



With best wishes
to J.T. Oliver
from
Ray Bradbury
July 7, 1947

And the Rock Cried Out, Ray Bradbury

And the Rock Cried Out

The raw carcasses, hung in the sunlight, rushed at them, vibrated with heat and red color in the green jungle air, and were gone. The stench of rotting flesh gushed through the car windows, and Leonora Webb quickly pressed the button that whispered her door window up.

“Good Lord,” she said, “those open-air butcher shops.”
The smell was still in the car, a smell of war and horror.
“Did you see the flies?” she asked.

“When you buy any kind of meat in those markets,” John Webb said, “you slap the beef with your hand. The flies lift from the meat so you can get a look at it.”
He turned the car around a lush bend in the green rain-jungle road.

“Do you think they’ll let us into Juatala when we get there?”
“I don’t know.”
“Watch out!”

He saw the bright things in the road too late, tried to swerve, but hit them. There was a terrible sighing from the right front tire, the car heaved about and sank to a stop. He opened his side of the car and stepped out. The jungle was hot and silent and the highway empty, very empty and quiet at noon.

He walked to the front of the car and bent, all the while checking his revolver in its underarm holster.
Leonora’s window gleamed down. “Is the tire hurt much?”

“Ruined, utterly ruined!” He picked up the bright thing that had stabbed and slashed the tire.
“Pieces of a broken machete,” he said, “placed in adobe holders pointing toward our car wheels. We’re lucky it didn’t get all our tires.”

“But why?”

“You know as well as I.” He nodded to the newspaper beside her, at the date, the headlines:

OCTOBER 4TH, 1963: UNITED STATES,

EUROPE SILENT!

THE RADIOS OF THE U.S.A. AND EUROPE ARE DEAD.

THERE IS A GREAT SILENCE. THE WAR HAS SPENT ITSELF.

It is believed that most of the population of the United States is dead. It is believed that most of Europe, Russia, and Siberia is equally decimated. The day of the white people of the earth is over and finished.

“It all came so fast,” said Webb. “One week we’re on another tour, a grand vacation from home. The next week—this.”

They both looked away from the black headlines to the jungle.

The jungle looked back at them with a vastness, a breathing moss-and-leaf silence, with a billion diamond and emerald insect eyes.

“Be careful, Jack.”

He pressed two buttons. An automatic lift under the front wheels hissed and hung the car in the air. He jammed a key nervously into the right wheel plate. The tire, frame and all, with a sucking pop, bounced from the wheel. It was a matter of seconds to lock the spare in place and roll the shattered tire back to the luggage compartment. He had his gun out while he did all this.

“Don’t stand in the open, please, Jack.”

“So it’s starting already.” He felt his hair burning hot on his skull. “News travels fast.”

“For God’s sake,” said Leonora. “They can hear you!”

He stared at the jungle.

“I know you’re in there!”

“Jack!”

He aimed at the silent jungle. "I see you!" He fired four, five times, quickly, wildly.

The jungle ate the bullets with hardly a quiver, a brief slit sound like torn silk where the bullets bored and vanished into a million acres of green leaves, trees, silence, and moist earth. The brief echo of the shots died. Only the car muttered its exhaust behind Webb. He walked around the car, got in, and shut the door and locked it.

He reloaded the gun, sitting in the front seat. Then they drove away from the place.

They drove steadily.

"Did you see anyone?"

"No. You?"

She shook her head.

"You're going too fast."

He slowed only in time. As they rounded a curve another clump of the bright flashing objects filled the right side of the road. He swerved to the left and passed.

"Sons-of-bitches!"

"They're not sons-of-bitches, they're just people who never had a car like this or anything at all."

Something ticked across the windowpane.

There was a streak of colorless liquid on the glass.

Leonora glanced up. "Is it going to rain?"

"No, an insect hit the pane."

Another tick.

"Are you sure that was an insect?"

Tick, tick, tick.

"Shut the window!" he said, speeding up.

Something fell in her lap.

She looked down at it. He reached over to touch the thing. "Quick!"

She pressed the button. The window snapped up.

Then she examined her lap again.

The tiny blowgun dart glistened there.

“Don’t get any of the liquid on you,” he said. “Wrap it in your handkerchief—we’ll throw it away later.”

He had the car up to sixty miles an hour.

“If we hit another road block, we’re done.”

“This is a local thing,” he said. “We’ll drive out of it.”

The panes were ticking all the time. A shower of things blew at the window and fell away in their speed.

“Why,” said Leonora Webb, “they don’t even know us!”

“I only wish they did.” He gripped the wheel. “It’s hard to kill people you know. But not hard to kill strangers.”

“I don’t want to die,” she said simply, sitting there.

He put his hand inside his coat. “If anything happens to me, my gun is here. Use it, for God’s sake, and don’t waste time.”

She moved over close to him and they drove seventy-five miles an hour down a straight stretch in the jungle road, saying nothing.

With the windows up, the heat was oven-thick in the car.

“It’s so silly,” she said, at last. “Putting the knives in the road. Trying to hit us with the blowguns. How could they know that the next car along would be driven by white people?”

“Don’t ask them to be that logical,” he said. “A car is a car. It’s big, it’s rich.

The money in one car would last them a lifetime. And anyway, if you road-block a car, chances are you’ll get either an American tourist or a rich Spaniard, comparatively speaking, whose ancestors should have behaved better. And if you happen to road-block another Indian, hell, all you do is go out and help him change tires.”

“What time is it?” she asked.

For the thousandth time he glanced at his empty wrist. Without expression or surprise, he fished in his coat pocket for the glistening gold watch with the silent sweep hand. A year ago he had seen a native

stare at this watch and stare at it and stare at it with almost a hunger. Then the native had examined him, not scowling, not hating, not sad or happy; nothing except puzzled.

He had taken the watch off that day and never worn it since.

“Noon,” he said.

Noon.

The border lay ahead. They saw it and both cried out at once. They pulled up, smiling, not knowing they smiled. . . .

John Webb leaned out the window, started gesturing to the guard at the border station, caught himself, and got out of his car. He walked ahead to the station where three young men, very short, in lumpy uniforms, stood talking. They did not look up at Webb, who stopped before them. They continued conversing in Spanish, ignoring him.

“I beg your pardon,” said John Webb at last. “Can we pass over the border into Juatala?”

One of the men turned for a moment. “Sorry, señor.”

The three men talked again.

“You don’t understand,” said Webb, touching the first man’s elbow.

“We’ve got to get through.”

The man shook his head. “Passports are no longer good. Why should you want to leave our country, anyway?”

“It was announced on the radio. All Americans to leave the country, immediately.”

“Ah, sí, sí.” All three soldiers nodded and leered at each other with shining eyes.

“Or be fined or imprisoned, or both,” said Webb.

“We could let you over the border, but Juatala would give you twenty-four hours to leave, also. If you don’t believe me, listen!” The guard turned and called across the border, “Aye, there! Aye!”

In the hot sun, forty yards distant, a pacing man turned, his rifle in his arms.

“Aye there, Paco, you want these two people?”

“No, gracias—gracias, no,” replied the man, smiling.

“You see?” said the guard, turning to John Webb.

All of the soldiers laughed together.

“I have money,” said Webb.

The men stopped laughing.

The first guard stepped up to John Webb and his face was now not relaxed or easy; it was like brown stone.

“Yes,” he said. “They always have money. I know. They come here and they think money will do everything. But what is money? It is only a promise, señor. This I know from books. And when somebody no longer likes your promise, what then?”

“I will give you anything you ask.”

“Will you?” The guard turned to his friends. “He will give me anything I ask.” To Webb: “It was a joke. We were always a joke to you, weren’t we?”

“No.”

“Mañana, you laughed at us; mañana, you laughed at our siestas and our mañanas, didn’t you?”

“Not me. Someone else.”

“Yes, you.”

“I’ve never been to this particular station before.”

“I know you, anyway. Run here, do this, do that. Oh, here’s a peso, buy yourself a house. Run over there, do this, do that.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“He looked like you, anyway.”

They stood in the sun with their shadows dark under them, and the perspiration coloring their armpits. The soldier moved closer to John Webb. “I don’t have to do anything for you anymore.”

“You never had to before. I never asked it.”

“You’re trembling, señor.”

"I'm all right. It's the sun."

"How much money have you got?" asked the guard.

"A thousand pesos to let us through, and a thousand for the other man over there."

The guard turned again. "Will a thousand pesos be enough?"

"No," said the other guard. "Tell him to report us!"

"Yes," said the guard, back to Webb again. "Report me. Get me fired. I was fired once, years ago, by you."

"It was someone else."

"Take my name. It is Carlos Rodriguez Ysotl. Go on now."

"I see."

"No, you don't see," said Carlos Rodriguez Ysotl. "Now give me two thousand pesos."

John Webb took out his wallet and handed over the money. Carlos Rodriguez Ysotl licked his thumb and counted the money slowly under the blue glazed sky of his country as noon deepened and sweat arose from hidden sources and people breathed and panted above their shadows.

"Two thousand pesos." He folded it and put it in his pocket quietly.

"Now turn your car around and head for another border."

"Hold on now, damn it!"

The guard looked at him. "Turn your car."

They stood a long time that way, with the sun blazing on the rifle in the guard's hands, not speaking. And then John Webb turned and walked slowly, one hand to his face, back to the car and slid into the front seat.

"What're we going to do?" said Leonora.

"Rot. Or try to reach Porto Bello."

"But we need gas and our spare fixed. And going back over those highways . . . This time they might drop logs, and—"

"I know, I know." He rubbed his eyes and sat for a moment with his head in his hands. "We're alone, my God, we're alone. Remember how

safe we used to feel? How safe? We registered in all the big towns with the American Consuls. Remember how the joke went? 'Everywhere you go you can hear the rustle of the eagle's wings!' Or was it the sound of paper money? I forget. Jesus, Jesus, the world got empty awfully quick. Who do I call on now?"

She waited a moment and then said, "I guess just me. That's not much."

He put his arm around her. "You've been swell. No hysterics, nothing." "Tonight maybe I'll be screaming, when we're in bed, if we ever find a bed again. It's been a million miles since breakfast."

He kissed her, twice, on her dry mouth. Then he sat slowly back. "First thing is to try to find gas. If we can get that, we're ready to head for Porto Bello."

The three soldiers were talking and joking as they drove away. After they had been driving a minute, he began to laugh quietly. "What were you thinking?" asked his wife.

"I remember an old spiritual. It goes like this:

"I went to the Rock to hide my face
And the Rock cried out, "No Hiding Place,
There's no Hiding Place down here."""

"I remember that," she said.

"It's an appropriate song right now," he said. "I'd sing the whole thing for you if I could remember it all. And if I felt like singing."

He put his foot harder to the accelerator.

They stopped at a gas station and after a minute, when the attendant did not appear, John Webb honked the horn. Then, appalled, he snapped his hand away from the horn-ring, looking at it as if it were the hand of a leper.

"I shouldn't have done that."

The attendant appeared in the shadowy doorway of the gas station. Two other men appeared behind him.

The three men came out and walked around the car, looking at it, touching it, feeling it.

Their faces were like burned copper in the daylight. They touched the resilient tires, they sniffed the rich new smell of the metal and upholstery.

“Señor,” said the gas attendant at last.

“We’d like to buy some gas, please.”

“We are all out of gas, señor.”

“But your tank reads full. I see the gas in the glass container up there.”

“We are all out of gas,” said the man.

“I’ll give you ten pesos a gallon!”

“Gracias, no.”

“We haven’t enough gas to get anywhere from here.” Webb checked the gauge. “Not even a quarter gallon left. We’d better leave the car here and go into town and see what we can do there.”

“I’ll watch the car for you, señor,” said the station attendant. “If you leave the keys.”

“We can’t do that!” said Leonora. “Can we?”

“I don’t see what choice we have. We can stall it on the road and leave it to anyone who comes along, or leave it with this man.”

“That’s better,” said the man.

They climbed out of the car and stood looking at it.

“It was a beautiful car,” said John Webb.

“Very beautiful,” said the man, his hand out for the keys. “I will take good care of it, señor.”

“But, Jack—”

She opened the back door and started to take out the luggage. Over her shoulder, he saw the bright travel stickers, the storm of color that had descended upon and covered the worn leather now after years of travel, after years of the best hotels in two dozen countries.

She tugged at the valises, perspiring, and he stopped her hands and they stood gasping there for a moment, in the open door of the car, looking at these fine rich suitcases, inside which were the beautiful tweeds and woolens and silks of their lives and living, the forty-dollar-an-ounce perfumes and the cool dark furs and the silvery golf shafts.

Twenty years were packed into each of the cases; twenty years and four dozen parts they had played in Rio, in Paris, in Rome and Shanghai, but the part they played most frequently and best of all was the rich and buoyant, amazingly happy Webbs, the smiling people, the ones who could make that rarely balanced martini known as the Sahara.

“We can’t carry it all into town,” he said. “We’ll come back for it later. Later.”

“But . . .”

He silenced her by turning her away and starting her off down the road. “But we can’t leave it there, we can’t leave all our luggage and we can’t leave our car! Oh look here now, I’ll roll up the windows and lock myself in the car, while you go for the gas, why not?” she said.

He stopped and glanced back at the three men standing by the car, which blazed in the yellow sun. Their eyes were shining and looking at the woman.

“There’s your answer,” he said. “Come on.”

“But you just don’t walk off and leave a four-thousand-dollar automobile!” she cried.

He moved her along, holding her elbow firmly and with quiet decision. “A car is to travel in. When it’s not traveling, it’s useless. Right now, we’ve got to travel; that’s everything. The car isn’t worth a dime without gas in it. A pair of good strong legs is worth a hundred cars, if you use the legs. We’ve just begun to toss things overboard. We’ll keep dropping ballast until there’s nothing left to heave but our hides.”

He let her go. She was walking steadily now, and she fell into step with him. “It’s so strange. So strange. I haven’t walked like this in years.” She watched the motion of her feet beneath her, she watched the road

pass by, she watched the jungle moving to either side, she watched her husband striding quickly along, until she seemed hypnotized by the steady rhythm. "But I guess you can learn anything over again," she said, at last.

The sun moved in the sky and they moved for a long while on the hot road. When he was quite ready, the husband began to think aloud. "You know, in a way, I think it's good to be down to essentials. Now instead of worrying over a dozen damned things, it's just two items—you and me."

"Watch it, here comes a car—we'd better . . ."

They half turned, yelled, and jumped. They fell away from the highway and lay watching the automobile hurtle past at seventy miles an hour. Voices sang, men laughed, men shouted, waving. The car sped away into the dust and vanished around a curve, blaring its double horns again and again.

He helped her up and they stood in the quiet road.

"Did you see it?"

They watched the dust settle slowly.

"I hope they remember to change the oil and check the battery, at least. I hope they think to put water in the radiator," she said, and paused. "They were singing, weren't they?"

He nodded. They stood blinking at the great dust cloud filtering down like yellow pollen upon their heads and arms. He saw a few bright splashes flick from her eyelids when she blinked.

"Don't," he said. "After all, it was only a machine."

"I loved it."

"We're always loving everything too much."

Walking, they passed a shattered wine bottle which steamed freshly as they stepped over it.

They were not far from the town, walking single file, the wife ahead, the husband following, looking at their feet as they walked, when a

sound of tin and steam and bubbling water made them turn and look at the road behind them. An old man in a 1929 Ford drove along the road at a moderate speed. The car's fenders were gone, and the sun had flaked and burned the paint badly, but he rode in the seat with a great deal of quiet dignity, his face a thoughtful darkness under a dirty Panama hat, and when he saw the two people he drew the car up, steaming, the engine joggling under the hood, and opened the squealing door as he said, "This is no day for walking."

"Thank you," they said.

"It is nothing." The old man wore an ancient yellowed white summer suit, with a rather greasy tie knotted loosely at his wrinkled throat. He helped the lady into the rear seat with a gracious bow of his head. "Let us men sit up front," he suggested, and the husband sat up front and the car moved off in trembling vapors.

"Well. My name is Garcia."

There were introductions and noddings.

"Your car broke down? You are on your way for help?" said Señor Garcia.

"Yes."

"Then let me drive you and a mechanic back out," offered the old man. They thanked him and kindly turned the offer aside and he made it once again, but upon finding that his interest and concern caused them embarrassment, he very politely turned to another subject. He touched a small stack of folded newspapers on his lap.

"Do you read the papers? Of course, you do. But do you read them as I read them? I rather doubt that you have come upon my system. No, it was not exactly myself that came upon it; the system was forced upon me. But now I know what a clever thing it has turned out to be. I always get the newspapers a week late. All of us, those who are interested, get the papers a week late, from the Capital. And this circumstance makes for a man being a clear-thinking man. You are very careful with your thinking when you pick up a week-old paper."

The husband and wife asked him to continue.

“Well,” said the old man, “I remember once, when I lived in the Capital for a month and bought the paper fresh each day, I went wild with love, anger, irritation, frustration; all of the passions boiled in me. I was young. I exploded at everything I saw. But then I saw what I was doing: I was believing what I read. Have you noticed? You believe a paper printed on the very day you buy it?”

This has happened but only an hour ago, you think! It must be true.” He shook his head. “So I learned to stand back away and let the paper age and mellow. Back here, in Colonia, I saw the headlines diminish to nothing. The week-old paper—why, you can spit on it if you wish. It is like a woman you once loved, but you now see, a few days later, she is not quite what you thought. She has rather a plain face. She is no deeper than a cup of water.”

He steered the car gently, his hands upon the wheel as upon the heads of his good children, with care and affection. “So here I am, returning to my home to read my weekly papers, to peek sideways at them, to toy with them.” He spread one on his knee, glancing down to it on occasion as he drove. “How white this paper is, like the mind of a child that is an idiot, poor thing, all blank.

You can put anything into an empty place like that. Here, do you see? This paper speaks and says that the light-skinned people of the world are dead. Now that is a very silly thing to say. At this very moment, there are probably millions upon millions of white men and women eating their noon meals or their suppers. The earth trembles, a town collapses, people run from the town, screaming, All is lost! In the next village, the population wonders what all of the shouting is about, since they have had a most splendid night’s repose. Ah, ah, what a sly world it is. People do not see how sly it is. It is either night or day to them. Rumor flies.

This very afternoon all of the little villages upon this highway, behind us and ahead of us, are in carnival. The white man is dead, the rumors say, and yet here I come into the town with two very lively ones. I hope you

don't mind my speaking in this way? If I do not talk to you I would then be talking to this engine up in the front, which makes a great noise speaking back."

They were at the edge of town.

"Please," said John Webb, "it wouldn't be wise for you to be seen with us today. We'll get out here."

The old man stopped his car reluctantly and said, "You are most kind and thoughtful of me." He turned to look at the lovely wife.

"When I was a young man I was very full of wildness and ideas. I read all of the books from France by a man named Jules Verne. I see you know his name. But at night I many times thought I must be an inventor. That is all gone by; I never did what I thought I might do.

But I remember clearly that one of the machines I wished to put together was a machine that would help every man, for an hour, to be like any other man. The machine was full of colors and smells and it had film in it, like a theater, and the machine was like a coffin. You lay in it. And you touched a button.

And for an hour you could be one of those Eskimos in the cold wind up there, or you could be an Arab gentleman on a horse. Everything a New York man felt, you could feel. Everything a man from Sweden smelled, you could smell.

Everything a man from China tasted, your tongue knew. The machine was like another man—do you see what I was after? And by touching many of the buttons, each time you got into my machine, you could be a white man or a yellow man or a Negrito. You could be a child or a woman, even, if you wished to be very funny."

The husband and wife climbed from the car.

"Did you ever try to invent that machine?"

"It was so very long ago. I had forgotten until today. And today I was thinking, we could make use of it, we are in need of it. What a shame I never tried to put it all together. Someday some other man will do it."

“Someday,” said John Webb.

“It has been a pleasure talking with you,” said the old man. “God go with you.”

“Adiós, Señor Garcia,” they said.

The car drove slowly away, steaming. They stood watching it go, for a full minute. Then, without speaking, the husband reached over and took his wife’s hand.

They entered the small town of Colonia on foot. They walked past the little shops—the butcher shop, the photographer’s. People stopped and looked at them as they went by and did not stop looking at them as long as they were in sight. Every few seconds, as he walked, Webb put up his hand to touch the holster hidden under his coat, secretly, tentatively, like someone feeling for a tiny boil that is growing and growing every hour and every hour . . .

The patio of the Hotel Esposa was cool as a grotto under a blue waterfall. In it caged birds sang, and footsteps echoed like small rifle shots, clear and smooth.

“Remember? We stopped here years ago,” said Webb, helping his wife up the steps. They stood in the cool grotto, glad of the blue shade.

“Señor Esposa,” said John Webb, when a fat man came forward from the desk, squinting at them. “Do you remember me—John Webb? Five years ago—we played cards one night.”

“Of course, of course.” Señor Esposa bowed to the wife and shook hands briefly. There was an uncomfortable silence.

Webb cleared his throat. “We’ve had a bit of trouble, señor. Could we have a room for tonight only?”

“Your money is always good here.”

“You mean you’ll actually give us a room? We’ll be glad to pay in advance. Lord, we need the rest. But, more than that, we need gas.” Leonora picked at her husband’s arm. “Remember? We haven’t a car anymore.”

“Oh. Yes.” He fell silent for a moment and then sighed. “Well. Never mind the gas. Is there a bus out of here for the Capital soon?”

“All will be attended to, in time,” said the manager nervously. “This way.”

As they were climbing the stairs they heard a noise. Looking out they saw their car riding around and around the plaza, eight times, loaded with men who were shouting and singing and hanging on to the front fenders, laughing. Children and dogs ran after the car.

“I would like to own a car like that,” said Señor Esposa.

He poured a little cool wine for the three of them, standing in the room on the third floor of the Esposa Hotel.

“To ‘change,’” said Señor Esposa.

“I’ll drink to that.”

They drank. Señor Esposa licked his lips and wiped them on his coat sleeve. “We are always surprised and saddened to see the world change. It is insane, they have run out on us, you say. It is unbelievable. And now, well—you are safe for the night. Shower and have a good supper. I won’t be able to keep you more than one night, to repay you for your kindness to me five years ago.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Do not take any bus to the Capital, please. There are riots in the streets there. A few people from the North have been killed. It is nothing. It will pass in a few days. But you must be careful until those few days pass and the blood cools. There are many wicked people taking advantage of this day, señor. For forty-eight hours anyway, under the guise of a great resurgence of nationalism, these people will try to gain power. Selfishness and patriotism, señor; today I cannot tell one from the other. So—you must hide. That is a problem. The town will know you are here in another few hours. This might be dangerous to my hotel. I cannot say.”

“We understand. It’s good of you to help this much.”

“If you need anything, call me.” Señor Esposa drank the rest of the wine in his glass. “Finish the bottle,” he said.

The fireworks began at nine that evening. First one skyrocket then another soared into the dark sky and burst out upon the winds, building architectures of flame. Each skyrocket, at the top of its ride, cracked open and let out a formation of streamers in red and white flame that made something like the dome of a beautiful cathedral.

Leonora and John Webb stood by the open window in their unlit room, watching and listening. As the hour latened, more people streamed into town from every road and path and began to roam, arm in arm, around the plaza, singing, barking like dogs, crowing like roosters, and then falling down on the tile sidewalks, sitting there, laughing, their heads thrown back, while the skyrockets burst explosive colors on the tilted faces. A brass band began to thump and wheeze.

“So here we are,” said John Webb, “after a few hundred years of living high. So this is what’s left of our white supremacy—you and I in a dark room in a hotel three hundred miles inside a celebrating country.”
“You’ve got to see their side of it.”

“Oh, I’ve seen it ever since I was that high. In a way, I’m glad they’re happy. God knows they’ve waited long enough to be. But I wonder how long that happiness will last. Now that the scapegoat is gone, who will they blame for oppression, who will be as handy and as obvious and as guilty as you and I and the man who lived in this room before us?”
“I don’t know.”

“We were so convenient. The man who rented this room last month, he was convenient, he stood out. He made loud jokes about the natives’ siestas. He refused to learn even a smattering of Spanish. Let them learn English, by God, and speak like men, he said. And he drank too much and whored too much with this country’s women.” He broke off and moved back from the window. He stared at the room.

The furniture, he thought. Where he put his dirty shoes upon the sofa, where he burned holes in the carpet with cigarettes; the wet spot on the wall near the bed, God knows what or how he did that. The chairs scarred and kicked.

It wasn't his hotel or his room; it was borrowed, it meant nothing. So this son-of-a-bitch went around the country for the past one hundred years, a traveling commercial, a Chamber of Commerce, and now here we are, enough like him to be his brother and sister, and there they are down there on the night of the Butlers' Ball. They don't know, or if they know they won't think of it, that tomorrow they'll be just as poor, just as oppressed as ever, that the whole machine will only have shifted into another gear.

Now the band had stopped playing below; a man had leaped up, shouting, on the bandstand. There was a flash of machetes in the air and the brown gleam of half-naked bodies.

The man on the bandstand faced the hotel and looked up at the dark room where John and Leonora Webb now stood back out of the intermittent flares.

The man shouted.

"What does he say?" asked Leonora.

John Webb translated: "'It is now a free world,' he says."

The man yelled.

John Webb translated again. "He says, 'We are free!'"

The man lifted himself on his toes and made a motion of breaking manacles. "He says, 'No one owns us, no one in all the world.'"

The crowd roared and the band began to play, and while it was playing, the man on the grandstand stood glaring up at the room window, with all of the hatred of the universe in his eyes.

During the night there were fights and pummelings and voices lifted, arguments and shots fired. John Webb lay awake and heard the voice of Señor Esposa below, reasoning, talking quietly, firmly. And then the

fading away of the tumult, the last rockets in the sky, the last breakings of bottles on the cobbles.

At five in the morning the air was warming into a new day. There was the softest of taps on the bedroom door.

“It is me, it is Esposa,” said a voice.

John Webb hesitated, half-dressed, numbed on his feet from lack of sleep, then opened the door.

“What a night, what a night!” said Señor Esposa, coming in, shaking his head, laughing gently. “Did you hear that noise? Yes? They tried to come up here to your room. I prevented this.”

“Thank you” said Leonora, still in bed, turned to the wall.

“They were all old friends. I made an agreement with them, anyway. They were drunk enough and happy enough so they agreed to wait. I am to make a proposition to you two.” Suddenly he seemed embarrassed. He moved to the window. “Everyone is sleeping late. A few are up. A few men. See them there on the far side of the plaza?”

John Webb looked out at the plaza. He saw the brown men talking quietly there about the weather, the world, the sun, this town, and perhaps the wine.

“Señor, have you ever been hungry in your life?”

“For a day, once.”

“Only for a day. Have you always had a house to live in and a car to drive?”

“Until yesterday.”

“Were you ever without a job?”

“Never.”

“Did all of your brothers and sisters live to be twenty-one years old?”

“All of them.”

“Even I,” said Señor Esposa, “even I hate you a little bit now. For I have been without a home. I have been hungry. I have three brothers and

one sister buried in that graveyard on the hill beyond the town, all dead of tuberculosis before they were nine years old.”

Señor Esposa glanced at the men in the plaza. “Now, I am no longer hungry or poor, I have a car, I am alive. But I am one in a thousand. What can you say to them out there today?”

“I’ll try to think of something.”

“Long ago I stopped trying. Señor, we have always been a minority, we white people. I am Spanish, but I was born here. They tolerate me.”

“We have never let ourselves think about our being a minority,” said Webb, “and now it’s hard to get used to the fact.”

“You have behaved beautifully.”

“Is that a virtue?”

“In the bull ring, yes; in war, yes; in anything like this, most assuredly yes. You do not complain, you do not make excuses. You do not run and make a spectacle of yourself. I think you are both very brave.”

The hotel manager sat down, slowly, helplessly.

“I’ve come to offer you the chance to settle down,” he said.

“We wanted to move on, if possible.”

The manager shrugged. “Your car is stolen, I can do nothing to get it back. You cannot leave town. Remain then and accept my offer of a position in my hotel.”

“You don’t think there is any way for us to travel?”

“It might be twenty days, señor, or twenty years. You cannot exist without money, food, lodging. Consider my hotel and the work I can give you.”

The manager arose and walked unhappily to the door and stood by the chair, touching Webb’s coat, which was draped over it.

“What’s the job?” asked Webb.

“In the kitchen,” said the manager, and looked away.

John Webb sat on the bed and said nothing. His wife did not move.

Señor Esposa said, "It is the best I can do. What more can you ask of me? Last night, those others down in the plaza wanted both of you. Did you see the machetes? I bargained with them. You were lucky. I told them you would be employed in my hotel for the next twenty years, that you were my employees and deserve my protection!"

"You said that!"

"Señor, señor, be thankful! Consider! Where will you go? The jungle? You will be dead in two hours from the snakes. Then can you walk five hundred miles to a capital which will not welcome you? No—you must face the reality." Señor Esposa opened the door. "I offer you an honest job and you will be paid the standard wages of two pesos a day, plus meals. Would you rather be with me, or out in the plaza at noon with our friends? Consider."

The door was shut. Señor Esposa was gone.
Webb stood looking at the door for a long while.

Then he walked to the chair and fumbled with the holster under the draped white shirt. The holster was empty. He held it in his hands and blinked at its emptiness and looked again at the door through which Señor Esposa had just passed. He went over and sat down on the bed beside his wife. He stretched out beside her and took her in his arms and kissed her, and they lay there, watching the room get brighter with the new day.

At eleven o'clock in the morning, with the great doors on the windows of their room flung back, they began to dress. There were soap, towels, shaving equipment, even perfume in the bathroom, provided by Mr. Esposa.

John Webb shaved and dressed carefully.
At eleven-thirty he turned on the small radio near their bed. You could usually get New York or Cleveland or Houston on such a radio. But the air was silent. John Webb turned the radio off.

“There’s nothing to go back to—nothing to go back for—nothing.”
His wife sat on a chair near the door, looking at the wall.
“We could stay here and work,” he said.
She stirred at last. “No. We couldn’t do that, not really. Could we?”
“No, I guess not.”

“There’s no way we could do that. We’re being consistent, anyway; spoiled, but consistent.”

He thought a moment. “We could make for the jungle.”

“I don’t think we can move from the hotel without being seen. We don’t want to try to escape and be caught. It would be far worse that way.”

He nodded.

They both sat a moment.

“It might not be too bad, working here,” he said.

“What would we be living for? Everyone’s dead—your father, mine, your mother, mine, your brothers, mine, all our friends, everything gone, everything we understood.”

He nodded.

“Or if we took the job, one day soon one of the men would touch me and you’d go after him, you know you would. Or someone would do something to you, and I’d do something.”

He nodded again.

They sat for fifteen minutes, talking quietly. Then, at last, he picked up the telephone and ticked the cradle with his finger.

“Bueno,” said a voice on the other end.

“Señor Esposa?”

“Sí.”

“Señor Esposa,” he paused and licked his lips, “tell your friends we will be leaving the hotel at noon.”

The phone did not immediately reply. Then with a sigh Señor Esposa said, “As you wish. You are sure—?”

The phone was silent for a full minute. Then it was picked up again and the manager said quietly, "My friends say they will be waiting for you on the far side of the plaza."

"We will meet them there," said John Webb.

"And señor—"

"Yes."

"Do not hate me, do not hate us."

"I don't hate anybody."

"It is a bad world, señor. None of us know how we got here or what we are doing. These men don't know what they are mad at, except they are mad. Forgive them and do not hate them."

"I don't hate them or you."

"Thank you, thank you." Perhaps the man on the far end of the telephone wire was crying. There was no way to tell. There were great lapses in his talking, in his breathing. After a while he said, "We don't know why we do anything. Men hit each other for no reason except they are unhappy. Remember that. I am your friend. I would help you if I could. But I cannot. It would be me against the town. Good-bye, señor." He hung up.

John Webb sat in the chair with his hand on the silent phone. It was a moment before he glanced up. It was a moment before his eyes focused on an object immediately before him. When he saw it clearly, he still did not move, but sat regarding it, until a look of immensely tired irony appeared on his mouth. "Look here," he said at last. Leonora followed his motion, his pointing.

They both sat looking at his cigarette which, neglected on the rim of the table while he telephoned, had burned down so that now it had charred a black hole in the clean surface of the wood.

It was noon, with the sun directly over them, pinning their shadows under them as they started down the steps of the Hotel Esposa. Behind them, the birds fluted in their bamboo cages, and water ran in a little

fountain bath. They were as neat as they could get, their faces and hands washed, their nails clean, their shoes polished.

Across the plaza two hundred yards away stood a small group of men, in the shade of a store-front overhang. Some of the men were natives from the jungle area, with machetes gleaming at their sides. They were all facing the plaza.

John Webb looked at them for a long while. That isn't everyone, he thought, that isn't the whole country. That's only the surface. That's only the thin skin over the flesh. It's not the body at all. Just the shell of an egg. Remember the crowds back home, the mobs, the riots? Always the same, there or here. A few mad faces up front, and the quiet ones far back, not taking part, letting things go, not wanting to be in it. The majority not moving. And so the few, the handful, take over and move for them.

His eyes did not blink. If we could break through that shell—God knows it's thin! he thought. If we could talk our way through that mob and get to the quiet people beyond. . . . Can I do it? Can I say the right things? Can I keep my voice down?

He fumbled in his pockets and brought out a rumpled cigarette package and some matches.

I can try, he thought. How would the old man in the Ford have done it? I'll try to do it his way. When we get across the plaza, I'll start talking, I'll whisper if necessary. And if we move slowly through the mob, we might just possibly find our way to the other people and we'll be on high ground and we'll be safe.

Leonora moved beside him. She was so fresh, so well groomed in spite of everything, so new in all this oldness, so startling, that his mind flinched and jerked. He found himself staring at her as if she'd betrayed him by her salt-whiteness, her wonderfully brushed hair and her cleanly manicured nails and her bright-red mouth.

Standing on the bottom step, Webb lit a cigarette, took two or three long drags on it, tossed it down, stepped on it, kicked the flattened butt into the street, and said, "Here we go."

They stepped down and started around the far side of the plaza, past the few shops that were still open. They walked quietly.

"Perhaps they'll be decent to us."

"We can hope so."

They passed a photographic shop.

"It's another day. Anything can happen. I believe that. No—I don't really believe it. I'm only talking. I've got to talk or I wouldn't be able to walk," she said.

They passed a candy shop.

"Keep talking, then."

"I'm afraid," she said. "This can't be happening to us! Are we the last ones in the world?"

"Maybe next to the last."

They approached an open air carnicería.

God! he thought. How the horizons narrowed, how they came in. A year ago there weren't four directions, there were a million for us. Yesterday they got down to four; we could go to Juatala, Porto Bello, San Juan Clementas, or Brioconbria. We were satisfied to have our car. Then when we couldn't get gas, we were satisfied to have our clothes, then when they took our clothes, we were satisfied to have a place to sleep.

Each pleasure they took away left us with one other creature comfort to hold on to. Did you see how we let go of one thing and clutched another so quickly? I guess that's human. So they took away everything. There's nothing left. Except us. It all boils down to just you and me walking along here, and thinking too goddamn much for my own good.

And what counts in the end is whether they can take you away from me or me away from you, Lee, and I don't think they can do that. They've

got everything else and I don't blame them. But they can't really do anything else to us now. When you strip all the clothes away and the doodads, you have two human beings who were either happy or unhappy together, and we have no complaints.

"Walk slowly," said John Webb.

"I am."

"Not too slowly, to look reluctant. Not too fast, to look as if you want to get it over with. Don't give them the satisfaction, Lee, don't give them a damn bit."

"I won't."

They walked. "Don't even touch me," he said, quietly. "Don't even hold my hand."

"Oh, please!"

"No, not even that."

He moved away a few inches and kept walking steadily. His eyes were straight ahead and their pace was regular.

"I'm beginning to cry, Jack."

"Goddamn it!" he said, measuredly, between his teeth, not looking aside. "Stop it! Do you want me to run? Is that what you want—do you want me to take you and run into the jungle, and let them hunt us, is that what you want, goddamn it, do you want me to fall down in the street here and grovel and scream, shut up, let's do this right, don't give them anything!"

"All right," she said, hands tight, her head coming up. "I'm not crying now. I won't cry."

"Good, damn it, that's good."

And still, strangely, they were not past the *carnecería*. The vision of red horror was on their left as they paced steadily forward on the hot tile sidewalk. The things that hung from hooks looked like brutalities and sins, like bad consciences, evil dreams, like gored flags and slaughtered promises. The redness, oh, the hanging, evil-smelling wetness and redness, the hooked and hung-high carcasses, unfamiliar, unfamiliar.

As he passed the shop, something made John Webb strike out a hand. He slapped it smartly against a strung-up side of beef. A mantle of blue buzzing flies lifted angrily and swirled in a bright cone over the meat.

Leonora said, looking ahead, walking, "They're all strangers! I don't know any of them. I wish I knew even one of them. I wish even one of them knew me!"

They walked on past the *carnecería*. The side of beef, red and irritable-looking, swung in the hot sunlight after they passed.

The flies came down in a feeding cloak to cover the meat, once it had stopped swinging.

The End