

ROADBLOCK

"The Retén"

The Retén Drafts
SOLDIERS are wearing caps and trucks 100
road a couple hundred meters ahead but
that I don't worry and Retén is roadblock
meaned by the military police are part of
life in Colombia a police force and Cali
I guess and covering growing fields a chief
M-16 rifle that was a pistol still in shoulder
except that the soldier's hand falls to his side
and I slow down as he walks back by a roadblock
the other hand has much activity turning a
and I see some tension soldiers are
poisoners that spread and pull forward
reflexes to pull search the soldier's
weapons and high rubber boots like other soldiers that
but their heads are some heads and a couple
back that is some heads to think to look at
I call myself there is no search and it is
ask the Pan American through some operate in
developed soldiers at Retén always have no
without a search when they see my blue jeans
Buenos Aires I was my way to the
I'll pull up behind a truck. Don't worry
Some of these kids doing repairs and
I see planes mean that the kids left the
national agency. Then the kids left the
event, I'd about after all soldiers draw
for the Colombian Army. I've seen pistols
holding a 39 revolver. I've seen a mask and
a new leader. A soldier's pistol is working
a new leader. A soldier's pistol is working
is clear. Get out of the car. I pull from
my billfold. I have a Nissang motor. I pull from
one of the international centers for tropical agriculture
and wide. Our purpose is to apply science for rural
to development. Our purpose is to apply science for rural
systems in small scale. I've seen a mask and
General. I'd never capture anyone. I'm C/A. That's
what I'd been told. I also have a card from the Colombian
international organization based in Colombia.

Soldiers are waving cars and trucks off the road a couple hundred meters ahead, but that doesn't worry me. *Reténs*, roadblocks, manned by the military or police, are part of the daily life in Colombia, especially around Cali. I pass the front guard, wearing tiger-striped fatigues and covering incoming traffic with an M-16 held at waist level. Still standard stuff, except that the soldier's hair falls to his shoulders and is held back by a knotted olive bandanna.

I feel uneasy as I slow down, approaching the *retén*. Too much activity, and I sense tension. Soldiers are leaning passengers, feet spread and palms forward, against the vehicles for body searches. Like other soldiers, these wear camouflage uniforms and high rubber boots, but their headgear is strange. Some wear floppy bush hats, some olive berets, and a couple wear bandannas. Nothing to worry about, I tell myself. I'm only ten minutes off the Pan-American Highway itself, and it's 7:30 A.M. Guerrillas don't operate on main roads in broad daylight. Soldiers at *reténs* always wave me through without a search when they see my blue license plates. I'll be on my way in a minute.

But a teenage soldier motions with his Israeli-made Galil assault rifle to pull up behind a truck. Don't worry, I think. Some of these kids don't know that the blue plates mean I represent an international agency. Then I see the word *ejército* [army] stenciled above the kid's left fatigue pocket. So it's the Colombian army after all. A soldier runs by, holding a .38 revolver. I've never seen pistols drawn at a *retén* before. Another soldier appears wearing—oh my God—a ski mask. An olive ski mask, and waving a .45 automatic at me. His message is clear. Get out of the car.

As I kill the Nissan's motor, I pull my CIAT identification card from my billfold. CIAT is the Spanish acronym for the International Center for Tropical Agriculture, one of 17 international agricultural research centers worldwide. Our purpose is to apply science to agriculture to develop improved crop varieties and sustainable farming systems for small-scale farmers across the tropics. We're nonpolitical, working in both communist and capitalist countries. Guerrillas would never capture anyone from CIAT. That's what I'd been told. I also have a card from the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs certifying that I represent an international organization based in Colombia.

I hand Ski Mask the ID cards with my right hand, clutching my billfold with my left. He takes both. "I work for *el Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical*, or CIAT," I explain in Spanish as Ski Mask skims my identification. That doesn't seem to impress him. Ski Mask speaks—rapidly—to a *guerrillero* with an AK-47. I catch only one word: *gringo*. The two guerrillas push me forward and we trot past soldiers who are frisking passengers and searching the other two trucks and three cars. Another car approaches the *retén*, and is pulled over for the same treatment.

We turn down a side road of dirt between sugarcane fields. There, a new Chevrolet pickup sits beside a beat-up Chevy van and a Toyota van whose side displays the decal *Ingresos de Cauca*, or "Earnings of the Cauca Valley." The pickup and Toyota van were obviously taken at the *retén*. All vehicles face away from the highway. Ski Mask and his friend turn me over to another armed guerrilla who guards a couple of *campesinos* who've passed by at the wrong time, and hurry back to the *retén*. The guard motions me into the back of the pickup. A *guerrillero* runs up. "Propaganda!" he shouts, and my guard pulls a sheaf of leaflets from his fatigue jacket. The portrait of the revolutionary Che Guevara, wearing a black beret, is printed on the front.

"Who is this group?" I ask.

"*Las FARC*," the guard says matter-of-factly.

Oh God, I think. FARC. The *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia. One of the world's last communist guerrilla armies. These guys routinely kidnap wealthy Colombians and, when they get a chance, foreigners with multinational corporations. That's one way they finance their operations. But FARC wouldn't kidnap a CIAT scientist, not purposely. CIAT makes no profit, sells nothing, exploits no natural resources. Our purpose is to improve the lives of the world's poorest farmers, and of urban dwellers who depend on their production. Ski Mask just doesn't understand. When I meet someone with authority, I'll be let go.

A shout! Guerrillas begin to move backward step-by-step, automatic weapons fanning their paths from the *retén*. They converge on our cluster of vehicles and two jump in the back of the pickup with me. One has a baby face and can't be more than 13. But he carries an AK-47, and two bandoliers of .30-caliber ammo for an M-60 machine gun crisscross his chest. The other teenager carries a Galil and wears a bandanna. He motions me to sit flat on the pickup bed. We speed away from the *retén*.

As we bounce down the dirt road at breakneck speed, the muzzles of both *guerrilleros'* weapons keep swinging in my face. By accident, sure, but those weapons are heavy-duty and loaded, and one little slip can blow me away. I motion to the kid with the Galil to *please* move its muzzle out of my face. Please? He does, but the weapon swings back and I'm looking into its muzzle again a couple of minutes later. The vehicles brake at an intersection, and the drivers talk rapidly. Our driver throws the pickup into first and guns it. The lurch takes Baby Face by surprise and he falls backward, almost out of the pickup, but clutching the tailgate with both legs and one hand. The other hand clings to his

AK-47. I grab Baby Face's forearm and pull him back into the pickup bed. He's more embarrassed than grateful.

Another half hour of hard driving through cane fields takes us into the Cordillera Central, the beginning of the Andes. We meet an Indian descending the road on horseback. The pickup stops. "Is the army or police ahead?" our driver asks. "*No, señor.*" We speed on. Higher in the mountains, the three vehicles stop by a small roadside store. The guerrillas buy *gaseosas*, soft drinks, and offer me one. No thanks. A *guerrillero* pulls a .22 revolver, confiscated at the *retén*, from his belt and fires two shots at rocks on the mountain slope. Another *guerrillero* takes the pistol and fires wildly into the air, laughing, until the cartridges are spent.

The men gather in a circle and, like soldiers anywhere after an action, start telling war stories, things that happened at the *retén*. Ski Mask, who by now has removed the mask, is the center of attention. Maskless, he's pudgy and could be a clerk in a grocery store.

"I'll pay! Don't kill me! I'll pay anything," Ski Mask shrieks, palms pressed together as if in prayer. He's mimicking a panic-stricken detainee back at the *retén*. Ski Mask hams it up, the guerrillas laugh madly, and I feel sick. Whatever happens, Hargrove, try to keep your dignity, I think. You can't break and provide entertainment for these bastards.

I'm put in the backseat of the Chevy van, and we drive on. "*Me llaman Rambo,*" the driver says. "They call me Rambo." He has a rough beard and mustache, and wears tiger-striped fatigues with a slouchy jungle hat. One brim is cocked up, Australian style. Ski Mask sits in the passenger seat.

"You've made a mistake," I explain to the two guerrillas. "I work for the CIAT."

I tell them how CIAT develops improved varieties of beans, cassava, tropical forages, and rice not only for farmers in Colombia, but worldwide. Rambo and Ski Mask don't seem impressed.

Finally, I change the subject. "What happened to my car?" I ask Rambo.

"We left it on the road." I guess FARC steals only four-wheel-drive vehicles, but someone else may have use for an empty 1993 Nissan Bluebird sedan, keys in the ignition. I doubt that I'll see that car again.

"What happened to my billfold?" I ask. "Will you give me my money?" I had 200,000 Colombian pesos, about US \$230—plus a green US \$100 bill for emergencies—in the billfold when Ski Mask took it. Ski Mask ignores the question.

Meanwhile, Rambo is on the radio coordinating movements with someone called Gato Negro—Black Cat. Forty-five minutes later we enter a mountain village and park along the lower side of the hillside plaza. I look for a sign that tells me the village's name, but see nothing. A small, whitewashed Catholic church looks down from the upper side of the plaza; at the far side is a broken-down Ferris wheel. FARC obviously considers this a secure village. *Guerrilleros* in fatigues bask in the sun on concrete park benches and stroll the streets. Rambo and Ski Mask tell a group of teenage soldiers to guard me, and leave.

"I work for 'CIAT,' I tell the soldiers. No response. "Do you know what CIAT is?"

"CIA," a teenager says. He pronounces it "ssea-a." "That's the intelligence agency of the United States."

"No!" I cry. "Not CIA—CIAT. *El Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical!*" I stress the first letters of the first three words and start talking about beans, cassava, poor farmers. A guerrilla brings me a plastic cup of apricot yogurt. As I eat, one guard puts a tape into the Chevy van's tape deck and we listen to the revolutionary music of the FARC guerrillas.

A *guerrillero* walks up carrying a black briefcase—my briefcase—obviously stolen from my car. He hands me what he thinks I may need from the briefcase—a stack of CIAT business cards, bound by a rubber band, and two checkbooks. One is for my U.S.-dollar account on the First National Bank of Rotan, Texas. The other is for my Colombian peso account, on the Banco Real of Cali. I doubt that I'll be writing many checks, but I take them.

"How much money do you make?" my guard asks, eyeing the checkbooks. "I make three million pesos a year." I know that's about \$3,700 U.S. dollars. "How much do *you* make?" the guard repeats.

"*No entiendo,*" I say. I don't understand your question.

Rambo and Ski Mask return, and we drive down a side street and park in front of a stucco house with a red tile roof. A civilian emerges and hands me a plate as Rambo and Ski Mask leave again, leaving me with a teenage guard. Rice and potatoes, and a broiled chicken wing. I'm not hungry, but figure I'd better eat.

"Do you like the food of the *indígena*?" the civilian asks.

"*Mucho,*" I lie. "You are an *indígena* [Indian]?"

"*Sí, señor.* Everyone in this village is Indian."

"Then Spanish is your second language?"

"Oh, yes, *señor.* We all speak Páez."

A *guerrillero* comes to the van and shows me a revolver taken at the *retén*. It looks like the one the boys were shooting earlier. "Is this your pistol?"

It may be the one the boys were shooting earlier, [illegible] "*Pero si quiere regalármela, acepto con mucho gusto,*" I say. No, but if you wish to give me it, I'll accept it with great pleasure. "With bullets, please!" The guerrilla laughs, and goes off to tell his amigos what the *gringo* prisoner said. Rambo returns and gets behind the wheel. As we drive out of town, I notice bold letters painted on the sides of buildings. "What does 'JBC' mean?" I ask. "The Jaime Beckemann Callon Front of M-19," Gato Negro says. M-19. That's another communist guerrilla front. A pretty Indian girl works in the garden of a house that we pass. Rambo stops the van and smiles at her, squinting his eyes, tips his hat, waves, and guns the motor. The girl waves good-bye. A kilometer down the road another Indian girl is riding a pony. Again Rambo puts on his killer smile and squint. They exchange looks and a few words, then Rambo rides off again. This guy considers himself God's gift to the Indian girls of this village, I think. There's a leather handbag that a *guerrillero* had thrown in the backseat with me.

I see a cluster of keys and I know that they are mine—because I doubt that many Colombians would carry a key ring with a brass plaque stamped “Redneck.” So I doubt that my Nissan will be stolen. We drive, higher and [illegible] 45 minutes then pull up in a valley. There the two other vehicles from the *retén* wait, along with another group of about 25 uniformed guerrillas. I’m ordered out of the van. Rambo meets with a group of men, then one *guerrillero*, with an AK-47, walks from the group toward a clump of trees along the stream below. “*Venga!*” he says, Come. Two more men walk up behind me. One motions me forward with his Galil. It hits me—one man in front, two behind, taking me away from the group to a clump of trees. I hadn’t thought, until then, that these men might kill me. They think I’m worth more alive than dead, otherwise they wouldn’t have taken me. Still there was that misunderstanding about CIA and CIAT, and this is the way the bad guys rub out the good guys in the movies. I walk, scared but not terrified. We reach the tree clump, but keep going. I pick my way on slippery rocks along the stream. “*Arriba,*” the *guerrillero* in front says, motioning toward the mountain slope that faces us. Up. Then I realize that a tree line, several hundred steep meters up the slope, is our objective. Cover from aircraft that might be searching for me. We reach the tree line and the other three *guerrilleros* relax. One asks me, “How do you like living in Colombia?”

I can’t believe this. “I liked it a lot—yesterday,” I say. But the question really pisses me off, so I add, “How can you ask such a question—holding an AK-47, and having kidnapped me?” The *guerrillero* smiles and looks at his feet.

We lie in the mulch of leaves the forest has left. I’m more frightened by the boredom that I know must come than by the prospect of immediate death. And I’m really concerned about how my wife, Susan, will take this. I look at my watch. It’s 2:30 P.M., so I was kidnapped about seven hours ago. By now the others at the *retén* must have reported that FARC took a *gringo* captive, and CIAT must have recovered my car. So surely Susan knows by now. I wonder how CIAT told her. By phone? Did someone come to our home?

At about three P.M. I survey my possessions. Not much. The clothes I’m wearing, a watch with a broken band, 2 checkbooks, 35 business cards, and—I count my money—650 Colombian pesos—about 75 cents. But I’m thankful for one possession. When captured, I had a Random House pocket dictionary, English-Spanish, in my front pocket. How lucky! I wish I could start writing some of this down, I think. Take notes at least. I’d learned from my days in Vietnam how quickly you forget, even powerful things you “know” are fixed in your mind forever.

The English-Spanish dictionary has several blank pages at the back, I see. And I could write more notes in the page margins throughout the dictionary. No, I can’t do that, I think. What if the guerrillas see that I’m writing and confiscate my notes? I can’t compromise my dictionary; that leaves . . . my business cards and the checkbooks. I look at the checkbooks. The dollar checkbook has more blank pages. Then I realize that the front of both my dollar and peso checkbooks have records of checks written, deposits, withdrawals. I’m not wealthy; I earn a

good salary, about what a professor at a U.S. university with similar professional experience and education would earn. Still, that must look like a lot to these guys. I silently tear the front deposit-and-withdrawal sections from both check-books and thrust them deep into the mulch of decaying leaves.