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# Where Did This Come From?

**FREE EXCERPT**



**Larry Nocella**

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Before Joe could reply, there was a scuffle outside the hut. Someone was pushing their way in. Joe put his head down and didn't move. He thought it might be Ndiko come to kill him, but he didn't care. Guilt and the chief's words had crushed his soul. He wasn't sure he wanted to live any more anyway.

"Nina! Nina!" It was Paulo, calling frantically.

Nina whirled around. "Have respect! Be quiet. What is it?"

"On the radio," Paulo spouted, "The PRM rebels, they're attacking the airfield! The prime minister has been killed. A revolution is underway." The thunder sounded again, this time close enough to reveal its true nature: mortar attacks on Palagua City. Paulo's eyes darted in all directions. "We should get the hell out of here," he whispered, "There's no telling what might happen."

Nina nodded. She grabbed Joe's hand and led him from the hut. Joe looked over his shoulder in time to see Yuala staring out at the three of them. The light outside snapped him out of his trance. He turned, running with Nina behind Paulo.

The boat-ride back to Palagua city was a bumpy one. Paulo whipped his boat around the sharp bends in the river with one hand, tuning the radio for updates with the other. Every station was filled with revolutionary talk, raised to a frantic pitch. Where the police checkpoint had been before, there was only the burning wreckage of a boat. The arrogant captain's corpse was slung over one side of the listing vessel, his neck wide open, blood running into the river.

"Christ," Paulo snarled, tuning the radio again. The voices were angry and merciless.

The boat hit the marina dock, barely slowing, nearly catapulting them out.

"What's the plan?" Joe asked.

"The plan is you get the hell off my boat," Paulo said. His quick hands went to work and again. By loosening a few knots on his boat's identifying flags, the Palaguan flag vanished, and the red banner of the revolution appeared in its place. Paulo pulled a red bandana from his pocket and began waving it above his head, joining a passing throng of celebrating revolutionary supporters, all waving rags of red. Paulo dissolved into them.

Nina said, "I'm heading back to my apartment. You should get out of here now or you might not ever. They might be looking for Americans. Bargaining chips as hostages, black market passports, money. Who knows?"

Joe slung his bag over his shoulder. "Drop everything except the most important stuff," Nina reminded him. "In case you need to run."

Joe set the bag down and kept only his wallet and passport. He nodded. "Lead the way."

“In case we get separated, keep working your way to the airport. Head to the east. It’s almost evening, so move away from the sun.”

They darted from the marina, where a giant explosion demolished a Palaguan tour boat. Flames blackened the colorful mermaids painted on the hull, and singed the still dolphins.

“Get home,” Joe said, “I’ll go alone. When I get back, I’ll send word. And I’m going to put a stop-” His sentence was cut off by a whistling sound as a mortar destroyed a fruit stand down the street. Warm dust rushed over them.

“Go!” He yelled. Nina nodded grimly and ran off toward her apartment. Joe sprinted in the opposite direction, heading for the airport.

\* \* \*

The streets alternated between emptiness and chaos. Leaving the marina, the only people around were a few bodies in the street, limping or crawling, leaving blood trails in the dirt. Joe wanted to help, but he knew he had to get out. Plus, his last act of kindness in Palagua had unfolded into this nightmare.

Around the corner, a crowd parted, surrounding a young couple. They were tourists, judging by their Hawaiian shirts. They were desperately trying to fend off the blows raining down on them. Finally, a man with a police officer’s jacket and cut-off shorts fired a shot in the air. The crowd pushed the young couple against a wall, and ran back. The officer lined up riflemen in front of them as the couple stroked each other’s face, painting their cheeks with red hand-prints.

The rifles spat, and dark red smears blew out their backs, spraying the wall behind them. The couple fell.

“Shit,” Joe said, clenching his teeth. He turned to run before the crowd sought other victims, but he was already found.

A staggering Palaguan stood before him, a knife blade in his shaking hand.

“Americano? Tu Americano?” The man spoke louder.

Joe stepped to the side. The man grinned and mirrored his movement, blocking his way.

This could be it, Joe thought as he faked searching for his wallet. This could be where I die. His heart shriveled into a cold, crumpled thing. Survival was all that mattered now.

“Dinero,” The Palaguan said, “Dinero.” He lunged with the knife.

Joe dropped his shoulder, charged and swung upward, redirecting the knife. His palm connected with thief’s jaw, crushing it with a satisfying crack. A lightning bolt of pain from the impact shot down his arm, but Joe roared and kept running, kept his feet churning. He knocked the man to the ground, stomped on his face

and sprinted away, not looking back until he was out of breath. The thief had not followed.

In the distance, he could see the entrance of the airport. A tank squatted in the grass; soldiers lined either side of the terminal. Black smoke boiled from behind the building.

Joe waited and watched as a car sputtered to the front. Three suits jumped out, holding their arms high, passports displayed in their right hands. The guards waved them in.

Joe bolted from his hiding place, imitating the three businessmen before him.

"I'm American! American! Estados Unidos!" He yelled, holding his passport open, hands above his head. The soldiers nearest him raised their guns and tracked him. "Estados Unidos! I'm American!" He shouted again. "Hurry! Hurry!" A woman called from the entrance, holding open the door.

Joe ran to her.

"Are there any flights left?" He gasped.

"Only one and only to Los Angeles," She answered. Joe emptied his wallet onto the counter.

"Will that cover it?"

An explosion from the runway blew in a whole section of the terminal's windows. Silver snow rained onto the sea shell-patterned rug.

"Forget the money. You may have to stand," The woman said, "Now go." She pointed him across the terminal, across the field of recently shattered glass.

I have to walk into that war-zone? Joe wondered, swallowing hard.

As he crossed the patterned carpet, among the fake palm trees, he looked over his shoulder. The front of the terminal was serene, completely calm and ordinary, except for the soldiers and tank guarding it. The back of the terminal, where he was heading, was a battle-torn ruin. The transition from well-armed tourist paradise to battle-torn hell occurred in a matter of steps.

He opened the door leading to the tarmac.

A soldier yanked him out, grabbed the back of his head and pushed him down. "Cabeza abajo!" The soldier knelt near and pointed him toward the stairs leading to the plane. Joe nodded. Salvation was a 100-yard dash away.

Two other soldiers nearby dropped to their knees and nodded to Joe, creating a virtual path with the barrels of their machine guns.

Other government forces darted back and forth underneath the plane, using the landing gear as cover, exchanging fire with the rebels emerging from the jungle along the runway.

Someone shoved Joe aside and waved his passport frantically. Joe recognized the flag of Japan on the cover.

“Solomente Americanos.” One soldier said and shoved the intruder back.

“But I speak American!” The man yelled, “I am American businessman!”

The soldier spun his gun and shoved the butt into the man’s belly. The man fell over, curling up. He pulled out his wallet, offering the colored plastic to the soldiers. The soldiers kicked him until he slunk away, back into the terminal.

The lead soldier put his hand on Joe’s chest, holding him back. He held up three fingers. “En tres!” He signaled to the other two. They nodded, “Si.”

“We cover you,” the leader said to Joe, in English. Joe nodded and dropped to a sprinter’s block start.

“Uno.” Bullet holes traced a dotted course across the side of the plane.

“Dos.” A rebel stepped from the jungle and was gunned down, falling backward.

“Tres!”

The soldiers stepped from their cover and fired. Flashes erupted from the brush. Joe leapt out onto the blacktop, feeling terribly open, more naked than he had ever felt. He bolted, hunched over, using his arms to cover his head.

“Just keep moving,” he repeated to himself, “Just keep moving.” Gravel exploded at his feet.

He was up the stairs and into the plane.

Muzzle flashes erupted from the jungle.

A woman in the second row screamed as her window cracked, a bullet lodged in the glass.

A flight attendant shoved Joe into the front seat and lifted the stairs as the plane started rolling.

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” Someone yelled.

Outside, Joe saw the Japanese man running toward the plane, waving for it to stop. Bullets cut him down as the attendant closed the door.

The small plane was already lifting. An overhead luggage compartment blew open, spilling clothes everywhere.

Over all the chaos, Joe fumbled with his seat belt. He could hear a frantic chattering from the cabin, “R-P-G! R-P-G!” the plane lifted and banked sickeningly to the right. Through the tiny window, Joe saw the rebels running onto the end of the runway, advancing from the jungle. One had a shoulder-fired rocket launcher.

With helpless horror, Joe watched him kneel and fire.

The rocket sped toward the plane, right at his window.

The wing sliced through the smoky white column.

“Missed!” He yelled, ecstatic, insane. A muffled explosion shook the aircraft. Oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling and the lights went out. The plane’s engine choked. Wheezed. The nose tilted downward.

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Based in the fictional South American nation of Palagua, *Where Did This Come From?* follows the Huapi tribe's desperate struggle for survival. When a leading U.S. toy manufacturer discovers a rare and beautiful crystal on the Huapi's sacred land, mining operations begin immediately. Christmas shopping season is coming, and Crystal Clay is by far the top seller. Soon the Huapi find themselves and the jungle that supports them on the brink of annihilation. Can they hope to resist the desire of consumers who never bother to ask, *Where Did This Come From?*

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Larry Nocella is the former editor-publisher of the award-winning magazine, QECE (Question Everything Challenge Everything.)

He was also the writer of the highly unique underground fiction-comic zine, eXtreme Conformity.

He sold his first article at age fourteen, and has been writing ever since. He lives in the USA, near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Visit his website at [www.LarryNocella.com](http://www.LarryNocella.com).

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ISBN: 1-4257-1381-5

