

A PRODIGAL BASTARD

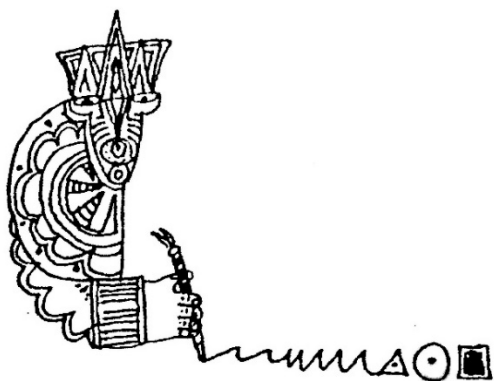
VOLUME I

The

ESCAPE FROM MICTLÁN

Trilogy

WILL LORIMER



PRÓLOGO

Rain was falling in sheets, the college campus dark and deserted. The hazy outlines of its postmodern buildings could have been the towers of a long-abandoned city, lost in gloom but for a haloed light spearing from the farthest block.

Behind the steamed-up glass of that one unboarded ground-floor window, two men, obviously arguing. The nearest, broader in the beam than he stood. Yea, not to put too fine a point on it, borderline midget, back turned, fists bunched at his sides. His mustard jacket and flaming red hair, fluorescent in the harsh neon light. The other, by his white shirt, black tie and rigid demeanour, clearly an official, sat behind a desk, empty but for a phone.

Though unseen in the darkness, my arrival outside the window had heralded an impasse of sorts, but then the official seemed to relent, reached into a drawer of his desk and, after a pause, passed something thin over. The stocky wee man hastily pocketed whatever it was and turned around, presenting a face I had never seen before.

But at least I had his name right. It seemed to fit his angry glare as he stepped out into the rain, and, though he did not have a droopy moustache to match his red hair, to me he was still the mad Mexican of the *Loony Tunes* cartoons I so loved as a child.

As I introduced myself, Wee Donald's beady eyes glinted, he flashed a broken-toothed grin then punched me hard in the ribs.

As I rubbed my side, he growled in a thick accent of the old country, 'Ach, I remember ye now! Y'er a fuckin' prayer answered, just when I need ye's. Yesterday my brother was swept away in a flood in fuckin' Can-ad-a!'

He spat each syllable. 'Can-ad-a!' D'ye ken whit tha' means? It's Spanish, *ca nada*, eh! Meaning there's nothin' there. The wurd's o' a Spanish sailor, looking oot tae the fogbanks o' Labrador, frae the furst galleon passin'. *Ca nada*,' he repeated, in a climaxing dirge.

'Well noo,' he sighed. 'That's true. An' today I learned,' he grinned, a characteristic of hard men of the old country imparting bad news, 'I wuz sacked six months ago from this dump.' He gave me a new look of approbation, implying I'd earned at least a quantum of respect. 'You're fuckin' lucky tae catch me, I wuz only here tae collect the outstanding.' He brandished a thin envelope. 'This, my wife says, is all that's stondding between wir family an' destitution.' His jaw jutted. 'But I say it's beer money,' he said, extending broad hands, 'And you're my first foot from hame in mair than twen'y years.' He wiped a tear from an eye as he embraced me. 'I love you brother,' he sobbed, resting his red head against my chest as I wondered how the fuck I had gotten there.

In the small hours of the day the lease on my Greenwich Village apartment was up. I was awoken by the phone ringing off the hook, and with a name tipping my tongue. Yea, I knew that caller hanging on the line. Ignoring her insistent clamour, I thumbed the dog-eared pages of my address book, until my index finger stopped on the name of a professor of Meso-American studies, under a college address in Mexico City. I couldn't fix the face, but as I closed the apartment door, leaving the phone to ring on, I recalled our chance meeting on an

ancient mound in the middle of desolate moor, Macbeth country.

On the summit loomed three standing stones known as the 'little sisters', huddled over the 'cauldron', a truncated black stone cupping the sky in a pool of rainwater. Mist coiled, the clouds were low and the wind biting. I was there with a party of friends, but had drifted away, when we struck up conversation, while watching a small police car approaching slowly along a long straight track, from where the distant hills blurred into the sky, making the moorland seem a desolation that went on forever. We heard the car stop out of sight below, before two red-faced policemen clambered panting over the brow of the mound. Yes, even in that remoteness, there was no escape from the long arm of the law. I'd heard the news item on the radio that morning, and now two police constables were delivering it to a friend in my party. It seemed that the elderly couple who drove their BMW into a dry dock in Blackpool had been his parents. I didn't know whether to be glad or sad they weren't mine, but I did get that college address.

Despite or because of all the threats and insults, the driver of the taxi I'd hired at the airport, depleting what remained from my cards, emptied at the ATMs of la Guardia, refused to drive to Wee Donald's locale, and instead set us down in pouring rain at a deserted street corner, some distance away.

'Pussy,' Wee Donald called after the departing cab, its one tail light blurring in the rain before it disappeared, a red streak into a maze of darkened back streets.

'What's the problem?' I asked, looking down at my bags and the crate of beer Wee Donald had just bought at a 24-hour *cerveceria*.

‘Och,’ Wee Donald shrugged, ‘A few mair murders and kidnappings than usual these past months.’

‘Really?’ I said, more alarmed by his nonchalance than anything.

‘Ach dae fuss ye’rself.’ He grinned, ‘Ye’re wi’ me. Everything’s perrrrfectly safe! I’ll show ye’s.’ Wee Donald cupped his hands about his mouth. ‘Fuck yuz cunts!’ he bellowed at the shuttered windows of tenements on all sides. ‘Come and get uz, assholes.’

‘That just proves you’re mental,’ I laughed, as his challenge boomed back, echoing empty city streets.

‘Aye,’ Wee Donald nodded, ‘But mental means too much fuckin’ bother tae the gangs roond here. Besides,’ he grinned, ‘They’re a’ boys, no real men like uz. C’mon,’ he said, heaving the beer crate onto a broad shoulder, ‘We’ve a wake tae get oan wi’.’

The block where Wee Donald lived appeared archaic and semi-derelict, sandwiched as it was between a sports arena with giant posters of masked wrestlers by its closed doors and the glass building of a TV corporation, with giant satellite dishes on its roof. At street level was a line of small shops, all shuttered, while the windows of the floors above, were oddly juxtaposed, and of different sizes and styles, suggesting the old building had been rebuilt, more than once.

‘Bonny, eh?’ Wee Donald said, nodding towards a woman, who briefly appeared, looking out of an upper floor window, her face underlit, red and green by a fizzing neon sign, which featured a cherry and a lime in a cocktail glass, blinking red and green, at the corner of the block.

‘If you say so,’ I shrugged, wondering if the woman was his wife.

‘No’ her,’ Wee Donald grinned, ‘Her.’ he waved his free hand, taking in the whole building. ‘Look at thae lines mon. Dae they no’ remind ye o’ a ship o’ state, magnificent eh? Originally that was whaur Prince Falling Eagle hung out. Yes, it was Cuhatomec’s fuckin’ palace. The last Aztec building left standing in Mexico shitty,’ he laughed, with a sweep of his hand including the whole city, ‘Though o’ course it’s much broken doon noo. Dates back tae ’afore the Conquest.’ He pointed to the lower facade. ‘See where that plaster’s fallen awa’, yon stane’s the pink o’ auld Tenochtitlán.’

‘Pay any nae heed tae the wife,’ Wee Donald cautioned over a heavy Latin beat from somewhere below, leading the way up worn wooden steps. ‘She cannae abide me drinkin,’ he chortled, ‘But that’s her fuckin’ problem, no’ mine.’ Throwing open the front door, he waved me in.

In a small dingy kitchen, Wee Donald’s wife was on her knees, polishing pairs of kiddies’ shoes. By the tears stains on her sallow cheeks and her bleary red eyes, she had been weeping a week. Hung on the back of a chair were school uniforms, a girl’s and a boy’s, neatly pressed.

‘Oh god, not more beer,’ she bleated, her accent redolent of Pimms, cucumber sandwiches and croquet on green summer lawns. Flicking a couple of strands of lank brown hair from her eyes she noticed me over the crate on Wee Donald’s broad shoulder. ‘And who’s this?’ her thin lips twisted. ‘Another stray from the street?’

‘A freend a’ the way frae the auld country, so you be mindin’ yer manners, hen,’ Wee Donald glowered.

‘Welcome, I’m sure,’ the English wife muttered, resuming polishing shoes, which, in the dingy kitchen, shone with a brilliance that was almost supernatural. ‘Your other *friends* are

in the back,' she added, as under her knees the floorboards began to shake, and the Latin music below increased in volume. 'How do you put up with that racket? I said, following Wee Donald's dancing zigzag course, hefting his beer crate with surprising agility to avoid the various tins that had been strategically positioned to catch the steady dripping of water from gaping holes in the plaster ceiling.

Twisting around, he raised a finger to his mouth. 'Ssh,' he cautioned, swaying uncertainly, 'Dinnae want tae wake them.' He pointed through the glass door of a bedroom where two children lay sleeping. Just their small faces above bunched covers, blinking pink, white, green, and back again, as the neon sign below their window fizzed and sparked in the heavy rain. 'Aye, I ken what ye'r thinking, son.' Wee Donald grinned fiendishly in the lurid light. 'Yon's Mexico's national colours! C'mon.' He turned, resuming his balancing act, like a footballer jinxing the opposition, dodging tackles - only they were tins - on into the gloom of the dingy passage, throbbing with the sound of Santana from below.

'That's our resident DJ doon stairs in the ... heh ... heh trannie brothel,' he called back.

'A transvestite brothel? You're putting me on,' I laughed.

'See for yerself,' Wee Donald said, stopping, his florid face under-lit by a roseate glow as, swaying, he pointed to a crack in the bare boards by his feet. Enough of a gap to make out a giant pink puffball and the bouffant hairstyle of an Elvis wannabe in a sequin suit on a stage directly below.

'That's the tosser at his decks,' Wee Donald sniggered. 'Thinks he's the king o' fuckin' Graceland. I only wish he'd play something apart frae fuckin' "Black Magic Wumman".'

At the end of the passage a door opened into a lounge

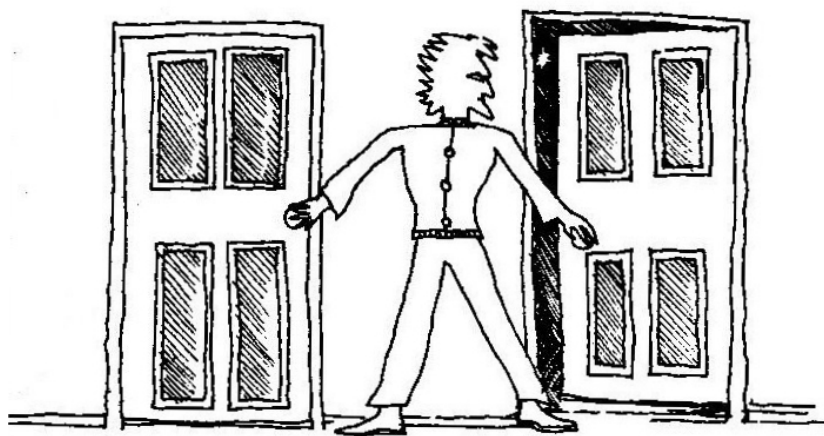
furnished in contemporary, if conventional, style, hung with framed lithographs of Mayan temples. It was uninhabitable, however, since a large section of the ceiling had fallen onto the sofa and carpet with the start of the seasonal rains a few days before.

Behind another door, six bearded anthropologists in worsted jackets were crammed into a narrow, smoke-filled study, done up like a train carriage, its walls decorated with railway memorabilia from the old country, and black and white photographs of Wee Donald's school days. The general familiarity of the images, together with the rusting enamel signs from the Age of Steam, made me feel I was trapped in a time tunnel as I sat on the edge of a chaise longue beside two Mexican men – obviously *caballeros*, since both wore posh tweed jackets -- swapping insults and turns as they played backgammon for high stakes that, with every few rolls of the dice, kept doubling. A stack of US dollars beside the board on the table staked against a set of keys for a Cherokee 4x4 and a kilo bag of smelly grass buds.

It was a fine wake and, as the night wore on, talk turned to a recent find by one of the group in a Mayan pyramid threatened by a new highway being cut through the jungle in Quintana Roo. If the artefacts in the unopened chamber weren't removed soon, the precious hoard would be looted by the *jefe* of the road gang. A rescue mission was proposed, and I was invited to join what could be a rewarding adventure.

But I had other plans in mind, and so, my head swimming from booze and dope, I left the claustrophobic study and wearily climbed some steep wooden stairs to a flat roof, hemmed in by the giant satellite dishes of a TV relay station on one side and the curving roof of the sports arena on the other.

It was when I saw the blue flashes of electric plasma, rimming the big satellite dishes and striking upwards in a column of rising sparks from the dome of the sports arena, that my head exploded. Through slashing rain, outlined in a luminous interplay of banded colours, soaring out of a purple backdrop of cumulus cloud, the shadow play of the three puppeteers of my existence. Gods or demons, I didn't know, though the thought did intrude that my life was hanging in the balance; in an abyssal realm higher powers were dickering, my fate being decided, as I stood transfixed.



I
EL SOL DE LA MUERTE ...



Looking out of a dusty bus window, I was half blinded by an engorged red eye, spiked on three black peaks rearing the high chapparal. Silhouetted sierras, pointy witches hats in huddle, casting inky shadows across a scratchy expanse of tarbrush back-lit like the set of Mexican snuff flick. And the sun? Going down to do battle with the astral armies of the night. To return? Once that depended on the valour of the vanquished, who if the chroniclers of the Spanish Conquest were to be believed, were sacrificed in their thousands on Aztec pyramids, drenched in blood. A crimson tide that by the evidence of my eyes, still lapped the desert hereabouts.

'Mira! El sol de la muerte!' Interrupting my mental drift, the hirsute smoker from the seat behind, blowing smoke in my ear, leaning on my shoulder, jabbing his *cigarro* at an angry face glaring in a bus window.

'The sun of death,' I recycled, turning away from the roadside telegraph poles, strobing past my grimy window. Do

re mi, the wires carrying messages I didn't want to hear. This joker with the shaggy black dog moustache, breathing brimstone and beer in my ear, giving the local weather lore. Wanting me to believe that the sombrero corona brimming the sun indicated bad weather on the road ahead. Considering the high cirrus clouds, I supposed he was probably right. But then the advancing weather front, might just as well have been tendrils of racked seaweed, seen from the deck of the ship of my drowned hopes, spiralling down to Davey Jones' locker room, in the depths of the Sargasso Sea.

'*Muy mallow para el gringo!*' he insisted in guttural Spanish even worse than mine, suggesting that Nahuatl, the ancient language of these remote parts, was his mother tongue.

But when I shrugged, wondering what was so bad for this *gringo* in particular, he seemed to take the hump and sat back down with a bump, raising a squawk from his prize cockerel in a crate on the wooden seat beside him. Bemused, I turned away and finally got the picture. Glaring through the bus window, not the sun king in a sombrero, his valour guard trailing sparks over the *sierras*, but the grinning skull of a ghostly bandit chief – Pancho Villa, or some such masked desperado, holed up since *la Revolución*. Every night, come hail, thunder and lightning, going down on the three sisters, riding out on the broomstick of the tarbrush horizon, flying over bandit badlands, spiked as a flagellant's cloak.

Mexico, more than a pilgrimage, *mucho mas*.

And now, cupped by a black caldera, pinioned by three purple-robed eminences, a shimmering egg, shrinking into a snake of gold descending between vitrine peaks, cracking the world. Captured in an eidetic blink a burning nest high in a tree, hatching a baby snake that changed into a yellow oriole

bird and flew away chirping into the blue.

Was that an image from the never-neverland land of lost childhood or a long-forgotten dream? How could I ever know; my memory was so porous. And no, it wasn't just the drugs. If I survived the next leg, there would be time for the exercises my analyst had prescribed for memory retrieval, supposed, turning to look out the window again, as a fleeting shadow crossed over and I caught a glimpse of wing tips as an unnaturally large black bird swept low above.

Another sign as the little bus banded red and green, the colours of *Líneas Fronteras*, the only bus company serving these remote parts, lurched from uncertain asphalt to more certain cobbles, paused, gathering energy before the assault on bandit foothills. There, at the turn, a crude sign with the words 'Trópico de Cancer' grooved on bleached wood, marking the crossing of a boundary..

Behind me now routes *norté* and the junk of my past. Was that phone still ringing, in my old apartment? I could still hear it. No matter, what glittered was baubles and trinkets. Slow lanes on a fast track, jumping saddle to saddle. Haymaking in the fields of my youth which once was sheaved with golden stacks blowing chaff in the wind, but now, entering my thirties, all I had was a fistful of corn slipping my grasp.

I was here, too, sheltering in a geological book so vast I couldn't make out the pages. There, high on the haunch of some antediluvian beast, my name in big letters on copper banded scree, proving I had made it - if not hereafter, then *sic gloria transit*, as a bishop might have opined. Quinton, after my paternal grandfather; Eric, from a Laplander great-uncle on my mother's side, no doubt a tall straw-haired numbskull like myself; Diogenes, from when I slept in a bathtub in a flat

shared by three girls who took pity on my homeless condition and nicknamed me after the cynic philosopher. I loved them so much I adopted the moniker by deed poll, and signed QED with a flourish on a bouncing cheque at the restaurant where we dined, after I flunked out of university without a degree, but with sad parting kisses from all three, who might have been sisters they were so similar in looks, though not nature. In the plain words of a dead language, *quo erat demonstrandum*, meaning thus proved the proposition. An absent father's pronouncement, I imagined, upon receiving the news of my latest failure from Mr Crook. Not that the well-worn Latin phrase would have meant anything to the other passengers – all *mestizos*, Native American genes predominating. All moustachioed, *machos* and *muchachas*, bumping two and three to a seat, like this was the love bus to Cancun, hanging on, hanging in, even the goggle-eyed turkey, dangling over the back of a portacabin squaw blocking the aisle of the bus, joining in the fun. I was alone, a stranger in the midst of one big happy family.

We had reached a way station in a gloomy gully, the most level gradient thus far. Even so, all that prevented the little bus from rolling back the way we had come was a rock wedged in under the nearside front tyre, parked perilously close to the sagging roofs of some shacks shedding tiles, just below – telescoping terracotta dammed by the roadside ridge. A whole tribe lived down there. At the head of a steep path, by the open bus door, three, four generations. Gaunt, pubescents; tots saddled on hips. More barefoot children clutching the torn skirts of bent-backed crones, who might yet be in only their thirties, I guessed, watching them passing back plastic