

# **Puerto Vallarta Squeeze**

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*(The Run for el Norte)*

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**Robert James  
Waller**



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For flowers  
and sad songs.

And for Jim Flansburg and Jim Gannon  
who trusted in me, early on.

I mean, Luz was really good, kind in her heart and all that. Christ, she was just a simple country girl, doing the best she could for herself. You should've seen her—she was knock-'em-dead beautiful sometimes, most of the time, with a flower in her hair and pink lipstick on. Even in that cheap straw hat Clayton Price bought her. I still see her that way . . . in that cheap straw hat and yellow dress and him carrying her across a little river in the Mexican backcountry—a butterfly in the keep of a fer-de-lance. . . . Clayton Price, that sonuvabitch. Still, you had to admire him in a perverse way. I even felt sorry for him a couple of times.

Danny Eugene Pastor, October 1994

Clayton Price's edge was that he never hesitated, never once, not as long as I knew him. While the rest of the world was standin' around waitin' for the bell to ring, he was already out of his corner and swingin'. In the old days, he'd have been gone while the bad guys were still gassin' their trucks. Can't figure out what happened, what he musta been thinkin' there at the end.

MacKenzie Watt, mercenary

## WHEREVER IT IS MEN GO

This guy Lobo, whose real and true name was Wolfgang Fink, played better than good flamenco guitar in a place called Mamma Mia in Puerto Vallarta. Had a partner name of Willie Royal, tall gangly guy who was balding a little early and wore glasses and played hot gypsy-jazz violin. They'd worked out a repertoire of their own tunes, "Improvisation #18" and "Gypsy Rook" as examples, played 'em high and hard, rolled through "Amsterdam" and "The Sultan's Dream" with enough power to set you two times free or even beyond that when the day had been tolerable and the night held promise. Lobo, sun worn and hard lined in the face, looking over at Willie Royal bobbing and weaving and twisting his face into a mean imitation of a death mask when he really got into it, right wrist looking almost limp but moving his bow at warp speed across the strings, punctuated here and there by Lobo's stabbing ruscados and finger tapping on the guitar top.

ROBERT JAMES WALLER

Good music, wonderful music, tight and wild all at the same time. On those nights when the sweat ran down your back and veneered your face and the gringitas looked good enough to swallow whole—knowing too they looked just that way and them watching the crowd to see who might be man enough to try it—people would be riding on the music, drinking and clapping in flamenco time, dancing around the dinner tables.

It was crazy back then, crazy good if you didn't look too close. The music as a mustering-out call at first, then later in the evening as wallpaper for the nighttime thrusts of a rumpled expatriate army whose soldiers never spoke of bolixed lives and stained little souls. Upriver Sally was working in bronze and Hillside Dave was foundering in what he called his "Regressive Matisse" period. Most of the rest were just talking about doing something—nothing small, understand—the "gonnas" per hour roughly equaling the number of tequilas consumed. From any kind of distance at all, it looked like amoebas navigating a glass slide, on the search for the nearest pile of food and being more or less content with what they found, mostly less. Less seemed easier and didn't require a reduction in beach time.

But none of that mattered unless you thought about it. And thought was to be restrained, if not suppressed, regarded as some antiquity from a former world. A world from which all had fled . . . or had been released, depending on your charity and point of view. Reflection or remembrance, any or all of that, pulled up things best left buried deep and covered over. Sifted through, boiled down, flipped twice and double fried, it had become a simple place to be. A kind of perverted Darwinism, where the flesh ruled but the species declined.

## PUERTO VALLARTA SQUEEZE

So it was: the music played and the people clapped. And the people danced and things were good for a while in the evenings. In Puerto Vallarta, in a place called Mamma Mia.

Luz María and Danny went there almost every night except when the royalty checks were late coming from Danny's New York agent. In that case they'd lie around their grubby little place down on Madero and drink cheap tequila and screw their heads off, which was sometimes even better than listening to Willie and Lobo. Or maybe something like Willie and Lobo—tight and practiced and wild all at the same time. After living with Danny for two years, and starting even before that, Luz had willingly shed most of the old strictures and hangups of village life, including Catholicism. That wasn't easy, but once it was done, it was done, and done full and pure and forever. That's what Danny believed, or wanted to believe. Made things easier for him, thinking that way.

As Danny said once, speaking with the kind of certainty coming from a ragged blend of drink and experience, there's absolutely nothing like a twenty-two-year-old Mexican woman who's gotten herself liberated and opens up and starts screaming for Jesus Christ to save her immortal Catholic essence while doing every single thing standing in direct contradiction with her words and really meaning she hopes Jesus won't take her now at this moment—maybe later, but not now—not now, with her body sweated and her head tossing from side to side on the pillow and her slim, brown legs waving in the air or draped over the shoulders of a gringo—Danny Pastor, in this case—who's doing his best to put her headlong through the adobe at bed's end and making other superior efforts at seeing she at least spends time in purgatory, if she lucks out at all.



ROBERT JAMES WALLER

Anyway, on a soft, hot night in 1993, when the sewer system was having its own troubles south of the Río Cuale, Danny and Luz drifted up from Madero to hear Willie and Lobo. But the sound system in Mamma Mia wasn't working up to expectations. That's what Lobo claimed and got sullen about it. After a while Willie started saying that, too. So Willie and Lobo took a long break and went to work on it, broken speaker or some such thing. Luz and Danny walked down the street, dodging tourists and sailors who'd come off an American military ship anchored in the harbor.

For no reason other than doing it, Danny pulled Luz into a hangout called El Niño. El Niño had big wooden shutters that swung open on two sides, along the front where you could look west across Paseo Díaz Ordaz through exhaust fumes and see the sunset on Banderas Bay, and also on the south side looking down on Calle Aldama, where street merchants held up fake silver bracelets to the tourists sitting in El Niño because the guide books said that's where tourists ought to go at sundown.

In the corner of the main room was a particular table where you could put your back against the wall and sweep the room and see who came in, who was walking along Aldama on your left and what was happening out on Ordaz. On the night in question here, with the bar crowded and people talking louder than conditions called for, that special table was occupied by a guy with neatly combed, medium-length silver hair. He was wearing a blue denim shirt and khakis and sitting by himself, drinking a Pacífico with lime. Had a photographer's vest folded over and lying on the windowsill next to him.

Luz and Danny found two seats at the bar and were

drinking straight tequila shots with lime plus the usual salt. Danny was talking to the bartender about fish and sun and passing days, while Luz María moved her hand along his thigh—sometimes a little higher when she thought nobody was watching. The touch of Luz María's hand along his leg—and sometimes a little higher—got Danny thinking maybe they ought to stumble back down to Madero and get crazy with love when he noticed the guy at the corner table reach under his vest on the windowsill. Nothing too unusual about that. Later on, Danny couldn't remember why he was paying attention to the man or, for that matter, to anything at all except what Luz was doing along his leg.

Smooth and easy, but quick at the same time, the man checked the room, then lifted the vest a little. Had a gun under the fold, some kind of automatic pistol with a noise suppressor on it. Nobody was watching this except Danny, far as he could tell, since a mime was doing his thing across the street on the Malecón, the cement promenade along the sea, while a mariachi band was playing just behind the mime and sending out a high decibel count for thirty yards in all directions. Everybody was concentrating on the show, including the waiters, while the bartender was tending to someone down the line. But Danny Pastor was staring at this guy with silver hair, like he couldn't believe what was going on was going on and sometimes still can't believe what happened actually did happen when he thinks back on it.

Up came the vest a little more, the gun still mostly covered, and the man's hand jumped three times. No sound that Danny could hear over the mariachis. Just a slight bounce of his hand when he fired. He folded the vest double, stuffed it in a knapsack sitting on the floor by his chair, and looked around. After scanning the room one more

time, the man got up and laid out a ten-peso bill, then made his way through the tables and went down the front steps to the street.

While Danny was sitting there temporarily immobilized and feeling like he'd just watched a short instructional film on audacity, which ended without being finished, all hell broke loose out on Ordaz, the mariachis cycling down a little at a time as they figured out something had happened. First one trumpet peeled off, then two of the violins, then the second trumpet stopped, and so on, until they ground down raggedylike and out of tune. They were all looking south along the street, and people were running along the Malecón in the same direction as the band was looking.

Danny slid off his stool, the bartender asking, "*Qué pasa?*" Danny said he didn't know what was happening but that he was going to find out. He walked over to the table where the shooter had been sitting, leaned across it, and looked out in the street. People were crowded around a green Nissan sedan, and he couldn't see anything, so he went down the stairs of El Niño and out on Ordaz.

An American naval officer was lying on the cobblestones, his body twitching and blood coming from a neck wound. Danny, gut tensed, walked past the officer, glancing down at him then quickly away. He went over to the Nissan, stepped on the back bumper and looked over the crowd. Two Mexicans in white short-sleeves and white pants were holding snub-nosed .38s in both hands, pointing them at the sky while they sweated buckets and looked all around with a kind of strange, crazy fear in their eyes. A heavysset gringo in gray slacks and a resorty shirt was lying face up, with the bottom half of him on the street and the upper half on four steps leading from the street up to the Malecón.

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Dead center in the gringo's chest was a dark wet spot and a pencil-size slice on his left temple where a bullet had grazed him was oozing red, and he was not moving even the tiniest muscle from what Danny could tell.

Danny went back inside and told Luz and the bartender what he'd seen, mentioning also he didn't think it was a good place to be hanging around in general, not even for a minute and time to finish their drinks since the *policía* were arriving in waves of sirens and confusion. He figured they'd be up in the bar pretty soon, hassling everybody's ass, and he was also thinking he might've been the only one who saw anything, so he hustled Luz María out the back door and over to Morales, heading south toward their place on Madero.

Danny was holding Luz's hand and pulling her along pretty fast. She was half running to keep up with him and asking what was going on, why he was hurrying this way. Probably some kind of premonition, but for reasons that weren't clear to him, he wasn't ready to tell her the whole story, that he'd seen the hit. All she knew was some kind of shooting had taken place. She didn't know Danny had seen the shooter do it and that he was pretty sure he'd been the only one who saw it.

After a few blocks, Danny slowed down and Luz decided an ice cream was necessary. They bought her a cone and walked another block. When they got to El Rondo, little joint with a three-stool bar and four tables, Danny said he needed a drink. Felipe poured him a double tequila and said it was too goddamn hot even for this time of the year and if the goddamn rains would come, things would cool down a little. Danny nodded and wiped his face with a paper napkin.

ROBERT JAMES WALLER

Luz was licking her blackberry cone, Danny watching her pink tongue circle the mound of ice cream. She watched him watching her and started moving her tongue slow around the ice cream and over the top of it, then put her mouth on it and sucked a little, keeping her eyes on his all the while she was doing these things. She sat back and licked the ice cream from her lips, taking her time and grinning at Danny.

Felipe, who was noticing this unhurried dance toward later-on ecstasy, patted his face with a bar rag and looked at Danny. Danny shook his head and gave Felipe a grin and shrug, still trying to put together what he'd seen fifteen minutes earlier. And shivering inside when he pulled the images up, in the way of remembering a dream you say you don't want to remember but keep remembering anyway because terror has its own fascination, if it's once or twice removed from your own reality. Once or twice removed—terror, that is—until it slow crawls over the tansom of your life and pauses there for a moment, looking around for you, eyes bright hard and caring not for your transient joys and sorrows, tongue casting about for your scent.

Movement out on the rim of his left eye, and Danny turned slightly. The man carrying a tan knapsack hesitated at the door to Felipe's before coming inside. Silverish hair and khaki pants. And light blue eyes, maybe gray blue, looking as if they'd seen to the end of things and back. Kind of dead eyes, but with a flicker of something far back inside, like a flashlight coming toward you through the dark from a long way off. Danny's heart seemed not to be working at that moment.

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The shooter eased onto a chair, nodded to Felipe. "Tequila, *por favor*."

Luz was looking at the shooter. So was Danny, but trying to appear as if he weren't. Still, he couldn't help glancing at the knapsack the man put under the table five feet away, thinking the two of them, he and the shooter, were the only ones who knew what was in there, but believing the shooter didn't know he knew. And what was in there was the worst kind of bad you could imagine. Danny ordered another double while Luz chewed her cone down to nothing and stared at the shooter in the direct, impertinent way she had when she was curious about something or somebody.

After drinking half his tequila in one swallow, the shooter lit a Marlboro and looked straight at Danny. He was older than he'd seemed when Danny had watched him in El Niño, maybe in his middle fifties or a little more. Dark circles under his eyes, the kind coming with age or from worrying too much or from not getting enough sleep too many nights in a row.

"*Buenas noches*," the shooter said, lifting his drink up an inch or two in a miniature salute. Gave Danny half a smile, hard smile though.

Danny nodded, said the same thing back to him, working at keeping his voice steady and feeling some bit of a thing coming around in his mind and swimming in there kind of eel-like, more than just hazy shadows yet still not formed in any recognizable way. But it had to do with writing and making money from writing. Maybe the first real money since *Chicago Underground* had come out six years ago. After that, it had been downhill to here, and *here* was beginning to lack a certain charm.

Following *Chicago Underground*, the recollections of an ace reporter, he'd turned to fiction. His first novel, *All the Boys Who Ever Were*, had shown its face in 1989 and fallen on it. "Naive and self-congratulatory; intrepid young journalists in search of truth, regardless of the cost to themselves," said one critic. Another sliced even harder: "However much journalists might like to think of themselves as serious writers, there is, or should be, a rather profound difference between fiction and journalism (though one must admit that difference is becoming more and more indistinguishable). Nonetheless, whatever Mr. Pastor's credentials as a newspaper reporter may be, he certainly is not a novelist and should return forthwith to what he apparently does best—reporting."

As the checks from his agent thinned down to survival money, Danny kept telling Luz and the dross down at Las Noches, where the gringo would-bes and might-have-beens and were-at-one-times hung out and devastated their livers, that he had five or six good ideas under way. What he had and knew he had was rubbish, tales already told a hundred times over and nothing to separate his telling of them from what'd already been said. But he was thinking, not too clearly, and more at the level of instinct than conscious thought, there might be a hell of a story in all this if he could just figure out how to bend it the right way. Get the story, then turn the virulent bastard over to the cops. Perfect: Danny gets rich, Luz is happy, the shooter hangs for his indecencies, and . . . the goddamn critics get it shoved up their noses.

The shooter helped Danny along, or maybe pushed him along, as Danny came to think of it later on.

"I'm looking for a ride up to the border . . . know any-

one going that way? I'm willing to pay well for a lift." He was speaking English with pretty good diction, a slow and almost lazy cadence to his voice, keeping his words quiet enough so Felipe couldn't hear. Didn't matter, since Danny was pretty sure Felipe didn't understand English anyway.

"That's a long haul," Danny said, shoving his hands underneath his thighs and sitting hard on them to hold down what might have evolved into a noticeable shake. He looked down at his feet and could see the third toe of his left foot peeking at him through a hole in his sneakers. "Three, three and a half hard days, depending on where you're headed."

He glanced at the shooter. "Most people fly down here except for truckers and those who have long-term rentals or own houses."

Danny was sweating even more than the evening called for, but nobody seemed to notice. The shooter kept one foot against his knapsack, knowing that way where it was all the time and keeping close track of it. A taxi horn honked twice in the street, and a group of tourists went by Felipe's door, a male voice shouting, "Are you sure this's the right way to Pizza Joe's?"

"Danny has Ford Bronco named Vito." Luz had finished her cone and moved into the conversation, smelling money. She knew they were short, and Luz liked margaritas and going uptown to hear Willie and Lobo and eating lobster at a beach restaurant up the coast in Bucerías. The shooter looked at her; lots of men looked at Luz. She was turned toward him, fine, slim legs crossed and running out from under her lavender dress, the hem of which had worked its way above her knees, wheat-colored sandal hanging from only one toe with silver nail polish on it.

"Who's Danny?"



Luz poked her finger against Danny's arm. "This Danny." She was grinning and speaking pidgin English, which she did sometimes, even though she handled English just about perfectly when she felt like it. Danny signaled Felipe for another double shot.

The shooter waved off a mosquito buzzing around his right ear, looked at Danny. "You interested in giving me a lift up there, to the border? Say, Laredo or Brownsville, maybe farther west?" Slow, easy words, as if he didn't care when he might get to the border or if he got there at all.

"Not particularly. If I were, I'd charge a hell of a lot more than a first-class ticket on Mexicana would cost." Pretty good, Danny was thinking. A little cagey, showing lack of interest, but still leaving the door open, slowly getting back some of the old confidence from his killer journalism years. Do it the way you did when you were courting the Chicago mob and getting the dope for *Chicago Underground*, making them think they were tough, practical guys who grew up on the scramble while the carriage trade was going off to college. You've handled big dicks before, and the shooter comes off as an easygoing country boy compared to the Chicago wiseguys. Not too smart, either, shooting from the window of a crowded bar. The Chicago kids would have done it in the back on a dark street and ridden the evening train afterward. Danny—Danny boy—get up and get on the high wire and walk it. Walk the wire, concentrate on the other end and don't look down.

The shooter finished his drink, smiled again in that something less than genuine way of his. "I don't like airplanes, never have. Friend dropped me off here from his sailboat. How much?" Now he was concentrating on Luz