mortem. Centeno is the most prominent rural worker's organizer to be killed this year. In a statement for the Union of Industrial Workers, UTI president Enrique Artola accused the government of complacency in the face of a total of four murders of activists in the popular movement since January……. Fuel prices now. Business leaders are complaining at the proposed increase in the price of diesel and gasoline……."

I switched off. I wanted so much to see Eusebia. But she was away in Panama until Wednesday. Really I just wanted to get away immediately from anything to do with the WLU. The news about Gladys was a fierce shock to me. In one way, it brought me much closer to Yelba and to Eva Maria despite coming up against a limit at which Yelba had shut me out. Where did she suddenly get the dour strength from for that shouting match with Miranda? That friendship she had with Eva Maria, each of them by turn carrying the other?

Morazán, so violent, so sweet. Was I any closer to understanding anything here? At least it provided a good theme for what I was writing. I worked late, trying to get myself weary enough to be able to sleep.

On Tuesday morning I made a point of buying all three newspapers from the vendor down at the bottom of the hill to see what coverage they gave to Gladys's death. The right wing "El Despertar" reported the murder briefly, describing Gladys as a "dedicated and ruthless subversive". It quoted local satisfaction that what one local landowner described as "a menace to decent society" had been removed.

"Nueva Tribuna's" report was more detailed. Gladys had been walking with two companions from El Quebracho to Tirurí. Unknown assailants ambushed them as they crossed a river at dusk. Gladys was killed outright, hit several times by automatic rifle fire, one of her companions was wounded but survived, left for dead by the attackers. The other, able to swim, escaped downstream, hiding in undergrowth along the riverbank.

Nueva Tribuna's editorial shed no tears for Gladys. "Morazán needs an end to conflict and murderous violence. Gladys Centeno's outdated revolutionary ideas have no place in modern society. Even in Nicaragua, the communist government has recognised the need for democratic elections. When they bury Centeno, let's hope they bury too the politics of hatred and the dead-end they represent."

"El Mensajero's" report put the killing in the context of murders of other activists over the year. They mentioned the bomb attack on Ninoska too. Their report quoted a source from the investigating magistrate's office. "The bullets used in this attack indicate weapons not normally associated with the army. The most likely culprits behind this incident are local landowners or maybe politically motivated groups acting on their behalf. This kind of case is very difficult to put together. Local people saw nothing. We think we're looking for three assailants, possibly four. We have very little to go on."

The attack must have happened at the same river Eva Maria and I had waded through. Gladys would have been helpless there in the water, almost up to her neck, so small she was.

Despondent, I spent the rest of Tuesday clearing up the flat, re-organising my system, throwing out old papers, junking a lot of WLU stuff. I had stored Walker's boxes in Ninoska 's room. In order to clean in there, I had to move them out.

One box was full of unmarked cassettes. I put one of them on thinking I might find some interesting music. The tape took a while to get to anything. I thought maybe it was blank. But as I went to change it I heard Walker's voice. It was an interview.

That one was with a spokesperson from the Army Internal Investigations office about human rights violations and army policy. I got curious. He'd said I could read his papers. Couldn't I listen to the cassettes? I tried a few. One with the union leader Enrique Artola was interesting about the state of trades unionism in Morazán. I sat and listened. Another interview was with a couple of indigenous people's leaders from La Virgen.

I tried another.

"We've spoken about your childhood. Can you tell me how you came to get involved in organising, How'd you come to get involved in what turned into the WLU….. ?"

"That's a long story, Michael. Where do I begin?….."

It was Gladys Centeno.

She talked at length about her early involvement with her local parish, being on the famous nineteen seventy three March of the Empty Saucepans, viciously broken up by the army as the marchers walked peacefully toward the Presidential Palace, her first arrest at the age of sixteen when she was sexually abused and humiliated for three days by local police, the optimism and enthusiasm at the Liberal Apertura in the late Seventies, the desperation and disappointment when it fell apart under the Conservative government of 1981.

She finally came to the period when a group of women, sick of being forever ignored by the male rural workers leaders, decided to found the Women Landworkers' Union. The tape ended. I cursed Walker for not marking the cassettes, before I noticed that he had, in fact. Each cassette had a little code in tiny writing on the inside of the cardboard cover in its box. In that case, there surely had to be a catalogue.

I went through his papers. He wrote everything up in locally bought school exercise books. His hand was messy. I noticed his "I"s barely existed on the page, the merest hint of a stroke, as if he could hardly bear to acknowledge his own existence. One of the exercise books was marked "TAPES". Sure enough, it had the key to the contents of his cassette recordings.

I found the numbers for the interviews with Gladys. Fifteen in all. Some of the tapes were an hour long, some an hour and a half, over nineteen hours all told. I listened to them from the beginning until gone midnight, completely immersed in her story. It was as if she were talking only to me.

Walker's questions served as unobtrusive prompts taking her off on lines of thought that hadn't occurred to her, getting her to elaborate and remember things she obviously thought unimportant, but which revealed much about her, her people, her country.

The recordings obsessed me. I woke early and washed some laundry up on the roof before returning to listen to more of Gladys.

"….In the end, things between the two blocks of opinion in the WLU became too polarised. We couldn't even agree to disagree. It seemed to people who thought like me you couldn't really change things or improve people's lives without changing the way the land is used. And you can't change the way land is used without taking land away from people who don't use it, or use it badly. ……. "

"……the lives of day labourers and their families won't improve by asking people to be nice. It's only pressure that makes selfish people change. You know people are still working for seven pesos a day? Seven pesos a day. And that's when there is work. Even if a day worker like that worked every day for a month he'd still only make two hundred and ten pesos. That's not even twenty dollars a month. Could you live for even one day on just twenty dollars? ……"

"….so, like being married, it boiled down to arguments about money. The foreign aid agencies came to have too much influence on the thinking of the people who ran the office and then again the people in the office began to work very closely with other people in other rural workers organisations, dominated by men, guys like Chico Miranda, Segundo Perez, Jorge Riso. Me and the others, we just got tired of it. We left. It was the right thing. That's not to say I don't respect the education and health work the WLU does. Sure, that's important. But it's like icing on the cake. It's not the main thing. The main thing is to get some justice into the way our land is used. That's always been my priority and it always will be……

"…..something you need to understand about the popular movement here, and I don't think outsiders can understand it easily, is the influence outside organisations have. I don't mean foreign donor agencies, I mean organisations in other parts of the isthmus. It's difficult to explain. Sometimes we end up fighting other people's arguments just because we have some loose ties with them even though they're in countries like El Salvador or Guatemala or Honduras or even Nicaragua…and we end up fighting among ourselves because of things that haven't even happened here in Morazán, it's crazy, but it does happen, believe me….."

Gladys talked for over an hour about problems in the popular movement generally, not just in the rural workers organizations, making very clear her distrust of the leadership. What did she mean by "other organisations"? It was very enigmatic. I couldn't help remembering the conversation with Ninoska about the disappearance of her husband Adán. Perhaps foolishly, I began to feel I was divining the springs of the scene between Yelba, Amelia and Miranda at the WLU. Was I? Is that the limit I'd banged up against between me and Yelba and Eva Maria? An internal secret in the family of rural worker's organisations they didn't want outsiders, foreigners involved in?

I went out to Asunción's to get some milk and bread and down the hill again for the papers. That day's editions were dominated by the row about the fuel price increases and leaked accusations from United Nations relief workers of government obstruction and corruption. But the main news was the press

conference with Edmundo Caceres, the Christian Democrat leader and Enrique Cabañas in which they announced plans for a coalition government, giving Cabañas a five seat majority in the national Assembly. The headline in El Despertar was "Constitutional putsch! Caceres and Cabañas violate will of the people!" Nueva Tribuna had "Cabañas and Caceres agree pact for stability". El Mensajero ran "Fuel price hike - Ramirez piling up problems for incoming government."

The Centeno investigation was on the inside pages. Nothing in El Despertar, although they did mention the killing in a piece about the Orozco gun running case, "…reliable intelligence service sources confirm at least two of those detained for smuggling mortar rounds towards the border at San Juan were associates of Gladys Centeno, killed recently during a shooting incident near San Luis…."

Nueva Tribuna ran more on the investigation, "…the post-mortem showed Centeno was shot five times in the head, neck and chest. "Two of the bullets would have killed her instantly," said pathologist, Doctor Francisca Meza. Investigating magistrate, Doctor Juana Urcuyo has confirmed the bullets came from three separate weapons. Doctor Urcuyo described the killing as, "a very well planned, carefully executed attack. The individuals who did this were highly trained professionals." When asked if she was suggesting involvement on the part of the army, Doctor Urcuyo, replied, "I find that unlikely given the calibre of the bullets and the likely weapons used. The probable weapons are not in use by the Morazán armed forces. I reject that as in any way a likely hypothesis."

El Mensajero carried similar interviews with the pathologist and Urcuyo, but also included two short interviews one with Celia Rodriguez and the other with the wounded survivor of the attack in which she died.

Rodriguez was quoted as saying, "The murder of Gladys Centeno follows a well established pattern which we have seen developing throughout the year. The security forces and their proxies have adopted a shoot-to-kill policy targeting any activist who defends the rights of workers, the poor and the dispossessed. I have no doubt the trail of evidence that has been so carefully covered up in the Centeno case does in fact lead to the armed forces in some shape or form."

The interview with the wounded survivor, a teenager called Silvio Barahona, featured a photograph of him in his hospital bed. Towards the end of his account he said, "….I played dead fearing all the time they'd shoot me some more. But they were really only interested in Gladys. I heard them dragging her out of the water and they said, "that's it, the bitch is dead, let's go" and then I heard them go into the trees and I heard the sound of horses. Then I passed out. Next thing I knew was people carrying me ……."

I put the newspapers aside to continue listening to the tapes. Gladys recounted stories of the land occupations she and her colleagues organised, how they managed to identify the elements that made the disputes winnable so as to avoid wasting time on land claims they were unlikely to win.

" ……We were just making fools of the landowners time after time. They really got angry with us. That's why the army grabbed me a couple of years back up there in the Maraní, west of Jiñequao. Only God can have saved me that time. What else could have pulled me through?…. "

She recounted her ordeal at the hands of the Mountain Troops, the most savage catalogue of beatings, rape and torture, talking about it as though it had happened to someone else, not her.

" ……You know what the most beautiful thing was? When I did finally get back home, I found a couple of my neighbours had been taking it in turns to suckle my youngest, who was just two months when I was disappeared….. The difference between them and the people I used to work with in the rural workers organisations decided me never to go back and work with those people again. I remember Chico Miranda laughing at me, saying at a meeting we had when I was just about able to walk again, "What did you expect, dinner and a trip to the cinema?" …….. "

"……What makes me keep going? I guess knowing we can do things to resist and do things to beat our situation. Change doesn't just happen. We need to create the conditions that make it possible. What keeps me going is I don't want my kids to suffer what I suffered. I want my kids to have a better life, to get an education and to get good healthcare and to have some economic security. We can see it out there, we know it's there, all that. Why can't we have it? What makes us so undeserving? Where is it written we have to live in misery while a few people with money have a great time?….. "

By the time I had finished listening it was four o'clock. I slid the boxes back into the room and tidied up. Had I listened to those tapes before, I would have saved myself a great deal of perplexity and worry. Listening to Gladys confirmed all my gut feelings about the leadership of the WLU and the rural workers generally. I felt no qualms at all now about moving on as fast as I could.

Eusebia's way of doing things suddenly seemed a most elegant and reasonable solution to the question I felt constantly about Morazán. How can you meet your own needs and balance them against basic human, moral obligations to those around you? As I showered, I felt I was washing off months of blindness and cobwebbed obscurity. I blessed Walker for recording those interviews.

It had been a crash-course in some fundamental realities I'd been bumping into, like hunting for something in the dark in an unfamiliar room. My heart went out to Yelba and Eva Maria for what they must both have suffered for so long, trying to reconcile their needs and beliefs with the squalid opportunism and double-dealing all around them. I headed over to Colonia Thomson.

Now the Avenida Juan Pablo was destroyed over by the Republic Rotonda, traffic out along the stadium road was packed solid at rush hour. So when Ondi opened the door to me, it was nearly seven. Ondina was on her own. "Eusebia won't be long. We've been worried about you because we guessed you'd be upset about Gladys Centeno. You Ok?"

"I'm ok, Ondi. Just wondering how many more illusions I have to lose before I get to be grown up."

"Come on, let me get you something to drink….I've made some rice and pineapple fresco. Like some?"

We sat in the kitchen where I helped her clean and sort some red beans she was preparing for the morning.

"You never talk about yourself Ondina. I'm surprised a lovely woman like you isn't married."

She laughed, "I was. He left me. I've got three kids. They're nearly grown up now. I'm not from here, you know. I'm from Nicaragua. The children stay with my mother. I send them money every month. Life in Nicaragua is hard now. I was back earlier this year for a week to see them. Things can't go on the way they are. I'm praying the elections turn out ok and we get some peace at last."

"Don't you have difficulty getting in and out?"

"I left legally. I have a passport. Eusebia helped me. She has many friends. Here, in Homduras , Nicaragua, El Salvador…. In any case, I have no fight with the Sandinistas. I don't like some of the things they do. But they are for the poor. So why should I hate them? When I was a little girl, I remember how things were then. Life was very hard. Things got better for a while in '79 and then the war came and the US blockade. I've had enough of war. I think people can only take so much you know? Anyhow, tell me about you. Got any family? Sisters and brothers?"

"Just my mother. My father died nearly four years ago. I don't have brothers or sisters."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It must be lonely for you. How old's your mother?"

"Forty nine."

"Ah, she's young. Think she'll find someone else?"

"She has some friends. But I don't think she'll marry again. We never talk about it. We don't really get on."

"You don't get on with your mother? Hey….."

She was thinking of saying something but changed her mind. Then she changed it back again. "Is it because you like women?"

"Not just that. I never did what she wanted me to do, not since I was a teenager. We just make each other angry."

We heard Eusebia come in. She was shooing the toucan out. "Bad Troocoo,…. naughty Troocoo…… "

She came in to us, "Hi Maeve, Hi Ondi. What a day!…." She kissed me. "It's so good to see you, Maeve. We've been worrying about you a lot these last couple of days."

Ondi put out supper asking, "Urania here?"

"No. Mateo dropped me back. He had to go and meet Urania later so he didn't stay. What a journey. The traffic is terrible. Thank you, Ondi."

Ondina had cooked what she called *peor que nada* - a fry of tortillas and cheese and egg. She served it with a spicy guacamol and refried beans. However she had done it, it was wonderful.

"You've got to teach me to cook, Ondina."

"My pleasure, Maeve." She hugged me.

I asked Eusebia, "How was Panama?"

"Depressing. It's only a question of time before the place explodes one way or another. They can't continue with Noriega. But he won't do the sensible thing and bow out. It's too late for that now anyhow. Washington won't let a nobody like Noriega make trouble for them and their bases there. It's too important both for trade and for operations in the Andean countries. People don't realise how much is at stake there. Noriega's a greedy fool. And it's the Panamanian people who will suffer. As far as my business went, it was very successful. I have some very good clients in Panama. We must go there together one day….. Mmmm Ondi, this is delicious…."

Ondina joined us to eat. Afterwards, I helped her wash up while Eusebia made phone calls. When she finished, we talked for a while about Gladys. I told her I wanted to go to the funeral. "You may like to think hard about that, Maeve. Remember what Saul Garcia said. There may be more to all this than we think."

"But she's dead, Eusebia. What harm can it do to pay my respects?"

"None perhaps…… Maeve, I know you're discreet. I wish I could help you understand the delicacy of this."

"You can trust me, Eusebia."

She stroked my face, "My angel. It's not that I don't trust you. We've no need to get involved in fights that aren't ours. Saul explained to me the other day. This murder and the Orozco case is another example of the disarray in which the popular movement in Morazán has fallen into. The political military organizations have mixed military activity with civilian activity. They've been milking money from resources of the popular organizations to fund their military operations, mostly shipping arms and supplies for the guerrillas in Guatemala and El Salvador. Gladys Centeno was always against that. She insisted that the military people stay out of the popular movement's civilian activities. Not necessarily because she was against the military operations. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't. Who knows? She just thought it was a threat to the security of both the civilian organizations and the military operations to mix the two areas of activity. She was right of course, as the Orozco case showed."

"So you think she was killed by her own side?"

"You don't sound surprised. That's interesting. Why not?"

I told her about the interviews I had listened to between Gladys and Walker.

"Ah. So Walker will know straight away what has happened. I hope for his sake he keeps his head."

"You think he'll be in danger too?"

"If he's not careful he'll make himself an inconvenience to everyone. It's not sensible to make a career of being inconvenient. Not in Morazán anyway. Yes. I think he will be in danger. Will you be seeing him?"

"I hope so. I want him to take his stuff away."

"You told me he was going to come back today, no?"

"Yes." She stood up and kissed me. "Let's think about this Maeve. Do you mind if I do my exercises?"

"Not if you let me raid the study…."

Eusebia did breathing and relaxation exercises each evening. I left her and went to read in her study. Our activities passed in and out of each other harmoniously. She never imposed on me. It was the very opposite of being with my mother. It occurred to me Eusebia was probably old enough to be my mother. But she looked incredible, fitter than me by far. Could I remake my childhood with her?

We went to bed early, talked a long time about Gladys. "But Eusebia, you almost sound as if you admire her. You'd have been one of the first for the People's Courts if people like her ever came to power."

She laughed. "Do you think so, my baby? Perhaps, yes. What I admire about Gladys Centeno is her clarity. Do you remember "Les Mains Sales"? The leader says to his assassin, "Purity is an idea for ascetics and monks….. You others, you intellectuals, you toss out excuses for doing nothing, Nothing but sitting still with your arms folded. Me, I get my hands dirty, right up to the elbows, deep in shit and blood. And what then? Do you think you can govern in innocence?" …. It's a great speech isn't it? You can hear Gregorio Ramirez saying it. You can hear Gladys Centeno saying it too. But you know who they are, what they are. They have this clarity about them. I think Saul is wrong about his "rule of law" reading. I think the play sides with the murdered party leader. He'll do whatever is necessary to win power. Gladys believed that too I think. And she's right after all, isn't she? Just as Frantz Fanon was right to talk about the cathartic, transforming power of revolutionary violence. People like me and Saul Garcia, we're cowards. We believe we can bleat about the rule of law. And we believe it, but only so long as we, the wealthy, hold power and take all decisions of any importance. Would we believe it, if those same laws were administered by the poor? If they took the decisions that affected our lives and made us less wealthy and powerful than we think we deserve to be? Of course not. We're hypocrites. So long as people like us administer the law we will criticise animals like Noel and Gregorio Ramirez and their accomplices. But do we act decisively to dismantle the apparatus of oppression? Never. Against that reality, what sane opponent will not seek to destroy us by every means possible? How long can we continue fooling the wretched and the dispossessed? After all, aren't there far more of them than there are of us? Can we keep grinding them into poverty and desperation forever? Gladys Centeno was a hero. We should be erecting statues to her. Instead, we'll vilify her and forget her, pray that no one else takes up where she fell. She represents too much truth for the rest of us. That's why she had to die."

She was speaking quietly but with a passion I hadn't heard from anyone since the night Raul recounted his Algerian experiences. I wanted to comfort her, dispel the cold anger that moved her. That tone of voice was precisely that of my mother railing calmly against my absent father in measured wintry outrage, me the silent jury and co-accused, agog at the unyielding indictment, her rejecting any comfort from me….the inescapable sentence "…just like him, just like him…."

I kissed Eusebia gently and stroked her, trying to calm her. She let me. I clung to loving her with all my heart. Something had rooted in me deeply, without my knowing: an ineradicable loyalty.

"Please don't sound as though you hate yourself, Eusebia. I feel so out of my depth. I just want to love you and be with you, I love you. I'll always love you, Eusebia. I won't go to San Luis if you think I shouldn't. I want to be with you. I want to be yours. I love you so much. ……."

"I know …… "

Before we fell asleep, I said, "Perhaps we could send some flowers……"

"Yes, we shall…."

She went running early, as usual. I found Ondina standing at the back of the patio, facing the sun, her arms outstretched, eyes closed. I realised she was praying. I let her be, slipped away to shower.

I decided to go in to the WLU to finish up some administrative chores Eva Maria and Yelba had left behind. I didn't want them to have to face that work when they returned, supposing they did return. I realised Amelia may well have suggested I took time off for her own reasons. Having me around as an observer during the crisis caused by Gladys Centeno's death was probably inconvenient.

Eusebia had a busy day of meetings. But she insisted I let her arrange the flowers for the funeral. "I have an account with a florist in town who has a branch in La Sabana. Leave it with me, Maeve…."

I left her working on an article in her study. Ondina was watering plants in the front garden as I left. I turned and watched her for a moment. She fussed with the weeds around one of the voluptuous white lilies. She must have sensed my gaze, turning to me as she bent down and smiling. She winked at me. I waved and left her to it.

Traffic was slow again that morning. Everyone seemed resigned to the delays. The usual cacophony of horns, that used to greet the mildest of hold ups before the floods, was absent. The drivers all knew very well the centre of town just wasn't there any more and wouldn't be for months to come.

I managed to get to the WLU shortly before nine. Amelia was out of the office. Juana was there and the new cleaner. They greeted me politely, but without warmth.

I worked through until lunchtime, filing, writing up notes Eva Maria and Yelba had left for reports, double-checking statistics, running off documents on the Gestetner copying machine. Yelba phoned from Xiguasí around eleven, just to tell me the funeral for Gladys would be in the morning. "Thinking of making it?"

"No, Yelba, forgive me. It seems to me it's a private affair. I hardly knew her."

"That's fine, Maeve."

"You coming in next week?"

"No. You?"

"Me neither"

"We want to see you."

"I'll be going down to Marañon on Monday. Can we meet up in Xiguasi for lunch?"

"Sure. Meet us at my house. Can you remember where it is?"

"From the south west corner of the rail terminal three blocks south, two blocks east'"

"That's it. See you there, God willing."

For lunch I bought a couple of tacos from el Panameño. There hardly seemed any point staying. I was thinking of going home when I saw Walker come up the patio, accompanied by a foreign woman. "Hi, Maeve. How are things?"

"Not great, Mike. I guess you heard about Gladys."

"Yes. Yes I did. Maeve, this is Montserrat Pijuan. Montserrat is visiting from Amnesty International in London."

"Hello, my name's Maeve O Siochru. You staying for a while?"

"Just three days I'm afraid."

Walker asked, "Is Amelia around, or another of the executive members?"

"No I think there's a meeting of the non-governmental reconstruction group, she's a member of that. You may find the international relations person in their office. Down here in the mushroom farm we don't have much to do with upstairs."

"That bad, huh? Maeve, do you think I could call by to pick up my stuff some time?"

"Whenever you like. Right now if you want."

"Really? That would be great. Sure it's not inconvenient?"

"I was just leaving anyway. Come on let's go. Why don't you check with the secretary when Amelia's going to be around?"

On our way out, Walker spoke to Juana, She told him Amelia would be in the office late in the afternoon. The old blue Mustang was parked around the block. We had to drive right around town to the Twin Bridges in order to get back to El Desdichado. By the time we got to my place it was going on for three thirty.

"Sorry to bother you with this so suddenly, Maeve. I wanted to give Montserrat some of the material I've collected."

"Sounds like you'll have a busy few days Montserrat. Shame you don't have more time. Morazán is a beautiful country."

"Perhaps on another visit, Maeve. Tomorrow Walker is taking me to Puerto Moro to meet Ninoska Vileda. This afternoon I'll try and meet someone from the WLU and later tonight I'm having supper with Celia Rodriguez. I have a meeting with the Attorney General's office tomorrow afternoon when I get back from Puerto Moro. I was hoping to talk to the former Attorney General too. He may have an

interesting perspective on events over the last year. But my flight on Saturday is at six in the evening so I don't know how much I'll be able to fit in. I have to be in Honduras to meet a colleague on Saturday night. It's too hectic really. But we don't have resources to spend more time on these visits, so they are always very rushed I'm afraid."

While Walker took his boxes down to the car, I made Montserrat some tea. She was a smart woman in every way, with a deliciously ironic sense of humour, an elegant mask for her essential inquisitiveness. Her concern for people was clear and sincere and practical. By the time Walker had finished she already had me talking about Gladys Centeno and Ninoska. Walker sat and listened.

He said, "You never told me about that harassment, Maeve. Jesus. I'm sorry."

"Why? It was my choice."

Later Montserrat said, "So you think Saul Garcia is manoeuvring for position to oust the Ramirez brothers from control of the Conservative Party?"

"I think so. D'you mind if I tell you something Mike?"

"Go ahead."

"Garcia told me the day after we went out to Eusebia Roa's to stay away from Gladys Centeno and he told me to tell you the same too."

"You had a meeting with Saul Garcia?"

"He was at the party Eusebia invited me to. So was Gregorio Ramirez."

"Great company you keep."

I had to work hard not to tear into him in front of our guest.

Montserrat asked me, "What do they think about the Orozco case?"

"I don't know. Garcia's line is that the army need to conform to civilian legal standards. He knows Cabañas and Caceres are going to force through change now they've formed their coalition. He's trying to get the Conservatives to a point quickly where they're not going to be on the defensive for two or three years. He's already thinking about the next election. The Ramirez group think they can carry on as before with just cosmetic changes. Who knows whether Garcia's timing is right? But that's what's going on. Is there any news about Orozco and the others? Are they still alive?"

"We received an informal message from the armed forces legal office confirming that the men are in custody and allegedly in good health. They insist they can keep the men incommunicado under Morazán's anti-terrorist laws without bringing them to court for periods of two weeks renewable by order of the Attorney General. Of course, they just made that up in the last couple of days. The Attorney General has promised us a formal letter following our meeting tomorrow. So perhaps the families will be able to get access to the men within a week or so."

Walker said, "They're treading a line between putting on a show of legality for international public relations and showing who's boss for domestic consumption."

Montserrat said, "Our main concern is to see those men in court where they can be protected by judicial procedure, whatever they may or may not be guilty of."

Walker added, "People I spoke to this morning told me their families say most of them had nothing to do with Simon Orozco. And he hasn't talked. That's why they're still incommunicado, I guess. His wife says he was just a driver of someone else's truck and had no idea about the secret compartment where the arms were found. If Orozco keeps denying everything and the others had nothing to do with it, the army will come badly out of this."

Montserrat added, "What puzzles me is that Celia Rodriguez plays down the case. She has actually done very little on it. In the same way she did absolutely nothing for over a week after the bomb attack on Ninoska Vileda. So she is very selective about which cases she treats with urgency. And the other thing that worries us in Amnesty is this Gladys Centeno killing. Celia Rodriguez is now accusing the army. But we feel her case seems very weak. And Michael here is suggesting the army may not have had anything to do with it. Do you have any insight into that, Maeve?"

I looked at Walker. "I have to make a confession, Mike. I listened to the interviews you did with Gladys. They explained a great deal."

"You're welcome. So?"

"I don't think the army killed Gladys. On Monday in the WLU, we got the news through a phone call from one of our literacy promoters, Eva Maria. She didn't want to talk to Amelia. She broke the news to me. She'd normally have told our colleague, Yelba Rosa. But she was worried because Yelba's still recovering from the emotional effects of being caught in the landslide at Totomoya during Hurricane Maureen. So she told me. When I told Amelia she took it as though I were telling here whether it might rain or not. I was really taken aback how nonchalant she was. When I told Yelba, she seemed to turn to stone before my eyes. She turned really hard and went straight up to talk to Amelia. Chico Miranda was there…."

Montse asked, "Isn't he the General Secretary of the Rural Workers Coordinating Committee?"

"That's right. So anyway, they had this huge argument up there in Amelia's office, a real shouting match and then Yelba walked out and left to go to San Luis to help Eva Maria. Eva Maria was looking after Gladys's children. Amelia came along to me then and sweet-talked me into taking some time off. That wasn't hard for her, believe me."

"So what do you make of that?"

"I think Gladys was poking too far into shady financial business people like Miranda and Amelia and the other leaders keep under wraps. Maybe it's mixed up with the landowners too. But I don't believe it was the army."

Montserrat asked, "So why is Celia Rodriguez sending out requests for urgent action to protect leaders of the popular movement in which she accuses the army of the murder?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think anyone else is in danger right now in the popular movement?"

"No, I don't. Not right now. Not directly from the army anyway. The balance of power has shifted since the election."

Walker said, "I think you're right up to a point. Cabañas and Caceres are provoking a crisis for the popular movement as much as for the army. What they seem to be saying is that society in Morazan has to modernise, leave the Cold War behind and move on. They represent the progressive right-wing and centre of Morazan politics. No one expected them to beat the conservatives in the election. They did and they're going to make the most of it."

Montserrat said to me, "I don't know how you cope here Maeve. I find the atmosphere of suspicion and fear and paranoia here totally suffocating. And I've only been here twelve hours."

"Life goes on, Montserrat. We all have to get up every morning and get on with life. I admire people like you who have to deal constantly with cases of torture and political murder all the time. Doesn't that get to you?"

"Sometimes. One gets hardened to it, I suppose. And the little victories we sometimes get make it worthwhile. It can be demoralising, especially back in London, trying to arouse interest and concern among bored journalists and foreign ministry officials glancing at their watches as they listen to yet another recital of grotesque inhumanity committed by their allies. Sometimes I get so cross I almost stamp my foot in frustration….. As you say, one gets up each morning and deals with whatever one is doing that day."

Walker wanted to get back to the WLU for Montserrat to meet Amelia. Montserrat said, "It's been so lovely meeting you, Maeve. Thank you for you hospitality. If you're ever in London, please look me up." She gave me her card. She exuded energy and gaiety, despite being so very tired with jetlag. I didn't envy her the schedule she was keeping.

Walker thanked me for minding his things. He was obviously anxious about helping Montserrat get the most out of her visit. In a way it was touching, he was almost motherly with her, opening the door of the car for her, closing it gently. But when I waved them goodbye, I hoped not to have to see him again. Like Raul, I felt able to write him off as one more self-righteous know-all lefty. He irritated me beyond measure.

Over Friday and Saturday, I packed most of my few belongings, the posters, the photos, the system. It was then I wished I had access to a computer. It took me hours to weed my papers again, despite my previous efforts at throwing out redundant documents. Being able to have everything on a couple of computer discs would have been perfect. I could have kept everything, weeds and all. On Saturday

morning I went to the bank to draw out some money. I wanted to give some to Eva Maria and Yelba for Gladys's children

I had decided with Eusebia to keep the flat until Christmas That meant I could move down to Marañon piecemeal instead of taking everything down in one go. Eusebia would maintain her monthly visits to Marañon where I intended to assist the Alcaldía doing liaison with outlying communities. I hoped to be able to travel up to La Bahía twice a month for two or three days each visit. We wanted to see each other as often as possible. The uncertainty, not having an assured role, was unsettling. Eusebia reassured me. I knew I could depend on her. That kind of love was entirely new for me. I needed it.

On Sunday I went walking along the quays and the docks around up Avenida Las Palmas as far as the Rio Hermoso. The cleanup was underway, a huge task. Construction of a new viaduct to join up the two parts of the Avenida had begun. I took the ferry across the river. Our Lady of Mercy was still unwashed outside. Inside they had begun painting the walls. All the former market area had been cleared of rubble and mud. Some local teenagers were playing football. They competed for space with many of the market people who had set up makeshift stalls to sell their merchandise again. Construction had begun too on a new bridge to replace the old Heroes of Verclaro Bridge.

I walked for hours, making a great circle around the city, coming back in past the hospital and through Bellas Artes. I lingered on the Twin Bridges, the old rail and road bridges, marvelling that they'd withstood the fury of the Rio Hermoso during the floods. The river was wider there. The bridges, sitting on truly massive stone bases, were higher out of the water than the Heroes Bridge had been.

I made my way past the stadium, uncertain whether to go straight home. Although it meant missing Eusebia's "Make It New", I decided to go to Abdallah Cloths, which stayed open all day Sundays, like many of the larger stores and supermarkets in the city centre. I bought some cloth, turquoise silk and blue taffeta for Ondina and a light, plain peach cotton for Eusebia. They both made their own clothes. Ondina especially enjoyed making party dresses. She used to mail them to her two daughters in Managua.

Eusebia was in better spirits that evening. The gallery had signed a lucrative contract with one of the regional banking groups to supply art works for their banks and offices in Morazan, Honduras and El Salvador.

"You know what that means?" she asked me.

"No idea."

"It means we can go to Brazil for Christmas. What do you think?"

"You're serious?"

"Yes my baby. Interested?"

"It would be wonderful Eusebia. But I'd feel terrible you paying all that money for me. I…"

She touched her fingers to my lips across the kitchen table, made her way around it to sit in my lap, closed her mouth around mine.

Ondina shouted outside the door. "You, Troocoo, I just cleaned there!"

We stopped kissing. Eusebia stood up beside me, as Ondina came in. "Hey, I'm sorry, don't you two lovebirds mind me, …. Maeve, that taffeta is just the right shade for the silk you bought with it. You're so good at combining colours. My eldest will die with excitement when she sees what I'm sending her……

Sure enough, after supper, Ondina got to work with enthusiasm on the sewing machine.

As I washed up, I asked Eusebia whether she'd managed to send the flowers for Gladys. "Yes, I did. Doña Maria took them down for you. She took some money you sent for the children too."

"Eusebia, what are we going to do with that unpredictable Doña Maria?"

She came up behind me and cupped her hands gently under my breasts, "Well I think you'll just have to teach her a lesson she'll never forget. Don't you? One of those lessons you're so very, very good at …."

She was kissing my neck. I felt her breasts in my back. Her hard nipples tickled me.

She said, "This washing up you know, I could get quite used to it…."

We passed the evening as usual, reading, talking, Eusebia and Ondina working out problems in their sewing. I was coming to think of this happiness as normality. It was hard to imagine going home to Dublin. Cabra seemed like a foreign country now. Could I ever go back there?

In the morning, Eusebia took me over to the Invicta bus depot for the seven o clock bus. We agreed to meet again the following weekend. "I'm very serious about going to Brazil, Maeve. A lot hangs on business meetings over the next few weeks. I may move back there for good. Could you bear to leave Morazán and come with me?"

"I'll go anywhere with you, Eusebia. I'll do anything to be with you. Even if we had nothing, I just never want to leave you." She touched my face and said in that tender, commanding voice of hers.

"No adventures down there now. I want you back here safe and well next weekend. OK?"

"OK. Kiss me."

The bus reached Xiguasí at noon. An hour was added to the journey by going through Las Ramadas. The river crossings were open on the La Sabana road, but long queues at each crossing still meant the Las Ramadas route was quicker. Since they didn't have to stop, the express buses chose that route.

In Xiguasí, I headed across town to the old rail terminal building and easily found Yelba's place. She was there with Margarita. The house was a smart, freshly painted timber construction, belonging to her father, a clerk with the Xiguasí Rail and Mineral Company. Her mother also worked, as a primary school teacher in one of the barrios on the far side of town. Yelba and Margarita were alone. Yelba's little boy was at school.

Yelba said, "We're waiting for Eva Maria. She's coming from San Luis this morning."

"How's Maritza?"

"She left the WLU. A lot of people have left." I thought about that for a moment, wondering what it was they wanted to talk to me about.

"Were there many at the funeral?"

"Quite a few people came. But it was very quiet. We were glad. Eva was angry because she found out one of the photographers was from El Despertar. They share all their material with the police. So we were very conscious of being watched. But several prominent local people attended, like Doctor Ruiz from the health centre in San Luis. So they couldn't say Gladys was just an unimportant radical or that all her friends are subversives."

Margarita said, "Didn't you see your friend Doña Maria? The one who owns the house where you stay in Marañon? She brought us the flowers you sent. We wanted to thank you for them and for the money too."

"I didn't get to see her this weekend. But I'm glad the flowers arrived. I just wanted to say goodbye somehow. Gladys was very special. I got some more money from a friend over the weekend. I brought it with me."

"Best give it to Eva, she's looking after all that."

Eva arrived shortly before one o'clock. She embraced me, "Good you could make it. Thanks for the money you sent. The flowers too. Gladys's daughter says she hopes you'll visit them. Will you have a chance to?"

"Not right now Eva. I want to see if I can set up some work in Marañon. My life's very uncertain. I need to work out what to do now. I suppose you're all thinking the same."

Margarita said, "That's true. And it's why we wanted to talk to you."

We sat on the porch of Yelba's house in rocking chairs around a long low metal table with a glass top. Yelba came out from the kitchen with some orange fresco.

Eva Maria began, "When the WLU started it was made up of twenty-four municipal women's campesino associations and groups. We've grown a bit since then, making links with groups in Bikuka and La Virgen. But the basic composition has stayed the same. There's always been tension between the groups from La Bahia, Moro and Xiguasí and the groups from Maraní and Momotoa. That's why, for example, when the gringo delegation was down, they never went further than Maribel's group up near La Sabana. We could easily have taken them up to Jiñequao in the Maraní. Anyhow, now Gladys is dead some of us who were close to her want to go back to the beginning and start working more locally again, to be more autonomous."

"That's great. But how will you fund yourselves?"

"Same as we always did, as far as salary goes. We'll just make do with what the groups can afford to contribute. Instead of contributing to the WLU, they'll put their resources into accounts in the local savings cooperatives we've helped them set up over the last two years. Administratively, the changes are simple. We just cut out the top layer and bring things down to municipal level in the Maraní and Momotoa."

Yelba said to me, "We were hoping you'd help us with the communities around Marañon and Walilika, since you know people there and you like it there so much."

"I'd love to. It's what I was hoping to do with the Alcaldía in Marañon. What kind of programmes would we be doing?"

"Gender training, health education and use of medicinal plants, literacy, advice work. We may be able to get some environmental and micro-credit programmes going too."

"Will you be able to keep going without funding?"

"After what's happened, we think, the foreign funding brings more problems than it solves. I guess we don't have to tell you Gladys was killed in a dispute over money. We don't know who did it. But the decisive thing that caused her death was the stand she made against how our funding was being used."

Margarita said, " You know how we've gotten by in Marañon, Maeve. Not having big money from the European aid agencies won't make much difference to us."

Eva continued, "Sure we're going to need some money from donations. We already have a small network of individuals and church groups overseas who help us at grass roots. We can get by with that for the resources we need. People from North America and Europe confuse things. So many of you think your high standard of living is the same as a good quality of life. They're really very different things, don't you think? Well, big money doesn't guarantee good community development practice. We think we should get back to basics. Like Gladys."

I agreed to work with Margarita on a programme of activities for the next quarter. I would cover Walilika. Yelba took responsibility for Guajiniquil. Maritza would cover San Luis and Eva Maria the area around Concepción. We knew Amelia and the others would manage to convince some of the communities to stay with them, since the office in La Bahia had all the money. But enough were sufficiently tired of being sidelined to be interested in working independently. We just had to offer them services they wanted and valued in order to develop a wide enough base for the programme we had in mind.

I felt part of this. It was something I wanted to do very much. The others seemed content to accept I could make no commitment beyond the next couple of months. We carried on talking over a lunch of beans, tortillas and cheese. It was good to be focusing on something totally practical instead of looking over our shoulders at what Amelia or Mary Douglas might think. We wound up at four so Margarita and I could get back to Marañon before it got too late.

On the way down, Margarita said we should try and talk to Marta Muñoz about possible cooperation from the Alcaldía. So we arranged to meet at the Alcaldía in the morning. As darkness fell I thought of Sylvie, wondering if I'd get to see her again before she left.

I got off the bus at the filling stations just past the bridge on the way into town and, against Eusebia's advice, walked in the dark to Doña Maria's. When I got to the house, little Osito barked at me fiercely before he recognised me, then came wagging his tail in friendship. Carmen told me off gently for walking that road alone at night. Threads of love and home tying us closer, she embraced me, Xochi reached up to me for a cuddle. "Shall I sing the new song I learned today… ?"

The meeting with Marta in the morning was disappointing. Little of the work we had in mind fitted the Alcaldía's plan, although help with transport and educational materials was a possibility. Their reconstruction priorities were environmental and agricultural, focusing on large-scale works to protect river areas and promote food security.

Marta suggested we talk to the Liberal Party office in town, since they would know the individuals likely to take over the local health and education offices in January. "Don't waste time with the departmental delegations now. They're all demoralised wondering what the hell they're going to do in January when the Liberals take over."

"Can I call back later and use the fax machine? The embassy want some information to finish their financial report."

"Of course. Need anything from me?"

"No. They just want more details of the receipts I put in from traders in the market."

"Sure. I'm in meetings all day today. If I'm not around, Paquita will help you….."

Marta's suggestion about the local Liberals was sensible. Over the next couple of days in informal conversations we met the teachers, doctors and administrators preparing to take over the departmental and municipal Ministry delegations with the change of government. They freely admitted expecting to have few resources and seemed glad to talk to us. It was their institutional backing we wanted more than anything.

We found the traders in the market from whom I needed information for Rita. They were reluctant to give me their national ID numbers until Margarita convinced them we had no relationship with the Tax Inspectorate. Later, watching Paquita feed the details through the fax machine to Rita, I had reached the end of something, a final goodbye to Raul.

For the rest of the week, we visited communities, talking to women about services they wanted. On the Sunday, we met up with Yelba. She acted as a clearing house for the information we gathered, sharing with us what the others were finding out elsewhere.

Yelba asked, "Do you ever see that Walker guy?"

"Haven't seen him since the end of last month, why?"

"He's asking a lot of questions that could get him killed if he's not careful. There've been enough deaths here. No one wants some gringo outsider getting hurt for no good reason. Eva asked me to see if you could have a word with him"

"But that's his job, Yelba. He's a journalist."

"Eva says, if you see him, can you tell him he's making some people very angry? He should move on. It won't bring Gladys back and it may cause more trouble."

"Why don't you and Eva tell him?"

"We might just do that. But you're more likely to see him than we are. Will you tell him?"

"Yes."

I got back to the flat in La Bahía that night to find a note slipped under the door:

"Dear Maeve,

I called to see if I could find you. Sorry I missed you. I know you must be busy. My flight's now on the 11th, next Saturday, the same time as Raul's. If we don't manage to see each other, please take care. I'll write when I get home.

Much love

Sylvie"

I promised myself I'd see her off at the airport. Maybe I'd have a chance to pass on Eva's message to Walker at the same time. He'd surely be seeing Sylvie off too.

At Eusebia's, Urania and her husband were just leaving as I arrived. Mateo smiled, mechanically, as though it were a skill he found difficult. He was very different from Urania, who was as natural as the wind on the sea. He hardly seemed someone with the sales skills necessary for a big wholesale business. Remarks Eusebia and Urania made from time to time indicated he was good with figures. Maybe his talent lay there.

Between kissing and playing that night, Eusebia and I compared our week. I told her how Xochi was getting on at school, Carmen's news, how Osito and Rosa and the other animals were doing, what plants were doing well, which ones were sad. Eusebia had no news on plans for the year ahead.

She said, "I'll know something next week."

"I can't wait for this limbo to end, Eusebia. Don't you find it frustrating?"

"Yes, but it'll be worth it, believe me….."

I asked her what she thought of Eva's concern about Walker. She answered, "He has to take responsibility for his work. Try and keep him at arm's length, Maeve. I hope he understands everything he does is carefully followed by the Interior Ministry and the army."

My next meeting with Yelba and the others was scheduled for the following Friday afternoon at her place again. We had come a long way quickly, developing a plan of work and a budget for 1990, based on responses from women in the communities. The meeting gave me a chance to talk to Eva Maria about Walker.

"In a way he's being quite clever," she said, "What he's really doing is calling their bluff. They've intimidated people for years and what he's doing now is saying "OK, you say there's no power struggle in the popular movement in Morazán, so you won't hurt me then, will you?" But it's a very dangerous game of chicken and he may come off worst. It's not his business. He should clear out."

"But from his point of view, that's his job, finding out things people don't want out in the open."

"They don't care what his job is, do they? All they see is someone messing up their arrangements."

"I don't see what difference me or anyone talking to him will make. He's not stupid. He knows the score."

"It may just bring him to his senses. It may save his life. It may stop him messing up other people's lives."

"Aren't they already messed up?"

"Hey Maeve, who's side are you on?”

"What's going on, Eva? People won't talk to Walker unless they want to. Isn't what you're saying that it's you who doesn't want them to talk? In the end, if people are talking to him, doesn't it mean that it'll all come out anyway? Aren't you just fighting your own corner for control of perceptions of the popular movement?"

She looked at me, saying nothing, before "You foreigners, will we ever work out real relationships with you? There's so much it's just impossible to explain to you, Maeve. Impossible…. You're a good woman. Forget about Walker. You're right. What happens happens."

Still, back in La Bahía the next day, as I took the taxi out to the airport, I was determined to discover from Walker what he was playing at to get Eva Maria so concerned. It was very hot. Inside the airport building, the air conditioning was too abrupt a change for me. I looked in vain for Sylvie or Walker. But I was early, so I went outside to sit in the shade and wait. That fierce air conditioning always gave me a sore throat.

Before long, they arrived, Walker's unmistakeable car nosing for an empty space among the lines of vehicles in the car park. I watched them kiss as Walker pulled Sylvie's luggage out from the back. They kissed again for a long time before finally releasing each other and making their way across the car park to the doors for the check in area.

I was touched. They made such an odd pair, him so casual, Sylvie so elegant. It was like watching a mother and her college boy son. I went inside to wait for them by the entrance for the departure lounge.

It took a while for them to get away from the check-in. When they did, they saw me immediately. Sylvie threw up her arms in greeting. I went straight to her. "I couldn't let you go without saying goodbye, Sylvie. I'm sorry you missed me that day you called. I've been in Momotoa for the last two weeks. I should have phoned, I know.…. Hello Mike…. Look, don't let me spoil your goodbye."

Sylvie said, "We've spent all morning saying goodbye, Maeve. I hate waiting around after checking in anyhow."

She opened her handbag, pulled out a card, "Here's my address, write to me. You'll be here until March won't you?"

"I'm not sure Sylvie. Let me write to you next month. I'll know by then what I'm doing. I'm waiting to hear about something. I might move on in January."

I gave her a warm hug, kissed her. "I'm so glad I met you."

"Likewise, Maeve. Let's keep in touch, eh?"

She turned to Walker for one last quick kiss, then left us, going through security into the departure lounge. As she collected her hand luggage from the screening machine, she gave us a final wave. Walker, dry-eyed, blew her a kiss.

I asked, "Time for a drink?"

"Sure. I'll buy. I'm glad you came. Sylvie said she hoped you might. I was going to see if you were home later anyway." We sat and ordered two beers, me a Rubia, him a Tigre.

"What did you want to see me about?"

"Another favour."

"What is it this time?"

"Can I take on your flat from next week?"

"I was thinking of using it for another month."

"Sorry, I thought you were moving down to Marañon."

"I am, kind of…. It would certainly save me a hundred and twenty dollars. Why? What's wrong with your place?"

"It's not secure. Your place is."

"That sounds dramatic. What's going on?"

"Really want to know?"

"Mike, a couple of people I know are very worried about you. They've asked me to tell you, you're making trouble for yourself. But it looks like you're already well aware of that….Look, if it'll help you, I've no problem handing the flat over to you. We just need to make sure it's ok with Asunción. I don't

think she'll mind. She prefers foreigners because they pay on time and she knows they're bound to move on. It'll give me the push I need to make the final break from El Desdichado and La Bahía. But what's going on? Has someone threatened you?"

"People have been following me. Someone tried to break into the flat the other night. They've slashed the tyres on the car."

"Why? Whose toes are you treading on? Will it bring Gladys back?"

"You think it's just Gladys?"

"I've no idea."

Walker spoke quickly, with an eloquence that surprised me, his singsong American English and his soft voice, oddly seductive. If I hadn't known him better, I could easily have been charmed. As it was, I listened because he knew what he was talking about and felt it deeply.

"I'm a journalist, Maeve. I'm paid to give people information about what's going on here in the popular movement, tell people about human rights stuff. I've been writing about the isthmus for three years now. People read my articles and think highly of them. So it's difficult for me when I discover, as I have in the last two weeks since Gladys died, that I've been taken for a ride by almost everyone I respected here. It's not just Gladys, Maeve. There's been an internecine war going on here inside the popular movement for years. It's like the army have been telling the truth in two or three out of every ten of the murders they've been accused of, maybe more. Celia Rodriguez and them have a nice pas-de-deux going. In the end only someone who looks really closely at all the evidence could possibly work out who's telling the truth about which murder. And you know the line I keep getting from people, "Oh, you have to accept that kind of thing here." That's what Enrique Artola told me. That's what Amelia told me. As if lying and covering up is ok for us but not ok for the White House. I've had this argument before with people in El Salvador. Their own side murdered Roque Dalton the poet and Melida Anaya the guerrilla leader. But saying so is taboo. Well, I don't think it should be. Orwell's right, the truth does go on existing behind our back, whether we acknowledge it or not. Sooner or later it confronts us. Here in Morazan, some big development programs have been infiltrated by the four main political-military networks operating in the isthmus and they've been milking money from them for political and military activities for years. The local aid agency workers know that, maybe their head offices don't, who knows? But they've been taking decisions on political criteria, not development criteria, and they've continued pouring money into these outfits knowing that the practical results of their development work are pathetic. I had a conversation just two days ago with one of the best-known and most highly respected US development workers in the region. He's about to retire. When I put my analysis to him, he wept. He couldn't deny it. All he said was, "Now is not the time." But when is? The bitter truth is, Gladys getting killed was a relatively insignificant event in a pattern of widespread corruption in the development aid sector. So it's hardly surprising those programs have been infiltrated by the local security forces. At the same time as they take a cut of the action, they exploit every opportunity to sow conflict and destroy people like Gladys who are inconvenient. And the beauty of it is, all they have to do is whisper an accusation in someone's ear. They don't even have to get their hands dirty. What the

aid agencies have done in effect is provide a perfect conduit for the security forces to deliver corruption and murder to the very heart of the popular movement. So not only are activists under threat externally from the army and the police. They're also at real risk from their own apparent colleagues. Is it any wonder the unions and the rural workers and the student organisations are in pieces here in Morazan? Do you know what I found out while I was back in the US? I interviewed one of the founders of the human rights movement here. Know what she said? She told me she's more afraid of Celia Rodriguez than she is of the police. And she wasn't joking. Me? I'm out of here. My contract ends at Christmas. I just want to be in a secure apartment until I go."

"You think something may happen?"

"They'd be crazy to try anything. As long as I'm alive at least they can say I'm a crazy paranoid attention seeker. If they hurt me, then they get themselves in the spotlight. I've already sent copies of my files out with Sylvie. If anything happens to me, the game's up. My job is to make sure the people who need my information get it. There's no advantage going public with it. Trouble is, you can't assume the bad guys here have control over all their people. It only takes one trigger-happy fanatic. Finished your beer?"

"Yeah. This air conditioning's getting to me."

"Let's go. I'll drop you back at your place. Maybe we could talk with Asunción."

"Sure."

"You don't seem very surprised, Maeve. Know something I don't? Saul Garcia tip you off?"

"No Mike. You're forgetting where I'm from. You think Morazán's a mess? Don't ever go to Belfast. You're crazy to get mixed up in this."

"Maybe, if it's crazy to be loyal to the memory of a brave woman like Gladys Centeno."

As we drove, Walker seemed very calm. I commented on it. "I've spent the last two weeks shouting at the walls in my apartment. The neighbours think I'm a raving lunatic. But if I didn't, I think my head would explode with anger and shame and disappointment. So. Calm?…. Making out with Sylvie kept me calm. I'm coping much better now. Knowing I can get away from here in a few weeks helps. Don't know anyone who wants to buy an old Mustang do you?"

"No. Did Sylvie manage to sell her Peugeot?"

"Yes she did. She sold it cheap to one of her colleagues at the hospital."

Marcel was minding the shop when we arrived. "Hi Marcel. How you doing? Asunción around?"

"I'm fine. You? What's up?"

"I wanted to ask you and Asunción if my friend here could take over the flat until Christmas."

He looked warily at Walker, perhaps remembering his visits with Ninoska. "Let me get Asunción. She's doing laundry out back."

Asunción came through, wiping her hands dry on her apron. "Hi Maeve. Everything OK?"

Walker told Marcel and Asunción his plans. They had no objection. I was glad.

The next day, Sunday, I cleaned the place up for the very last time. Asunción came up with Marcel. "We'll miss you." I looked at the pair of them. Asunción was right. Marcel wasn't a bad man. He so obviously loved her. He had their youngest child in his arms.

"You don't need to do that, Maeve. The place is cleaner than when you moved in."

"Hey, don't complain. Anyway, it's therapy for me."

Walker repaid me the money I'd given Asunción up front for December and also two weeks of November. He would move in on the fifteenth. I only had one small holdall of things left in the flat, apart from a couple of mattresses and kitchen things. Of those, I took with me two good kitchen knives, my grandmother's tea strainer, a plain, cream-coloured jug that had been Da's and a china mug Janet Melvin had given me. I wrapped them in pillowcases and a towel. Asunción let me leave the rest behind. When Walker was gone, she would have them. Apart from the bookshelves, the furniture was theirs.

Turning up that evening at Eusebia's, I was very conscious I had nowhere else to go. Seeing me at the door with my little bags and my poncho, the one Luisa had given me at Bikuka, Ondina, hugged me and said, "Our little runaway. Come on in, you're home now….."

Eusebia had made up her mind. "Our backers told me this week they've decided to close the gallery, Maeve. We've done well this year but the outlook for next year is risky. None of us want to lose money. So we're quitting while we're ahead. I may stay on for a month or so in the New Year. I'm not sure. We still have some legal and business matters to sort out. I expect we'll wind up the gallery by the middle of next month. You and I need to think about what we shall do. Can you bear the idea of moving? You've made some close friendships here."

I felt completely calm. She was leaning over me, cradling my head. I opened her blouse and began kissing her breasts, folding the bra away from her nipples. "I don't have anything to think about except being with you, Eusebia. What about Urania?"

"Mateo and Urania are thinking of moving to Europe for a while. Mateo has family in Madrid. Urania wants to follow up the contact we made in Paris through Raul for an exhibition on African religion and culture in Latin America."

"And Doña Maria? Won't she be sad too?"

"She will be sad. But I'll keep in touch with her. She's told me how glad she is I've found a beautiful clever young white woman to take care of me……..oh…"

She wasn't much good at talking when I licked her like that.

Our lives went on through that time as if we were floating in mid-air, awaiting decisions on the timetable to close the gallery. Eusebia continued her journalism and her radio programme. With

Ondina, she began making plans for a farewell luncheon party on December 10th for her Radio Morazán colleagues, the day of the last "Make It New".

One evening, towards the end of November, while we were picking some fresh beans from their pods that a campesino family had given me in Walilika, I asked Ondina "Won't you be sad when we all have to move on?"

"No. I'll be glad to get home to Managua and my family there in San Judas. I miss my children very much, you know. Only Eusebia persuaded me to stay on so long here. Once she goes, there's nothing to keep me here. The war has to end in Nicaragua. The elections are at the end of January. Things can only get better there now."

I planned to go down to the border over the weekend of the tenth so as to renew my visa. That would keep me out of the way of Eusebia's party. She and I began talking about what to do for Christmas. Eusebia said Doña Maria would like to visit Puerto Moro for a couple of days so we could see Ninoska, Adelina and the children. We talked happily about walking those long sandy beaches and snorkelling out by the reef.

The thought of moving to Brazil was exciting, unsettling too. It meant goodbye to Ireland, college, thoughts of a doctorate. My Portuguese was rudimentary. But I relished the intriguing challenge of another culture to learn and enjoy. After Morazán, I felt able for anything.

Each week I met with Eva Maria, Yelba, Margarita and Maritza, usually at Yelba's in Xiguasí, sometimes in San Luis. Once we met at Doña Maria's in Marañon. I had no difficulty dissociating Doña Maria from Eusebia. The two public personae were so totally different. To myself, I kept the enigmatic goddess, my lover.

We agreed finally to make arrangements to visit Puerto Moro for Christmas. I phoned Ninoska before I went down to San Juan to renew my visa. She was delighted. Aracely spoke to me on the phone. "I'm starting school next year, Aunt Maeve. I'll be going to school with Rogelito."

"That's great Aracely. Shall we go to the beach on Christmas Day?"

She cried triumphantly, "Yes!"

I was pleased I'd have the chance to see them before leaving Morazán.

By mid-December, the work with Margarita, Yelba and Eva Maria was well beyond the planning stage. I'd begun workshops with women in a couple of villages on the way to Walilika and in the town itself.

The Saturday I travelled down to San Juan for my visa, Margarita and Carmen did the first of a series of workshops on natural medicine in our house in Marañon.

I'd been expecting to find Eusebia at Doña Maria's on my return on the Sunday night. It was too unusual. Eusebia was faultlessly punctual in everything. Carmen comforted me. "Doña Maria always does what she says. She'll come. Don't worry." I did worry, but occupied the time playing with Xochi, helping her with schoolwork, reading.

Eusebia eventually arrived at gone eleven o'clock, Osito alerting us as she approached.

"I'm so sorry Maeve."

"I was worried. Have you eaten?"

"No, some tortilla and cheese would be good."

"We bought some fresh maize today. Carmen made *güirilas*."

"Even better."

"Coffee?"

"Could you put some water on to boil? I'll make some lemon grass tea."

Carmen took the scissors down from where they hung and went to cut the grass. As I put some sticks to the embers in the oven to get the fire going and heat the tortillas, I said to Eusebia, "I'm so glad to see you. This week has seemed like a year."

Eusebia filled a pan to put some water to boil. She explained, "The lawyers phoned just as I was going to the bus station. They needed to get something straight for a deal we have to close tomorrow afternoon. I'm afraid I have to be there to sign the documents."

"Oh no…. Does that mean you leave tomorrow."

"Yes. It's something that can't wait."

"I'm sorry. I've caused you to come all this way when you must already be worn out."

"It was important I come. We need to discuss something with Carmen."

She ate first before inviting us into the back house where we talked by candlelight. "It's better we talk here. We have more privacy."

She spoke softly, explaining to Carmen she would be leaving the country for some time.

"I've drawn up a deed keeping the house in my name, Carmen, but bestowing lifetime use of it on you and on Maeve. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Doña."

"It means you and Xochi have the right to live here as if you owned the house and Maeve does too. You and Maeve have the same rights to live here as I do."

"God bless you Doña. I know you told me you might leave. I'm sorry it's so soon."

"I just want you to know you're secure here. No one can take this from you. Whatever happens. Don't talk to people about this. It's no one's business but our own. If anyone ever asks you about it, just say I've left for Canada. Nothing else. Will you do this for me?"

"Yes Doña." Carmen said little, but her goodnight embrace to us was emphatic.

Eusebia was exhausted. "These preparations to leave are wearing you out Eusebia. Are you under pressure to get out of the house in la Bahía?"

"No. That house is on a lease until the end of February and in any case, even if we were to need to stay on a bit longer, at the worst we could always move in for a few weeks with Urania. But I don't want to find myself wasting time with trivial legal and financial details if I can get them sorted out now. I'm waiting to hear from contacts about arrangements for moving back to Brazil. The details are quite complicated."

"I wish I could help Eusebia. Tell me if you need me to do anything, please."

"You do help, Maeve. Just knowing you're here is a help….. Something you should do is close your bank account. It's possible we may travel soon after our visit to Puerto Moro, I'll know by Thursday. Will you do that? It might save us unnecessary delay."

"Sure, I'll do it tomorrow."

"Can you massage my back? Preparing all this has me stiff with tension."

We had some of her favourite sandalwood oil in the cupboard. For about five minutes I worked her back, then just decided to do all of her. This always aroused me and poor Eusebia always fell asleep on me. For once, I let her sleep. Gently covering her with the sheet, I slipped in quietly beside her, soothed by the scent of the oil and by her warmth. She was saying something in her sleep. It was in that African language she spoke with Urania sometimes, out of reach.

I woke to find her finishing her exercises in the half-light of early dawn. She wiped the sweat from herself with the previous day's dress, bent over me for my early morning kiss.

"Beat you to the shower."

"No contest. You always do." I sat up and stretched, "What do you want to eat? We've eggs."

"I'd love one of those omelettes you do…. "

I went out to the kitchen. The day was just becoming light. Carmen bathed her daughter in the concrete sink, little Xochi covered in suds, her mother making her squat so as to rinse her off with a bowl which she filled from the running tap. Eusebia was talking to her as she bathed herself from the water butt in the shower.

"What will you do today, Xochi?"

"I'm on holiday now Doña. I can play all day long."

"But you must study a little too, Xochi. Only lazy girls play all the time."

"Will you help me?"

"Aunt Maeve will help you later. I have to go back to La Bahía now. I have work to do."

Carmen was drying her daughter now. Xochi complained, "Why do you work so, Doña? We never see you like we used to."

"Does it seem like that, my baby?" Eusebia came out in her towel and took Xochi over to the kitchen, sitting with her close by the white clay oven where it was warm. They talked and cuddled while Carmen made coffee. I cooked Eusebia's omelette, making it the way she liked, with sweet pepper, onion and garlic. Carmen just wanted güirilla and cheese.

I bathed while they ate, then took some coffee before seeing Doña Maria off to the bus. We agreed to meet on Thursday and travel to Puerto Moro together on the twenty-second straight from Marañon. "I'll see you on Thursday. Have a good few days till then, my darling."

"You too, Doña."

We kissed. I looked into her deep brown eyes, pools of childlike knowingness in that mask that would always enchant me. I was happier than I had ever been in my life. What knowledge could I want beyond the certainty that she loved me?

The day ahead was clear for me, since I had planned to spend it with Eusebia. So I stayed with Xochi when Carmen left for work. Xochi obediently put herself to practice her writing. We played arithmetic games with the animals. Rosita took against one of the bantam cockerels and chased it around the houses. Osito, ears pricked beneath the lemon tree, observed the progress they made, like a timekeeper.

The cat from Doña Candida had taken to sleeping on top of the cupboard in the back house, a handy retreat from the zoo outside. When I sat down to read, it chose to accompany me on my lap. Rosita came to interview me about this, moving her head from side to side to examine the matter from different angles. For lunch, Xochi and I ate beans and cream with hot tortillas. We picked oranges to make fresco.

I wanted for nothing except my true love.

In the next two days I visited the three groups we were working with in Walilika. One was on the far side of the river, one based in the school and the third on the way out along the road to Zapote. That made a total of five groups between Marañon and Walilika with just over 120 women and girls between them. We agreed activities and a budget for the first quarter of nineteen ninety. We had a shortfall of about four hundred dollars for the things we wanted to do, all for materials for craft skills classes.

I felt happy on Wednesday night. Eusebia would be down shortly after lunch the next day. I changed the sheets on the bed, put all the dirty laundry ready for a big wash in the morning. Carmen was ironing. We talked about the next medicinal plants workshop we'd set for the first Saturday in January.

She finished ironing and sat down to the supper I'd made her, some rice with a chicken stir-fry, which Carmen loved, spiced up with chilli and herbs from the garden. I'd done a separate one earlier for Xochi without the spices. It gave me pleasure to cook for us all.

Unplugging the iron, I put on the seven thirty news from Radio Maravilla, "….The United States has announced it's forces invaded Panama today in what they term Operation "Just Cause" A State

Department spokesman told reporters that the invasion was so far limited to Panama City. American forces intend to restore democracy in Panama and to arrest General Manuel Noriega for involvement in narcotics trafficking. So far no casualties have been reported. The whereabouts of General Noriega are unknown…….. "

Eusebia had been right. Had she heard something from her contacts in government? I guessed her visit to Panama had been to protect the business interests she had there.

I turned the radio back to Station X. Xochi preferred it for the music. She had a great memory for the songs, performing them for us spontaneously. Her mother taught her songs in Tolti as well, which she sang with much solemnity compared to the verve she used for the pop numbers of Station X.

Carmen was teaching herself to crochet, working on a coverlet for a baby one of her sister's was going to have in January. I sat with Xochi playing cards. When she got sleepy, her mother took her and sang her fast asleep in a rocking chair inside the front house.

I read some Portuguese grammar. A shadow flew across the light bulb there in the kitchen, a bat. They were common there, sleeping in nearby trees.

In the morning, I was washing sheets at the sink early, when a vehicle drew up at the front. Bernardo Corea walk around the side, Osito barking angrily.

"Hello Doctor. What a pleasant surprise. How can I help you?"

"Thank you Maeve. Good morning. Good morning Carmen."

"Good morning Doctor. Say good morning to Doctor Corea, Xochi."

Xochi walked shyly up to Bernardo to greet him. "Thank you Xochi. Good morning."

He turned again to me, saying, "I got a call from Doña Maria last night. She's had to stop off on the way down to see Candida, the pre-school director, who is very sick. It's only twenty kilometres away, not far. She rang me because she's anxious for you not to worry. She was hoping you'd be able to meet with her there. She doesn't want to leave Candida on her own. They're very close…… It's not the most straightforward place to find. I barely remember the way myself. Eusebia thought you'd be interested, it's an old *trapiche* there on one of the sugar plantations. She also asked me to bring some leaves of plants that might help Doña Candida. Do you mind if I cut them?"

"Go ahead. Have I time to finish this washing?"

"Well, I myself have some appointments this morning. I'd like to take you straight away if I may, so I don't inconvenience my patients. Is that possible?"

"Of course. Let me clean up a bit. I'll be right with you."

I dressed quickly while he asked Carmen where to find the plants.

It was a short drive out of Marañon. Some fifteen kilometres north, the pick-up took a track off the highway into a banana plantation. We drove through avenues between unending ranks of banana plants

that stretched away in orderly green fronds before joining another track at the plantation edge, separating the bananas from fields of sugar cane.

Eventually we arrived up a slope at a disused water powered trapiche, the area for the first stages of processing sugar cane. The great wooden water wheel that powered the crushing rollers was still. We got out. I could hear the water running above us in the wooden aqueduct.

A couple of lean-to rooms stood to one side of the crushing area. The metal rollers, surprisingly small, reminded me of the mangle my mother used to work to wring the water from the wash in the back garden in the days when I was tiny, before we had a washing machine. Wooden troughs at one end of the *trapiche* received the molten sugar liquids once they'd been boiled and cleaned. They were black from years of use.

Urania was waiting for us at the door of the lean to. She looked pale.

She said, "Come this way , Maeve."

"Is Eusebia here?"

"Through here...."

I followed her inside. It was clean, though the floor was of earth. The adobe walls had been freshly painted with the lime whitewash used everywhere in the campo. Along one wall stood a bed and a table. A couple of chairs sat in the middle. A rudimentary cane partition separated this sleeping area from the kitchen next door. No Eusebia.

I asked, "Urania, what's happened? Where is she?" Urania picked up her bag and pulled out an envelope. I heard Bernardo's pick up drive off and looked out to see it disappear away into the banana trees.

Urania took my arm.

Calm and hard, she said, "Sit down Maeve, please. This is difficult for both of us."

"No Urania, no...please...."

I took her hands as I pleaded with her. What did I expect? That she'd make everything right? That whatever awful news she was about to give might go away? She took me to the bed and sat me down. Overcome with fear, I was already certain of the worst....

"Eusebia was killed last night at the house in La Bahía."

"No, please, Urania, stop...please. Oh no, no....."

"Mateo was staying at the house. We knew something like this was possible. They were well prepared. He and Ondina managed to get away. Ondina is safe. She's already out of the country. Mateo and Eusebia took the assailants by surprise. They killed two. The others escaped with at least one other wounded. But they killed Eusebia ....."

What was this insanity?

Despite all the fervent wish for it not to be so, that massive absence opened up around me in a heartbeat, sucking me into deep oblivion, the centre of whatever was me pulling out through my stomach.....

Urania stopped, held me. Listening was the last thing I was capable of. She let me lie against her, sobbing, while the first shock wore off. How long she held me ..... Eventually I was able to look at her.

"Who could have done this? Who could have hated her so?"

"Please Maeve, Rosa gave me this for you last week. We were afraid of something like this. For a couple of weeks we have been ready. It was one of the reasons Rosa wanted you down here, safe. We were unable to complete arrangements to leave in time."

I gazed at her. What could she be talking about?

"Who's Rosa?"

"Please. Read what she has written to you. She told me to make sure nothing happens to you. She was a great woman who suffered more than she should. You made her happy. We love you for that. Please. Read it. We don't know how much time we have."

Miserable, confused, my eyes clouded with tears, aching with the shock of inexplicable loss, I opened the now crumpled envelope and read.

"My beloved, my daughter and sister in spirit,

Well, it has come to this and I know you must be very, very unhappy and perhaps very angry also.

But I pray you will take heart from what I tell you here, and from the brief, sincere love we shared together for a while. Now there is no reason to keep anything from you or deceive you as I have done for many months. I know you will forgive me - your heart is true, true as my own duty to my country, to the vision of resistance we Cubans embody for our African family, for our Latin American family, for all peoples.

I am tired of this long battle Maeve. The effort and the sacrifices it calls for, few people can imagine.

I have to write quickly. So I'm leaving out much that I longed to tell you, more than I could tell you, far more, even if we had spent a lifetime together. Believe me, the moments I have spent with you here in Morazán have been as important and intense for me as any moment of victory or defeat I have ever known. Please forgive me for being unable to tell you what I longed to tell you. I had to choose, losing you by telling you everything, which was impossible, or hiding the truth from you so as to enjoy the priceless gift of your love. I beg you to believe me that I have loved you with all my heart. Forgive me for not being able to be truthful with you.

Even so, you will please comply with my request that you hand this message to the person who gives it to you and that they burn it before you as soon as you have read it. Of course, they have the same orders. Resist the temptation to try and keep this as a memento. It's impossible to say what use the enemy may make of it should it fall into their hands.

My real name is Rosa del Carmen Peng Maceo. I had the honour to serve as an intelligence officer in the Cuban army since 1971, receiving the rank of Major in 1983, until I sought and received honourable discharge in 1987.

I was born in 1944 near Cardenas in Matanzas, Cuba.

My mother was the daughter of a vaqueiro mulatto from the Bahia sertao and of a Brazilian-African woman, a cane cutter. She was the youngest of a family of eight. They were very poor, always on the move for one reason or another - fleeing from drought, in search of work. Her parents split up when she was an infant and she went with my grandmother to live in Salvador, the capital of Bahia province. Her mother was affectionate and hard working, but things got too difficult for them all to be able to stay together. When she was twelve she went to work as a live-in servant for a local family who owned a jewellery business in Salvador.

So you see, I have not been entirely deceitful in the tales I have spun you about my Brazilian background.

The family she served was reactionary, but they treated her well, as part of the household. In the mid-nineteen twenties, Brazil was unstable. Migration brought new elements into the country, many Europeans, fleeing the old countries where economic problems and social conflict made the chance of a new life in Brazil seem attractive.

This was the time of the Prestes Column and other threats to stable civilian government in Brazil. Many wealthy people were afraid. The family my mother worked for had business connections in Cuba and Florida and decided to move to La Habana, then under the criminal Machado regime. That was in 1930 and that's how my parents met.

My father was Chinese, originally from Canton. He worked in La Habana as a cook, although he was a carpenter by trade. He'd come to Cuba in 1919 as a teenager, to work on the plantations, one of a gang of indentured labourers contracted by foreign agents for the Cuban sugar planters. Anyway, he had served his time and was taken on as a cook by the family my mother worked for. A couple of years later they got married. I came along in 1947, the youngest of five.

By then my parents had moved on from the family that brought my mother to La Habana and we lived in Matanzas up on the coast near Cardenas. My father was an excellent workman. We lived ok, better than a lot of people. My mother was considered clever because she could read and write in Spanish and Portuguese, so white people treated her with a bit more respect than they did other black people. People of African descent respected her because she spoke Yoruba and knew the different ceremonies for the orishas and the dances of the tambors. She encouraged my brothers to learn the bata.

My older brother, Ramón, was clever, diligent and ambitious. He won a scholarship to attend university in La Habana and he was involved in the student movement led by Fidel. I remember later his comrades recalling his role the day the students brought the Demajagua Bell - do you remember Maeve? - to the University and held rallies to commemorate its sacred meaning. My other brother,

Segundo, and my two sisters, Clara and Amalia, thought Ramón was foolish. To me, a child, he was always a hero.

Ramón was arrested by Batista but released in the same amnesty as Fidel in 1953. He was killed in 1955, transporting weapons for the guerrilla. This was terrible for us; his death, and its sequel, as we became targets for Batista's police. I was too young to really understand what was happening. We were lucky none of the rest of the family suffered more than routine harassment. Segundo always kept out of trouble, although he hated Batista. Our dear father was losing his sight around then. Segundo took on the carpentry business. He kept us going through those bad times, him and my mother.

After the revolution, my sisters had a change of heart when we realized that we women too would be able to get a good education. My father began to get specialist medical care for his eye problems for the first time. I remember my sisters going off on the Literacy Brigades out to places where the poverty was worse than anything we'd ever known. Then we all realised what our brother had died for.

You have seen something of the misery and abandonment people suffer here in the marginal barrios, in the campo, in the mountains. There is no need for this suffering and injustice, Maeve. In Cuba, with all the problems we face, we are able to give a decent life to every citizen. That's why the Yankees hate us. They hate us because we have shown that a Hispanic African country can do what they cannot do, bring social justice to all. And we have done this despite their embargo and their endless covert war, despite their petty hatefulness against ordinary Cuban families that shows for all with eyes to see the wretchedness of their souls and the emptiness of their religion.

Be patient with me when I write with such feeling, my love. I have good reason.

Things went well for me and for my family. I joined the army in 1964, continuing my studies in anthropology and psychology. I was a good athlete. Those legs of mine you used to find so erotic took me to the Mexico Olympics as a reserve on the sprinting team. I ran in the heats to give one of the stars a chance to treat a muscle problem. That meant we had our best team fit for the final when we took silver behind the United States. We were so proud, watching those great women from our small country receiving their medals beside the representatives of our mortal enemy.

Things started to go wrong for me when I finally accepted my sexual desires were for other women. I began to react badly to advances from men. I took an interest in the ideas of foreign feminist thinkers and writers and tried to harmonise some of their ideas with the revolutionary ideals I still passionately believed in then, and still do, and with my strong religious feeling, that beautiful gift to me from my beloved mother.

I had a bad time, Maeve. For a while it looked as though I might lose everything, I was in prison for a while. The Revolution in Cuba has had to be hard, even cruel, to survive. It's easy for comfortable foreigners to criticise. I suffered worse than some, less than others. Eventually I was given the benefit of the doubt.

I was good at my work and at that time they needed all the trained people they could get. It was soon after Chile. The gringos were developing Plan Condor with the military regimes of the Southern Cone.

I debriefed and treated many victims of torture inflicted by men and women trained in or by the United States. It was a very painful time for me both professionally and personally, because my father died in 1974 when I began working with the first survivors of the Pinochet regime to make it to Cuba from Chile.

When Raul told me you had risked your comfort to shelter Ninoska Vileda, I knew you were someone worth worrying about - and yes, worth cultivating for possible use in my work, how can I deny it? Your instinctive charity is one of the endearing things about you in this world of double-dealing and self-interest. I recognised my younger self in you, I see Amalia with her rucksack climbing onto the train taking the brigadistas to Camaguey and then on up into the mountains to teach. And in your brash carelessness of what people may think, I recognise my heroic brother Ramón.

The linguistic and religious schooling I got from my mother and the fascination this engendered in me for my African background led me to specialise in the African languages of the Portuguese colonies in my studies. So when in November 1975, the chance came to volunteer for service in Angola, I was overjoyed. It was a chance to prove myself, to do something dramatic to defeat the South African racists and their Yankee allies, to free Africa.

I was sent out in December when things were in the balance, just beginning to go our way. I worked with many victims of savage treatment by the South African invaders and made many friendships with my Angolan colleagues.

Between 1975 and 1983, I spent a total of six years working in Angola and, for a short time, in Mozambique. I became an expert in counter-intelligence and received many commendations for my work. You can imagine that much of what I did was not entirely clean, morally. Sometimes I could barely live with myself. Do you remember the night after my dear friend Gladys Centeno was murdered we discussed "Les Mains Sales" and Fanon? I was talking as myself then, in truth.

You can see how I have deceived you all these months, encouraging your desire, even when you had questions about what you believed were my political opinions. But enough of what I offered you was true to convince you to surrender to me. I don't feel guilty about using my professional skills to attract you and make you mine, my angel. In a different world, a cleaner one if you will, we would have been lovers anyway, I know.

The contradictions I mentioned just now led to an emotional crisis early in 1982. The trigger was my mother's death. For operational reasons I was unable to get home. But after my breakdown I was sent home to recover. My superiors even suggested I give up army service and retire to teach at the university.

By late 1983 I was OK again, but advised not to return to Africa. I was sent to Brazil, in part to continue my recovery, but also to build up business and personal connections for intelligence gathering. This was a time of healing for me. I discovered my aunts and uncles who were still alive. I searched out my grandfather's family, discovering the suffering and beauty of the sertao. I learned more of my Yoruba roots and religion and became more comfortable with my sexuality, with me. How foolish this sounds, but I must tell you so you know how important loving you has been to me.

In that time, with my colleagues, we built such a convincing account of ourselves that the CIA and their allies have found it impossible to disentangle fact from invention. It was a misfortune that the man who took you and Raul out diving was an informer for the British. Raul had suspected this person and confirmed his link with the British soon after the incident outside the gallery when his brother intervened, supposedly to help you. The British, faithful to their masters in Washington, have good intelligence gathering throughout Latin America. Our main worry for our work in Morazán has always been that their constant cross correlating of information from diverse sources might connect us to Angola and expose us to the attention of our local enemies.

The British are expert at sowing dissent and conflict among the liberation movements. I remember once listening at a party in Rio de Janeiro to a woman whom we knew to be a very important British officer, at that time responsible for training advice in counter-intelligence to our enemies. She spoke with contempt of her United States counterparts and asked "why should we get our hands dirty and risk our own people when with a little common sense and care we can cause groups opposed to ourselves to tear each other apart?" Gladys Centeno, an outstanding leader, died in the course of one such operation - or, more accurately, one such area of sustained activity.

In Angola and Mozambique, I had already become familiar with these techniques and learned how to use them for our purposes. Here in Morazán our role has been two-fold: to identify enemy agents in the popular movement and to protect transit for liberation materiel and personnel. Why is it important for you to know this? Well, I want you to open your eyes more and to understand more, for your own sake. If I can help you see more clearly, I will have assuaged some of my guilt for having misled you. And too, I want you to understand that whatever has happened to me is not a defeat. In all wars casualties and setbacks are inevitable. That does not mean all is lost.

Early in 1987, I was asked to consider returning to Angola to reorganise intelligence networks that had been destroyed by the South Africans with help from Britain and the United States. This was a vital part of our effort to force NATO to recognise the failure of its policy in support of the apartheid regime in Pretoria. Of course, I accepted. When the Angolan army "Greeting October" offensive failed that year, we faced another decisive moment, just as we had in 1975.

I had long before been working with my colleagues to build up dormant networks in UNITA controlled areas. These we were able to activate and leave in place behind the advancing South Africans and so get access to reliable and timely information on troop, tank and artillery movements. We also consolidated networks in northern Namibia. All of this was very difficult and dangerous work, of especial importance to our air force. By late 1987 our forces and the Angolans had halted the South African advance at Cuito Cuanavale and subsequently threatened their bases in Namibia. Our actions have created the conditions for liberation in South Africa.

Well before the end of 1987, I returned to Cuba and was immediately asked by someone I respected in one of the isthmus liberation movements to come to Morazan to reorganize their logistics network here. Since 1986, the enemy had made important progress impeding these activities. Urania had already worked here for over a year by then.

To do this I asked for discharge from my army duties since it was impossible to undertake such a task as a serving officer. I was able to take advantage of my Brazilian background to take on the identity of Eusebia Roa and so I came to Morazan as a civilian, an individual.

And here I met you. How can I explain what you mean to me? I have already told you how I recognise my family in you. I listen to you talk about your father and how you struggled to do well at university. I listen to your enthusiasm about your literacy work with rural women and their families. I listen to you speak with affection and camaraderie about Yelba Rosa, Margarita and Eva Maria. I saw your devastation when you learned that Gladys had been murdered. You have little of calculation or selfishness. As the gringos say of people like you - you would give away the shirt off your back. This is foolishness, my beloved, in a world such as ours, but it is purity too. You are a pure daughter of Oshun. That's why I love you.

This may seem strange to you, but I want you to know that Raul Pec is a good, brave man. Few in his place would have run such risks of professional and personal disaster for the sake of others, knowing no one would stand by them. He had everything to lose and very nearly did lose his family. Raul asked me to take care of you because he knew some of the people the WLU work with might use you and then fail to protect you. For me he was someone with enough access to the NATO country intelligence community to help me orientate myself to their changing tactics and overall strategy. He is safe now. You must ask him if you need to know more. That is between you and him.

It's true I have taken advantage of you to encourage among other people a certain image of myself. This was necessary. It was especially important to mislead foreign aid agency personnel, among whom are people perhaps not working directly for their governments but in close enough contact with them to deliver valuable intelligence. The CIA looks forward to getting this kind of supplementary information because it gives them access to sources otherwise beyond their reach. So you see my relationship with you also helped me feed disinformation into their network.

But I have loved you and cherished you sincerely Maeve. When I have caressed your beautiful white body and shared the sweetest intimacies with you, none of that was false, mi gatita linda.

Time is running out. Writing this is hard. I have tried to tell you who I am so you will carry a truer memory of me in your heart. You will keep this memory safe for me, I know. Pray for me my angel, and know I will always be with you through Yemaya, through Oshun, through Oyá.

You can trust Urania. She is my niece, my brother Ramón's only child.

a thousand kisses

Rosa"

I could see nothing. A tremendous painful panic caught me and hurled me up and outwards. I flew straight into someone, "Eusebia!" I cried and grabbed at her angrily through my tears. Of course it was Urania. With a gentle sweep of her foot, she took my legs away from under me and caught me up, laying me on the bed and cradling me while I broke uncontrollably against her. In a still moment, she made me drink something and held me close. I felt calmer after a while. She let me lie down.

Taking up the sheets of Eusebia's last words to me, she went out to the kitchen. Through the rickety cane screen, I watched her take a smouldering stick from the ashes, and gently blow on it to ignite what my beloved had written to me. I watched the most important thing in my life curl up in flames and drop into the white clay stove, me there overcome with exhaustion, disbelief and paralysing emptiness. Urania came and sat by me, her sensitive face and high brow, those steady penetrating eyes of hers, beneath the maroon red headscarf, the colours of Oyá, "You will sleep now....."

I was alone when I awoke But I heard voices just outside.

"Carmen will be OK. Eusebia left the house to her and Maeve nearly two weeks ago. The other properties in the campo are in your name or in Aura Lila's. Here are the deeds and bills of sale. The houses in La Bahía and the gallery were all rented. We shipped the artworks to Panama last week."

"Did Mateo manage to close the main account?"

"Yes. Nothing was in Eusebia's name. All transactions were in cash, except for the gallery and she transferred all that in cash to Mateo last week too."

"Thank God she saw so far ahead. How much are you carrying?"

"Two hundred and eighty thousand. I'll deposit it with Carlota in Managua Here's the full account of the movements we've done. Mateo already has a copy."

"What about matériel."

"The two December shipments are through. We were too late to divert the first January shipment but broadcast another coded message in the last "Make it New" alerting them to change the route. We just have to hope for the best there. All other shipments are cancelled pending reorganisation."

"What else?"

"Nothing. That's it. How long will it take to get the passports?"

"Bernardo will be back from San Juan with them today. You and Maeve will be stamped through to the other side. Mateo activated the exit procedure. Everything should be arranged the other side. We've been working on the immigration people at San Juan for over a year. Bernardo has the passwords."

"Will Mateo be Ok?"

"He should be in Honduras tonight. He's going by boat .."

"Best I don't know ……. Neither you nor Bernardo have to stay, you know."

"We know. That's our decision, Urania. It was a fluke they caught Eusebia out. They have nothing on the rest of us."

These voices, who were they? I stood and walked out. I could hardly put one foot before the other. The voices were going through some papers. They looked up.

There was a bench there against the house. I sat on it, resting my back against the wall. Beside me I saw an automatic weapon leaning there.

One of the voices, male, stood. "Maeve, what can I say?" I stared at him, unable to think. José Fiallos? It kind of came back to me from somewhere beyond the huge emptiness in me. But it was misty still.

He asked, "Are you angry with us?"

What was he talking about? Had they killed her? What else could he mean? What else in the world could possibly matter? I closed my eyes. He came and sat by me, feeling my pulse.

I heard a voice say far away, "She may not be up to the journey."

Something picked me up. I was floating in dizziness. It stopped. And then something covered me.

I heard the female voice say, "Thank you, José. How long do you think we have?"

"You need to get over the border before tomorrow morning. They'll wait for you on the other side until noon. You're on your own after that. I'm sorry I can't do any more. I have to be back in La Bahia by fifteen hundred hours. Thank you for organising the documents so thoroughly."

"Thank Eusebia. She worked everything out."

"We all have a lot to thank her for. I'm not here now. Good luck, Urania."

"You too."

I felt Urania beside me, stroking my head.

I heard her say, "Sleep Maeve. We need you to be strong."

She got up. I slept.

On waking, I saw her at the table, cleaning an automatic machine pistol. I watched her. She loaded half a dozen replacement magazines with ammunition, forcing in the bullets from boxes beside her on the table.

"Urania. Please…." I couldn't bear what was happening.

She took me in her arms again. These weren't the arms I wanted. Oshun, of sweet waters, love and tenderness had left me. Ondina, goddess of women and childbirth and the sea, Yemaya, was far away. I was here with the power of the fierce ocean winds and storms, Oyá, also keeper of the cemetery gate.

"Urania, please, what's happened? Please, help me. Is she dead then? I just can't take it…I just can't take it in….."

"Maeve, you remember what she wrote, what you read this morning?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Our work here is finished. The army will be looking for us. Jose and Bernardo tell me radio news says they're looking for Ondina and me and Mateo, saying we've stolen money and killed Rosa. They haven't mentioned you by name, but the report says police are investigating Rosa's associates."

"But we…..", I wanted to say we hadn't done anything.

"Maeve, we'll be fine. For now we wait here. Bernardo will take us to the border later today. Tonight we will be safe."

As she spoke, I felt her strength take hold in me.

My self said, "But you'd be safer without me, Urania. What can they do to me? Am I involved for having loved Eusebia?"

"Have no illusions, my sister. If they find us they'll torture us to see what we know and then kill us. For them we are both enemies. Me with all my heart. You, by accident, but precisely because you loved Rosa. Can you eat something? I've cooked some soup. There are tortillas. You should eat. We have a long journey to make."

Her words doused my wishful thinking. I still couldn't focus. Eusebia, Doña Maria, Rosa. The soup revived me.

We heard a vehicle approach. Urania whispered calmly, "Move to the corner. Stay still. Don't make a sound."

I obeyed. She took up the machine pistol and peered out first through the door at the rear, she left it open. Moving completely silently she returned then to the front and made ready her weapon, her back against the wall. I closed my eyes, praying dumbly.

After a while a voice said, "The cane's ready now." Urania said, "The *trapiche's* ready too." She put on the pistol's safety and relaxed with a sigh.

A stranger came in. Not until he spoke did I realise it was Bernardo. I hardly recognised him. He seemed to have lost thirty pounds. He sat down beside me.

Urania asked, "Any news?"

"They have nothing. Or else they're much smarter than they've been in the past. Eusebia was just unlucky."

To me then, he asked "Are you all right, Maeve? This is terrible for everyone. I wish I could comfort you. We're all devastated."

He handed me my passport, a wad of the dollars I'd withdrawn earlier in the week and my small holdall.

"Here's your money and passport. I'm sorry about your things. I just packed what I could think of."

He handed Urania her passport. Urania asked, "Was it expensive?"

"Five hundred dollars. Two hundred and fifty each. You're stamped as having gone through to the other side. We were lucky no word is out on Maeve. I used your Dominican Republic passport, the one in the name of Helena Mendez."

"Do you think they recognised you?"

"I hope not. It's the glasses that fool them, combing your hair differently and this damn thing."

He took off his shirt to reveal a white canvas corset. "Can you help me get this off, Urania? I can hardly breathe"

In other circumstances it would have been funny, the mass of his belly suddenly appearing again as if someone had inflated him.

I began to think clearly. Everything was in Eusebia's letter. Her presence dominated the three of us there. A dim glow of self-reproach flamed up into a burning angry sense of what a dupe I'd been, the folly, the impossibility, the awful wound…

I was calm enough to see they were risking themselves to help me. Could they not have dumped me, leaving me to the police? But I knew so much even without the knowledge in me now from Eusebia's final letter. I was a danger to them as well as to myself. They had to help me. And I had no choice. The army would never believe I wasn't part of it all. I remembered Gladys, her deformed shoulder, her account of the rapes and beatings…..

Bernardo put his shirt back on. "We should go." I had no questions. My life was entirely in their hands. I followed Urania, fixing my mind on getting through whatever lay ahead. She carried a typical campesino backpack and her weapon.

Bernardo had put the canvas-covered frame on the back of his pick-up. We climbed in the back, lying on the floor between some boxes covered by a tarpaulin. I felt the road surface change as we reached the highway. In fifteen minutes, we heard the noise of traffic, the vehicle stopping and starting as Bernardo drove through Marañon.

As we drove on, I reached out for Urania's hand. She took mine and squeezed it, quietly saying, "Everything will be fine, Maeve. Rosa is watching over us, my father too….When we make the rendezvous, we must ask "Is the lake this way?". The answer should be, "Only for the birds". Will you remember that? You must remember in case we get separated. If they don't get it right, it's not safe. What's the question?"

I said, "Is the lake this way?"

"And?"

"Only for the birds."

"Well done. You have your money and your passport. Remember, you're legal. Your passport is stamped. You've nothing to explain or justify. If anything separates us, make for Managua. Bernardo has written a phone number for you. It's in with your money. They're friends."

Bernardo pulled over and got out, spoke to us from outside. "We're a kilometre from the turn off. Keep your weapon ready, Urania. The canvas on the passenger side is undone and will lift back for you. If we end up shooting, take the guys in the bivouac on the passenger side. The bivouac is twenty metres from the road. You'll need to fire at two o'clock from the back of the jeep. The bivouac is two point two metres above road level. There are usually two of them there. Understood?"

"Yes."

"I'll take whoever's on the driver's side. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Nothing is going to happen. I'll chat to them for a while like I always do when I go through on my visits this way. Then we'll go. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Stay calm *gatita*. Nothing is going to happen. Relax. I'm going to put the radio on so you can breathe easy. They won't hear anything if you just breathe normally. Relax. But pay attention. Here we go."

He got back in and started up and we moved off. Urania came closer and kissed me. I was stiff with fear.

"Everything will be fine…Relax."

Once we turned off the highway on the Walilika road, it was just ten minutes to the bridge. Bernardo soon slowed up, stopped.

We heard, "Hi Doctor Corea, out visiting?"

"Yes, I've a couple of kids with gastro-enteritis there by Cangrejas. Wanted to see them this morning but I got delayed"

"My wife said to me to ask you if you could get her some albuterol for our little girl. Her asthma's got real bad lately. What do you think?"

"Don't like prescribing albuterol, especially for children. I'd need to see her. Tell her to bring the girl in tomorrow. She'll be better off with an inhaler. But I need to see the girl to decide what kind she needs."

"Well. She went to the health centre yesterday, They gave her a prescription, but… you know the score, Doctor….. "

"Money's no problem, Sergeant…...send your little girl over, I'll fix her up. OK?"

"Thanks Doctor, you take care now…"

I listened coldly, noting the balance he kept between camaraderie, authority and the utter falsity of it all, the knowledge that he'd shoot the man ruthlessly if he had to. Perhaps my life hung on that consummate deception. I wanted to shut it all out, but listened, completely still.

"Thank you sergeant, see you later…..

We were through. After another fifteen minutes driving more slowly over the bad road, we turned off, finally stopping about a kilometre along a deserted track. Bernardo reversed into a clearing. He got out.

"Wait," he said.

We heard him pissing some way off. We waited for a few minutes.

Then he said, "It's ok. It's all clear."

We climbed out, pulling our bags after us.

Bernardo said, "We're lucky. There's still no urgent search for you in this area. The focus is at the ports and on the northern frontier crossings. Here you're just fourteen kilometres from the border through the hills. Get off the track and head due west. Got your compass Urania?"

"Yes."

"See that hill that's lost all its tree cover? That's El Pelón. Keep that at about eleven o'clock as you head due west and you come to a small river with willow trees along both sides. That's the border. Keep heading due west for two kilometres. You should then be at the edge of a tree line. Wait there tonight. In the morning you'll see a survey team. One man. One woman. A red double-cabin pick up. If there's any variation, stay well out of sight and make your own way as best you can."

Urania said, "You sure you won't come?"

"The rest of us are fine. We've no traceable contact with Eusebia except through Maeve. Now we've got you away there's no problem. Take the machetes from the back there. Find them?"

Urania reached in to the back of the pick-up and pulled out two machetes. Bernardo opened the passenger door and pulled out two hats.

"Here, take these as well. Put them on. From a distance, you'll look like campesinos."

To me, he said "You'll be fine, *gatita.* It's just a walk in the country. The drama's over. Tomorrow night you'll be safely in Nicaragua"

He embraced me. I was limp and unresponsive.

He said, "It's terrible for all of us, Maeve. We just have to get through it. Good luck."

Urania embraced him and kissed him. "Good luck Bernardo."

He drove away.

"We'll stay still for ten minutes, " said Urania.

No one appeared. We started walking. It was cattle country, easy rolling hills, We stuck to trees where we could, staying well away from any houses, of which, in any case, there were few. We walked without urgency, in silence and the fading heat of late afternoon.

El Pelón was clearly visible. Urania checked her compass from time to time. After a couple of hours, it began to get dark. We reached the river. The water was low. We crossed where some stones formed a small natural weir.

Urania said, "We're safe now. Even if we don't make our rendezvous, we have all we need to make our own way. Let's make a shelter."

She worked quickly and expertly. The woodland provided plenty of material. We soon had a shelter against the cold ánd damp of the night. She took me in her arms, talking to me, telling me how much Eusebia loved me, what a difference I'd made to her life, talking to me about her aunt as if she were a legend. I wept freely in her embrace and felt ashamed when on touching Urania's face as I asked her yet one more question, I felt warm tears running there. Remorseful for that selfish grief of mine, I pulled Oya to me and kissed her eyes, her mouth…...

"Forgive me Urania, ….."

She said, "We must sleep, my sister….."

The rendezvous went as planned. By mid-morning our escorts had delivered us to the capital where we caught a lunchtime bus to take us on to Nicaragua. Urania left her weapon with the escort. But still, we sat separately on the bus. By then I was numb, my nerves seemed to have stopped working. In any case, the crossing into Nicaragua was uneventful.

We went by local stopping buses as far as a small town called Estelí, where we stayed the night. Urania phoned ahead to Managua from the hotel. When she returned to the room she said, "I spoke to Ondina. She sends her love. We'll see her tomorrow."

As we lay awake I asked her, "Will Mateo be all right?"

"I pray so. He should have taken a fishing boat around the coast to Honduras. He has many friends there. The advantage we had for the first twenty-four hours was that we took them by surprise. They killed Rosa, it's true, but it would have been worse if we hadn't closed everything down and destroyed all traces of our work. Worse too if they'd taken Ondina or me or Mateo, or you. They thought Rosa was alone with Ondina. They came lightly armed, only five, maybe six men. They were lucky Mateo and Rosa didn't kill them all with their machine guns. Mateo told me Rosa's jammed, the firing was so intense. The surviving assailants were fleeing when she was hit in the head. She died almost immediately…… Ondina took her weapon and ….. "

She spoke almost to herself. I got up in tears and went over to her, "Please don't make me sleep alone Urania, I can't bear it….." She let me lie down with her and after a while holding me, she told me,

"You were her life at the end. You kept her going. If you only knew how much she loved you…… She told me loving you helped her put her work in perspective. She was so angry at the people in Morazan for the mess they made of things. When Gladys was killed, she told me that was the end for her. By then, she had proved to the people in El Salvador who the traitors were. They knew who they were. But they wanted Rosa and Mateo to do the dirty work of eliminating them…… From that day on, Rosa

knew it meant someone wanted to get rid of her and Mateo too when the moment was right. It was only a matter of time. She knew the rot had spread too far. So she set to work to close everything down and leave. She told me on Monday, after she returned from seeing you, the only thing she wanted was the chance to tell you the truth and beg you to forgive her and stay with her. She felt such guilt having to deceive you. You represented innocence for her, purity. She worshipped you. You gave her peace …… For me, she was my beautiful, brave, talented aunt, the one who loved my father best, the father I never knew. She talked to me always about him and made me proud of him. She was the one who most tried to live up to him and the only one who really did, becoming her own person as she did so. I learned much from her….. I promised her I would take care of you. For me, you're my little sister. I suppose I feel about you the way Rosa felt about me. Perhaps our lives will go different ways soon. But you'll always have a home with us….."

I fell asleep in bits beside her.

The following morning we travelled to Managua on an express, arriving around eleven in the morning. Urania knew the city well. She told the taxi driver, "From the Linda Vista police station, three blocks west, then two to the lake….."

We drove past the area flattened by the earthquake in 1972. It was now a wide-open green space. In one part, some prisoners were at work under guard, tidying it up. In another, some youths played baseball. We skirted it along a broad one-way street, running across confusing junctions and then through a middle-class residential area, along streets lined with abundant green trees, the sidewalks narrow and broken up. We stopped at a corner house.

Even before we opened the low gate a white, foreign woman opened the door, "Urania, what a relief for us all….come….."

Inside, in a large front room, Ondina was waiting for us.

She stood there holding her arms out to us and we fell against her, Urania and I, kissing her, holding her.

It was a truly bittersweet reunion.

When eventually we stood apart, Ondina insisted we shower and rest. She had food for us. The European woman, Laura, made us welcome. She told Urania "Carlota will send a car for you this evening."

She took Urania's backpack. "Is this the money….?"

I showered and slept most of the afternoon. When I awoke, Ondina was sitting beside me on the bed. She said, "I was so very afraid for you, my little sister. It seemed impossible we'd be able to reach you in time. We must thank Rosita for being so good at her work. We're all so angry she was taken from us that way. Are you very angry with us?"

I rolled over so my head rested in her lap and said nothing. She stroked my brow, my eyes. "Rosa feared what might happen when you discovered the truth. She wanted to tell you. How often she told

me she wanted to tell you….. I knew it would make no difference. So many times I told her, it would make no difference to you. She could trust you. Was I wrong?…"

"I don't know, Ondina. I just know I love her. I just love her and I can't believe…" I couldn't get out the words….. never…. again…. They just wouldn't form in me. All that came out were stifled sobs and tears.

Someone came for Urania later. Before she went, she came and told us, "Mateo has made contact. He's safe. I'll be back late tonight."

It was days before I began to piece together some sense of myself without Eusebia. I'd been so deeply involved making and imagining our life together. Ondina and Urania stayed close to me, emotionally wounded themselves, but perhaps better able to face their loss. During their clandestine life in Morazán, had they not chanced disaster constantly for nearly two years? For me any sense I could make was tied intimately to Eusebia's last letter, which I re-read in my head continually. I wore Urania out with questions about Rosa and her family, her work in Angola, her life in Cuba, her stay in Brazil.

Urania brought the Morazán newspapers for a few days. El Despertar led "Brazilian writer murdered by lesbian lovers……. Controversial Brazilian writer and art dealer Eusebia Roa was murdered on Wednesday night in what police believe was a degenerate lesbian love triangle…. Business associate Urania Valdivia and domestic worker Ondina Murillo are believed to have fled the country leading investigating detectives to suggest the killing resulted from a dispute about money from Señora Roa's lucrative art dealing business….."

Nueva Tribuna had "Leading cultural figure murdered in love feud… Police are investigating the horrific murder at her home in Colonia Thomson on Wednesday night of the Brazilian writer and art dealer Eusebia Roa. Señora Roa, who had lived in La Bahía for two years, was perhaps the most outspoken anti-communist cultural figure in Morazán. But police have ruled out any political dimension to the killing…."

El Mensajero wrote "Horrific murder of right wing writer…….. Mixed reaction greeted the murder of right wing propagandist and cultural critic Eusebia Roa on Wednesday night. Investigators believe Roa was killed during a dispute over money from her art business with business associate Urania Valdivia. Valdivia and domestic servant Ondina Murillo are missing . Police have appealed for information in their efforts to locate the fugitives. Interpol have been alerted…"

The story quickly dropped from the headlines. On the inside pages of a subsequent Nueva Tribuna I found, "Anomalies in police account of Roa shooting…. Household workers of neighbours to the house in Colonia Thomson where Eusebia Roa was found murdered contradict accounts given of the shooting by police. Nueva Tribuna has spoken to two gardening staff and one maid at neighbouring houses who report hearing heavy gunfire late Wednesday night from the direction of Señora Roa's house. Security personnel at the entrance to the Colonia spoke of seeing two cars carrying up to six men enter the Colonia together soon after eleven that night. One of those cars left the Colonia just before midnight with three men inside. Another car with a male driver and one female passenger left the Colonia soon afterwards. The police have refused entry to the Roa house since the shooting took place, alleging the

need to prevent contamination of forensic evidence….speculation is mounting there may be political motives for the murder…."

El Despertar ran, "Left wing assassin theory in Roa killing…..Police are now taking seriously the possibility that leading writer and art dealer Eusebia Roa may have been the victim of an armed robbery by left wing paramilitaries. Señora Roa's maid, Ondina Murillo, is now known to have links with a terrorist group based in Nicaragua responsible for a string of attacks throughout the isthmus. The killing may have coincided with the closure of their gallery by Señora Roa and her business partner Urania Valdivia so as to defraud investors and leave the country. It is believed a large sum of cash was being held in the house on the night of the attack. Detectives led by Captain Jorge Lira say they have many unanswered questions and expect the investigation to last for several weeks if not months….."

Another Nueva Tribuna had, "Gardener murdered in unprovoked attack……Enrique Alvarado, 47 years old, a gardener in the Colonia Thomson, was shot dead yesterday afternoon on his way home from work. Witnesses allege the killers used a motorcycle to draw alongside Alvarado on the Moro Coast Road, shooting him five times with an automatic pistol. Señor Alvarado died immediately."

An edition of El Mensajero probed deeper into the whole affair, " Confusion deepens in Roa murder investigation…..Detectives investigating the mysterious killing of right-wing writer and art dealer Eusebia Roa continue to keep open various lines of enquiry. Speculation continues about the murder of gardener Enrique Alvarado who is alleged to have told reporters he saw an army ambulance and other vehicles at Señora Roa's house before police arrived at the scene. No trace has been found of two crucial witnesses, possible suspects Urania Valdivia and Ondina Murillo. Police sources suggest both women may already have slipped through the unprecedented nationwide police dragnet and may possibly be in South America. Valdivia entered the country on a Brazilian passport. Police now believe the most plausible explanation for the confusion surrounding the murder of Señora Roa, is that they are dealing with two separate crimes. Detective Captain Lira, head of the investigation, has confirmed that Roa and Valdivia closed down their art gallery in the weeks before the murder and had large amounts of cash in their house, probably to avoid taxation on their gallery's profits. Murillo is believed to have ties with left wing paramilitaries who may have carried out a robbery intending to seize the large amount of cash, possibly in excess of US$250,000, believed to be in Señora Roa's possession at the time. Police are also anxious to interview a young foreign woman, May Osuku, believed to be from Japan, who visited Señora Roa's house several times in the weeks prior to the murder. This woman is not believed to be involved in the events of December 20th. However police do believe that Mateo Zepeda, Valdivia's husband, who also disappeared after the murder of Señora Roa, may be able to help with the enquiry and are anxious for any information as to his whereabouts. Asked whether the notorious bi-sexual promiscuity of Señora Roa, may be relevant to the case, Captain Lira replied, "That kind of speculation is just sensationalism. Señora Roa's sexual preferences are not relevant to this enquiry. This crime was about money, pure and simple."

Slowly, the shock of that terrible last day in Morazán, began to wear away. I still became weepy when I found myself putting on Eusebia's underwear. Bernardo had stuffed some of her pants and bras in my bag thinking they were mine. He'd also put in her sandalwood oil and a couple of her books. One

volume, poems by Agostinho Neto, President of Angola until his death in 1979, had a dedication from the author to my Eusebia, "To Rosita, daughter of Oshun, woman of Ogun…." Things kept tripping me up into unfathomable pools of emotion. Days would go by heading back surely to stability and then I'd drop without warning into one of those deeps, Ondina hauling me back up and out, her smiling tenderness redeeming me time after time.

On Christmas Day, she took me to visit her family in the huge San Judas barrio in southern Managua. Her sisters and mother and family lived in squat, close rooms made with rough timber, roofed over with zinc sheeting long past its useful life. We ate a simple dinner of chicken and rice, before sitting apart together alone on the pavement while the family rested inside.

"Are you political Ondi? I mean, once you told me you…..sorry,…." She had stared fixedly at her beer. "I was just curious. I still don't get why you were with Rosa."

"Maeve, when I was seventeen I was a good looker, you know? That was in '79. When the revolution happened, maybe a month before the muchachos took control of Managua, I was stopped at a road block on what's now the old road to León. The officer, a young guy, questioned me and when they found out where I lived they slapped me around some because two of their unit had been ambushed the week before right there on the corner there." She motioned with her lips to the end of the street. "So then they took me up away from the checkpoint just nearby and beat me some more and they showed me two men they had there. They were naked, hung upside down, still alive, from a bar tied up between two trees. And their balls were all cut and bleeding and their eyes were gouged out. They were moaning in agony, the blood dripping on the ground beneath them. The officer, the Guardia teniente there, he said to me, "You want to be like them?" I said nothing. So he screamed at me "You want to be like them, do you? Do you?" Hitting me, you know? So I still said nothing and he told his men to strip me naked and they did and they beat me again. Can you imagine how I felt? ……And then another officer came along and told the teniente to let me be. So they took me back to the checkpoint, naked, ok? And they made me stand there in the sun for I don't know how long with all the cars going by and all the people staring at my humiliation. In the end they beat me some more and threw my clothes at me and told me I could go…..So when you ask me, am I political, I guess I just don't know……. Maybe one way I'm not. Maybe another way I am. Do I care which political party is in power? No…Do I want a decent life for me and my kids that none of the politicians give a damn about? Sure I do. Will I fight for that? Yes. So. Am I political?…. You tell me……"

She leaned over to me and kissed me on my mouth. "I can see why Rosa loved you, Maeve. I hope one day you have loads of kids so there'll be another few good people in the world. We need all of them we can get…… "

A couple of times, Laura took us all swimming to Xiloá, a lake resort outside Managua. Other times we went for walks in the wooded slopes of Mombacho, the volcano overlooking Granada, swimming in the black waters of volcanic springs and pools where the volcano met the lake. Ondina would take me shopping in the Eastern Market. It became possible for me to consider a future.

Urania left for Havana. She wanted to be with her family. She asked me to go with her. But I didn't want to travel. I wrote to her recently and hope to see her in the autumn.

It took me another couple of weeks before I felt able to move around with confidence again on my own. Ondina and Laura saw me through the nights of tears and anguish. Laura assured me I could stay with her as long as I needed to. But as I recovered I wanted only to be away in some neutral territory somewhere.

I reached Pat by phone, eventually finding him at a number in Montreal. "You OK?"

"Sure."

"Don't sound too convinced…."

My uncle Pat, tall like my Da', a man you could talk to; still, "Another time, Pat… "

He arranged for me to stay at his place in London, putting me in touch with his friend Philomena.

Before I left in February, I sent a letter with someone from the ICSO office in Managua to Rob and Evora, enclosing a letter for Ninoska. I asked them to pass it to her by hand via the Jesuits with whom ICSO were in close touch. It was the safest way to avoid the censorship.

I know I'll make good these friendships, broken so abruptly by Rosa's death. But when?

Here in London, my leg is healing now.

False Candour and Mary Norris return wanting to frighten me, hurt me, use me.

They take me away for a few days, Prevention of Terrorism. False Candour opens the first session with, "Do you know what a banning order is Maeve?" "Do what you need to. I've done nothing wrong."

They attack relentlessy for hours.

"What were you doing in Morazan?"

"Working on a literacy project."

Norris says, "You were the lover of Rosa Peng Maceo, a Cuban intelligence officer in charge of smuggling advanced weaponry to Salvadoran terrorists. Don't give us this shit about fucking literacy programmes…."

"I was in a relationship with Eusebia Roa, a writer and art dealer. I worked on a literacy programme."

"Rosa paid for everything didn't she? You owed her."

"I had my own money. I don't know why you keep calling Eusebia, the woman I knew, Rosa."

"You met with Gladys Centeno. Gladys Centeno was a known terrorist. What were you doing?"

"I visited rural families on a land occupation. She happened to be there."

"We know you travelled to Nicaragua, probably with Urania Valdivia or Ondina Murillo or Mateo Zepeda. Who are they?"

"I travelled to Nicaragua completely legally on my own passport."

"Who is Ondina Murillo?"

"A domestic worker."

False Candour scoffed, "How many domestic workers use Czech-made machine pistols?"

"Ondina was Eusebia Roa's cook."

"Ok. Look at this photo…"

They showed me photographs. Me in the front garden at Colonia Thomson with Ondina. Me leaving the gallery with Urania. Me in the car with Eusebia.

"How about this one?"

Me meeting Urania and Eusebia at the cinema."

"And this one."

Mateo with Urania outside my flat.

"You were in this up to your neck. You want to be put on a database of terrorist suspects so every time you go through an airport you get taken aside by security police? Maybe worse…?"

"I worked on a literacy programme."

"Ok how about this one?"

It was Eusebia, dead, covered in blood on the floor of her house, her eyes wide open. I said nothing.

"Cold bastard, aren't you?"

In another session "You stayed in the house of Laura Jammes, for nearly two months. Laura Jammes is an East German training officer with the Sandinista counter-intelligence service. What were you doing there?"

"I was very ill after Eusebia died. Laura took care of me."

"What was your relationship with Sergio Lopez, whom you say you knew as Jose Fiallos?"

"He was someone I met from time to time as a development worker."

"Where were you trained in unarmed combat?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maeve, you broke the arm of a thirteen stone US army artilleryman. When are you going to stop bullshitting us?"

"I have never had training in unarmed combat. I worked on a literacy programme."

Between sessions they left me alone in a lighted cell, with plenty of banging and noise outside, a brief non-respite to soften me up with fatigue and uncertainty, then back into the questions.

"They were clever about communicating with their network, weren't they? That became your job, didn't it? Using the literacy programme as cover….Aren't you worried about your mate Eva Maria there? ….Want us to tell you what's happening to her right now?"

Mary Norris adds, "Perhaps you'd like us to ship you back to La Bahia, Maeve? Ever had a lighted blow torch played along your vulva?"

False Candour says, "Surely you want to help her, don't you?…. What kind of person are you?"

"We worked on a literacy program."

"What is the relation of Raul Pec to the arms smuggling ring you were part of?"

"I worked on a literacy programme. In my spare time, Raul Pec was my dance partner."

"You went diving together. You were lovers before he left for home and then he passed you on to Rosa Peng Maceo as if you were some cheap slut. What do you take us for? Did he move stuff for the network using his Corps Diplomatique plates?"

"He sent you nearly twenty five thousand dollars during the hurricane. How much of that was embassy money and how much was money you were moving around for Peng Maceo?"

The interrogations go on, round and round, for hours at a time over three days. I know they have to charge me or let me go eventually, even under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Raul's advice stays fixed in my mind. I avoid conversations with them. They're easy to stonewall since I'm telling the truth, my version.

They release me at three one morning. I forget which morning. Back home I sleep long and deep, wake up to find it's the weekend.

The phone rings. I answer. A lively, soft voice says, "Hi, this is Dolly. Can I speak to Maeve?"

Oshun is smiling on me. I finger the amber bracelet on my wrist, Rosa del Carmen Eusebia deep in my heart forever. Her voice starts in me. Wh325at should I say? Is my life not already over?

"I thought I'd never see you again."

Can I date her? Leave behind all the hurt without abandoning what's me? I know I must return, to Urania and Ondina, to Carmen and Ninoska, Xochi and Aracely …. Do I?

"I got the note you left. It was sweet of you, you know. Took me a while to get up the nerve to phone you. What are you doing tonight?....."

Giving me to you, if you'll have me….. Eusebia kisses my neck……. I want to give in…..

"Nothing", says I……