

## **Tres Torres**

By Jack English

**The story I'm going to tell you is true. Or mostly true. It's as true as I can make it without being sued for liable, arrested by Interpol or disappeared by the CIA. They say you should write what you know. So here it is...**

### **Chapter One**

I thought I was dead. I lay face down on the beach and the images of my surroundings came to me as fitful bits of information not as sight, sound, touch or smell exactly. They came as if by direct perception. The sky was turning that steely gray that heralds the first crimson of dawn, and the last few stars burned steady and bright as if to ward off the coming day.

Waves lapped around my feet flowing along my pants and up over my arm. A few gulls circled restively down the beach fighting over the crabs and other sea creatures stranded by the receding tide.

The cold was terrible. As I floated between the oblivion of unconsciousness and a certain lucid state of awareness, it was the utter cold that gripped my attention and kept me from fading out as did the last few stars of the night sky. The cold focused my attention inward. I knew I should not

be cold. The climate in Guatemala should have been ideal, silky and warm.

The circle of my perceptions closed more tightly about me. I could no longer hear the gulls, though I felt they were close by; and the sky, while brighter, seemed to blend with the sandy beach into a haze. I could feel sand in my mouth, and taste its salty brine. The coolness of the sand comforted the dull ache of my bruised face. A knife wound in my right hand had long since stopped bleeding and had been washed clean by the sea.

Below my knees, a length of hemp was looped around my legs. A sloppy job, I remembered thinking, just before two, or was it three shots slammed into my chest and stomach. When the bullets hit, I didn't exactly feel pain. It was more like surprise, even shock. I felt as though someone was sitting on my chest, and at the same time, I felt like throwing up. I wanted to cry out, but I was paralyzed with shock and fear. A moment later I was being slid over the gunwale of an ancient and unkempt cabin cruiser, like some giant piece of chum. I thrashed helplessly for a few minutes trying desperately not to breathe the salt foam about me. I heard the throaty roar of the cabin cruiser's engines as she moved away at full throttle. It was pitch black at sea that night except for the cruiser's running lights and a few stars. When I could no longer see her lights, I took a last look at the stars and slipped silently beneath the foam.

How I got to the beach I'll never know. What puzzles me most was how I could end up like this. Somehow, I had known this audit was going to be trouble and sensed it at the Miami Airport. I should have scotched the job right there.

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The breakfast flight from Baltimore to Miami had been flawless. Few sights rival sunrise at 40,000 feet. The cloud tops, exposed to the full optimism of the morning sun, were as pure and brilliant a white as I had ever seen. Wispy fluffs of orange and crimson reached toward the white cloud tops. Below the crimson lay great billows of light grey that tossed slowly as if in a light sleep. In the deep recesses and hidden valleys, recalcitrant patches of purple lurked furtively resisting the passage from night to day.

There was a rustle as a stewardess rushed down the aisle; mechanically efficient, displaying an economy of motion gained through the practice of tasks repeated thousands of times a year. They were very polite, a politeness meant to stave off conversation as well as complaints. Nothing could be permitted to interfere with their ballet of beverage carts, seat belts and tray tables.

The cabin of the airplane had just the right combination of temperature, pressure, humidity, and mood music. In sharp contrast, the heat, humidity and moldy smell of recycled and reconditioned air at the Miami Airport was oppressive. Within seconds of leaving the

airplane, tiny beads of sweat formed under my collar.

The discomfort was as much a feeling of diffused apprehension as from the heat and humidity. I didn't know whether the uneasiness was due to the assignment itself, to the fact the assignment was in Guatemala, or my translator.

I had never met the woman who was to be my translator, although I had managed to find out a little about her through the corporate grapevine. Helen was a new hire in the Audit Department. She had a husband, three grown sons, a dog, two cats, and a goldfish. Unfortunately, she had no accounting, auditing or computer background.

In fact, she had no background at all for this job at all except for the fact that she had taught high school Spanish twenty years ago. The company, John Adams Insurance, is usually careful about whom they hire. I hoped they hadn't made a mistake this time. I hoped she knew Spanish really, really well. I remembered thinking, "I couldn't speak a word of Spanish if my life depended on it." At the time, I didn't know how profound a thought that was.

Too many competitors had made the fatal mistake of confusing John Adams' old money tastes and courtly corporate society with inertia. But when John Adams found its market share or position threatened, it moved against its competitors with ruthless efficiency. As a tribute to slain competitors, John Adams built a forty-story

office tower overlooking Baltimore's inner harbor. Oh, what I would give for just one more glimpse of that building.

I must have been dreaming, fading in and out of my barely conscious state. The tide had receded enough so that only the largest waves lapped at my feet. The sun beat down and dried my clothes, but it couldn't overcome the icy chill that ran from my skin through muscle and sinew into the marrow of my bones.

Down the beach the gulls began to screech. I heard distant voices, which abruptly stopped. I had been discovered! I didn't recognize the language they were speaking, but it didn't seem like Spanish. It was a group of Indians. These decedents of the great and noble Aztecs approached with a caution that bordered on fear, and perhaps rightly so. At six foot four, I was almost a foot and a half taller than the men.

They stood in a semi-circle around me and chattered as though I were a beached whale or other natural curiosity. One of them poked me with a stick. When a couple of good jabs failed to rouse me, several tiny pairs of hands searched my pockets. They took my belt, a pathetic water-logged watch, and were starting to strip off my shirt when the women began jabbering furiously.

Suddenly, an alert tension spread through the tiny band of Aztecs in the same way a warning signal passes through a flock of gulls. Without uttering a word, they took off down the beach and

across the dunes. The sounds of surf and sea gulls were replaced by the low constant growl of an engine. For the first time since I arrived on the beach something replaced the bitter, life-draining cold. It was dread at the prospect the crew of the cabin cruiser had returned.

## Chapter Two

The sound was not that of the cabin cruiser, it was the sound of a jeep growling along in low gear. The jeep contained four soldiers carrying automatic weapons.

The jeep stopped about fifty feet away. One man posted himself next to the jeep and scanned the horizon, as if I might be a trap of some sort. Two others approached my prostrate body with rifles cocked. The driver leaned on the steering wheel and yawned. The two soldiers who approached, did so in the same circular manner as the Indians, but were less gentle when they prodded me with the muzzles of their guns.

"Identification?" said the man scanning the horizon.

"No identification," was the reply.

This exchange was followed by a dialogue in Spanish then the question, "American?"

"Es posible," one of them said. More discussion in Spanish followed and a soldier was sent back to the jeep to get a body bag.

In Central America a body bag is used to store death squad victims until it was decided whether the victim was important enough to arouse a public outcry, or in the case of an American, a sanction from the United States Government. If the victim were of no particular importance to the body politic, he was displayed as an example of terrorism. However, if the victim is important, the most eloquent and elaborate measures would be taken to dispose of the body where it will never be found.

I knew I was being slid into the body bag, but could not feel the hands that lifted my feet and slid them into the bag, nor the hands that slipped the bag beneath me, or feel them pull the bag up around me. I thought I heard the bag being zipped up, but I could have been dreaming. The body bag just wasn't made for a man my size and the soldiers couldn't quite zip it shut. I was left with an opening two or three inches long through which I could dimly see. It must have taken all four of them to lift me onto the jeep. It took several tries, and they dropped me once.

I was slipping toward the end of my cares and woes. It was the end of a brilliant career, fought for and bought at such a price. It was the end of long hours of work; it was an end to lonely nights in motels while on audit investigations; it was an end to the terrible cold.

## Chapter Three

I slipped more deeply into a gray oblivion; it had been light as a mist before; now it was as dark as charcoal. Time passed, I couldn't say how long, I saw a bright and shining light above me. There was no pain, no cold, just the light. The cold was finally gone and I could rest. I drifted along in that state of peace and tranquility one can only get when one gives in, and gives up. Minutes, hours, days, it didn't matter. There was only rest and the light.

The light had a strange appearance. It was not the light of the sun or moon, nor was it heavenly light. Yet it was familiar.

I strained to focus on the light, to understand it, to enjoy it. The light spilled through the small opening where the body bag was not quite zipped closed. After what seemed like an enormous effort, the dimmest outline of the light took shape. I was disappointed to discover the light was a bare, high wattage light bulb in a metal fixture. I pondered that light for a long, long time. I was growing weary again, when I felt a small shudder run through me. Perhaps it was rigor mortis. I was surprisingly indifferent to the thought. I had heard that after death muscles stiffen and strain, sometimes twisting a corpse into grotesque shapes. I thought I heard something. I listened as hard as I could. It happened again. Again I listened. It

seemed like minutes passed. It almost sounded like a heart beat. Could it be a heart beat? Or, was it just a muscle spasm?

If it was a heartbeat, would it last? I mean, would it continue? I had to know. I was flooded with anxiety. I had to know. When I was resigned to death, I felt complete and utter peace. Now that there was a hope of life, no matter how unlikely or remote, I felt wracked with anxiety. I had to know.

If it was a heartbeat, something I dared not hope for, how could I speed it up? How could I make it more regular? How could I keep it from slipping away? Exercise, exercise speeds up the heart, but how can a dead man exercise?

Legs are you there?

Nothing.

Arms rise?

Nothing.

Stomach growl! Lips cry out! Eyes blink! For God's sake do something to let people know you are almost alive!

Thumb? Thumb! My right thumb responded ever so feebly. I bent it down at the knuckle and then back up. Not more than half an inch of deadly slow movement. Another heart beat and each beat was a triumph, a miracle!

I curled my fingertips. Not a fist yet, but movement. I curled them into the palm of my hand and then stretched them out again. In and out, in and out. Now wrist. My heart began to beat in a more rhythmic, but deadly slow pattern.

The cold replaced by a new sensation. It was getting hard to breath. I was being suffocated by my own exhaled breath, the breath that was trapped with me in the body bag. I had to open the light hole and let more air in.

With ever so much effort, I tried to raise my hand to the zipper on the body bag. There was little room to maneuver my hand between my body and the bag. The bag had been stretched tight by the soldiers when they forced my extra-large body into a regular-size body bag. I gasped for air. My fingers worked at the zipper. The pull tab was on the outside where I couldn't reach it. I pushed on the zipper from underneath. It moved two teeth, then one, then two more.

Finally, I was able to reach a finger out through the hole and unzip the bag a few inches. With my face exposed to the air, I took a few deep breaths and fell asleep exhausted.

## **Chapter Four**

When I woke, the light was gone. My heart maintained its slow, but steady beat and my breathing was deep and slow. I felt drained, but alive.

I heard several voices discussing something in low conspiratorial tones. One of the voices had a deep gravelly quality. No... it wasn't gravelly exactly. It had a more guttural, Germanic quality.

I lay there wondering where I had heard that voice before. Then I remembered. It was on the boat! It was the last voice I heard before they dumped me overboard. Oh my God! They've come to get me!

The image of the shots flashed through my mind. I could feel myself reliving the moment I was hoisted up onto, then over the gunwale of the cabin cruiser. The image was so vivid I could taste the salt brine.

I heard a click, and the door to the room where I lay swung open. I couldn't see who was standing there, but I could see the shadows of three men on the ceiling. They walked toward me!

I tried to slow my breathing, to hold my breath. Those signs of life I prayed for so fervently, I now prayed would stop, but just for a while. If they stayed too long I would have to breathe and give myself away. I dared not move.

They came closer and unzipped the body bag a bit to get a good look at me. They wanted to make sure they had done their job. They stood there and talked some more.

I got a terrible cramp in my foot. The pain was piercing, but I dared not move. Still they talked. One reached over and I thought he was going to check the pulse at my neck, but instead he zipped the body bag closed. I heard the door close and lock. I took a slow, deep breath and tried to relax the cramp. Again, I worked the bag zipper from the inside until I could reach a hand through to the clasp and pull it open.

They would be back. I had to get away. I unzipped the bag as far down toward my feet as I could reach and tried to sit up. I felt dizzy. Static crackled through my brain, and I retreated to one elbow. I took a few deep breaths and tried to sit up again. I swung my feet around and down toward the floor. My legs were pretty shaky and the cramp in my right foot prevented me from putting any weight on it. Two feet away from the slab I was on, there was another slab and another body. I looked around the room and there were a dozen other slabs with body bags and their grisly contents. It was a makeshift morgue.

I was weak as a kitten but I knew I had to escape. I opened the door and looked down the hall. There were closed doors on both sides and a staircase leading up to a door at one end. A light showed under the upstairs door. I crawled across the hall and opened the door opposite me. It was an equipment room containing boilers, air conditioners, and electrical equipment. At the far side of the equipment room, there were two basement windows. Cold, pale moonlight flooded in through them and illuminating the machinery.

There was an old wooden Windsor chair against one wall. I dragged it under a window and rested. Cold beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I laid my head on one arm, and rested my arm on the chair. I took more deep breaths and climbed on the chair so I could reach the window. Again, I had to rest, head on my arm, and arm on the window

ledge. My legs were like rubber. I unlatched the window and raised it; there was a stick on the sill to hold it open; and I put it in place. My plan had been to get out of the building and hide. I didn't know where I was going to hide. I couldn't think that far ahead. I was beginning to feel nauseous. Oh... oh... I had to lie down. I thought I was going to throw up. My stomach was doing somersaults. I got back down on my hands and knees again and tried to rest.

I heard footsteps and voices in the hall again. I looked up at the window and knew I didn't have the strength to climb out. The air conditioning equipment seemed to offer the most promise of providing a hiding place. The central air chamber was five feet from the closest wall. Around it on the floor laid an ungainly collection of pipes, compressors, and motors. Like a frozen explosion, ducts radiated out in all directions, up, down, sideways. I crawled over some of the mechanical equipment, trying to keep a pant leg, shirt sleeve, or hand from being caught in a flying belt or spinning gear. I climbed behind the main air chamber and waited.

The voices in the corridor had reached the morgue. I could tell they flipped the light on because it flooded through the ventilation slats in the equipment room door. A pool of shadow beneath one of the large air intake ducts resolved itself as a ten-inch high space. I lay on my back and wiggled underneath.

I heard shouts coming from the other room. "Poor Dios," was the only thing I recognized and it was repeated over and over again. It means "Oh my God! Oh my God!" I could hear running; hands turning door knobs; lights being flipped on. I worked my body as far under the machine as I could. I tried to swing my feet under the duct. My right leg swung under and hit something. It could go no further. I pulled my left leg as close to it as I could. It didn't quite fit. The tip of my shoe just stuck out into the light. The rest of me was protected by shadows.

The door to the equipment burst open. The men standing in the doorway were armed and angry.

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