



# Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates

Tom Robbins

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**Fierce Invalids  
Home From  
Hot Climates**

**TOM ROBBINS**

**BANTAM**  
New York Toronto  
London Sydney  
Auckland

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For Rip and Fleet and Capt. Kirk

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I want God, I want poetry,  
I want danger, I want freedom,  
I want goodness, I want sin.

—Aldous Huxley

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## part 1

Sometimes naked  
Sometimes mad  
Now the scholar  
Now the fool  
Thus they appear on earth:  
The free men.

—Hindu verse

### Lima, Peru October 1997

The naked parrot looked like a human fetus spliced onto a kosher chicken. It was so old it had lost every single one of its feathers, even its pinfeathers, and its bumpy, jaundiced skin was latticed by a network of rubbery blue veins.

“Pathological,” muttered Switters, meaning not simply the parrot but the whole scene, including the shrunken old woman in whose footsteps the bird doggedly followed as she moved about the darkened villa. The parrot’s scabrous claws made a dry, scraping noise as they fought for purchase on the terracotta floor tiles, and when, periodically, the creature lost its footing and skidded an inch or two, it issued a squawk so quavery and feeble that it sounded as if it were being petted by the Boston Strangler. Each time it squawked, the crone clucked, whether in sympathy or disapproval one could

not tell, for she never turned to her devoted little companion but wandered aimlessly from one piece of ancient wooden furniture to another in her amorphous black dress.

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Switters feigned appreciation, but he was secretly repulsed, all the more so because Juan Carlos who stood beside him on the patio, also spying in the widow's windows, was beaming with pride and satisfaction. Switters slapped at the mosquitoes that perforated his torso and cursed every hair on the hand of Fate that had snatched him into South too-goddamn-vivid America.

## Boquichicos, Peru November 1997

Attracted by the lamplight that seeped through the louvers, a mammoth moth beat against the shutter like a storm. Switters watched it with some fascination as he waited for the boys to bring his luggage up from the river. That moth was no butterfly, that was certain. It was a night animal, and it had a night animal's mystery.

Butterflies were delicate and gossamer, but this moth possessed strength and weight. Its heavy wings were powdered like the face of an old actress. Butterflies were presumed to be carefree, moths were slaves to a fiery obsession. Butterflies seemed innocuous, moths somehow . . . erotic. The dust of the moth was a sexual dust. The twitch of the moth was a sexual twitch. Suddenly Switters touched his throat and moaned. He moaned because it occurred to him how much the moth resembled a clitoris with wings.

Vivid.

There were grunts on the path behind him, and Inti emerged from the forest bearing, somewhat apprehensively, Switters's crocodile-skin valise. In a moment the other two boys appeared with the rest of his gear. It was time to review accommodations in the Hotel Boquichicos. He dreaded what he might find behind its shuttered windows, its double-screened doors, but he motioned for the boys to follow him in. "Let's go. This insect—" He nodded at the great moth that, fan though it might, was unable to stir the steaming green broth that in the Amazon often substitutes for air. "This insect is making me feel—" Switters hesitated to utter the word, even though he knew Inti could understand more than a dozen simple syllables of English. "This insect is making me feel *libidinous*."

# Central Syria

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May 1998

Trekking toward Jebel al Qaz-az in a late spring rain, the nomads were soaked and nearly giddy. Behind them, at lower elevations, the grass was already yellowing and withering, fodder not for flocks but for wildfires; ahead, the mountain passes conceivably could still be obstructed by snow. Whatever anxieties the band maintained, however, were washed away by the downpour. In country such as this, hope's other name was moisture.

Even the sheep and goats seemed merry, lighter of hoof, although individual beasts paused from time to time to shake rainwater from their coats, vigorously, stiffly, causing them to look like self-conscious burlesque queens. Their leathery black muzzles, glistening with rain, were pointed—not so much by their drivers as by a migratory instinct older than humanity—toward distant pastures.

Switters was one of four men—the khan, the khan's eldest son, an experienced pathfinder, and himself—who traveled on horseback at the head of the procession. The rest were on foot. They had been on the move, dawn to dusk, for almost a week.

About two miles back, prior to beginning their gradual ascent, they had passed a large compound, an oasis, undoubtedly, completely surrounded by a high mud wall. The boughs of orchard trees rose above the wall, and the scent of orange blossoms boosted to a higher power the already intoxicating smell of the rain. From inside the compound, Switters thought he heard the wild sugary shriek of girlish laughter. Several of the young men must have heard it, too, for they turned their heads to stare wistfully at the remote estate.

The band pressed on. That is what nomads do. Forward the march. The burden and the bleating.

Switters, however, could not get the mini-oasis out of his mind. Something about it—its mysterious walls, its lush vegetation, its auditory hint of young women splashing in the rain—had gripped his imagination with such steady pressure that eventually he announced to his hosts his intention to return and investigate the place. One might say they were shocked, except that his very presence among them was in and of itself so extraordinary that they were partially immune to further bewilderment.

The khan shook his head, and his eldest son, who spoke passable English, objected, “Oh, sir, you must not turn back. The flocks—”

Switters, who spoke passable Arabic, interrupted to explain that he meant to go alone.

“But, sir,” said the eldest son, wringing his hands and screwing up his forehead until it looked like the rolled-back lid of a sardine can, “the horse. We have only these four, you see, and we—”

“No, no, good buddy. Assure your papa I had no notion of galloping off with his fine nag. Now, he can let his next eldest son hop up and take a load off *his* tootsies.”

“But, sir—”

“I’ll just zip on back there in my starship. If you boys’ll be so good as to ready it for me.”

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The khan waved the procession to a halt. At that exact moment the rain stopped as well. Two of the tribesmen unfastened Switters’s chair from behind the saddle, unfolded it, placed it on a reasonably level patch, and set its brake. Then they helped him off the horse and lifted him gently into the seat. They strapped his croc-skin valise to the chair back and laid his computer, satellite telephone, and customized Beretta 9-mm pistol, each wrapped in a separate plastic garbage bag, on his lap.

Elaborate farewells were exchanged, after which the nomads watched for many minutes in nothing short of awe as Switters, laboriously, precariously—but singing all the while—maneuvered the rickety, hand-operated wheelchair over the brutal rocks and ensnaring sands of a landscape so harsh that its promise that a mere glimpse of it would propel a Romantic poet to therapy or a developer to gin.

Slowly, he dissolved into the wilderness.

He seemed to be singing “Send in the Clowns.”

## Vatican City May 1999

The cardinal ordered Switters and his party to queue up single file. The garden path was narrow, he explained, and besides, it would be unseemly to approach His Holiness all in a bunch. Switters was to go first. If his weapon had not been confiscated at the last security checkpoint, he might have insisted on bringing up the rear, but now it didn’t matter.

Because of his “disability,” Switters needn’t feel obliged to kneel upon reaching the throne, the cardinal had generously conceded. Switters wondered if, nevertheless, he would be expected to kiss the pope’s ring. *Only way I’m smooching that ring, he thought, is if they paste a crumb of hashish on it, or else smear it with pussy juice or red-eye gravy.*

As he thought that, he was remembering an actress he used to know, who, in order to entice a tire-trained terrier to follow her around during a movie scene, had had to have scraps of raw calf’s liver stapled to the soles of her high-heeled shoes.

Thinking of that terrier magnetized by meat-baited slippers reminded him then of the old ba

parrot that had waddled after its mistress in a Lima suburb many months before—and for a moment Switters was back in Peru. That's the way the mind works.

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That's the way the mind works: the human brain is genetically disposed toward organization, yet not tightly controlled, will link one imagerial fragment to another on the flimsiest of pretense and the most freewheeling manner, as if it takes a kind of organic pleasure in creative association, without regard for logic or chronological sequence.

Now, it appears that this prose account has unintentionally begun in partial mimicry of the mind. Four scenes have occurred at four different locations at four separate times, some set apart by months or years. And while they do maintain chronological order and a connective element (Switters), and while the motif is a far cry from the kind of stream-of-consciousness technique that makes *Finnegans Wake* simultaneously the most realistic and the most unreadable book ever written (unreadable precisely *because* it is so realistic), still, alas, the preceding is probably not the way in which an effective narrative ought properly to unfold—not even in these days when the world is showing signs of awakening from its linear trance, its dangerously restrictive sense of itself as a historical vehicle chugging down a one-way street toward some preordained apocalyptic goal.

Henceforth, this account shall gather itself at an acceptable starting point (every beginning narration is somewhat arbitrary and the one that follows is no exception), from which it shall then move forward in a so-called timely fashion, shunning the wantonly tangential influence of the natural mind and stopping only occasionally to smell the adjectives or kick some ass.

Since this new approach should render chapter headings (those that designate date and place unnecessary, they will from now on be scratched. If the next chapter *were* to have a heading, however, it would read:

**Seattle**  
**October 1997**

It was on a mist-bearded Saturday morning, gray as a ghoul and cool as clam aspic, that Switters showed up at his grandmother's house. En route from the airport, he had stopped by Pike Place Market, where he bought a bouquet of golden chrysanthemums, as well as a medium-sized pumpkin. Now, he was forced to juggle those items in order to free a hand with which to turn up his trench coat collar against the microdantic nipping of the drizzle. He had also purchased a capsule of XTC from a hipster fish merchant he knew, and as he walked from the rental car to the stately mansion, he managed to get it to his mouth and swallow it without benefit of liquid. It tasted like snapper.

He punched the bell. After a brief interval, his grandmother's voice crackled out of the speaker. "Who is it? What do you want? This had better be good." The woman refused to keep a downstairs maid, although she was eighty-three years old and had the wherewithal.

"It's me. Switters."

"Who?"

"Switters. Your favorite relation. Buzz me in, Maestra."

"Heh! 'Favorite relation' in your dreams, maybe. Do you come bearing gifts?"

"Absolutely."

He heard the electronic loosening of the latch. "I'm advancing. Brace yourself, Maestra."

"Heh!"

When Switters was less than a year old, his grandmother had stood before his highchair, her hands on her still glamorous hips. "You're starting to jabber like a damn disk jockey," she said. "Pretty soon you'll be having a name for me, so I want to make this clear: you are not to insult me with one of those déclassé G words, like granny or grams or grandma or whatever, you understand; and if you ever call me nannie or nana or nonna—or moomaw or big mama or mawmaw—I'll bust your cute little chops. I'm aware that it's innate in the human infant to produce M sounds followed by soft vowels in response to maternalistic stimuli, so if you find it primally necessary to label me with something of that ilk, then let it be '*maestra*.' Maestra. Okay? That's the feminine form of the Italian word for 'master' or 'teacher.' I don't know if I'll ever teach you anything worthwhile, and I sure as hell don't want to be anybody's master, but at least *maestra* has got some dignity. Try saying it."

Little more than a year later, when he was two, the child had marched up to his grandmother, pinned her with his already fierce, hypnotic green eyes, planted his hands on his hips, and commanded, "Call me Switters." Maestra had studied him for a while, had puzzled over his sudden identification with her none too illustrious surname, and finally nodded. "Very well," she said. "Fair enough."

His mother continued to call him Baby Dumpling. But not for long.

Maestra failed to greet him in the vestibule, so Switters wandered the ground floor searching for her. Nearly a year had passed since he'd been in the house, but it was as he remembered it: spare, elegant,

and spotless (Maestra had a professional housecleaning service come in twice a week; her meals served or ordered delivered from Chinese and pizza take-out joints), and a dramatic contrast to the dumps which her offspring—and *their* offspring—had often resided. Maestra had done all right for herself. Above the living room fireplace was an Henri Matisse oil of a mountainous blue nude reclining with distorted limbs akimbo, on a jazzy patterned harem sofa. He was reasonably sure it was authentic.

He found her in the library, perched at a computer. Much of the library was jammed with electronic equipment, twice the amount as on his last visit. Her collection of great books was now double- and triple-parked at one end of the room, while at the other end there were two computers, an array of modems, printers, and telephones, a forty-inch television set into which a stack of black boxes was jacked, a fax machine, and a helmet with goggles attached, which Switters took to be some type of virtual reality device.

“Maestra! Surfing so early in the day?”

“Less traffic this time of morning. Switters! Are you alone?”

“Of course. Who’d I dare bring with me?”

Punching off-line, she swiveled to face him. “Well, I did intercept an e-mail message in which you promised little Suzy you were gonna take her ‘all the way to grandma’s house.’ “ Her affectionate gaze hardened into a glare.

Switters blushed so incandescently he could have hired out his face as a beer sign. It was one of those instances, rare in his life, when he was at a loss for words.

“Perhaps that expression has some different connotation for you. Eh? Something I’m not hip to?” Her smile was ironic and a tad malicious. “After all, you’ve always exhibited the good taste not to refer to *me* as ‘grandma.’ “

“Uh, er,” Switters stammered, “Suzy? Suzy’s in Sacramento, how in hell did you access her e-mail?”

“Heh! Easy as pie. Child’s play. You of all people ought to know that.” The edges of her smile softened some. “All right, Switters. Come here. Kiss these wrinkly old cheeks. It’s a blessing to see you. A mixed blessing, but a blessing, nonetheless. Mmm. Boy. So what’d you bring me? Great, you know I’m crazy about mums. And a most fine pumpkin. Yes. Excellent damn pumpkin.” Her disappointment in the presents was ill concealed.

From his jacket pocket, he fished a Bakelite bracelet, pinkish butterscotch in tone. “Found this in an antique shop in Paris. Guy claimed it belonged to Josephine Baker.”

“Well, it’s mine now!” Maestra was immoderately fond of bracelets, often wearing as many as ten on each thin arm. “That’s so thoughtful of you, Switters. So sweet.” She paused, adding the bracelet to her jumble and admiring it there. “But don’t think this lets you off the hook, buddy boy. I don’t have to tell you what a wicked degenerate you are.”

“Oh, tell me anyway. I never tire of hearing it. Puts a spring in my step.”

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“You *are* a wicked degenerate. A rascal, a wastrel, a pervert. . . . Don’t look so pleased with yourself. This business with little Suzy is not funny. It’s sick. What’s more, it’s criminally prosecutable. You’ve always been the most irresponsible—”

“Now, now. How can you say that? I’m a dedicated, decorated public servant with a top-secret security clearance. Hardly the resumé of a slacker.”

“I’m supposed to sleep better nights knowing the likes of you is guarding the henhouse? It amazes me you’ve lasted in that job.”

“Over a decade now.”

“It amazes me they ever recruited you in the first place.”

“It was my firm jaw and air of tragic nobility.”

“It was your academic record.” There was an irrepressible yeast of pride in her voice when she said, “The dean of students at Berkeley told me personally they’d never seen the likes of you when it came to cybernetics and linguistics. . . .”

“Don’t forget modern poetry. I had nine hours of modern poetry.”

“He neglected to mention that. And the rugby fellow, that swarthy Englishman, he said you were the only American he’d ever coached who actually understood the game.”

“Nigel was just buttering you up. He was consumed with desire for you. You drove him wild.”

“Heh! Rubbish. I was a senior citizen even then. Rugby’s barbaric. Worse than football. But there’s no denying it, you hit the grade-point jackpot.”

“Genes, Maestra. Abilities I inherited from you.”

“Heh!” The old woman beamed in spite of herself. “You were clever, in *some* areas, but I’m still surprised they’d recruit you, considering your extracurricular activities and your weak moral fiber.”

“It’s government service, Maestra. Morality’s scarcely an issue.”

“You have a point there, unfortunately. So what monkey business has that agency of yours got your nose into now? What’re you up to? What’re you doing in Seattle? How long before you leave me?”

“Upon the rosy-fingered dawn.”

“Tomorrow? No!”

“I fly to South America first thing in the morning—but I’ll be back in a wink. Actually, I’m supposed to be starting a thirty-day leave, but the yard boss insisted I postpone it just long enough

dash down to Lima and back. Really, I'll probably only be there overnight."

---

He saw her eyes narrow behind her spectacles.

"Assassination?"

"I don't do windows. You've been watching too much TV. Company recruited a very promising young dude down there, indigenous operative, fronted him a new Honda as a signing bonus, and now he's backing out on the deal."

"You're going to terminate him with extreme prejudice."

"Get real. I'm gonna lobby him, try to talk him into staying aboard."

"Why you?"

"I guess because we have similar backgrounds. He earned a double master's from the University of Miami. Computer science and languages."

"No modern poetry?" She was needling him.

"Methinks not, Maestra. But I bet he can quote a line or two from *Howl*."

"And what'll you do on your vacation? May I expect another intrusion?"

"Absolutely. Another bangle, too. First thing when I get back. Uh, I was hoping you'd let me use the cabin up at Snoqualmie Pass for a week or two. I've sucked way too much cement this year. Bad job rising off them city sidewalks. I need to babble with a brook or two, inhale starlight, make friends with some trees. Then I may hop over to Sacramento briefly, regale the family."

"Including Suzy?"

"Uh, well, uh, Suzy quite possibly may be on the premises. I believe she's going to school."

"Of *course* she's going to school! She's a *teenager*!"

Maestra fell quiet and remained quiet for such a lengthy period that Switters wondered if she might have nodded off, as the elderly are wont to do. Either that or she was truly very angry. He cleared his throat. He cleared it again. Louder now.

"South America," she said abruptly.

"Yes."

"Nice."

"Not nice. No. South America holds a minimum of charm for this buckaroo."

“I suppose. The death squads, the poverty, the corruption, the destruction of nature.”

---

“Hmm, well, yes, there’s *that*.” He scratched himself, as if thinking of South America made his skin itch. “And then there’s the fact that it’s just too goddamn vivid.”

She regarded him quizzically, but when she spoke she asked not what he meant by “vivid” but what country, exactly, was he traveling in South America?

“Peru.”

“Peru. Yes. That’s what I understood. Lima, Peru.”

There followed another long silence, but this time he could tell she wasn’t drifting in any geriatric ozone. Her eyes simultaneously narrowed and brightened until they looked like the apertures through which Tabasco droplets enter the world, and the *zing zing zing* of synaptic archery was very near audible.

“Jeez,” he muttered eventually, shaking his head. “If J. Robert Oppenheimer had thought that hard he’d have invented video poker instead of the A-bomb.”

Maestra smiled sardonically. “Prove to me,” she said, “that chivalry can still eat lunch in the town.” With a rattle of bracelets, she extended both arms. “I need to be excused.”

Switters was taken aback at how light she was, how frail. Her body was a husk compared to the meaty pulp of her spirit and her voice. Yet once he had helped her to her feet, she left the room rather briskly, barely relying on the rustic mahogany cane that she seemed to sport mainly for effect. He heard her rat-a-tatting it along the banister posts as she climbed the stairs.

After tossing his trench coat over a modem (underneath, he wore a gray Irish tweed suit and a solid red T-shirt), he strolled to the library windows. Maestra’s house sat high on the bluffs of the Magnolia District, so called because a botanically challenged early explorer had mistaken its profusion of madrona trees for an unrelated species that graced more southerly climes. Magnolia’s cliff overlooked the shipping lanes through which all manner of vessels, from warships to oil tankers and funky little salmon-snaggers, sailed from the Pacific to Seattle’s docks by way of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound. Maestra’s second husband had been a sea captain and owner of tugboats, and he liked to keep an eye on the tides. On this drizzly day, the captain wouldn’t have seen very much. The sky and the water looked like separate panels of the same chalk-fogged blackboard. Nature had erased the diagrammed sentences and multiplication tables, leaving a view that was all pan and no orama.

Switters turned from the misty void and was instantly confronted with its opposite: namely, a well-defined object of lurid coloration. It was the pumpkin, only its orangeness had become so intense it seemed to be undergoing spontaneous combustion right there on the library table. Switters didn’t know whether to reach for a fire extinguisher or fall down and worship. The thing was blazing—and spinning, as well. At least, it appeared to be, for a minute or two. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Then he remembered.

He had forgotten about ingesting the XTC. It was starting to come on, and come on strong. Knowing that 150 milligrams of 3, 4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, to call it by its rightful name, would not produce hallucinations, he figured that his present-moment awareness must be substantially heightened. With that in mind, he pulled up a chair and sat directly facing the gourd. It was no longer on fire, but it was *very* pretty and *very* friendly, and Switters felt compelled to caress its haptic contours.

“We search for the door in the side of the pumpkin,” he whispered, “but unlike Cinderella’s coach it is drawn only by its own slow ripening.” (Where was this coming from?) “Distracted by the toothy glitter of corn, mice leave it to rot, to orange: a globe of lost continents, a faceless head, its true identity known only to the Halloween knife and certain deputies of the pie police. O pumpkin, pregnant squaw bladder, hardiest of moons, scarecrow’s beachball, in the name of farmers’ daughters everywhere, remove your hood and—”

“Switters!” Maestra had entered the room behind him. “What the hell are you saying to that poor fruit? Is this what nine hours of modern poetry does to a man?”

“My queen. You have returned.”

“Christ, boy! I see the frost is off *your* pumpkin. Have you finally gone around the bend?”

He smiled at her sweetly. Shyly, he studied his white sneakers. “Maestra, would you mind putting on some music? I feel like dancing.”

“Never mind the damn music. Sailor Boy and I want your undivided attention.”

It was then that he noticed the parrot.

How his grandmother, in her fragility, had managed to fetch Sailor’s cage from her upstairs sitting room, Switters could not imagine. Although airily constructed of wicker and copper wire, it was spacious, as birdcages go, and probably none too light. Normally a skeptic, Maestra had become convinced that pyramids possessed the power to refresh and preserve organic tissue, whether of plucked apple or a fully feathered bird, and inspired by an article on the subject in a reputable science magazine, she had long ago commissioned a craftsman to build her parrot a cage in the model of the Great Pyramid, although whether its geometric shape added to or subtracted from its total weight was something that had never been considered. Its impact on Sailor Boy’s health was likewise unproven, yet no observer could dispute the salubrious sheen of his plumage.

“I’m aware,” she said, “of your antipathy toward animals.”

“Why, that’s slander, Maestra. I cherish all God’s creatures, great and small.” It was the XTC talking. The XTC grinning.

“Okay, pets then. I have it on good authority, namely you yourself, that you don’t like pets. Why are you acting so goofy?”

He scratched his jaw in a pensive manner. “It’s cages I dislike. Cages and leashes and hobbles and

halts. It's the taming I dislike. I appreciate that a pet can be a comfort to one such as yourself, but domesticity shrinks the soul of a beast. If God had meant for animals to live indoors, he would have given them second mortgages."

"It's the wild kingdom that you fancy."

"Well, sometimes nature has a tendency to go over the top, lay it on a bit thick with the creeping and crawling and sliming and hissing and stinging and ceaseless reproducing. But generally speaking yes, my respect is for the thing that sniffs its prey instead of sniffing my crotch, the thing that shits the elephant grass instead of shitting in a box in my kitchen."

"Your phrasing is indelicate, but your meaning is clear. You prefer your creatures wild and free. That's good. That's very good."

"Is it good, Maestra?" His expression was that of a proud child who has just been praised for something trivial if heartfelt achievement.

"Yes, it's very damn good because it means that you're philosophically disposed to undertake the little mission I'm about to assign you."

Switters blinked. He was in a drug-induced neurologically based state of blissful benevolence, a state in which ego was softened, fear dissolved, and trust expanded, yet through it all he sensed that he was about to be conned.

It turned out that his grandmother wanted Switters to take Sailor the parrot with him to South America and release the bird in the jungle there. At her advanced age she faced the inevitable, and while its life expectancy was almost certainly greater than her own, the parrot, too, was no spring chicken. She wanted her pet to spend its remaining years flying free in the forest of its birth.

"But, but, uh," Switters sputtered, "you've had Sailor for about as long as I can remember. . . ."

"Thirty-four, thirty-five years. And he was at least that old when I acquired him."

"Sounds right. I'm thirty-six. So, why at this late date . . . ?"

"Don't pretend to be a knucklehead. You *know* why. I've always assumed that he was leading a good life, but that may have been a chauvinistic presumption. I mean, he's behind bars, isn't he? You might recall that he used to be loose in the house, but in recent years he's taken to ripping up the draperies with his beak and committing other disagreeable and destructive deeds. He's undergone a personality change. You're the one who's claimed that all pets eventually become anthropomorphically neurotic. Correct? Anyway, I've had to keep him locked up. You have no idea how guilty I've felt. So it's for my conscience as well as for his 'shrunk soul' that I want you to liberate him."

"But, but I thought Sailor was from *Brazil*. He's a Brazilian parrot. I'm going to *Peru*."

"Quit speaking to me like I'm senile. Brazil, Peru—the Amazon jungle's the Amazon jungle. Birds

and beasts don't recognize national boundaries. They have better sense."

---

"Okay, but I'm not going to the Amazon jungle. I'm going to Lima." His voice was fuzzy, and muffled by faux nonchalance. "Lima's on the coast. There's desert around it. It's hundreds of kilometers from the Amazon." He turned to face the cage. Sailor was tearing at a bunch of grapes, but his head was cocked to the side, with one shiny orb trained on Switters, as if he could detect the man's abnormal state. "Sorry, ol' birdy, ol' pal, but if you expect to wing home to the emerald forest, you're gonna have to redeem your frequent-flyer miles."

Maestra was neither amused nor dissuaded. "Your tone disappoints me," she said. The pupils of her aforementioned fierce, hypnotic green eyes were so dilated they looked like the burners on a dollhouse stove. She stared into them without trepidation. "A quick detour, that's all I'm asking. It may widen the pinhole in your travel map, but you're going to have to do it for me."

"Oh, no. No, no. It wouldn't be anywhere near quick enough for me. If I'm not out of South America within forty-eight hours, I will have forfeited all claim to future happiness. Can't do it, Maestra. It's an ordeal in the making, and it's too much to ask."

She clapped her age-spotted hands together with such a sharp *pop* that it caused the parrot to startle and flutter. "Then I'm no longer asking. I'm insisting."

Switters grinned. He loved the whole world at that moment, South America and a demanding matriarch included, but he wasn't going to let himself be manipulated. "You forget, I'm the only member of our family you've never been able to intimidate or control. That's why you adore me. So you might as well—"

"Heh! The reason I tolerate you, to the extent that I *do* tolerate you, is that you're the only one of your kind left with any tricks in his bag. In this case, I'm afraid, those very tricks of yours are your undoing." She paused briefly for the theater that was in it. "You see, buddy boy, I happen to have on file every e-mail mash note you've posted to Suzy in the past six months."

"No, you don't!" he blurted out confidently, but somehow he knew she wasn't bluffing.

"Want to bet?" She went directly to the smaller and older of her two computers, the Mac Performer 6115, and within a few minutes had pulled up a text. "All right, this one is dated thirty, September. Ahem. It reads, and I quote, 'I long to greet your delta like a rooster greets the dawn.'"

"Oh, dearie me." Blushing, he slumped in his chair and began to croon very softly, "Send in the Clowns."

In the discussion that followed, the word *blackmail* fell many times from Switters's lips. He said it without rancor, she responded without guilt.

"I can't believe my own grandmother would stoop to blackmail." He shook his dark blond curls. He was bemused.

“Nobody else will believe it, either. But they’ll have no choice but to believe the sordid evidence of Suzy’s e-mail. I ask you again: Do you want your mother and stepfather to read those messages? Want your superiors in Virginia to read them? Mull it over.”

“Blackmail most foul. No pun intended.”

“It’s for a good cause. Don’t take it so hard. And you know, I’ve been contemplating updating my will. The Sierra Club probably wouldn’t know what to do with the cabin at Snoqualmie, so I’m not considering, only considering, leaving it to you.”

“I . . .”

“Hush. Just listen. My Matisse that you’ve always been kind of gaga about? At present it’s destined for the Seattle Art Museum, but I might be persuaded to keep it in the family. If Sailor was sprung free and my heart was at peace.”

“Blackmail wasn’t sin enough. Now you’ve added bribery.”

“Yes. The old B and B. It doesn’t get any better than that.”

“You realized from the start that bribery alone wouldn’t work.”

“Materialism is one of the few vices you don’t subscribe to. Yet, deep down, even you have a pitifully honest sense of self-survival.”

He made a final effort to escape his fate. “Perhaps this hasn’t occurred to you, Maestra, not being a traveler, but a person can’t just take live animals in and out of foreign countries. Most countries have strict quarantine laws regarding pets. I’ll wager Peru—”

“Switters! You’re a CIA agent, for Christ’s sake! Surely you have ways of getting any manner of restricted items through the tightest of customs. You told me once it was like diplomatic immunity, only better.”

Defeated, he slumped further in his chair. In that position, he was at eye level with the pumpkin, and he imagined he could detect its seeds spiraling inside of it like stars in a galaxy or bees in a hive.

Conspicuously pleased with herself, Maestra strutted over, bracelets clattering, and gently poked his neck with her cane. “Sit up straight, boy. Do you want to be Quasimodo when you grow up?” From somewhere in her richly brocaded kimono, she produced a thrice-folded sheet of crumpled pink paper. “All this blackmail and bribery has given me an appetite. Let’s do lunch.” She slapped the check, a brochure and a cordless phone onto the table between him and the pumpkin. “There’s a new Thai restaurant opened in the Magnolia shopping area. Why don’t you order for us? Five years in Bangkok should’ve given you a modicum of expertise.”

He ought to be hungry (except for a pint of Redhook ale at Pike Place Market, he’d had no breakfast) just as he *ought* to be furious with Maestra, yet thanks to the XTC, he was neither. “Like

sedated spacemen conserving their energy for the unimaginable encounters ahead, the pumpkin seeds lie suspended in their reticulum of slime.” Those were the very words he whispered, but luckily Sailor paid them no heed, having already moved to the pyramid to speak to the parrot. Unlike those of women who coo baby-talk to their birds, Maestra spoke to Sailor exactly as she spoke to everyone else, which is to say, with language that was fairly formal and occasionally flowery, a self-amused ironic eloquence that to some degree, though he might deny it, had influenced Switters’s own manner of speech. (As for the parrot, on those rare occasions when it spoke at all, it would utter but a single sentence, and it was always the same. “Peeples of zee wurld, relax,” is what it would say, as if giving sage advice in a raspy Spanish accent.)

Seeing no route around it, and aiming to please, he studied the menu and picked up the phone. As he requested such dishes as *tom kah pug* and *pak tud tak*, names that routinely sounded like a harebrained pleading for a package of thumbtacks, the tricky tonalities of Thai didn’t faze him. The waiter, in fact, mistook him for a fellow countryman, until Switters explained that despite his immaculate accent, he could not actually speak that tongue that in all probability had been invented by the ancient Asian ancestors of Elmer Fudd.

In less than thirty minutes, cartons of aromatic food were clustered, steaming, on the library table. Wafts of lemongrass, chili paste, and coconut milk enlivened the technologized old room.

After about five torrid forkfuls of *pla lard prik*, Maestra dozed off in her swivel chair and slept for hours.

Switters didn’t eat a bite, but danced alone in front of the CD player until deep in the dark afternoon.

The next morning he flew to Peru. Alaska Airlines to Los Angeles, then the 1:00 P.M. LAN-Chile flight to Lima, which stopped in Mexico City barely long enough for him to telephone a maverick philologist professor he knew there.

Once he had gotten the parrot secured in the pressurized portion of the cargo hold that airlines set aside for passengers’ pets, the departure passed smoothly. That was fortunate because the effects of the XTC had left him moderately fatigued. Settled into a business-class seat with a Bloody Mary on his tray, he began to feel consoled, if not actually buoyant, about the demands of the immediate future.

In all honesty, he had to admit that the mission forced upon him by his crafty grandmother was a good deal less boring, potentially, than the mickey mouse assignment he'd been handed by Langley. Which was not to say it would be anything beyond an inconvenience, but it had the virtue, at least, of being an *out-of-the-ordinary* inconvenience, a kind of dead-cat bounce. A couple of extra days in South America wasn't exactly going to poison all the tadpoles in his drainage ditch. He would endure.

Yes, unquestionably, he would get through a sticky, buggy, rainy, much-too-vivid side trip to the Amazon jungle. The in-flight movie, however, was another matter.

It was one of those so-called action suspense pictures in which the primary suspense was the uncertainty as to whether there would be ninety seconds or a full two minutes between one massive explosion and the next. In those films the sky was seldom blue for long. Black billows, orange flames, and polychromatic geysers of flying debris filled the screen at irregular intervals, while on the soundtrack the crack, roar, and shatter of battered matter was as common as music, although not quite so common as gunfire and wailing. Both Maestra and Suzy sometimes watched such movies because they imagined that this was what his life must be like in the Central Intelligence Agency. Silly girls.

Switters endured a half hour of it before ripping off his headset, quaffing his drink, and turning to the passenger in the next seat, a tall, wiry, sharp-featured Latino in a blue-and-white-striped seersucker suit. "Tell me, amigo," said Switters in a voice just loud enough to penetrate the fellow's earphones, "do you know why boom-boom movies are so popular? Do you know why young males, especially, love, simply love, to see things blown apart?"

The man stared blankly at Switters. He lifted his headset, but on one side only. "It's freedom," said Switters brightly. "Freedom from the material world. Subconsciously, people feel trapped by our culture's confining buildings and its relentless avalanche of consumer goods. So, when they watch a city or this shit being demolished in a totally irreverent and devil-may-care fashion, they experience the kind of release the Greeks used to get from their tragedies. The ecstasy of psychic liberation."

The Latino smiled, but it was not a friendly smile; it was, in fact, the sort of quasi-smile one observes on small dogs in the backseats of parked cars just before they begin to bark hysterically and try to chew their way through the window glass. *Perhaps he doesn't understand*, thought Switters.

"Things. *Cosas*. Things attach themselves like leeches to the human soul, then they bleed out the sweetness and the music and the primordial joy of being unencumbered upon the land. *Comprendo*. People feel tremendous pressure to settle down in some sort of permanent space and fill it up with stuff, but deep inside they resent those structures, and they're scared to death of that stuff because they know it controls them and restricts their movements. That's why they relish the boom-boom cinema. On a symbolic level, it annihilates their inanimate wardens and blows away the walls of their various traps."

Feeling loquacious now, Switters might have gone on to offer his theory on suicide bombers, to wit: Islamic terrorist groups were successful in attracting volunteer martyrs because the young men got to strap explosives on themselves and blast valuable public property to smithereens. Exhilarating boom-boom power. If they were required to martyr themselves by being dragged behind a bus or sticking a wet finger in a light socket, volunteers would be few and far between. "Incidentally," he might have

added, “are you aware that there’s no such thing as a smithereen? The word exists only in the plural.” He said none of this, however, because the Latino had begun to grind his teeth at him. Yes, it’s an odd concept, grinding one’s teeth *at* another, but that’s unmistakably what the fellow was doing: grinding them audibly, too, and so forcefully that his bushy black mustache bucked and rolled as if it were a theme-park ride for thrill-seeking tamale crumbs, leaving Switters with no choice but to pierce the grinder with what some people have described as his “fierce, hypnotic green eyes.” He stared at the grinder so fiercely, if not hypnotically, that he gradually ceased to grind, swallowed hard, turned away, and avoided Switters’s gaze for the rest of the journey.

Aside from that, the flight was uneventful.

He arrived at Jorge Chávez International at two o’clock Monday morning with a dull, dry headache. He was subject to moderate migraines, for which air travel was a definite trigger. Reading intelligence reports concerning Peruvian guerrilla activity while drinking Bloody Marys hadn’t helped. The pain behind his eyes escalated as he went through the rigmarole of getting Sailor Boy cleared by customs. Had he not been carrying papers stating, falsely of course, that he was temporarily attached to the United States embassy, he might have been there until Christmas. Sometimes Langley was capable of marvelous efficiency.

Carrying the shrouded parrot cage in his right hand, he used the left to steer a luggage cart through clusters of surly men who wore brown uniforms and shouldered automatic rifles. These were the Policía de Turismo. Their duty was to protect foreign tourists from the pickpockets, purse-snatchers, bag-slashers, muggers, con artists, bandits, and revolutionary thugs who were as thick in Lima as seeds in any pumpkin. On occasion, the police themselves were the problem. (During his last trip to South America, he’d been forced to shoot a policeman in Cartagena, Colombia, who tried to rob him at gunpoint. The man lived, but Switters still had nightmares about it, hearing in his dreams the unbelievably loud echo of his Beretta as he shot the man in the wrist to disarm him, and the screaming as Switters pulverized both of the scumbag’s kneecaps to insure that he would never again leap out on a victim from behind a badge. Switters believed that law enforcement officers who themselves broke laws should receive sentences twice as severe as civilians who committed the same crimes, for the criminal officer had not only betrayed a sacred public trust, he or she had also undermined the very concept of justice and fairness in the world. A crooked cop was every bit as much of a traitor as was a seller of national secrets, and should be punished accordingly.)

At the Gran Hotel Bolívar, there were even Policía de Turismo in the worn though still opulent lobby. Most were napping in faded overstuffed armchairs. One who was standing scowled suspiciously at Sailor’s cloth-covered pyramid, but he chose not to investigate and Switters registered with no more than the typical delay.

Without bothering to unpack, he popped an Ergomar pill for his headache and went straight to bed. It was four in the morning. The hour when Madame Angst knits large black sweaters, and blood sugar goes downstairs to putter around in the basement.

He awoke, groggy, at ten-thirty and opened the blinds just enough to illuminate the telephone. First, I

called Hector Sumac, the reluctant recruit, and arranged to meet him for a late dinner. He'd keep his fingers crossed that Hector would actually show up. Then, he phoned Juan Carlos de Fausto, a guide recommended by the hotel desk clerk, and scheduled for midafternoon a tour of Lima's most important cathedrals and churches. Switters was considering converting to Catholicism in order to please Suzy, who was devoutly religious. He'd make a terrible Catholic—he found organized religion in general to be little more than a collective whistling past the graveyard, with dangerous political undertones—but he enjoyed ritual, if it was pure enough, and certainly infiltration was a tactic not entirely unfamiliar to him.

Ritual he liked, but compulsory routine he hated. Thus, he resented every minute that he now had to surrender to showering, shampooing, shaving, and flossing and brushing his teeth. If mere men could devise self-defrosting refrigerators and self-cleaning ovens, why couldn't nature, in all of its complex inventive magnificence, have managed to come up with self-cleaning teeth? "There's birth," he grumbled, "there's death, and in between there's maintenance."

Having said that, he went back to bed and slept for three more hours.

Before leaving on his tour, Switters contacted the housekeeping staff to warn them that there was a parrot in his room. Sailor was quite jet-lagged, so disoriented he wouldn't eat, and it was unlikely he would cause any commotion, yet all it would take would be a screeching "People of zee wurl, relax" as an unsuspecting maid came through the door, and Switters could find himself in a situation similar to that experienced by his grandmother a dozen years ago.

At the time Maestra had had in her employ a normally competent servant named Hattie. One day while Maestra was away at an all-day computer workshop sponsored by North Seattle Community College, Hattie added to her list of chores the cleaning of the pyramid birdcage. In the process, she scrubbed Sailor's water dish, which, admittedly, was rather funky, with a popular household cleaning product that went by the brand name of Formula 409. Parrots, alas, are unusually sensitive to chemical odors. Perhaps it was the solvents in Formula 409, perhaps the 2-butoxyethanol, but when Sailor went to drink from his now immaculate dish, the lingering fumes, subtle though they were, overcame him and he passed out cold.

Hattie thought he was dead. Desiring to spare her employer the trauma of dealing with a freshly deceased pet, she wrapped the comatose bird in newspaper and placed it in the trunk of her car. Leaving Maestra a sympathetic note, she then drove home to prepare an early supper for her semi-invalid father, after which she planned to dispose of the corpse. While Hattie was busy in the kitchen, her father hobbled out to the car, looking for something or other. When he opened the trunk, the parrot, now fully revived, flew out in his face, wings flapping furiously, and squawking like the mad conductor on the night train to Hell. The poor man had a heart attack from which he never fully recovered.

It took Maestra a day and a half to coax Sailor down from the fir tree in which he'd taken refuge, and as for Hattie, her reaction was that of the typical contemporary American: "I'm suffering. Therefore, somebody must owe me money. I'm hiring a lawyer."

Eventually the judge dismissed Hattie's suit as frivolous, but not before it had cost Maestra more than thirty grand in legal fees. She hadn't had a servant since.

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Because Switters lacked confidence in his Spanish—he was considerably more fluent in Arabic and Vietnamese—and because he wished to make certain that the hotel staff understood that the object of his concern was a parrot, he pulled from his jacket pocket a Polaroid snapshot that Maestra had taken using the automatic timer, moments before he departed the house on Magnolia Bluff. To the maid struggling to comprehend, he pointed out the cage and its gaudy occupant. It was there in the snapshot: Switters on the left, Maestra in the middle, Sailor on the right.

Or, as Maestra had written in a wavering hand on the lower border of the photo: the Slacker, the Hacker, and the Polly-Wanna-Cracker.

Inspecting his reflection in a full-length, gold-framed mirror, one of several baroque ornaments whose bombastic tendencies were rendered meek by the dramatic stained-glass dome atop the lobby, Switters commented, "Don't *look* like no slacker," and if the truth be told, he probably didn't. The saving grace of places such as Lima was that they afforded him an opportunity to wear white linen suits and Panama hats, which is precisely how he was attired at the moment. The suit bore the label of a famous designer, but for all of the pussy in Sacramento, he couldn't have identified which one. It had a yellowish tinge, due to lack of proper maintenance.

Completing the ensemble was a T-shirt, solid black except for what at first glance appeared to be a tiny green shamrock above the left breast, but which on scrutiny proved to be the spiderlike emblem of the C.R.A.F.T. Club, a secretive society with branches in Hong Kong and Bangkok, whose members met periodically to imbibe strange beverages and discuss *Finnegans Wake*. When asked about it later, members would answer, "C.R.A.F.T."—Can't Remember a Fucking Thing—and for the most part they wouldn't be lying. Switters also wore black sneakers and chomped on a skinny black cigar that somewhat resembled an iguana turd. He liked the way he looked but knew better than to pretend it mattered.

With respect for fellow guests, if not the Policía de Turismo, he waited until he was outside before torching the cigar. No sooner had he expelled the first perfect smoke ring than he was approached by a stoop-shouldered, balding, middle-aged gentleman with kind eyes and a light dusting of mustache hairs above a sincere smile. The man introduced himself as "Juan Carlos de Fausto, English-speaking guide to all attractions and points of interest in this, the City of Kings." Señor de Fausto was the person who, for thirty-five U.S. dollars, would give Switters a tour of Lima's holy sites and who, free of charge, would give him advice that would indirectly, but severely and irrevocably, alter the course of his life.

From the Gran Hotel Bolívar, it was but a short walk along the Jirón de la Unión mall to the Plaza de Armas and Lima's main cathedral. The notorious coastal fog had burned off, and the afternoon had turned unseasonably hot. The mall was sizzling. It was also teeming. A pickpocket stir-fry.

Juan Carlos, parting a surf of aggressive vendors, led Switters across the plaza and into the rath

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