

# 1

They could hear it coming, a plane approaching from the west. It flew low; first over the beach, its dark silhouette trailing across the white sand, then past the high dunes, and then past the windsock at the end of the runway. They could hear when it finally touched down.

Someone said it was the mail plane back from the Gulf run. They were mostly older turboprops that called the airport home: Fokkers, DC-7's and Brazilian Bandeirantes. The airport was primitive. It sat alone on the desert near Cabo San Lucas. Nothing much to the place but a few dismal hangers, the stained tarmac, and men who knew a lot about planes and flying them.

Jimmy Hidalgo, the owner of one of the cargo companies, had been saying that the runway at San Javier, where the doctor and his friends were going, was tricky. It was too short, he explained. You had to drop in very quickly as soon as you cleared the mountain.

“And on the way out it's worse; you have to clear the date grove,” he said. He glanced at his son, who was talking to the German girl, Marita, who'd come with the doctor and Alfredo from Mexico City for the weekend.

Dr. Collin Reeves looked at the old DC-5 on the tarmac. His father flew and owned a plane, so the doctor had grown up with talk of airplanes and difficult landings. The plane that was to take them to San Javier was far too old to still be in service. He

## *The Good Physician*

---

understood now why the man at their hotel in Cabo San Lucas had suggested driving to San Javier, rather than risk flying in.

They were drinking coffee in the hangar and watching the dawn break outside, suddenly, the way it does in the desert. The cargo boys had arrived for work, and the place seemed more like an airport now.

The owner told them that he'd bought his DC-5 from a Dutch mining company two years before in Ecuador. According to Hidalgo, it had been built in 1935 and seen action with the Marines at Guadalcanal—"and been shot at by Japanese gentlemen that didn't like her." Hidalgo had found her abandoned in an Amazon boom town where, he said, everyone was digging for gold, covered in muck, and drunk. He'd always wanted a DC-5, and bought her from the Dutch owners, who were using her for parts.

He loved the plane, he told them. "Sometimes you love things you shouldn't love, doctor," Hidalgo said. "But that's life. I've spent more restoring her than she'll ever make me." Collin's friend Alfredo, a painter, said that had to be the definition of love, and they all laughed.

A mail pilot stopped by the hangar to report that visibility was poor over the coast between Loreto and Cabo. The doctor listened as the two professionals talked about the weather. Hidalgo bit his lip. He nodded twice when he heard the word "fog," his expression serious. Before he left, the mail pilot turned to the doctor and said that conditions were actually pretty good for the end of March, when things could be quite bumpy.

The pilot gave them a fey smile, as if he understood something Collin didn't. Then he wished them all *buena suerte* and rode his bicycle back across the tarmac, the morning sunlight making the airport's old hangars seem somehow beautiful and ugly at the same time.

Collin had asked why Hidalgo wasn't flying them. Hidalgo explained that he wasn't allowed to fly because he'd had a bad

crash up at San Quintin in a Fokker 27 the year before. His right leg and foot had been badly burnt before he was pulled from the wreck. He'd been lucky to survive it, he said.

“So when you take off at San Javier, the date palms end right up under you, doctor—just a *few* feet under you. You could pick the fruit as you go by! The trick is to clear the date palms.”

Collin understood that it was probably dangerous to take off from San Javier, and that Hidalgo missed doing it.

“Are you a pilot, doctor? You seem to know something about it.”

“No, but my father is,” Collin said.

“Then he would understand. I finally ran out of luck at San Quintin in that Fokker,” Hidalgo said, before his mechanic interrupted him.

*Everyone runs out of luck some place, Collin thought. It was just a question of where. Everyone gets their San Quintin.*

The mechanic started the DC-5's engines in the cold. Each one turned over slowly so you could see the propeller shudder-rotate, cough black exhaust and then finally go strong. The sound was thrilling once they got going. The plane was definitely too old, Collin thought again, watching the mechanic. But this was Mexico, and there were no rules about things like that. If there were, no one paid them any attention. Everything had two or three lives here, before it was finally allowed to die.

Collin watched as the mechanic popped out of the cabin, listening carefully to the engines for any sign of trouble. The ground crew began loading a crazy assortment of cargo to be dropped off at various airstrips along the way: a horse, some scuba gear for a hotel in Loreto, and a motley assortment of luggage.

“Of course, sometimes there are accidents at San Javier,” Hidalgo said over the sound of the engines. “Usually pilots from Texas or Arizona who aren't familiar. It's only fair that we charge

## *The Good Physician*

---

more to land at San Javier. At least we've done it before," he said, laughing. Then he went outside. Collin noticed how big Hidalgo was, walking with his cane, limping, his right leg shot, to check the plane himself.

They flew with the rear hatch open and no thought of personal safety, the cargo door long ago removed for convenience' sake. They landed thirty minutes later at a desert airstrip, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

A rancher and a young boy came and helped take the horse off the plane, leading it off on a makeshift ramp. Then they'd taken off again, the rancher waving at them as if he'd met them all.

The doctor, standing near the open cargo door, waved back feeling like they were on the edge of a lonely, beautiful world, the last ones left. *Sometimes you fall in love with things you shouldn't.*

They flew over the mountain, and then he saw the date palms and the dirt landing strip of San Javier below, stained dark by the March rain, all looking like a painting. They dropped hard, as Hidalgo had said they would, just as soon as they cleared the mountain. The nylon netting—kept for bundling large cargo—slid at the doctor, and he had to turn away from the open cargo door to brace himself against it.

Hidalgo's son throttled the engines back and landed the plane expertly, *mano-a-mano*, just as he'd been taught. When they'd landed, the son, big and handsome like his father, shook everyone's hand and promised he'd come for them that Sunday at noon, unless the weather got bad. The pilot shook the German girl's hand twice. While their luggage was loaded into the taxi, they all watched the son take off and clear the wall of date palms by a good six feet.

On the way to the *pensión* they'd agreed that the son was a good pilot and that his father had done a good job with him. The German girl didn't say anything, but she'd watched, too. She was

just quiet, Collin thought, in that way that made you know she was paying close attention to everything.

• • •

Dr. Collin Reeves' specialty was tropical diseases—parasitology, his card said. They were the diseases travelers feared most, some tiny invertebrate that had penetrated the unsuspecting patient's defenses and gotten down to its nasty god-given biology, thriving while their host suffered. As one of his professors had been fond of saying: "If you have one, you've probably got several."

He was listed as a "go-to" doctor by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, where he saw American tourists—either at their hotels, which he preferred, or at his combination office and apartment downtown, not far from the *Zócalo*.

Several doctors were on the list, but he was the only young American. He was boyishly handsome; being a doctor still seemed secondary to his obvious youth. He'd played basketball as an undergraduate, so was naturally commanding. His patients seemed to feel better in the hands of a tall man.

He'd fallen in love with Mexico and with painting it and was paying the price, something he wasn't yet aware of. If anyone had told him that he was a bohemian in the making, he would have laughed.

His parents, very well-to-do, had despaired completely when he hadn't come home after medical school. They'd expected a successful physician, not what they thought he'd become: a hand-to-mouth backwater doctor, throwing his life away in various slums.

His father, a prominent San Francisco surgeon, had announced the previous Thanksgiving that his son had failed to live up to his promise. It seemed to slip out of his father's mouth without his being able to stop it. It was a shock. Collin had thought, sitting at the table, that it all sounded true. He couldn't really deny it.

## *The Good Physician*

---

Yet it wasn't right to say it like that, in front of people Collin had known his whole life. He hadn't tried to defend himself. He couldn't. Everyone at the table was quiet for a moment; it was out of character for his father to speak that way. His younger sister managed to change the subject.

They'd gone on from there, but the damage had been done. His parents had expected a wedding at their country club, a pretty young blonde wife, and grandchildren they could spoil. They'd gotten none of it. They were angry at him now, because he hadn't lived up to his end of the contract.

After two years in the intelligence service, he regretted joining. They hadn't used him for much, kept undercover as a go-to doctor first in Kuwait, then in Mexico. But he could do little about it, other than quit and go home, and he couldn't face that.

He didn't miss the States at all; that was the truth. Part of him loved the backwater existence: the tramping without a clear destination, playing the rôle of a country doctor to the hilt. He couldn't explain it, really. He was angry at his parents, especially his father, but he couldn't explain exactly why, other than he hated his father's arrogance, which his father thought—in his stupid way—was how he was supposed to be a father. Collin had learned to hate arrogance of any kind.

After graduating from medical school, rather than go back home to San Francisco, he'd gone to study, on scholarship, at the University of London's famous school of tropical diseases. Then he'd gone to Brazil, where he'd volunteered for a program treating poor people in the *favelas*. Later he'd joined *Médecins Sans Frontières*, confronting strange and frightening diseases in various African *bidonvilles*.

He made no money. In fact, sometimes he had to borrow it just to go on. He enjoyed living from day to day in the bush with no one to answer to. It was the first time he'd felt free and done whatever the hell he wanted.

He had a certain quiet confidence that worked for him. While

other doctors gave up, or wouldn't go that extra mile, afraid for their own safety, he always had. He was always certain he could beat whatever was thrown at him. The more filthy and dark the hut, the better he liked it. He hated the diseases he fought and took the misery they brought his patients personally. They were the enemies of *his* State. He believed in Science's power to do good. He was inspired by the power of human intelligence and believed in it. It was his religion.

He had been recruited in Africa where scouts were attracted by his having gone native, a talent the agency sought for their clandestine service. The fact that he was a brilliant young doctor hadn't been very important. They simply needed doctors—brilliant or otherwise—for those moments when they couldn't call a “civilian” doctor.

Someone called Bill came to see him after 9/11, while he was working in Nairobi. Collin wanted to do his bit to help fight the terrorists, and he'd agreed to go to Virginia to see some people in a company called “International Recruiting Services.” He was hoping to be sent to Afghanistan.

The agency had lied to him. They'd promised him he'd be in the front lines of the war on terror; instead, they'd sent him to Kuwait for a year to be at the beck and call of some local Emir who was the Embassy's darling. The man's greatest fear was that his live-in Russian prostitutes were going to give him some horrific disease, or kill him outright when they were drunk.

“You check good. Take all the time you need. You check *everything, young man,*” his master said to him over the phone whenever he expected a new girl. Collin would be called to his white marble palace in the desert, built by the Bechtel Corporation. He would be forced to wait like any other flunky in the Emir's pay, in an enormous foyer chilled by air-conditioning and staffed by young Filipino girls in uniform, who seemed never to speak to anyone. His Emir would appear suddenly with his retinue of bodyguards,

## *The Good Physician*

---

shake his hand perfunctorily, and politely remind him to check her for *everything* one more time, in case Collin hadn't understood before. They'd all wait for the limousine carrying yet another diffident and breathtaking 18-year-old from Belarus whose visa said "administration services." The girls were changed frequently, for safety's sake.

Collin realized one day while shaving that he'd become an on-call brothel doctor. It had shocked him at first; he'd graduated at the top of his class at medical school. He would certainly have been more valuable to his country doing real medical work somewhere in the front lines of the War On Terror—but he'd had to get used to it. His Emir was important to his bosses at the Embassy, and that was that.

The rest of the time he was free to play golf in one of the hottest places on earth. He'd spent hours alone with a caddy from China who couldn't speak a word of English. He'd come close to going mad.

His service in Mexico had been no less boring. He believed he deserved revenge on the system, and took it by leaving the city at every opportunity to paint, something he'd discovered he loved. He no longer thought much about the War On Terror. No one seemed to notice when he was gone.

## 2

They took the taxi from the runway to a rustic *pensión* near the church. The room, when Collin opened the door, smelled of the sea and the ancient timbers used to build the place years before. He had gotten a room on the desert side. Its one small window offered a good view of a treeless mountain, almost blue, scarred by jeep tracks that seemed to wander aimlessly across the mountain's face like scars.

He found a bark scorpion in the shower and killed it with a newspaper. Its amber-colored body scrambled on the tiles to avoid the blows; then suddenly it was dead. As he cleaned up for breakfast he wondered where else they were hiding.

He thought about the German girl while he put his things away. He couldn't help it. He'd always liked women too much: not just the sex, which he enjoyed, but their company. He loved the company of women. He loved them for being mercurial and taciturn at times, the very things that most men he knew disliked.

He met his friends for breakfast on the *pensión's* second floor balcony, under a green market umbrella with a view of the oasis. In the distance the doctor could see the tops of the date palms sway from the weight of the pickers, some shirtless, who were already up in the trees, harvesting the fruit before it got too hot. Everything was done in the town before it got too warm, their waiter told them. Children, he joked, were all conceived at dawn, or after midnight.

## *The Good Physician*

---

After breakfast they'd all gone out to paint. The doctor wanted to work alone; he thought he wasn't as good a painter as the others. They were professional artists, and he considered himself a rank amateur. He'd stayed out of the oasis, where his friends all wanted to be, or in front of the town's famous church. It was better if he were alone, he'd told himself, not getting in their way, taking up a valuable position that rightfully belonged to the professionals.

Instead, he'd wandered down a dirt track running by the back of the *pensión*. The dirt road became very rough and rutted as he walked towards the sea. He carried a cheap backpack that he'd bought in the market at *San Angel* in Mexico City. It carried his portable easel, paper, his watercolors, and a bottle of iced tea he'd bought in the town.

He walked for a kilometer or so and found nothing of interest. The heat, building suddenly after eleven, pressed down on him almost like a weight. The intense sunlight started to rob the landscape of its hard, clean edges. He was going to give up and go back, because all he'd seen was the strange landscape with its hulking barrel cacti and the odd signs of civilization: a rusted and defiled car and an unfinished building's foundation sprouting steel rods, oddly surreal in the middle of nowhere. But he kept going, enjoying the walking, the feeling of being completely alone, not wanting to waste the morning.

He stopped finally at an abandoned one-story adobe rancho sitting by itself. *Someone's homestead?* He couldn't tell for sure, but it had that feel. From the look of it, whoever had built it had abandoned it years ago. Its roof had been smashed in; its adobe walls, once whitewashed, were pocked now by the weather, big brown patches of mud showing through the lye. He knew right away that he wanted to paint the place, to render its lonely deserted dignity, the worn face of someone's dream all gone wrong. He unpacked his things and worked standing in the sun, adding a few shadows, like people standing inside the rancho.

He got a good painting out of it because he worked fast: all impressions, no explanations, no over-thinking or consciously trying. He'd left a lot of white from the paper showing, which gave the rancho's blistered lye walls a stark quality that excited him. The week before he'd had to tell a patient of his, an engineer, that he was going to die and that there was nothing he could do for him. It had stuck with him, the sadness of it all, because he'd gotten to know the fellow, personally. And now a little of that moment was forever in the painting, too: the rancho vulnerable, deserted, left to face the desert alone, no illusions about failure or hope. He decided it was truly stoic, and painted it that way.

He drank his tea, which had gotten warm, and carefully rolled up the painting by one o'clock. He was slightly sunburnt around his arms and the back of his neck, but he felt satisfied in a new way he couldn't explain with words. It was as if the act of painting were some kind of catharsis that for a moment had purged him of everything he'd been through lately. He felt good heading back with it to the *pensión*. It was a small, still-wet victory tucked into his backpack when he walked up the stairs eager to show it, but also afraid to.

At lunch, everyone in the party was impressed with what he'd done. The German girl, Marita, looked but said nothing. She painted in oil, and his was a very small watercolor. He assumed she would dismiss it as sophomoric. Alfredo told him he should abandon his "straight" life and become an artist and stop screwing around with medicine and science, because he had real talent. It was the first time he'd ever said that. He seemed to mean it.

Alfredo had propped up the doctor's painting in the center of the table without asking him, so they could all see it. They were all intellectuals, and it was intimidating but exciting, too. By then the painting was completely dry and looked pretty damn good. He'd gotten the sky, too, Collin thought—the dry empty-beauty and the blue nothingness in it.

## *The Good Physician*

---

At lunch they talked about Goya and his paintings of the French invasion of Spain. There was a white tablecloth, and the doctor, without wanting to, started looking at the plates and people's faces, the sweat on the water glasses as the others spoke, making a kind of music as it was in Spanish. The others talked about what was happening in America, which everyone hated now and he was tired of defending, after the awful photos from Iraq. He composed a still life in his head as they inveighed against his country.

They assumed he was against the war because he seemed sensitive and was a doctor. He wasn't sure anymore what he felt. He'd joined the intelligence service to fight terrorism. They'd sent him to Kuwait, and he'd run pap tests on whores. When he'd complained about it, they'd accused him of not being a team player. His artist friends had no idea he was an intelligence officer and had believed in the war.

Twice he looked at the German girl and wondered what she was thinking, and why she looked so good without obviously trying to. Maybe it was the bright light in her hair when she sat down, or the fact that she was bra-less, or because she was quite intelligent. He just looked at her beauty as he would at a very good painting, a Sargent maybe, and got lost in it.

After lunch they were all a little drunk because they'd drunk wine. They all met at the pool to read and do nothing but lie around the verge and wait for the late afternoon; it was too bright to paint during the heat of the day.

He'd been pretending to read a paperback by the side of the pool, but in fact had been looking at the girl. She was wearing a two-piece orange bathing suit. He watched her boost herself out of the water. Her body glistened wet, the curve of her ass womanly. Her shoulders were very straight. The sun in her short blonde hair sparkled so you could see all the different colors of blonde in it. The doctor had an overwhelming desire to make

love to her, a full blast of lust. It was like when he'd seen the island in the Gulf from the plane, and wondered how it might be to go ashore and explore.

The girl had sat next to him in Alfredo's beat-up Volvo for the drive to the airport. When she'd jumped into the car, she was wearing a peasant blouse and cutoffs. No luggage, just all her stuff in one of those cheap plastic market bags that the poor carry. Everything seemed to be spilling out: her painting stuff, food, a bottle of wine, and mostly her youth. She bought a bathing suit at the airport in Cabo. She'd smelled, because she didn't have a shower in her studio. She'd smelled like clay and turpentine and woman. He was a little overwhelmed by her, by her goddess-girliness.

He was hopelessly attracted to her physically, and now by the pool, he was suddenly tired of trying to play it cool. He wanted her to notice him in that way men want women to notice them. He was always decisive with women; it worked because he was handsome. He had been lucky in that regard.

He decided, putting the book down, that he was going to flirt with her. Try and get her away from the others, if he could, and take it from there. He had a plan. Like the painting he'd done that morning. He'd had a plan from the moment he'd come across the rancho, not to over-think it, but just to get it down.

He felt the concrete's heat on his ass immediately when he sat down next to her. The heat seemed to go all the way up his spine and to warm his crotch. The heat of the concrete made his sexual fantasy somehow more tangible. Looking at her while he'd pretended to read, he'd been afraid he'd get an erection and embarrass himself, like he had once in high school.

"How do you live," he asked her, "without a job, I mean?"

"From day to day," she said. "My mother sends me a little money. It's just enough for the studio and tortillas. . . . She's a

## *The Good Physician*

---

judge. In Hamburg.” Like so many Europeans, she spoke English almost perfectly. He thought her accent charming.

She was twenty-five. She lived in Mexico City where she had some kind of studio space which, according to his friend Alfredo, had to be seen to be believed. She was a painter’s painter, Alfredo had told him. “She has all her sheets to the wind,” he’d said. He supposed Alfredo had been her lover at some point.

Apparently it was rough living. No water, a dangerous neighborhood. She thrived on it, she told him. The neighborhood toughs were all in love with her, she claimed; he believed it, too. Her small body was so alive-looking.

Alfredo had lent her the money to come painting with them, as she was broke all the time. Collin’s friend Alfredo came from a *very* rich family and never had to worry about money. Alfredo was kind to her, even after they’d broken up, checked on her to make sure she had food and a little cash. He was old-fashioned that way, a gentleman.

“That must be difficult,” the doctor said to her. “No potable water, I mean.”

“Yes, it’s difficult,” she said. “You can’t wash dishes with tequila.”

She smiled. She was wearing the big sunglasses that had come back into fashion; the doctor remembered them from his childhood.

She slipped her dark glasses up and took notice of him now, not as a member of the group, but as Collin, the man who was obviously pursuing her. He could see into her eyes. They were like the *pensión’s* pool; very, very clear and light blue. Her intelligence zigzagged there at the very back of them. She gave him an “Okay, I get it” look.

Later, when she was in bed with him, in that room that smelled like the Gulf of California, he was amazed by just how physically strong she was. She was kind of a beast, really. They’d made the

wooden bed move on the tile floor. She asked him to do something he'd never done before and he liked that, the danger of what they did. The adventure of it.

The clinical approach to sex taken in medical school had almost ruined it for him. Sometimes while making love, though, he'd see the old-fashioned medical drawings of coitus from the 19<sup>th</sup> century texts that med students had passed around for laughs, and those drawings and their stark, lyrical beauty had recaptured the romantic tenderness and intimacy of it all for him.

She seemed hungry for everything, where he was more careful and always had been. She was all about the Right Now, it seemed: the pleasure of painting, the pleasure of legs-in-the-air screwing, drinking at lunch, dope smoking, blowing him in a hammock on the deck overlooking the oasis, where they could be caught by a maid or a passerby.

He watched the tops of the palm trees while she went down on him. He'd struggled against the orgasm like a man who doesn't want to get off an escalator—going up, the palm trees blurry now in the sun. Then orgasm. The mind and body suddenly pushed together. A wash of sunlight and sweat on his face. A small delirium. Her fatuous smile.

He'd slipped off the verge into the pool.

"You have a job?" she'd asked. She was interested, he could tell. She said she liked the painting he'd done. She said it had a "male quality," but didn't explain what she meant by that. He'd decided right then, feeling the cool water around him, that he was going to do everything he could to get her into bed. He watched her wet her knees, dipping water out from the pool. "Alfredo says you're a doctor, and you work for the U.S. Embassy."

"Yes. I'm a doctor," he'd said. She'd broken out laughing and said something in German that he didn't understand, but that must have been something like "Oh shit!" She jumped into the pool and stood next to him in the water. Sometimes you can feel

## *The Good Physician*

---

another person's body without actually touching it. He'd felt hers then because she stood very close, the unseen tendrils of energy moving around them like the light in the water.

"And I thought you were just another down-and-out American painter," she'd said. "I meet them all the time at parties at Alfredo's house. They always want to borrow money!"

He got what he wanted that night, and then some. Love making, tile sounds. The sound of her voice when she came filled the candlelit room. Very good.

Later, she'd told him she couldn't sell any of her paintings. She wasn't going to give up, she said, but he'd heard the desperation in her voice. She said he couldn't understand; he had a straight job and didn't live like she had to live, like an artist. It stung a little because it was true. He'd been a kind of voyeur, watching his friends be artists. Alfredo kept telling him it was a dangerous occupation, but he hadn't really understood that until he saw the fear in Marita's eyes. For some reason he thought of the old pilot and his kind of bravery, the silent get-up-and-do-it kind. He thought maybe the German girl had it, too.

"People like you—straight people—will never understand us," she'd told him in bed. "Not in a million years."

He didn't try to answer her back; it hadn't seemed right.