

Golpe de Estado

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*The lives of all of us are stories.
If enough of these stories are told,
then perhaps we will begin to see
that our lives are the same story.
The differences are merely in the details.*

—Julius Lester

February 4, 1992

Low-flying planes startle me awake.

Squeezing my eyes, I try to capture my interrupted dream before it puffs off into darkness and is forgotten. I was dreaming of Denver. Hanging with Stray and Camp. Don't ask how they got the nicknames. I wasn't Zack with them; I was Whip. I miss being Whip.

Another plane shreds the predawn sky, followed by rumblings. Thunder? In the dry season? I've been in Caracas only three weeks—not long enough to know what is normal and what is not. I decide to ignore it as I fumble for the light on my watch. Five-fifteen. Almost time to get up for another day of faking like I know what people are saying.

Hugo Chávez, a former paratrooper in the Venezuelan army, served

I think about homeroom at CIV—Colegio Internacional de Venezuela. Eight students. Three embassy kids—American, Chinese, and Brazilian. Another oil-patch kid, like me, and three very wealthy Venezuelans (I have labeled them VWVs.)

I have nothing in common with any of them, except perhaps Armando (a VWV), who lives here in the Dorado Apartments and speaks English better than most. He promised to teach me “important” Spanish words so I’ll have *asfalto*—street smarts.

First lesson was the F-word. Except here, it’s the C-word and sounds as harmless as a kitten’s name. (Imagine: Fluffy you!)

The American embassy guy, Doug, is obnoxious. He riffs every morning on the ills of Venezuela. As a fellow American, this embarrasses me. A guest shouldn’t criticize the host to his face. I mean, yeah, Mom gets going on what’s wrong with traffic-glutted, crime-ridden Caracas, but she’d never rag in front of our driver, Humberto, or any other *Caraqueño*. I figure the VWVs hate the ugly American.

Before I can doze off, someone bangs on the front door. I listen, wondering if I should answer it. My dad gave strict orders never to open the door unless I’m expecting someone. This command is always followed by stories of kidnapped expat kids held for ransom. And maimed or tortured or killed.

I wait, wondering if Dad, who dumped us here in the big city and went off to work in Punto Fijo, wanted to scare me into a state of paranoid caution. Whatever. It worked.

two years in prison for attempting to overthrow the government,

Voices tell me Mom has let someone in.

Curious, I get up and pull on a pair of cargo shorts *sin* shirt and shoes. In the living room, I find Armando from 3B, dressed the same way.

"*¿Qué pasa?*" I ask. What's happening?

In answer, he clicks on the TV and switches to *Venevisión*, a local station. I see Perez, the president, yelling into a microphone. The camera cuts to a shot of *Miraflores*, the presidential palace. Tanks are ramming the gates.

Mom curses, her patience already rubbed thin by an air-conditioner repairman who never showed and a plumber who came four hours late, then walked off with her tools.

Hey, we were warned that Venezuelans live on elastic time, but for my efficient American mother and her DayPlanner, this is torture.

I stare at the TV. A news camera jiggles as the crew runs. Gunfire pops as they skirt a burning car.

Watching the scene play out only blocks from our apartment shakes my American sensibility. Feeling rubbery, I sink to the couch, hoping no one notices how it's affected me. Jeesh, I just figured out how to order a *McDonald's hamburguesa*, and now I have to deal with this?

Mom forcefully clicks off the television, as if that will stop the attack. "Armando, how did you know this was happening?"

"CIV phone tree. Señor Blanco call one student. He call the next, and on down the line until the last student call back to the teacher."

even launching a second failed coup from prison in November 1992.

Mom's face is a mixture of fear and betrayal—certainly aimed at Malcolm Oil, who sent us here. "Does stuff like this happen a lot?"

Armando shrugs. "Workers strike. Students of the university burn tires in the streets. Floods bring looters. The phone tree is the only way to tell everyone school is cancel."

"Wait," I say. "What exactly is happening?" I'd watched political chaos on TV a million times, but it's always halfway around the world. Today I'm halfway around the world, and it's happening in my face.

I yank back the drapes. In the dark, it looks as if a fireworks display is exploding way too close to the ground. The sight chills me in spite of the tropical humidity.

"A lieutenant colonel in the army of Perez tries to throw over the government," Armando explains. "His name Chávez."

"Oh, lord," Mom mumbles. "We move here and they stage a coup."

"*Un golpe de estado*," Armando adds, as if saying it in Spanish clarifies the situation.

"So, what are we supposed to do?" I peek outside again, willing daylight to hurry so I can see what's going on. In spite of the fear, a sense of excitement races through my veins.

Armando's eyes are taking stock of our apartment. I wonder what he is thinking. "They order—stay inside until more we know." He backs toward the door. "I go to call the next person for you. Hey, Zack, come down later."

"Sure," I say, trying to sound casual. It's the first time

In 1992, vowing to end corruption, he was elected president of

anyone has included me in plans. Okay, they're not really plans, but still, I'm pleased.

"You're not going anywhere," Mom says as soon as the door shuts.

It surprises me. I figure she wants me to make friends. "I'm not going to Miraflores, Mom, just to the third floor." I look at her with an unexpected rush of male protectiveness and notice gray in her hair. Had it been there before the move? I don't remember.

She grasps my arm. "This could be serious, Zack. The company might want to get us out. We need to stay together."

Wow. The hope of Malcolm Oil sending a jet to rescue us brightens my morning. I hurry to dress so I'm ready in case we have to bravely fight our way to the roof to catch a U.S. helicopter.

Noon

So much for a "here comes the cavalry" rescue.

I sprawl on the couch, bored, dying of the heat, likewise cursing the A/C guy *plus* the delinquent phone installer—not that I have anyone to call.

I think of a girl at CIV—Ana Bello from Argentina. Eyes as black as the frigate birds riding the thermals, buzzing our twelfth-floor windows. Hair that melts around her shoulders. I secretly believe if I could touch her hair, I would sail through the semester unscathed—filled with confidence, fluent in *español*.

Venezuela in a landslide victory. After rewriting the constitution to

Suddenly my grandparents barge into my fantasy without even knocking. Ana's image politely scurries away. I'll bet Gram and Grandad will be worried sick about us when the news hits the *Denver Post*. Or is a South American civil war important enough to warrant more than a paragraph on an inside page?

Guilt shoves me off the couch. How many times have I skipped uninterested over headlines such as FIGHTING ERUPTS IN BOTSWANA?

Ugly American indeed.

Sudden activity on TV catches my eye. Two planes begin a dogfight in the sky. Awesome! I grapple for the remote to turn on the sound I'd muted earlier after the rapid-fire Spanish started getting on my nerves.

Before I can raise the volume, a roar pains my ears. I run to the window. The same two planes dip and bank in a deadly dance as they try to blow each other out of the sky. I can see the fight on TV and from the living room window at the same time. Amazing! Wait till I tell Camp and Stray!

"Zack, get away from the windows!"

Mom closes the drapes and shoos me into the kitchen, where I can't even watch the fight on television. Her argument about raining bullets is a good one, though, and before I can complain, the electricity cuts off, silencing the TV. Outside, whining engines rip the air, then slam to a stop with a cryptic abruptness. It kills me not to know what happened.

extend his term from five to a possible twelve years, he staged

Mom gives up trying to call Dad on the cell phone. Malcolm Oil provided for emergencies. She fixes cheese on crackers. I hate seeing her hands shake in apprehension as she works.

We don't have much food because she hasn't figured out shopping yet. Humberto explained how one goes to a *panadería* for bread, a *carnicería* for meat, and a *frutería* for vegetables. Mom has no intention of spending an entire day in Caracas *tráfico* just to shop. She believes she and her DayPlanner can organize Venezuela. Clean it up and fix it. Send all the bad guys to their rooms. I say it's a good sign she's thinking like a North American.

Seven P.M.

Mom finds a box of macaroni and cheese, but it's useless without electricity. We scavenge some dead bread and make (untoasted) cheese sandwiches, eating in the glow of one candle and two flashlights. Afterward, she fixes me a bowl of Tío Rico cho-co-LAH-te ice cream, afraid it will melt all over the freezer. She buys it but won't eat it. Her usual fat-free frozen yogurt is not to be found in a Third World country where hunger is a greater concern than weight loss.

Outside, it's grown quiet except for occasional gunfire. I pretend I'm hearing pop-bottle rockets instead of bullets; it takes the edge off my anxiety.

* * *

another election in 2000 to put the new constitution into effect. His

Nine P.M.

Feeling an unspoken need to stay in the same room, Mom and I play cards by candlelight. I've just fixed a second bowl of ice cream when, up from the streets, a low clanking begins. Mom and I look at each other. In the soft candlelight her face appears young, her eyes tinged with dread. I know she is worried about Dad. She finally got through to him. He's stuck in Punto Fijo, trying to get a *salvo conducto* permit from the *Guardia Nacional* to allow him safe passage to Caracas.

The faraway clanking grows louder. And nearer. The creepy noise draws me to the window in spite of Mom's protests. What's going on? This is freakin' unnerving.

I see people swarming into the streets, banging pots and pans. In the moonlight, outlines are blurred, creating a ghostly effect. They ooze across the avenue, surrounding the Dorado. A sea of angry people, powerless, yet wanting their presence to be known.

The mass clanking becomes deafening, nerve rattling, terror inducing. Totally spooked, I stumble back to the kitchen in the dark to make sure Mom is okay. She is so shaken, she is eating my ice cream.

I check the door to make sure it's locked.

I check the door again.

And again.

February 5

The rising sun hunches behind slow-moving clouds, as if

main opponent, Francisca Arias Cárdenas, a former brother-in-arms

hiding, as it makes its way above a troubled city. The streets are unearthly quiet.

From my room, I gaze out the window at the alien view. To the north, I'm surprised to see skyscrapers still standing after last night. They make Caracas look like any major city, yet mask the poverty surrounding downtown. The flashy SIEMPRE COCA-COLA sign towers over the freeway, implying, "We are all the same. We all drink Coke." To the south, row after row of dirty concrete-block houses bake in the heat. For those who can afford them, metal bars take the place of windows, and papaya trees grow in enclosed yards. But most of the huts have dirt floors and broken chairs out front, where families sit in the street at night, searching for cooler air.

From my window, I see a girl, maybe ten years old, in front of her graffitied wall. She's there every day, selling *queso de mano* or *tortas*. While she waits for customers, she plays ball with a stick and a rock. Today, no one is on the street. The girl sits in her gateway, looking stunned. When this is over, I will buy *tortas* from her.

Across rooftops, Mt. Avila's lumpy spine juts above the city like a prehistoric dragon. It makes me think of the Colorado mountains. Surely, Denver is a deep freeze on this February morning, yet here I am staring at palm trees—which would be cool if I were on vacation, but I am not. The phrase "It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there" teases my mind and makes me shake my head.

This morning, I am thankful to have water for a shower

in Chávez's "peaceful revolution," accused the new president of

and electricity for coffee. I eat the last boiled egg and the last slice of bread. Then I read, catch up on homework, pace, watch TV, play Nintendo, and pace. Sometime after three, the power goes out again. I cannot stand to stay in this apartment a moment longer.

Mom is on a cell-phone rampage after finding out that teachers at CIV knew danger was brewing early enough to stock up on food and water—but did not warn the parents.

I am glad she is on the phone so I don't have to argue with her. I jot a note so she will know where I went, then slip out.

On the third floor, I tap on Armando's door. His mother, Señora Cordero, appears.

"Bienvenido," she says. "Adelante."

Armando swoops me into his room. Doug-the-obnoxious is lounging at the computer desk. My stomach clenches when I see him, but I say, "Hey," and try not to act surprised that he and Armando are friends.

Doug's family lives down the boulevard in a *quineta*, a house with a live-in maid, a gardener, a pool, and a satellite dish capable of picking up U.S. TV stations. He fills me in on CNN news:

The coup attempt failed. Chávez has been arrested. However, *la gente*, the people, are still riled up in favor of the revolutionaries. Snipers are shooting at buildings and at people in line for food. Martial law has been declared, including a curfew from six P.M. until six A.M. Schools are canceled for the rest of the week.

And worse. Doug tells us that a senior at CIV was shot

straying from their original revolutionary ideals. Arins claimed

and killed in the doorway of her house by stray gunfire. Paola Vargas. I fake a sudden interest in Armando's CD collection so they don't see how much this rattles me. Paola had this incredible giggle and always said "Hola." I feel like crying, even though I didn't really know her.

Armando's mother comes to the door with *arepas*. We dive in, scarfing down the cornmeal patties. I'd gotten into the habit of stopping at Rosa's *Panadería* on the way to school to buy *arepas*. On the way home, I'd grab an *empanada* and *Chinotto* to drink.

My mom doesn't "get" *arepas* or *empanadas*. She thinks they are grease city.

Armando and his mom chatter in Spanish. After a language crash course on audiotapes I got for Christmas, I can pick out words, but not content.

I hear "*comida*" and hope we're being invited to dinner. Mom is running out of cheese and crackers and doesn't have the old standby, peanut butter, because she can't find it. Venezuelans don't "get" peanut butter. Ha.

Armando faces us. "You want to look for food?"

Doug immediately springs to his feet. "Sure, let's go."

I hesitate. Besides the fact that it's less than two hours until curfew and I've left the apartment without permission, I recall the news about snipers.

Señora Cordero returns and hands Armando a stack of *bolivares*. She tells us in broken English to be quick and cautious. Armando shoves the money into his pocket. "*¿Listo?*" he asks. "Ready?"

Chávez had turned a blind eye to corruption and was running a sham

Doug notes my hesitancy and sneers. "Gotta ask your mommy first?"

Testosterone pumps my muscles. I look away to avoid smashing his face. *Yeah, Whip, he's right, but you'd never admit it.* "Let's hurry," I say, tapping my watch to imply we haven't got much time. I'll deal with Mom later. Maybe if I return with food, she won't report my blatant misbehavior to Dad.

We leave the Dorado Apartments. Streets are deserted. Not one rusty, falling-apart '77 Chevy in sight. We walk down a garbage-strewn *calle*, stepping over potholes. Rosa's *Panadería* is dark and empty—closed like every other shop. Where are we supposed to buy food?

A pack of mangy dogs makes us hurry our steps. Stray dogs and cats line the gutters like litter, useless and ignored. This kills my mother, who wants to feed them all, but we were warned at our Malcolm Oil security briefing not to touch street animals.

A distant *tat-tat-tat* stops us. I begin to sweat. The machine-gun fire is blocks away, but it's coming from the direction we're heading. We turn down a different street.

Before my heart can stop pounding, three F-16 fighter jets scream across the sky, followed by more gunshots.

"American-built," Doug snips. His conceit streaks across the sky with the jet trail. "So," he continues, "if the revolutionaries were doing this to save the people from a corrupt government, how can they justify killing innocent people who got in the way?"

Armando leaves the question dangling in the air. I think democracy while concentrating power in his own hands. Regardless,

of Paola and wonder how many others have died. Who exactly is the enemy? The corrupt government? Or a dissatisfied lieutenant slaughtering civilians?

Who do we trust? The president, assuring TV viewers everything is okay? Or Chávez, dressed as a typical revolutionary in his battle fatigues and red beret, as though he's watched too many war movies? He urges the masses to fight for their rights. *El soberano*, he calls them. The sovereign.

I want to believe in Chávez's dream, but he is in jail right now.

Six blocks from the apartments, we find an open *mercado*. People are jammed inside. Shelves are almost empty. Armando grabs cans of Comuna peaches and Los Andes shelf milk. There's no bread or fresh anything. Not one carton of Tio Rico for my mom not to eat. The electricity is out, and the smell of rotting fish is sickening.

I move through the crowd toward the cashiers, picking up candy, crackers, cheese, and a can of tuna. I don't know how many *bolivares* I have, so I'm afraid of taking too much. Twenty-five sweaty minutes later, we have moved through the long lines and paid without working cash registers. There are no bags, so I stuff everything into my cargo shorts, glad for the extra pockets.

By the time we get outside, it's half past five. I can't imagine how much trouble I will be in if I get arrested after curfew. Or worse—get caught in the line of fire. I don't even have my passport, which is mandatory. I wasn't planning on going anywhere.

Chávez easily won reelection. Today he is considered South

"Let's hustle," I say. Doug smirks. I force myself to ignore him.

Sounds of a shouting mob send us on yet another detour. Avoid noises of any kind, I think. Hello, *paranoid caution*.

I wish Armando and Doug were Stray and Camp, with our "we can conquer the world" attitude. The way Stray would mouth off and then Camp, all 220 pounds of him, would rise up tall, daring anyone to mess with us. Like a cat puffing its tail. Worked every time.

I'm on a street I don't know. I see a *farmacia* and note it for later since Mom was needing Tylenol. I'm about to ask Armando if there is any such thing as Tylenol in Venezuela when five guys loom menacingly ahead of us. They are definitely not VVVs.

Armando spits out a Spanish curse I haven't learned yet. Then, "*Ladrones*. Thieves. Keep walking." He leads us to the other side of the street.

Doug is cursing in English. That I understand.

I face the scowling Latinos, certain that my blond hair does not endear me to them. I reach for my apartment key, thinking it's the closest thing I have to a weapon. Or I could pelt the *ladrones* with crackers and candy. Toss cheese into their eyes. My brain is whirling with plans of defense, but my shaking knees do not get the message.

As my dad says, "The have-nots strike out against the haves no matter what society you're in." We are the haves. They are the have-nots.

America's most colorful and unpredictable leader and meets often

Suddenly, the group is barreling toward us, shouting words I don't know yet understand completely.

"Run!" Doug hollers:

I'm glad he's the one who yells it and not me.

I cut down a side street seconds before I realize that three against five might not be bad odds. Armando is no Camp, but he's big. I wouldn't want to mess with him.

Too late.

Two sets of footsteps pound after me with the same *tat-tat* rhythm of the machine guns, now popping erratically nearby: I am running toward the hot spot instead of home.

Brilliant, Whip.

For someone used to living a mile above sea level in a cold climate, I'm having a tough time huffing air so thick, it enters my lungs and stays.

Ahead of me, an army tank rolls across the intersection. A massive, rumbling reminder that I'm caught in the middle of somebody else's war.

I falter.

A hand grabs the back of my shirt. Twisting, I swing blindly. Dodging my fist, the guy jabber-shouts at me. I can't respond because all my Spanish flies out of my head. I figure he is demanding *dinero*. I'm still clutching my key-weapon, but if all they want is money and not my life, then fine. Take it.

I dig into my pocket and pull out the remaining *bolivares*. The boy removes the bills from my hand and the watch from my wrist in one swift movement. I am too impressed to mourn the loss of my Casio.

with the person he calls his mentor: Cuba's Communist dictator,

I meet his gaze, suddenly realizing he's just a kid. Twelve, maybe, but tall enough to make you think he's older. His accomplice is even younger.

"Vete!" the boy growls, trying to scare me away.

I am weak with relief to know they are finished with me. But I do not run. I stare at the torn, filthy clothes, the patched shoes. Rage boils inside me. Not at these kids, but at the second-richest oil country in the world. How dare they allow so many of their people to live in *ranchitos* and *barrios*?

Forgetting any *asfalto* I might have acquired, I blurt, "Wait."

They react like cats, poised to flee, yet curious. At that instant, I realize they are as afraid of me as I am of them.

I reach into the deep pockets of the cargo shorts and pull out my piddly stash of snacks. They creep close, as if thinking it's a trap. I stand still, holding out the loot. They snatch it and fade into the dusky night so fast, I think I imagined it.

Tat-tat-tat.

I flinch at the shots, suddenly terrified to be alone on the street at twilight. I run, stopping at corners, scanning the skyline until I spot the Dorado. Don't know if it's after curfew since I no longer own a watch.

The electricity is back on, so I take the elevator to the third floor. Armando opens the door. A fresh cut oozes across his cheek, making me wince.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Me! Yeah. Are you okay?"

Fidel Castro. Meanwhile, Venezuela remains oil-rich yet poverty-

"Besides this"—he pauses to touch his cheek—"I am more poor, but alive. I save the food, but not Doug."

My heart skitters. "You what?"

"I warn Doug not to mouth off, but he does. They was hard on him. He is more poor now, like me, only he find his way home in his underwear."

I crack up, even though it must have been awful. Armando laughs with me and instantly the joke bonds us. I will enjoy a semester of hanging with him. The fact that he is friends with Ana Bello certainly won't hurt.

I head for the twelfth floor, grateful not to be showing up with a knife slash but sorry to be empty-handed—not to mention out an entire week's allowance. As I suspected, Mom is hyperventilating and ready to murder me. I give her a safe "mother version" of the story. What can she do? Ground me? I'm already grounded. So is she.

The doorbell rings, and we both tense until we recognize the voice. It's Humberto, arriving with groceries five minutes before curfew.

When a mother is starving, a gift of soup and chicken makes her forget about murdering her only son. Thank you, Humberto.

We dine well. Humberto stays to regale us with stories (in Spanglish) of the '88 Caracas riots, which have culminated in the present coup. It's a case of history repeating itself. Those in power pocket a country's wealth while the masses suffer—until someone comes along to upset the stranglehold.

Against our protests, Humberto defies the curfew and

stricken. Chávez still wears battle fatigues with a red beret, and he

slips out into the darkness, assuring us that he knows all the back streets and alleys to his home.

I head for my room to unclench my still tense muscles. Suddenly, I feel the need to check on the little girl across the street, making sure she's tucked in safely for the night. The street is empty. Cursing the broken A/C, I slide open a window, not caring about mosquitoes. Immediately I feel guilty. At least I have air-conditioning—or will as soon as it's repaired.

Glancing around my room, I see other things I have: a computer, TV, Nintendo. I am one of the haves.

I gaze up at Mt. Avila's twinkling *barrios*. At night, the dragon mountain and its hoarded jewels are incredibly beautiful. At dawn, the ugliness returns.

Dad says lights in the barrios means stolen electricity. So what? Let the poor steal light and heat—something we take for granted until we don't have it.

I wonder if the *ladrones* live on the mountain. I wonder if their lives would have gotten better if the coup had succeeded. Or would Chávez simply have become another Perez?

I wonder if the boys' families are dining on crackers and cheese tonight—like Mom and I did yesterday. Man, I think, *maybe we are way more alike than different.*

Stepping into my closet, I grab the baseball Stray and I used to toss around at Cherry Creek Park. In a bag, I find the bat Dad gave me for my fifteenth birthday. It's a good one, an aluminum HSB.

I have to steal through the empty maid's quarters to get

has turned the anniversary of the coup attempt into a national day

out the door without Mom hearing me. I go down the elevator and across the street as silently as a *ladron*. I creep along the graffitied wall until I come to the right gate. Reaching between the bars, I toss the ball and bat along the inside wall.

She'll find them in the morning.