

Candy Bag

Against the yellow wall festooned with what faux columns, an imitation of colonial days, the sun declines toward the sea. The color burnishes as the bank building nears the anonymity of night, but not yet. In the clarity of ocean and sunset, soldiers emerge from a side street and talk casually in front of yellow. They wear fatigues. Their pants tuck into polished boots. The smell of steel from their automatic rifles tinges the mix of Caribbean air. A less than youthful soldier with a big belly and a machine gun slung over his shoulder commands a group of boys. The clean-shaven (if shaven at all) privates wield their automatic rifles like broom handles, or novice baton twirlers at tryouts for the marching band. Are they loaded?

These sixty-day veterans loiter between the columns.

A slender man crosses the street and walks toward them. He smells of dust and of age. His legs, arms, neck, and belly are taut, a man practiced in labor by back and arm. His leathery skin is smooth and dark covered at the chin and the side of his face with the bristle of white whiskers. As he moves toward the soldiers, his yellow baseball hat vanishes into the hue of the building. His stride is even, purposeful, unencumbered by Army presence.

He has purpose, and she perched snugly in the crook of his left arm—a bob-haired young girl who couldn't have known her fourth year. Her yellow baseball hat is worn catcher style. There is no talk between. But there is the touch of mutual affection, his protection.

They turn the corner at the far end of the building. The soldiers, unaware of the girl and her papa, stroll from the portico toward the new esplanade presided over by

Simon Bolivar and his nameless horse. They gather in the unkempt order of two files and with the authority of their smiling sergeant, they gangle west toward the sea. A crow flies above them squawking

Soldiers and police cover Colombia, as numerous as small stores in every neighborhood. Randomly, buses are pulled over and searched, sometimes their passengers. Identity cards are checked; moto-taxi licenses are checked. During Carnival and holy days, armed boys in uniform stand watch over each corner wherever people gather.

The sun's near the sizzle of the sea. He returns, this grizzled figure with beauty on his arm. In his free hand, he holds a small sack. Candy for his love.