

A Ghost from the Ashes

By Keith Eckert

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CAST

Fidel, Carlos lieutenant, in his mid 20s

Ysmael, Gang leader, Carlos second in command, early-to-mid 30s

Tomasa, Carlos gang leader, in her late 20s

Miguel, Carlos gang leader, early 30s

Orlando, Carlos gang leader, early 30s

Tino, Ysmael lieutenant, late-mid 20s

Alvarez, Ysmael lieutenant, early 20s

Vincente, Tomasa lieutenant, early 20s

Manny, local aligned with guerillas, early 20s

Ramon, local aligned with guerillas, early 20s

Renata, local aligned with guerillas, early 20s

General Hernandez, leader of local militia, late 40s

Colonel Fuentes, general's aide, 30-40 years old

Sophia, hotelkeeper, friend of Fidel, 70 years old

Stranger, young man, late teens or early 20s

Various Local Residents, Police and Soldiers

SCENES

Various Street Scenes

Ysmael's Office

An apartment

Hotel Lobby

Militia Leader Headquarters

LOCATION/TIME/DATE

A Small City in Colombia

June 1985

EXCERPT

ACT I

SCENE 1

(The scene: A nighttime alley leading to a street corner – stage right. Trash bags lay in a pile in the alley. A road construction marker flashes drowsily at the corner. A gunshot is heard in the distance. Some indistinct shouting is heard offstage. Then a couple more shots, this time closer. The sound of running feet. Voices are heard off stage.)

TINO. *(offstage)* Drop it, Manny, or I'll unpack your brains!

MANNY. *(offstage)* All right! All right! Don't shoot!

TINO. *(offstage)* We got him here, Fidel!

FIDEL. *(offstage)* Good – good. Bring him in the alley.

(Fidel, Tino and Alvarez enter with Manny. Tino and Alvarez push Manny onto the pile of trash bags then put their guns away. Fidel, who doesn't have a gun, stands back while Tino and Alvarez hover over Manny.)

TINO. *(panting and wiping his brow)* A broiler! Oven! Ah – a furnace! Ugh! And you, you fucker — making me run! I'll cook you good, you scampering cockroach!

(Tino motions as if to strike Manny, but doesn't. Manny cowers.)

FIDEL. Okay, okay. What's with you popping at us, Manny? You could've plugged someone.

MANNY. Fidel! I just – I just seen three young wolves with guns coming all crazy – I didn't know it was you, Fidel. Straight up!

(Manny tries to get up but Tino pushes him back down roughly.)

TINO. Just look at me! Shit! I'm oiled up for the roaster. Damn this heat! *(to Alvarez)* Here, feel my shirt! It's soaked. Feel it!

ALVAREZ. No way, that's gross!

TINO. Damn this heat! And damn you, Manny – forcing me to run like some broiled devil! Well, now Hell's door is opened – let's start the party!

(Tino kicks Manny.)

MANNY. Hey! What'd I hurt? Come on! Come on! I said your faces were a blur. I panicked! Straight up! I said I'm sorry! Sorry!

FIDEL. Well, now we need to talk, my friend.

MANNY. Sure, anything, Fidel. 'Bout what? You know I'm cool.

FIDEL. I know. That's why we're talking now instead of cracking open your nut right here.

MANNY. *(fearfully)* What? What? I didn't do nothing!

FIDEL. The missing leaf — where is it?

MANNY. What leaf? What?

FIDEL. *(turning away angrily, to Tino and Alvarez)* Wrap him up.

(Tino and Alvarez tie Manny's hands behind his back, then throw him back down on the pile trash bags.)

MANNY. No, I'm not sure! What leaf d'you mean? *(to Tino)* Come on, I'll talk. You got to clue me in! Come on, I'll talk! I'll talk!

FIDEL. It seems some leaf has, well, it's left the nest and no one knows where it is. I just want to bring it home.

MANNY. Come on, Fidel — Fidel! Hey, you know me. I'm just the middleman, a body in a suit, a name and feet, that's all. You know – just doing what I'm told. I don't know a thing. Shit, I'm stupid, you know that.

FIDEL. You need to smarten up and fast. Pick him up — he can talk to Carlos.

(Manny becomes increasingly hysterical – resisting Tino's and Alvarez's attempts to pick him up.)

MANNY. Car-Carlos! No, man, no! Not Carlos! Please! (*bawling almost indistinguishably*) No, don't take me to Carlos. Whatever you want! Whatever! Please, oh, please don't take me to Carlos! God no! No, no, no! Ah fuck! God no!

(*Tino and Alvarez give up trying to pick up Manny and smile at each other. Manny continues blubbering while Fidel, Tino and Alvarez talk.*)

FIDEL. You're getting smarter, Manny. Yes, you are.

TINO. Hey, if Carlos likes you, he'll just slit your fucking throat and pull your tongue out through the hole. But if he doesn't like you, well, things won't go so good.

ALVAREZ. (*pinching Manny's cheek*) But I think he'll like your pretty eyes. He collects'em, you know.

TINO. Oh yeah!

(*Alvarez and Tino laugh. Manny starts blubbering louder but indistinguishably.*)

FIDEL. My god, Manny! Steel up! Death comes to all of us and all you got's your word – and any shred of dignity left to you. Now, before we say goodnight, just tell me about the leaf. You got the brown but we, we didn't get no green. What happened to it?

MANNY. I gave – I gave the stash to Rico and he – he said I should get scarce a while. Said that he was tired of Carlos. Said he didn't believe in Carlos anymore. He said – he said Carlos should come get it himself.

FIDEL. Rico said that, eh? I didn't know he had the brass.

MANNY. Oh, Rico – man, he didn't look so good. All nervous twitchy and kind'a crazy eyed. I think the business's fucked up his head. Anyway, he told me to hide out a couple weeks.

FIDEL. How's that? You weren't gone a couple days.

MANNY. I tried – I tried – But it's too damn boring living in the hills, with nothing there but wind and crickets – and then the women there, the women – all angry and bony. Ugh, I hate them all!

FIDEL. (*smiling*) Shot you down, eh? Ha! They're smarter than you thought.

MANNY. (*throwing his body toward Fidel's feet*) Don't take me to Carlos, please! Don't take me, please!

FIDEL. (*while Manny is talking*) Shut up! Shut up and show some self-respect – Jesus!

(*Tino grabs Manny by the shirt and roughly tosses him back on the trash bags.*)

It's good that you came back, my cricket, that made it very easy for us – very easy. Just scent the hounds with cash and girls, and here you are. Yes, very easy. Now if you'd made me search the hills and far, well, that just might have pissed me off. But no, you made it easy. And you're chirping right along just like good cricket should.

MANNY. (*mumbling*) Sorry, sorry, sorry —

FIDEL. You are sorry. Now what'd he pay you?

MANNY. What?

(*Fidel kicks Manny.*)

FIDEL. Don't give me fucking "what" – We'll cut you neck to nuts right here! We will!

MANNY. (*moaning*) A hundred dollars — all American!

FIDEL. Clean his pockets.

(*Alvarez rifles through his pockets producing some cash.*)

ALVAREZ. 'Bout fifty bucks U.S.

FIDEL. (*to Alvarez*) Hold on to it. (*to Manny*) I'm surprised you've still got fifty dollars. Slowing down there, Manny?

MANNY. I just got into town this morning.

FIDEL. It looks like you still owe us fifty more. But I'll tell you what: I'm going to get the cash, but not from you, I'm getting it from Rico's hide — plus all the other money that he owes us.

MANNY. Do I — do I still have to go see Carlos?

FIDEL. (*after a short pause*) No, Carlos needn't break a sweat on you. Lions don't catch flies.

MANNY. Oh, thank you! Thank you! You're a good man!

FIDEL. Tino, he needs cut.

(*Fidel makes a motion by his ear with his hand.*)

MANNY. What? What? (*to Tino*) What's he mean?

(*As Fidel speaks the following lines, Tino pulls out a knife.*)

FIDEL. We got to mark you, Manny.

TINO. Come, I'm just going to clip your wings, my little cricket!

FIDEL. This way we know you won't be blubbering to Rico 'fore we track him down. Because if he sees the mark of Carlos, then he'll know you talked, and he'll take out the garbage for us. It's for your own good.

(*With Alvarez holding down Manny, Tino cuts off the top of Manny's ear. Manny is screaming hysterically. A policeman enters anxiously.*)

POLICEMAN. What the — ? Ah, Fidel. (*pausing to look at the situation, he relaxes*) Is everything okay?

FIDEL. It's fine.

POLICEMAN. (*taking off his hat and wiping his brow*) Oh boy, this heat wave — it just won't break.

FIDEL. (*unable to hear over Manny's screaming*) Say what?

POLICEMAN. (*loudly*) I say, this is some heat. You need some help here?

FIDEL. Nope. We're good. But thanks.

POLICEMAN. Well okay. Just, uh, be sure to clean up your mess.
Goodnight.

(Manny stops screaming. The policeman exits. Tino and Alvarez untie Manny and step back.)

FIDEL. *(to Manny, after he stops screaming)* There, was that so bad? Now get out of here.

(Manny, untied, gets up, holding his ear with blood dripping down his neck and shirt.)

MANNY. *(looking down at the ground)* Thanks, Fidel.

(Manny exits quickly.)

FIDEL. *(as Manny is scurrying off)* You stay low now, Manny. Just a day or so. It won't take long for us to smoke out Rico. *(To Tino and Alvarez)* Let's go. You can update Ysmael.

TINO. Wait a sec. I need to cool my grill.

(Tino pulls out a flask and drinks from it. He then hands it to Alvarez, who swigs. They sit down on some old crates.)

ALVAREZ. This fever — it won't break until we're broke. When will it rain?

TINO. Rain? What's rain? If my flesh weren't melting to a stew, I swear, I'd crumble to a pile of tinder!

FIDEL. You won't blow away too soon, you ox.

TINO. Ah me, not soon. But look — just look around. Everything's turned brown.

FIDEL. Yeah? How are we to fix it?

ALVAREZ. You'd think that Carlos —

FIDEL. *(laughing)* What the —? How can Carlos fix the weather?

ALVAREZ. I don't know, but you remember the Cueto brothers out of Cali. Remember them? Well, this was — what now — eight years past? They lorded over all this region. And Carlos, he was just ambition then. Well, one thundering night, Carlos sat with them to make his claim for more control. But they just laughed. A big mistake — a big mistake! Carlos stood, and smiling darkly said the brothers wouldn't live to feel the new day's sun. That night, while driving to their villa near the Cauca River, their car broke down and they were struck by lightning waiting for a ride. Both dead before the dawn. Just as Carlos said.

TINO. I heard that it was six men killed by three lightning bolts.

ALVAREZ. No, Fazio was there — he told me honest.

TINO. No! Faz couldn't have been there — he joined with Carlos just four years ago.

ALVAREZ. What the fuck! I'm just saying: If Carlos can control the lightning, he can make it rain.

(A young man with a small mustache enters. He is awkward looking, wearing a hat and ill-fitting, ill-matched clothes — giving the impression of a clown. He is unusually cheerful and full of energy — rather manic. Tino and Alvarez generally avoid looking at him out of contempt.)

STRANGER. Hello, my friends. I see you're practicing catch and release. But how's the fisherman of souls to satisfy his appetite when you just let them go?

TINO. We throw the small ones back.

STRANGER. *(laughing)* You're after bigger game! That's good! That's very noble! Ambition crowns us gods among the apes. Your friend, though, you've made quite a mess of him before you threw him back.

TINO. He wasn't our friend.

ALVAREZ. If you don't want the same, get lost.

STRANGER. No sooner said than done, for I've been shipwrecked on the reef of time – shelterless and trying to keep myself afloat. Some change would help to current me home.

(The Stranger goes to Alvarez and then to Tino with his hand out.)

A bill? A coin? A smile?

ALVAREZ. Fuck you. Get out of here!

TINO. Move on or get a thrashing!

STRANGER. They turned down Jesus, too.

TINO. Yeah? You don't look like him.

STRANGER. We share the face of god on us, or so the story's told, and by this logic we can assume he wears our mug; which, come to think of it, explains the world's muddled affairs where good is masked as evil, and lies charade as truth.

(The Stranger goes to Fidel.)

D'you know what day it is?

FIDEL. It's Wednesday.

STRANGER. Ah. For the English it's the day of Woden, the shepherd of the dead. He leads the wandering souls to their after-home, you know. It's true. Say, help a dead-tired man to find his home?

(The Stranger holds out his hand. Fidel pulls a bill from his pocket and gives it to him.)

I knew this town wasn't without a heart.

FIDEL. Okay, you've had your preach and filled the plate. Now move along.

STRANGER. I like it here — this town is nice. Very quiet but for the screams of men getting their ears trimmed.

TINO. Look here, patches, move it! Perhaps you'd like to meet with Carlos!

ALVAREZ. (*laughing*) Yeah, Carlos!

STRANGER. Carlos? Sure. I like all kinds of people! Yes, every man's his own song.

TINO. He'd teach a tramp like you to sing — his whip will help you to reach the higher notes. There used to be a slacker — Ricardo, was it? It doesn't matter, but this guy, he mooched and mooched off everyone like some damned flea. Well, he never did a bit of work — not good or bad. He was like a cobweb that left the itch on you. Well, one day Carlos found him lifting money from the community center fund. So Carlos locked him inside a barrel, stuck it full of four-inch nails, then rolled it down the hill and in the river. Oh! You should've heard the fucking song that weasel sang!

(*Tino and Alvarez laugh.*)

STRANGER. Ah, very quaint. A barrel of fun. But what's this man to me, this "Carly"?

ALVAREZ. Carlos! You've never heard of Carlos? Carlos Marquez? Carlos the Lion?

STRANGER. Hmm, I know a Pedro Marquez — and a Carlos DeLeone (who owes me money). And I know Reynard, my old butcher's cat. But I don't know any lion.

ALVAREZ. What the fuck? No, Carlos Marquez. Carlos controls the entire region — from here to Puerto Berrio. The leftists, the militias, the gangs — they all jump when he calls.

FIDEL. Look — Carlos keeps the peace here. He's brought order to this place, opened community centers, built football fields, helped widows.

STRANGER. A philanthropic murderer? Sounds fascinating. I'd love to meet him.

TINO. Ha! I don't think you'd like it very much.

STRANGER. Really, he sounds amazing. I'd love to talk to him of man and god.

TINO. You won't be offering up such airy thoughts when he boils you in oil. Ha!

STRANGER. A dangerous man – I love it. God doesn’t give the lion claws for their aesthetics. No! Why, all day long I see the same old sheep and cows. You have to take me to him —I’ve got to meet this man-lion – right now!

TINO. Look you — uh

STRANGER. Let’s go! What? He doesn’t have to be afraid of me.

ALVAREZ. *(approaching the Stranger angrily)* All right! All right — you’re going to see him! *(pausing and getting a puzzled look)* But — but

TINO. But not right now. He’s — he’s out of town.

STRANGER. Then he’ll be back soon.

ALVAREZ. I don’t know...

STRANGER. Well, when did he leave?

TINO. It’s — uh — been a little while.

STRANGER. A little while? How long’s a little while? A week?

ALVAREZ. *(looking at Tino)* I don’t know. It’s been, what — six months?

TINO. I think it’s almost eight months.

STRANGER. Eight months! Well, surely you’ve talked to him.

TINO. Me? Well, no.

ALVAREZ. No one has, but Ysmael.

STRANGER. Well friends, it might be time to check his vital signs. Eight months? To the sky bear, that’s but a shrug. And yet the marigold is unwound from seed to flower to death. But for a man, well, the eight-month sleeper wakes to no trumpet.

TINO. *(angrily)* What’s that you’re saying?

STRANGER. I’m saying that if your nose detects a stench, you’d best be checking on your tenant.

TINO. Watch your fucking mouth.

STRANGER. Wait – you've never even thought of it? The lion, Carlos, might be dead?

ALVAREZ. Don't even say it!

STRANGER. Silence has no meaning, friends, yet words add little weight upon the blacksmith's blow.

To speak foolishness is to own it.
To speak silence is to break it.
To speak truth is to uphold it.

ALVAREZ. We told you to shut your yap!

FIDEL. Enough now, gypsy, you've heard the growl, don't draw the teeth.

STRANGER. So, you're as thin-skinned as the rest? It makes you nervous, eh? Though it may dress in patches, bells and pointed shoes, the truth's the truth — and yet it's treated as a ragged beggar. (*to Tino*) You wanted a song? Now listen!

(*The Stranger sings the following*)

A bell, a bell, rung night to day,
Heigh ho, heigh hey, the rain,
It shakes the air, it quakes the bed,
But cannot wake the dead.

TINO. (*grabbing at the Stranger*) Come here you fucking bastard!

STRANGER. (*eluding Tino*) Ah, yesterday moves slower than today, the truth 'lights on a nimbler foot!

TINO. Come here!

STRANGER. What? You don't like my song?

ALVAREZ. Carlos isn't dead!

STRANGER. Perhaps he died not for our sins but of their weight — was laid upon the counting table counting our omissions — here a blackbird, there a pie. Yes, laid upon the kingly scales and found a man of fire and feathers.

The sky swirls and we creep.
The wheel turns and we sleep.

Goodnight!

(The Stranger starts to leave.)

TINO. Come here you damned mosquito!

(Tino and Alvarez walk toward the stranger to apprehend him.)

STRANGER. *(as he runs offstage)*

He's dead, he's dead,
And all the king's men
They will not see him —
Not ever again!

TINO AND ALVAREZ. Hey! Hey! Stop!

(Tino and Alvarez chase the Stranger offstage. The Stranger's laughter can be heard offstage. Fidel follows to the edge of the stage but stops and watches. He is alone for a few moments. But soon, Tino and Alvarez reappear and they walk back sharing drinks from the flask.)

TINO. *(reaching out to Alvarez)* Give it here. *(taking the flask and sitting down again)* A bird can't fly on just one wing.

FIDEL. What? No luck netting that mosquito, eh?

TINO. It's like he slit the air and vanished in it.

ALVAREZ. Poof! And he was fucking nothing.

(Tino and Alvarez sit down again.)

FIDEL. A queer kid. Very strange.

TINO. Yes, really! Carlos dead. Ha!

ALVAREZ. It's unbelievable!

TINO. Unthinkable!

ALVAREZ. Yeah, really! Fuck.

TINO. Sure, no one's seen him in almost a year.

ALVAREZ. That's not that long.

TINO. A year, it's –

ALVAREZ. A year – that has been weird.

TINO. What if – ?

ALVAREZ. What if he's – ?

FIDEL. All right, enough.

TINO. But that stranger – he made some good points. He knew about the trip to Bogota.

FIDEL. He never said a word of Bogota!

TINO. Then tell us what you think, Fidel.

FIDEL. Carlos just tells me what to do, I see it's done, and I tell him it's done. That's what I think.

ALVAREZ. Dependable Fidel, always on the job. Well, what you going to do if Carlos –

FIDEL. Come on, enough! If Carlos heard us talk he'd hang us by our thumbs. Why let that gadfly stoke these fires in your skulls?

ALVAREZ. I guess so. But ...

FIDEL. But what?

TINO. But nothing. (*getting up*) Let's get back to Ysmael. Come on Al.

(*Tino takes a drink from the flask.*)

I'm still fucking roasting.

(Alvarez gets up and exits with Tino, talking quietly among themselves. Fidel pauses for a moment in thought, then exits. The lights go down.)