

Coppola Resorts

- WINE



- Home
- Subscribe
- Renew
- Current Issue
- Back Issues
- Events
- Workshops
- Online
- Submissions
- Contests
- The Virtual Studio
- FFC Winery
- Volunteer
- About
- Contact Us
- SHOP
  - Magazine
  - Winery

Vol. 6, No. 1



ADD TO CART

BACK ISSUES

The New Generation of Classic Short Stories



## Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera

by Ben Fountain

*"I extended to the comandante the opportunity to walk the floor of the exchange with me, and he seemed reasonably intrigued."*

— Richard Grasso, Chairman, New York Stock Exchange  
Bogotá, Colombia, June 26, 1999

No way Blair insisted to anyone who asked, no self-respecting bunch of extortionist rebels would ever want to kidnap him. He was the poorest of the poor, poorer even than the hardscrabble campesinos pounding the mountains into dead slag heaps—John Blair, graduate assistant slave and aspiring Ph.D, whose idea of big money was a twenty-dollar bill. In case of trouble he had letters of introduction from Duke University, the Humboldt Institute, and the Instituto Geográfica in Bogotá, whose director was known to have contacts in the Movimiento Unido de Revolucionarios de Colombia, the MURC, which controlled unconscionable swaths of the southwest cordilleras. For three weeks Blair would hike through the remnant cloud forest, then go back to Duke and scratch together enough grants to spend the following year in the Huila district, where he would study the effects of habitat fragmentation on rare local species of parrotlets.

It could be done; it would be done; it had to be done. Even before he'd first published in a peer-reviewed journal—at age seventeen, in *Auk*, "Field Notes on the Breeding and Diet of the Tovi Parakeet"—Blair had known his was likely the last generation that would witness scores of these species in the wild, which fueled a core urgency in his boyhood passion—obsession, his bewildered parents would have said—for anything avian. Full speed ahead, and damn the politics; as it happened they grabbed him near Popayán, a brutally efficient bunch in jungle fatigues who roused all the livestock and people off the bus. Blair hunched over, trying to blend in with the compact Indians, but a tall skinny gringo with a big backpack might as well have had a turban on his head.

"You," said the *comandante* in a cool voice, "you're coming with us."

Blair started to explain that he was a scholar, thus worthless in any monetary sense—he'd been counting on his formidable language skills to walk him through this very sort of situation—but one of the rebels was into his backpack now, spilling the notebooks and Zeiss-Jena binoculars into the road, then the Leica with the cannon-barrel 200x zoom. Blair's most valuable possessions, worth more than his

car.

“He’s a spy,” announced the rebel.

“No, no,” Blair politely corrected. “*Soy ornithologo. Estudiante.*”

“You’re a spy,” declared the *comandante*, poking Blair’s notebooks with the tip of his gun. “In the name of the Secretariat I’m arresting you.”

When Blair protested they hit him fairly hard in the stomach, and that was the moment he knew that his life had changed. They called him *la merca*, the merchandise, and for the next four days he slogged through the mountains eating cold *arepas* and sardines and taking endless taunts about firing squads, although he did, thanks to an eighty-mile-a-week running habit, hold up better than the oil executives and mining engineers the rebels were used to bringing in. The first day he simply put down his head and marched, enduring the hardship only because he had to, but as the column moved deeper into the mountains a sense of possibility began to assert itself, a signal too faint to call an idea. To the east the cordillera was scorched and spent, rubbed by decades of desperate agriculture. The few mingly scraps of surviving forest were eerily silent, but once they crossed the borders of the MURC-controlled zone the vegetation closed around them with the density of a cave. At night Blair registered a deep suck and gurgle, the engine of the forest’s vast plumbing system; every morning they woke to piha birds screaming like pigs, and then the mixed-species flocks kicked in with their contrapuntal yammerings and groks and crees that made the forest sound like a construction site. In three days on the trail Blair reliably saw fourteen species on the CITES endangered list, as well as an exceedingly rare *Hapalopsittaca* perched in a fern the size of a minivan. He was amazed, and said as much to the young *comandante*, who eyed him a moment in a thoughtful way.

“Yes,” the rebel answered, “ecology is important to the revolution. As a scholar”—he gave a faint, possibly ironic smile—“you can appreciate this,” and he made a little speech about the environment, how *the firmeza revolucionaria* had banned the multinational logging and mining “mafias” from all liberated zones.

The column reached base camp on the fourth day, trudging into the fortified MURC compound through a soiling rain. They hauled Blair straight to the Office of Complaints and Claims, where he sat for two hours in a damp hallway staring at posters of Lenin and Che, wondering if the rebels planned to shoot him at once. When at last they led him into the main office, Comandante Alberto’s first words were:

“You don’t look like a spy.”

A number of Blair’s possessions lay on the desk: binoculars, camera, maps, and compass, the notebooks with their microscopic Blairian scribble. Seven or eight *subcomandantes* were seated along the wall, while Alberto, the *comandante maximo*, studied Blair with the calm of someone blowing smoke rings. He resembled a late-period Jerry Garcia in fatigues, a heavy man with steel-rim glasses, double bags under his eyes, and a dense Brillo bush of graying hair.

“I’m not a spy,” Blair answered in his wired, earnest way. “I’m an ornithologist. I study birds.”

“However,” Alberto continued, “if they wanted to send a spy they wouldn’t send somebody who looked like a spy. So the fact that you don’t look like a spy makes me think you’re a spy.”

Blair considered. “And what if I did look like a spy?”

“Then I’d think you were a spy.”

The *subcomandantes* hawed like drunks rolling around in the mud. So was it all a big joke, Blair wanted to know, or was his life really at stake? Or both, thus a means of driving him mad? “I’m an ornithologist,” he said a little breathlessly, “I don’t know how many ways I can tell you that, but it’s true. I came to study the birds.”

Alberto’s jaws made a twisted, munching motion, like he was trying to eat his tongue. “That is for the Secretariat to decide, all cases of spying go to the Secretariat. And even if you are what you say you are, you will have to stay with us while your release is arranged.”

“My ‘release,’” Blair echoed bitterly. “You know kidnapping is a crime in most countries. Not to mention a violation of human rights.”

“This isn’t a kidnapping, this is a *retención* in the sociopolitical context of the war. We merely hold you until a fee is paid for your release.”

“What’s the difference?” Blair cried, and when Alberto wouldn’t answer he came slightly unglued. “Listen,” he said, “I don’t have any money, I’m a student, okay? In fact I’m worse than worthless, I owe twenty thousand dollars in student loans. And if I’m not back at Duke in two weeks,” he went on, his voice cracking with the wrongness and rage of it all, “they’re going to give my teaching-assistant slot to somebody else. So would you please save us all a lot of trouble and let me go?”

They scanned his passport photo instead, then posted it on their Web site with a \$5 million ransom demand, which even the hard-

core insurgents knew was a stretch. “Sixth Front gets the Exxon guys,” Subcomandante Lauro bitched, “and we get the scientist with the holes in his boots.” He became known around camp as “John Blair,” always the two names together, *Johnblair*, but *John* got mangled in the depths of their throats so that it came out as the even more ridiculous *Joan*. In any case they couldn’t seem to speak his name without smiling; thirty years of low-intensity warfare had given the rebels a heightened sense of the absurd, and Blair’s presence was just too fertile to ignore, a gringo so thick, so monumentally oblivious that he’d walked into the middle of a war to study a bunch of birds.

“So tell me, Joan Blair,” one of the *subcomandantes* might say, pointing to a manakin spouting trills and rubatos or the tanagers that streaked about like meteor showers, “what is the name of that species, please?”

He knew they were testing him, nominally probing for chinks in his cover, but more than that they were indulging in the fatuous running joke that seemed to follow him everywhere. Which he handled by coming right back at them, rattling off the Latin and English names and often as not the Spanish, along with genus and all the natural history he could muster before the rebel waved his arms and retreated. But an implacable sense of mission was rising in Blair. He eyed the cloud forest lapping the compound’s walls and knew that something momentous was waiting for him.

“If you let me do my work,” he told Comandante Alberto, “I’ll prove to you I’m not a spy.”

“Well,” Alberto answered, “perhaps.” A man of impressive silences and ponderous speech, who wore his gravitas like a pair of heavy boots, he had a habit of studying his hands while he spoke, slowly turning them back and forth while he declaimed Marxist rhetoric in the deep rolling voice of a river flowing past giant boulders. “First the Secretariat must review your case.”

Always the Secretariat, MURC’s great and powerful Oz. In the evenings the officers gathered on the steps of their quarters to listen to the radio and drink *aromática* tea. Blair gradually insinuated himself onto the bottom step, and after a couple of weeks of Radio Nacional newscasts he understood that Colombia was busily ripping itself to shreds. Gargantuan car bombs rocked the cities each week; judges and journalists were assassinated in droves; various gangs, militias, and guerrillas fought the Army and the cops, while the drug lords and revanchists sponsored paramilitary *autodefensa* squads which seemed to specialize in massacring unarmed peasants. In their own area Blair could hear shooting at night, and the distant thud of helicopters during the day. Rebel patrols brought in bodies and bloody *autodefensa* prisoners, while U.S. Air Force planes gridded the sky overhead, reconnoitering the local coca crop.

“Where,” Blair asked during a commercial break, “is this Zone of Disarmament they’re always talking about?”

“You’re in it,” Subcomandante Tono answered, to which Lauro added with a sarcastic snarl, “*You mean you couldn’t tell?*”

Some evenings Alberto joined them, usually when one of his interviews was being broadcast; he’d settle onto the steps with a mug of tea and listen to himself lecturing the country on historical inevitability and the Bolivarian struggle and the venomous strategies of the World Bank. After one such broadcast he turned to Blair.

“So, Joan Blair, what do you think of our position?”

“Well,” Blair said in his most formal Spanish, “of course I support these things as general principles—an end to poverty, an equitable education system, elections where everyone is free to participate.” The officers murmured patronizingly and winked at each other; amid the strenuous effort of articulating himself Blair barely took notice. “But frankly I think you’re being too timid in your approach. If you really want to change society you’re going to have to start thinking in more radical terms.”

Everyone endured several moments of intense silence, until Alberto cleared his throat. “For example, Joan Blair?”

“Well, you’re always going on about agrarian reform, but face it, you’re just evading the real issue. If you really want to solve the land problem you’re going to have to get away from the cow. They’re too big, they overload the entire ecosystem. What we have to do is forget the cow and switch over to a diet of mushrooms and insects.”

“Mushrooms and insects?” Lauro retched. “You think I’m risking my ass out here for mushrooms and insects?”

But Alberto was laughing. “Shut up Lauro, he gave an honest answer. I like this guy, he doesn’t bullshit around—with a hundred guys like him I could take Bogotá in about two weeks.”

During the day Blair was free to wander around the compound; for all their talk of his being a spy the rebels didn’t seem to mind him watching their drills, though at night they put him in a storage hut and handcuffed him to a bare plank bed. His beard grew in a dull sienna color, and thanks to the high-starch, amoeba-enriched diet he began to drop weight from his already aerodynamic frame, a process helped along by the chronic giardia that felt like screws chewing through his gut. But these afflictions were mild compared to the awesome loneliness, and like all prisoners he spent countless vacant hours savoring the lost, now-clarified sweetness of ordinary days. The people in his life seemed so precious to him now—*I love you all!* he wanted to tell them, his parents and siblings, the Biology Department secretaries, his collegial though self-absorbed and deeply flawed professors. He missed books, and long weekend runs with his buddies; he missed women so badly that he wanted to gnaw his arm. To keep his mind from rotting in this gulag-style sump he asked for one of his blank notebooks back. Alberto agreed, more to see what the gringo would do than out of any humane impulse; within days Blair had

extensive notes on countersinging among Scaled Fruiteaters and agnostic displays in Wood-rails, along with a detailed gloss on Haffer's theory of speciation.

Alberto fell into the habit of chatting with Blair whenever they happened to cross paths in the compound. He would inquire about his research, admire the sketches in his notebook and generally smile on Blair like a benevolent uncle. It came out that Alberto was a former banker, a *burgués* city kid with advanced degrees; he'd chucked it all twenty years ago to join the MURC. "It was false, that bourgeois life," he confided to Blair. "I was your typical social parasite." But no matter how warm or frank these personal exchanges Blair couldn't shake the sense that Alberto was teasing him, holding back some essential part of himself.

"You know," Alberto said one day, "my grandmother was also very devoted to birds. She was a saint, this woman—when she walked into her garden and held out her arms the birds would fly down and perch on her hands."

"Amazing," said Blair.

"Of course I was just a kid, I thought everyone's grandmother could do this trick. But it was because she truly loved them, I know that now. She said the reason we were put here on earth was to admire the beauty which God created."

"Ah."

Alberto's lips pooched out in a sad, nostalgic smile. "Beauty, you know, I think it's nice, but it's just for pleasure. I believe that men should apply their lives to useful things."

"Who says beauty and pleasure aren't useful?" Blair shot back, sensing that Alberto was messing with his mind again. "Isn't that what revolutions are ultimately about, beauty and pleasure for everyone?"

"Well," the *comandante* laughed, "maybe. I'll have to think about that."

So much depended on the rebels' goodwill—whether they lived by the ideals they so solemnly sloganized. Blair knew from the beginning that their honor was the best guarantee of his life, and with time he began to hope that he'd found a group of people with a passion, a sense of mission, that was equal to his. They seemed to be authentic *concientizados*, fiercely committed to the struggle; they were also, to Blair's initial and recurring confusion, loaded with cash. They had the latest in laptops and satellite phones, fancy uniforms, flashy SUVs, and a potent array of high-tech weapons—not to mention Walkmen and VCRs—all financed, according to the radio news, by ill-gotten gains from the cocaine trade.

"It's a tax!" the rebels screamed whenever a government spokesman started going on about the "narcoguerrillas" of the MURC. "We tax coca just like any other crop!" A tax which brought in \$600 million a year, according to the radio, a sum that gave Blair a wifty, out-of-body feeling. On the other hand there were the literacy classes and crop-rotation seminars, which the rebels sponsored for the local campesinos, who looked, however, just as scrawny here as in the nonliberated areas. So was it a revolution *a conciencia*, or just a beautifully fronted trafficking operation? Or something of both—Blair conceived that the ratio roughly mirrored his own odds of coming out alive.

The notebook became his means of staying clued to reality, of ordering time, which seemed to be standing still or maybe even running backwards. The only thing the guerrillas would say about his ransom negotiations was that Ross Perot might pay for his release, which Blair guessed—though he could never be sure—was some kind of joke. A group of the younger rebels took to hazing him, *los punketos*, ruthless kids from the city *comunas* who jittered the safeties of their guns whenever Blair walked by, the rapid *click-click-click* cascading in his wake like the prelude to a piranha feed. Sometimes he woke at night totally disoriented, unsure of where or even who he was; other nights it seemed that he never really slept, sinking instead into an oozing, submetabolic trance that left him vague and cranky in the morning. One night he was drifting in just such a haze when a *punketo* burst into the shed, announcing through riffs of soft hysterical laughter that he was going to blow Blair's head off.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Blair said flatly. The kid was giggling and twitching around, literally vibrating—hopped up on *basuco* was Blair's guess. He'd probably been smoking for hours.

"Go fuck yourself," said the kid, jamming his gun into the notch behind Blair's left ear. "I'll kill you if I want."

"It'll be thrilling for a minute, just after you pull the trigger." Blair was winging it, making it up as he went along; the main thing, he sensed, was to keep talking. "Then it'll be like having a hangover the rest of your life."

"Shut up you cocksucker, just shut the fuck up. Shut up so I can kill you."

"But it's true. I know what I'm talking about."

"You? You never killed anybody in your life."

"Are you kidding? The United States is an extremely violent country. You must have seen the movies, right? *Rambo*? *Die Hard*? Where I come from makes this place look like a nursery school."

"You're a liar," the kid said, though less certainly.

“Why do you think I’m here? I have so much innocent blood on my hands, I was ready to kill myself I was so miserable. Then it came to me in a dream, the Virgin came to me in a dream,” he amended, remembering how the rebels fell to their knees and groveled whenever the Spanish priest came to say mass, and the *punketos* were always the worst, weeping and slobbering on the padre’s ring as he walked among them. “ ‘Follow the birds and you’ll have peace,’ that’s what she told me in the dream. ‘Follow the birds and your soul will know peace.’ ”

And Blair talked on in the most hypnotic, droning voice imaginable, cataloguing the wonders of Colombian avifauna until the *punketo* finally staggered off into the night, either stupified or transcendent, it was hard to say which. But when dawn broke and Blair was still alive a weird peacefulness came over him, along with the imperatives of an irresistible conviction. As soon as the cuffs came off he strode across the yard to Complaints and Claims, brushed past the guard and walked into Alberto’s office without so much as a knock. Alberto and Tono were spreading maps across the *jefe*’s big desk; when the door flew open they went for their holsters, a reflex that nearly got Blair’s head blown off.

“Go on,” he dared them, stepping up to the desk. “Either let me do my work, or shoot me.”

There was a heat, a grim fury about Blair that most people would associate with madmen and fanatics. The *comandantes* eyed the gringo at a wary slant, and it occurred to Blair that, for the moment at least, they were actually scared of him.

“Well,” said Alberto in a cautious voice, “what do you think, Tono?”

Tono blinked. “I think he’s a good man, Comandante. And ecology is important to the revolution.”

“Yes,” Alberto agreed, “ecology is important to the revolution.” He tried to smile, to inject some irony into the situation, but his mouth looked more like a fluttery open wound.

“Okay, Joan Blair, it will be as you wish. I give you permission to study your birds.”

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Blair was twelve the first time it happened, on a trip to the zoo—he came on the aviary’s teeming mosh pit of cockatoos and macaws and Purple-naped Lorries, and it was as if an electric arc had shot through him. And he’d felt it every time since, this jolt, the precision stab in the heart whenever he saw Psittacidae—he kept expecting it to stop but it never did, the impossibly vivid colors like some primal force that stoked the warm liquid center of your soul.

He’d known a miracle was in these mountains, he’d felt it in his bones. For five rainy days he tramped ever-widening circles out from the base, traversing ridges and saddles and moiling through valleys while the armed guard followed him every step of the way. Hernan, Blair guessed, was another of the *comandantes*’ jokes, a slight mestizo youth with catlike looks and a manner as blank and flaky as cooled ashes. By now Blair knew a killer when he saw one; Hernan would as soon shoot a man as pinch off a hangnail, but as they trudged through the gelatinous drizzle together Blair began to get the subtext of the *comandantes*’ choice.

“So how long have you been with the MURC?” he asked.

“Always,” Hernan replied in a dreamy voice.

“Always?”

“That other boy,” Hernan said in a gaseous hum, “that other boy died. I have been a *revolucionario* my whole life.”

Blair studied the youth, then went back to scanning the canopy. Alberto had returned the binoculars but not the camera.

“So I guess you’ve been in a lot of battles?”

“Yes,” Hernan said in his humming voice, and he seemed to reflect. “Yes, many,” he added.

“What’s it like?” Blair asked rudely, but the kid’s catatonia was driving him nuts.

“Oh, it’s not so bad. Once the shooting starts everything’s okay.”

Which Blair took for a genuine answer; five days through some of the most beautiful, rugged country in the world and the youth showed all the emotion of a turtle. It might not matter what you hit him with—a firefight, a bowl of stew, a trip to Disneyland—Hernan would confront each one with the same erased stare, but when Blair passed him the binoculars on the fifth day, pointing down a valley at a grove of wax palms and the birds wheeling around like loose sprockets, Hernan focused and gazed in silence for a time, then burst out laughing.

“They’re so silly!” he cried.

And they were, Blair agreed, they were delightful, this remnant colony of Crimson-capped parrots whose flock notes gave the impression of a successful cocktail party. There’d been no sightings of the Crimson since 1973, when Tetzlaff et al. spotted a single breeding pair in Pichincha, Ecuador. CITES listed the species as critically endangered, though the more pessimistic literature assumed

extinction; that first day Blair counted sixty-one birds, a gregarious, vocal group with flaming crowns and chunky emerald-green bodies, their coverts flecked with blues and reds like glossy M&Ms. Sixty-one birds meant that God was good: not only was there a decent chance of saving the species, but if he lived and made it home with his data intact Blair was going to knock the ornithological world on its ass. He and Hernan built a blind of bunchgrass and palm fronds, and Blair settled into the grind-it-out fieldwork mode. He charted the foraging grounds, the potential nest holes, the roosts and flyways across the valley; he identified the mated pairs within the flock and noted the species' strong affinity for wax palms—*Ceroxylon andiculum*, itself endangered—and surmised a trophic relationship. They talked constantly, with complex repertoires of sounds, chattering in an offhand, sociable way as they clambered about the canopy or sputtered from tree to tree, their short shallow wing beats batting the air with the noisy ruction of windup toys.

Within weeks Blair had a basic ethological profile. In exchange for the privilege of fieldwork he had to do camp chores every afternoon, which was nothing—three years of graduate school had inured him to slave labor and subsistence living. In some ways this was better than school: he got room and board, worked with minimal interruptions, and was furnished a local guide-bodyguard free of charge. Hernan proved adept at tracking the birds on their feeding rounds, leading Blair through the forest as they listened for debris tumbling through the leaves, then the fuddles and coos that meant Crimsones were overhead. At the blind he usually lay back on the grass and dozed, rousing from time to time to say amazing things about himself.

"I had a girlfriend," he once confessed to Blair in a sleepy voice. "She wouldn't let me kiss her, but she'd bite me on the ear."

In the same vacant drone he told all manner of terrible stories: battles he'd fought, prisoners he'd executed, patrols where his column had come across peasants burned to death or babies nailed to planks. The stories were so patently nightmarish that Blair wondered if Hernan was talking in his sleep, channeling the dreams that rose like swamp gas out of his wounded subconscious. His own family had been killed when he was twelve, their village wiped out by *autodefensas* for electing a former insurgent as mayor.

"Sometimes I see them," Hernan murmured in a half-doze, one arm thrown over his eyes, feet crossed at the ankles. "Sometimes I'm lying on my cot at night, and I look up and all my family's standing there. And it's like I'm lying in a coffin, you know? My family's alive and I'm the one who's really dead, and they've come to my funeral to tell me good-bye."

Blair was so horrified that he had to write it all down, the baroque, spiraling cycles of murder and revenge mixed with his notes on allopreening among the mated Crimsones and the courtship dances of the unattached males, the way they minced around like fops doing a French quadrille. *Sickness* he wrote in the margin of his notes, *there's a sickness in the world*, along with *parrots the most intelligent and beautiful of birds, also the most threatened—a clue to the nature of things (?)*. He wrote it all because it all seemed bound together in some screamingly obvious way that he couldn't quite get. Tramping through the woods, he and Hernan kept coming across giant cocaine labs, the thuggish workers warning them off with drawn machetes. The coca fields around the camp kept expanding; radio reports of the fledgling peace talks took on a spectral air, with the MURC insisting on prenegotiation of themes which might be substantively negotiated at a later time. Every few weeks Hernan would go off on a mission, and after three or four days he'd drag in with the other survivors, skinnier, with corpse-like shadows under his eyes but otherwise the same—the next dawn he and Blair would be at the blind, watching the birds greet the day with gurgling chatter. In March the males began to hold territory, and when the females developed brood patches Hernan offered to climb the trees for a look at the nests, a job they both knew was beyond Blair. After a year in the mountains he was a rashy stick figure of his former self, prone to fevers and random dizzy spells that made his head feel like a vigorously shaken snow globe. Sometimes he coughed so hard that his nose bled; his bowels were papier-mâché, his gums ached, and the sturdiest thing about him seemed to be his beard, which looked positively rabbinical.

"Go for it," Blair answered, and in a flash Hernan was seventy feet up the tree, relaying information while Blair wrote. Clutch, two; eggs, white; nest, about the size of a Guambiano water jar. Hernan had left his rifle propped against a nearby tree; Blair eyed it while allowing an escape fantasy to float through his head, a minivacation from the knowledge that if he ran they'd catch him before the day was out. Still, the rifle raised a nagging question: how could he leave, now, in the middle of his research, even if he got the chance? But not to leave might be a slow form of suicide. Sooner or later something would get him, either sickness, a swacked-out *punketo* or an *autodefensa* raid, or maybe the Secretariat would decide to make a point at his expense. The hard line had lately crept back into the MURC's rhetoric, which Blair guessed was part posturing for the peace talks, part exasperation at the trend of the times. The Soviet Union had imploded, the Berlin Wall was gravel, and the Cuban adventure was on life support, and yet the MURC insisted it would soldier on.

"Some say the end of history has come," Alberto intoned to the journalists. "We can all have different interpretations about what's happened in the world during these very complex years, but the fact of the matter is that most things haven't changed. Hunger, injustice, poverty, all of the issues which led the guerrilla of the MURC to take up arms are still with us."

True, thought Blair. He wanted to believe in the Revolution, in its infinite capacity for reason and justice, but the Revolution wouldn't return his camera for one day. All of his research would be deemed hypothetical unless supported by a photo or specimen. No

photo, no dissertation, and he'd sooner burn every page of his notes than take a specimen.

"I could steal the camera back for you," Hernan offered. "I think I know where he's keeping your stuff."

"What would happen if they caught us?"

Hernan reflected. "To me, nothing—I can just disappear. To you?" He shrugged. "They'd probably cut off your fingers and send them to your family."

Blair considered for a second, then shook his head. Not yet. He wasn't that desperate yet.

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When the chicks hatched Hernan went up again, checking out thenests while the parents and auxiliaries seethed around his head like a swarm of belligerent box kites. One egg would hatch, then the second a few days later; Blair knew the second hatchlings were insurance, doomed to die unless their older siblings died first, and he sketched out a program for taking the second chicks and raising them in captivity.

The Crimsons had saved him, in a way; maybe he'd save them in turn, but he had to know everything about them first. "There's something wrong with us," he told Hernan one day. He was watching the nest holes for the soon-to-fledge chicks and thinking about the news, the latest massacres and estimates of coca acreage. The U.S. had pledged Colombia \$1.6 billion in aid—advisers, weapons, helicopters, the whole bit—which made Blair wonder if his countrymen had lost their minds. There was a fire raging in Colombia, and the U.S. planned to hose it down with gasoline.

"Who?" Hernan answered, cracking open one eye.

"Us. People. The human race."

Hernan lunked up on one elbow and looked around, then subsided to the grass and closed his eyes. "People are devils," he said sleepily. "The only *persona decente* who ever lived was Jesus Christ. And the Virgin. And my mother," he added.

"Tell me this, Hernan—would you shoot me if they told you to?"

"Anh." Hernan didn't bother to open his eyes. "They'd never ask me."

"They wouldn't?" Blair felt an unfamiliar surge of hope.

"Of course not. They always put the new guys on the firing squads, to toughen them up. Guys like me they never bug for stuff like that."

Over the next few days seven chicks came wobbling out of the nests, and Blair set himself the task of tracking the flock as it educated the youngsters. Back in the shed he had notebooks and loose papers crammed with data, along with feathers, eggshell fragments, and stool samples, also a large collection of seeds with beak-shaped chunks gnarled out of them. Occasionally Alberto would trek up the mountain to the blind, checking in on Blair and the latest developments with "the children," as he'd taken to calling the parrots. He seemed relaxed and jolly during these visits, though his essential caginess remained; he would smile and murmur noncommittally when Blair lobbied to start his captive-breeding program. "Get with it, Alberto," Blair pressed one day. "It would be a huge PR coup for you guys if the MURC rescued an endangered species. I could help you across the board with that, like as an environmental consultant. You know we're really on the same side."

Alberto started to speak, then broke off laughing as he studied the wild gringo in front of him. Blair was dressed in scruffy jungle fatigues—his civilian clothes had worn out long ago—and with his gaunt, weathered face and feral beard he looked as hardened as any of the guerrillas. New recruits to the camp generally assumed that he was a zealot from the mythical suicide squad.

"Joan Blair, you remind me of a man I once knew. A man of conviction, a real hero, this guy. Of course he died in Bolivia many years ago."

"Doing what?"

"Fighting for the revolution, of course!"

Blair winced, then shook off the spasm of dread. "So what about my captive-breeding program?"

Alberto chuckled and patted Blair's shoulder. "Patience, Joan Blair, you must learn patience. The revolution is a lot more complicated than you think."

~

"They're negotiating you," Hernan said a few weeks later. "Some big shot's supposed to be coming soon."

“Bullshit,” Blair said. The camp was a simmering cesspool of rumors, but nothing ever happened.

“It’s true, Joan Blair, I think you’re going home.”

“Maybe I’ll stay,” Blair said, testing the idea on himself. “There isn’t an ornithologist in the world who’s doing the work I’m doing here.”

“No, Joan, I think you should go. You can come back after we’ve won the war.”

“What, when I’m eighty?” Blair chewed a blade of grass and reflected for a moment. “I still don’t have my photo. I’m not going anywhere until I get that.”

The rumors persisted, gradually branched into elaborate subrumors. Just to be safe Blair got all his data in order, but it was still a shock to see the helicopters come squalling out of the sky one day, cutting across the slopes at a sassy angle and heading for camp. Blair and Hernan were walking back for afternoon chores, and if there was ever any doubt about Blair’s intentions his legs resolved it for him, carrying him down the trail at a dead sprint. At camp the helicopters were parked on the soccer field, two U.S. surplus Hueys with the sky-blue Peace Commission seal on their hulls. Campesinos and guerrillas were streaming into the compound; Blair had to scrum his way through the crowd to get a view of Complaints and Claims, where some kind of official moment was taking place on the steps. Several distinct factions were grouped around a microphone: Alberto and the *subcomandantes* were on one side, along with some senior *comandantes* whom Blair didn’t recognize, while to their right stood a sleek delegation of civilians, Colombians with careful haircuts and tasteful gold chains. Blair spotted the American delegation at once—their smooth, milky skin was the giveaway, along with their khaki soft-adventure wear and identical expressions of informed concern. Everyone was raked toward the microphone, where a Colombian was saying something about the stalled peace talks.

*Why didn’t you tell me?* Blair almost screamed. A Tele-Nacional crew was filming the ceremony; photographers scuttled around like dogs chasing table scraps. *What about me?* he wanted to shriek, *say something about me!* He tried in vain to make eye contact with the Americans, who’d arranged themselves into distinct pairs. The two middle-aged men stood farthest from the action, robust, toned, country-club types; the other two Americans stood close to the center, a tall, older gentleman with a shrinking hairline and sharp Adam’s apple, then the sturdy young woman who was glued to his side, short of stature, hyperalert, firecracker cute. *The international community’s show of support*, said the speaker. *A message of hope from U.S. financial circles.* Blair felt one of his dizzy spells coming on, his eyes clouding over in a spangly haze. He slumped and let the crowd hold him up; Hernan had vanished somewhere along the trail. When the delegation began to move inside Blair watched them disappearing as if in a dream, then roused himself at the last moment.

“Hey!” he yelped in English, “I’m American! Hey you guys, I’m an American!”

Only the woman seemed to hear, flashing a quick, startled look over her shoulder, then continuing inside. Blair started to follow but a guard blocked his way.

“*Alto*, Joan Blair. Only the big shots go in there.”

“Who are those people?” Blair asked, craning for a look through the door. Which abruptly shut.

“Well,” the guard said, assuming the manner of someone schooling a particularly dense child, “there is Señor Rocamora, the Peace Commissioner, and there is Señor Gonzalo, the Finance Minister—”

“But the Americans, who are they?”

“How the hell should I know? *Peces gordos*, I guess.”

Blair didn’t dare leave, not for a second, though he could feel the sun baking all the juices out of him. The crowd in the compound absently shuffled about, disappointed without really knowing why. *Fritanguera* ladies set up their grills and started frying dough; a King Vulture scraped lazy circles in the sky. After a while the American woman stepped outside and walked down the gallery to speak to the reporters. Blair brushed past the guard and was up in a second, intercepting the woman as she walked back to the door. Out of instinct she started to dodge him; he looked wild with his castaway’s beard and grimy jungle fatigues, but his blue eyes beaming through the wreckage brought her up short.

“Oh! You must be John Blair!”

He could have wept with gratitude. “Yes, I’m John Blair! You know who I am!”

“Of course, State briefed us on your situation. I’m Kara Coleman, with the—” A scissoring blast of syllables shot off her lips. “Wow,” she continued, eyeing him up and down, “you look like”—*hell*, she barely avoided saying—“you’ve been here awhile.”

“Fifteen months and six days,” Blair instantly replied. “You’re with the State Department?”

“No, I’m with the—” She made that scissoring sound again. “I’m Thomas Spasso’s assistant, he’s leading our group. Thomas Spasso,” she repeated in a firm voice, and Blair realized that he was supposed to know the name. “Chairman of the Nisex,” she continued, almost irritated, but still Blair didn’t have a clue. “The Nisex,” she said as if speaking to a dunce, “the New York Stock



Exchange.”

Blair was confused, but quite as capable as anyone of rationalizing his confusion—he knew that fifteen months in the Andes might have turned his American frame of reference to mush. So maybe it wasn’t so strange that the king of Wall Street would turn up here, in the jungly heart of MURC territory. Blair’s impression of the stock market, admittedly vague, was of a quasi-governmental institution anyway.

“Right,” he said, straining to put it all together. The unfamiliar English felt like paste on his tongue. “Sure, I understand. But who, I mean what, uh—why exactly are you here?”

“We’re here to deliver a message from the financial community of its support for the current peace initiative. Foreign investment could do so much for this country, we felt the MURC might be more flexible if they knew the opportunities we could offer them. And Mr. Spasso has a special interest in Colombia. You know he’s close personal friends with Ambassador Moreno.”

Blair shut his eyes and wondered if he’d lost his mind. “You mean,” he said in a shattered whisper, “this doesn’t have anything to do with me?”

“Well, no, we came chiefly with the peace process in mind. I’m sorry”—she realized the effect she was having—“I’m truly sorry, I can see how insensitive that must seem to you right now.”

Blair was sagging; all of a sudden he felt very, very tired. “Isn’t there something you can do for me?” he softly wailed. “Anything?” Kara touched his arm and gave him a mournful look; she wasn’t heartless, Blair could see, but rather the kind of person who might cry in movies, or toss bites of her bagel to stray dogs.

“Mr. Spasso might have some ideas,” she said. “Come inside, I’ll try to get you a few minutes with him.”

She led Blair through the door, down a short hallway and into the big concrete room where the *comandantes* mediated peasant disputes every Tuesday and Thursday. The delegates were sitting in the center of the room, their chairs drawn in a circle as if for a group therapy session. Thomas Spasso was speaking through an interpreter, and in seconds Blair formed an impression of the chairman as a ticky, nervous guy, the kind of intractable motormouth who said the exact same thing no matter where he was. “Peace will bring you huge benefits from global investors,” the chairman told the *comandantes*. “The capital markets are lining up for you, they want to be your partner in making Colombia an integral part of the Americas’ economic bloc.” He rattled on about markets and foreign investment, the importance of strong ratings from Moody’s bond-risk service—the rebels sat there in their combat fatigues and Castro-style hats smiling and nodding at the chairman’s words, but Blair could see they were barely containing themselves. It was so close that they didn’t dare look at each other, but the real challenge came when the chairman invited them to visit Wall Street. “I personally extend to each and every one of you an invitation to walk the floor of the exchange with me,” Spasso said, his voice thrumming with heartfelt vibrato. He clearly thought he was offering them the thrill of their lives, but Blair could picture the rebels howling on the steps tonight—*Oooo, that we should have this big honor, to walk the floor of the bourgeois exchange with him*. Even now the *comandantes’* eyes were bugging out, their jaws quivering with the strain of holding it in, and it was only by virtue of supreme discipline that they didn’t fall out of their chairs laughing.

Spasso, ingratiating yet oblivious, talked on. “He’s very passionate,” Kara whispered to Blair, who was thinking how certain systems functioned best when they denied the existence of adverse realities. After awhile the Peace Commissioner got to say some words, then the Finance Minister, and then Alberto, who limited his comments to an acknowledgment of the usefulness of market mechanisms, “so long as social justice for the masses is achieved.” Then some aides circulated a proposed joint statement, and the meeting dissolved into eddies and swirls as each group reviewed the language.

Kara waited until Spasso stood to stretch his legs. “Mr. Spasso,” she called, hustling Blair over, “this is John Blair.”

Spasso turned, saw Blair, and seemed to lose his power of speech.

“The hostage,” Kara said helpfully, “he’s in your briefing kit. The guy from Duke.”

“Oh yes, yes, of course, the gentleman from Duke. How are you, so very nice to see you.”

*Nice to see you?* Fifteen months in hell and *nice to see you?* For Blair it was like a curtain coming down.

“Sir, John and I were discussing his situation, and while he understands the limited scope of our visit he was also wondering if we could do anything with regard to facilitating his return home. At some possible future point.”

“Well,” Spasso said, “as you know we’re here in the spirit of a private-sector exchange. Though your name did come up at the embassy this morning.” He paused as one of the other Americans approached, a fellow with silver-blond hair and a keen, confident look. “Working the final numbers,” he told Spasso, waving a legal pad at the chairman. “Then we’re good to go. Thanks so much for setting this up, Tom.”

Spasso nodded and glanced at his watch as the American moved off. People were milling about the big room, talking and bumping

shoulders.

“Uhhh—”

“John Blair,” Kara prompted.

“Mr. Blair, absolutely. I’m afraid your situation is rather problematic. There are laws”—he looked to Kara for confirmation —“apparently there are laws here in Colombia which prohibit private citizens from engaging in kidnap negotiations. Am I correct on that, Kara?”

“Unfortunately yes, sir.”

“ ‘Aiding and abetting a kidnap negotiation,’ I believe those are the words. We’re to avoid any action that could be construed as aiding and abetting a kidnap negotiation, those are our strict instructions from the State Department. Which I know must seem rather harsh to you—”

Blair had groaned.

“—but I’m sure you can appreciate the bind this puts us in. Much as we’d like to help, our hands are tied.”

Blair wanted to hit this fool, or at least shake him hard enough that some air got to his brain. “Look,” he said in his most determined voice, “they’re threatening to kill me, they’ve accused me of being a spy. They could take me out and shoot me as soon as you leave.”

“I’m certainly aware of the seriousness of your situation.” *Señor Spasso*, someone called from across the room. “Believe me, I am most sympathetic. But any goodwill we foster here today will redound to your future benefit, I’m sure.”

*Señor Spasso, we’re ready.*

“Be right there! People are working for your release, I can assure you. Top people, extremely capable people. So hang in there, and God bless.”

Spasso joined the general push of people toward the door. “I am so, so sorry,” Kara said. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a handful of Power Bars. “Here, take these,” she said, passing them to Blair. “I’ll talk to you before we leave.”

Kara melted into the crowd. Blair allowed the flow to carry him out to the gallery, where he leaned against a column and closed his eyes. He could not comprehend what was happening to him, but it had something to do with the casual cruelty of people who’d never missed a meal or had a gun stuck to their heads. Out in the yard the press was forming ranks for another photo op. Spasso and company gathered around the microphone; while they made the same speeches as two hours ago Blair ate his Power Bars and discretely wept, though in time he pulled himself together and resolved to make one last plea for help. He scanned the yard and gallery for Kara, then entered the building, where he found her in the big concrete room. She and the other two Americans were sitting with Alberto and one of the senior *comandantes*. They were speaking in quiet, reasoned tones, their chairs so close that their knees almost touched. Blair was struck by their visible ease with each other, the intimate air which enclosed the little group.

“Oh, John!” Kara cried. “Maybe John can help,” she said to the others, waving Blair over. “John, we’re having some trouble with the language here, maybe you can help us out.”

The blond American stood with his legal pad. “All those years of high school Spanish,” he chuckled, “and I don’t remember a thing.”

“John’s American,” said Kara. “He’s in graduate school at Duke.”

“Super!” The man pulled Blair close. “Listen, we’re trying to work out the numbers here and we can’t seem to get on the same page. I’m offering thirty-five hundred per fifty unit, fifty thousand board feet in other words. Think you could put that into Spanish for me?”

Blair eyed the scribble of numbers on the pad. “Thirty-five hundred...”

“Dollars, U.S.”

Blair kept scanning the pad, the numbers teasing him; it seemed important to make sense of the mess. “Board feet...”

“It’s the standard unit in the industry. One square foot by one inch thick.”

“Of board,” Blair said. “You’re talking about lumber.”

“You bet.”

“Who are you?”

The man stuck out his hand. “Rick Hunley, Weyerhaeuser precious woods division.”

“You’re going to log this area?”

“That’s the plan, if we can close this thing.”

Blair turned to Alberto, who gave him a squirrely, sullen look. The honks and woofs of the press conference drifted through the

door, and that, Blair realized, was simply a show, a concoction of smiles and talking heads. Whereas the deal was happening right here in this room.

“Alberto,” he cried in bitter, lancing Spanish, “how could you? How could you even think of doing such a thing?”

Alberto shrugged, then turned away as if he smelled something bad. “Running an army is expensive, Joan Blair. The revolution doesn’t survive on air, you know.”

“Christ, look at all the coca out there, how much money could you possibly need? You’re going to wipe out the parrots if you log up here.”

“We have to save the country, Joan Blair.”

“What, so you can turn it over to these guys?”

“Enough.”

“You think there’ll be something to save when they’re done with it?”

“Enough, Joan Blair, I mean it.” Alberto flicked his hand as if shooing a fly. “Get out of here, I’m tired of listening to you. Beat it. Where are those son-of-a-whore guards—”

But Blair had rounded on Hunley. “There’s a parrot up here,” he said in very fast English, “an extremely rare species, these are probably the last birds of their kind in the world. If you guys come in here logging it’s a pretty sure thing you’re going to wipe them out.”

“Whoa, that’s news to me.” Hunley and his partner exchanged dire looks; Hunley turned to Alberto. “Comandante, I can tell you right now if we get bogged down in any environmental issues then we’re outta here. We don’t have time to mess around with that stuff.”

“Is not a problem,” Alberto said, emitting the gruff sort of English that a bear might speak.

“Well according to your interpreter it is.”

“Not a problem, no, for sure, no bird problems here. Forget the birds.”

“I won’t stand for this,” Blair stated flatly. “I don’t accept it. You people can’t do this.”

Alberto’s lips cramped inward, holding back a smile, though Blair could see it surface in his eyes well enough, the near-lethal mix of pity and contempt. “Okay, Joan Blair, why don’t you stop us,” he mocked, but something skittish and shamed began to leak into his eyes, a grey, mizzly vapor that snuffed out all the light. Alberto tried to stare him down but couldn’t, and at the moment he turned away Blair knew: the revolution had reached that classic mature stage where it existed only to serve itself.

“Okay,” Alberto said, reaching for Hunley’s legal pad, “I think we can make the deal.” He circled a number on the pad and handed it back to Hunley. “For that, okay? For this price we make the deal, but one more thing. You have to take this guy with you.”

“No way,” Blair said, “forget it. You aren’t getting rid of me.”

“Yes, yes, you are going. We are tired of feeding you, you have to go home now.”

“Go to hell Alberto, I’m staying right here.”

Alberto paused, then turned to the Americans. “This man,” he said stiffly, pointing to Blair, “is a spy. As a gesture of goodwill, for the peace process, I am giving him to you, you may please take him home. And if you don’t take him home, today, now, he will be shot. Because that is what we do to spies.”

Kara gasped, but the worldly lumber executives just laughed. “Well, son,” said Hunley, turning to Blair, “I guess you better come with us.”

~

Blair wouldn’t look at them, Spasso, Kara, the others, he wouldn’t acknowledge the smiling people in the seats around him. He kept his face turned toward the helicopter’s open door, watching the dust explode as the engines powered up, the crowd waving through the storm of rotor wash. The chopper throbbed, shuddered, shyly wicked off the ground, and as it rose Blair glimpsed Hernan in the crowd, the kid dancing like a boxer as he waved good-bye. In the chaos of loading he’d slipped through the muddled security cordon and shoved a plastic capsule into Blair’s hand—film, Blair had known without looking at it, a thirty-five-millimeter cartridge. The film was tucked into Blair’s pants pocket now, while he clutched to his lap the backpack with its bundles of data and artifacts: the first, and very likely the last, comprehensive study of the Crimson-capped Parrot. He hung on as the Huey accelerated, trapdooring his stomach into empty space as it slammed into a sheer vertical climb. The world fell away like a ball dropped overboard, the torque and coil of the jungle slopes diminishing to finely pebbled sweeps of green. The craft pivoted as it climbed, nose swinging to the east, the Crimson’s valley with its fragile matchstick palms sliding past the door like a sealed tableau—from this height Blair could see how easy it would be, nothing at all to rub out the faint cilia of trees. Easy. The sheltering birds just so much incidental dust.

*How does it feel?* Spasso was shouting in his ear. *How does it feel to be free?* They were rising, rising, they might never stop—Blair closed his eyes and let his head roll back, surrendering to the awful weightlessness. Like dying, he wanted to tell them, like death, and how grieved and utterly lost you'd feel as everything precious faded out. That ultimate grief which everyone saves for the end, Blair was spending it, burning through all his reserves as the helicopter bore him away.

[Back to Top](#)

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