



# GONZO GLOBAL INC.

by James Weitz

*Before, these hills were covered with small plots. There were vines everywhere. Everyone cultivated them. Now, people have become carried away by consumerism. They've lost their identity. They don't know where they come from or where they're going. We've become reduced to the level of animals, but at least animals choose what they eat.*

- Mondovino; winemaker, Italy

*...It never ceases to amaze me that sovereign states have agreed to investment arbitration at all... Three private individuals are entrusted with the power to review, without any restriction or appeal procedure, all actions of the government, all decisions of the courts, and all laws and regulations emanating from parliament.*

- Juan Fernández-Arresto, Arbitrator



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## Preface

Washington D.C., Capitol Hill. [August 22nd, 2019]

Across the street from the Dirksen Senate Office Building, within sight of the U.S. Capitol, several hundred protestors were holding up signs and chanting, “Hey, hey, ho, ho! Your stink’n drink has got to go!” A phalanx of police officers in the middle of the street rested the ends of their shields on the pavement. A few were yawning. Their eyes looked everywhere except at the protestors, who were losing the rhythm of the chant until it eventually petered out. An organizer shouted, “One-two-three-four!” and the protestors tried again. Most appeared to be in their seventies or eighties, and their chanting had a sort of sleepy, civilized cadence to it.

Next to the office building, a van door slid open. From a doorway, a woman motioned hurriedly to come inside. Four men in suits and one woman stepped out of the van. As soon as they came into view, the senior citizens came to life. The police looked startled as the chanting disintegrated into bursts of cursing and swearing. The four men and one woman hastened into the Dirksen.

Inside, they followed a congressional aide down a long marble-floored corridor. The only sound now was the clickety-clack of their shoes. The aide looked nervous. Just before they came to a corner, she whirled around: “We’re late. Keep close and follow me straight into the hearing room.” On turning the corner, a gaggle of reporters and photographers came into view 15 meters away. The photographers immediately began shooting photos and a moment later came a storm of questions: “Will you continue sales within the United States, Mr. Delgado?” “How much money are you making?” “Do you fear you will be arrested?” “What are people in Mexico saying?” The five squeezed through the crowd of reporters and followed the woman into a large hearing room with wood paneled walls and 20-foot floor-to-ceiling windows. They kept their heads down and followed her past a hushed audience to a long table at the front, where they took their seats.

Facing them and the audience, on a raised platform, several U.S. senators sat at a large semi-circular desk that arched the width of the room. Senator Scrope occupied the center chair. Behind him, the green trim on an in-room door framed his head like a demonic halo. He leered down at the witnesses for a moment before turning on his microphone.

Senator Scrope: “The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) is holding this emergency hearing in an attempt to find out the truth behind how Mexican tap water was imported into the United States under the North American Free Trade Agreement and sold as bottled water with laxative-like properties. We also want to understand the facts and background reasoning behind a recent NAFTA judicial proceeding in which a three-member tribunal ruled that the importation and sale of this product within the United States can continue. The tribunal, convened under NAFTA’s Chapter 11 which allows for “protected information” to be kept private, has not made clear the arguments of the Mexican

company. In other words, the American public cannot know all the information and related reasoning the tribunal relied on to allow this product to be sold within their country. Although judicial transparency is a fundamental part of the American judicial system, the NAFTA tribunal is an international body beyond the reach of American law. As such, it appears to be within its rights in keeping some information hidden from the public eye.

“The product, originally sold in stores around the American Southwest, expanded its market presence with startling speed to many parts of the country, causing perhaps hundreds of thousands to become sick. It is the duty of the Food and Drug Administration to regulate food and bottled water to ensure they are safe for consumers. However, in this case, with NAFTA having already circumvented our regulatory system, The Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health are now working to contain this outbreak by educating the public. Complicating their task is the fact that the sale of this product may well continue. The nature of protections afforded to foreign businesses under NAFTA, combined with our own domestic regulations, seem to have helped generate this unfortunate outcome.

“Five witnesses have agreed to be here today to explain what they know. They are the head of the importing company, Mr. Gonzo Delgado, his in-house counsel Bowen Cohen, a legal representative from the distributing company, George Flint, and the Sheriff of Phoenix Arizona, Roy Cole. We appreciate their being here today. As well, Amy Liu, a journalist who covered these events from early on, has agreed to join us.

“Due to the interests of time, my colleagues and I will begin our questions without any further review of the facts. I’ll direct my first question to Mr. Delgado.

“Mr. Delgado, what is your relation to the company called Gonzo International?”

Gonzo Delgado stared blankly at Senator Scrope for a moment. Instead of answering right away, his mind drifted blankly back to that day in Ocampo when it all began...

## THE PRODIGAL SON

**Ocampo, Mexico. The Chihuahuan Desert. [04/02/19, 10:00 AM]**

In a land of cacti, tumbleweeds, and windblown borderless sands, where men for centuries had resisted the intrusions of civilization and governed themselves by nothing more than their own ethical codes... within this land, on the side of a hill, sat a cantina with no name. And within this cantina sprawled the body of a man whose head lay on the table in front of him. A single beam of morning sunshine cut through a hole in the roof and shone upon the head's dirty blonde matted hair.

The head belched and lifted itself off the table. Gonzo Suave Delgado awoke and through glazed puffy eyes perceived a set of tattooed arm muscles contracting in front of him as though lifting something up from under the bar.

"More tequila, Señor Gonzo?"

Gonzo ignored the question, looked around with his mouth open and tried to remember where he was. The cantina's walls were a slapdash structure of concrete blocks with mortar that bulged between them like layer cake icing. The floor followed the grade of the land such that it was one foot closer to the roof at one end of the room than the other. Around the room a handful of men were passed out on the floor.

Gonzo looked back at the man in front of him.

"You were drinking again until 4:00 in the morning," said the bleary-eyed bartender.

Gonzo looked again at the prostrate clientele.



“Every time you lost a hand of cards, you bought them drinks,” the bartender tapped the counter, “and never a tip, by the way.”

The men began stirring to life. One of them raised an arm. “He still owes two more rounds,” he said.

Gonzo shook his head. “Drinking debts drown at dawn, Carlos.”

“Buy the damn rounds so I can go home!” hissed the bartender.

Gonzo held up his hands and nodded. As the bartender began pouring drinks, from outside came the sound of a car pulling up... a slammed door... footsteps on gravel... a man clearing his throat and... a knock at the door.

“Who the hell knocks at a cantina?” whispered Carlos.

The bartender walked to the door and looked through a peephole then whirled around. “It’s the priest!”

The men shirked back into the shadows as the bartender opened the door halfway and smiled. “Good morning, Father Natividad. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Good morning, my good señor,” said the priest. “I have a message from a family who are worried for the welfare of their son. They have reason to believe he might have been to this cantina recently. Maybe you’ve seen him?” He took a photo from a messenger bag and handed it to the bartender.

The bartender yawned and took the photo without looking at it. “I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say who has been to my cantina and who has not. My customers value their privacy.” He glanced back into the darkness. “Many of them prefer their whereabouts not to be revealed. I hope you can understand, Father.”

“Very well,” said Father Natividad. “Perhaps, if you see the man in the photo, you could let him know his family is looking for him. His name is written on the back.”

The men shook hands. “I certainly will. Thank you for the visit, Father.”

“God bless you, son.”

As Father Natividad walked away, the bartender looked at the photo and a sudden in-suck of air sounded from between his teeth. “Father, my apologies!” The bartender waved the photo high above his head. “I do know this man! And he’s right inside!” He opened the door to the darkness.

Father Natividad’s eyebrows jumped like a desert hare. “I hadn’t expected to find him here at this hour! What a fortuitous circumstance!”

The bartender smiled and extended his arm for the priest to enter. “I’m sure it was meant to be!”

Father Natividad walked inside. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, his expression changed from one of surprise to sadness. So many souls sinning at such an early hour. His gaze came to rest on Gonzo. “Son, I have a message for you,” he said. “But first, I have work to do here.”

He turned to the other patrons, produced a Bible and a bottle of holy water from his bag, then began reading from Isaiah 5:12 as he walked around the room sprinkling water on the clientele. The bartender quickly put on an old narcocorrido.

Father Natividad raised his voice above the music, “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink! Who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them! They do not pay attention to the deeds of the LORD! Honorable men are famished—and their multitude is parched with thirst!”

Father Natividad closed the Bible, turned back to Gonzo and shouted above the music. "Mr. Delgado, I am here to deliver a message. Perhaps you overheard me talking to the bartender?"

"Yes, I did," Gonzo shouted back.

"So how did you wind up so far from your home when you have such a nice family?"

"Well, Father," Gonzo's voice quivered. "I'm in love with a girl here in Ocampo. Her name is Ameriga. I come to see her as often as I can, but she always refuses to talk with me and then I wind up here." Gonzo's eyes seemed to gaze at something far away. "We met a year ago here in Guanajuato. She and her family were selling produce by the side of the road. When I bought some strawberries, she smiled at me. At that moment, I took one look into her beautiful eyes and knew that I loved her." Gonzo's eyes welled with tears. "I can tell she's pure! But she won't have anything to do with me!" A tear trickled down his cheek. "What can I do, Father?"

"Perhaps you can woo her, son."

Gonzo slumped as a sudden look of fear passed over his face. "But I don't know how... My mother says I've got no social skills." Gonzo burst into sobs. Father Natividad looked around quickly at the other men in the cantina, but no one seemed to be paying any attention.

"Take it easy, son," said Father Natividad, resting a hand on Gonzo's shoulder. "I'm sure you could bring her around. I'm told you come from a very good family."

At Father Natividad's words, Gonzo's mind wandered to his earliest memory of Ameriga on that day when he bought the strawberries and walked with her around her family's farm. The rolling hills full of fruit were as beautiful as she was. When he asked how they got such good harvests, Ameriga said that despite occasional water shortages, they could still pump in from the nearby city, though the water was tainted with various impurities. She was passionate about the issue of clean water and talked for a long time about how a lack of it was one of Mexico's biggest problems.

“Can’t they just collect rainwater?” Gonzo asked.

“Impossible!” Ameriga shot back angrily. “Didn’t you listen? The problem is much more complicated than rainwater!”

It made Gonzo’s brain hurt trying to understand what Ameriga was saying. But she sure looked sexy, all hot and bothered like that. Only weeks later, when GASMAX took her family’s land in a forced sale far below market value, Gonzo wondered how wound up she might get if he explained the legal justification for eminent domain. The ensuing slap across his face was as close as he had ever gotten to a woman. And while Ameriga roared about land and freedom, all he could think of was the little tingle running up his leg...

Father Natividad cleared his throat and Gonzo’s mind came back to the present. He wiped his hand across his runny nose and looked up at the priest. “My family is exactly the problem. My uncle has a high position at GASMAX and he used his connections to get me a job there. But GASMAX took Ameriga’s family farmland for oil drilling and gave them very little compensation. Then she broke up with me!” Gonzo sobbed again and buried his face in his hands.

Father Natividad rolled his eyes towards the sky and took a deep breath. “You must be strong, Gonzo! When you show a woman the man that you are, then she will come to you. Remember you’ve got a good job and prospects.”

Gonzo looked up and wiped away his tears. “Why Father! You’re absolutely right. Thank God for nepotism,” he sniffed.

Father Natividad grimaced and turned away. “God works in mysterious ways....” He gestured towards the cantina. “The important thing now is that you get home. It’s not healthy here.”

“Thank you, Father. I appreciate your delivering the message on a Sunday morning when you have other responsibilities.”

“Sunday morning?” Father Natividad stared at Gonzo. “Why it’s Monday, son! This is my day off.”

Gonzo smacked his head. “Oh shit!”

Suddenly, a tone sounded on Gonzo’s phone. As he read the message his eyes grew large and his jaw went slack: A GREAT NEW OPPORTUNITY AWAITS YOU IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR!!! Gonzo jumped up and smiled at Father Natividad. “What a blessing your visit has brought me, Father! My uncle seems to have found me some work with another company! Maybe Ameriga won’t hate me after all. I have to get back quickly. I can still catch today’s flight, if I hurry!”

Father Natividad stood up. “I’ll give you a ride to the airport,” he said.

Gonzo went to the bar to pay the tab. “Hey, everyone! I have to get back to the capital. I’ve got a new job!” he shouted.

The men had just finished their two tequilas. Carlos walked up and wrapped an arm around Gonzo’s shoulder.

“Gonzo, you’re a gentleman and a scholar.”

“Am I?” asked Gonzo.

“Indisputably.”

Carlos shouted at the other men at the bar. “Let me be the first to congratulate our good friend Gonzo who has just gotten a new job in the capital!”

“Hurray!” the men cheered.

“Another round!” shouted Carlos.

“Hurray!” the men cheered.

“On Gonzo!” shouted Carlos.

“Hurray!” the men cheered.

\* \* \*

On the way to the airport, Father Natividad talked about how, like the prodigal son, Gonzo had been blessed with a second chance. He would need to work hard to win Ameriga’s love. No more visits to the desert. No more 10:00 AM tequilas.

But Gonzo was messaging on his phone all the while and eventually called his uncle Manuel, who explained that some very unusual events had taken place just that morning and things were moving quickly. He had had an impromptu meeting with the CEO of GASMAX and two Petroleum Committee members from the Mexican Chamber of Deputies. A new project, bottled water for export to the USA, was in the works. Gonzo needed to get a handle on relevant U.S. regulations ahead of another meeting the next day. And he was sure Gonzo would project a mature and professional demeanor befitting his position at GASMAX.

For a moment, Gonzo wondered why his uncle would help him get another job after he had shirked his responsibilities for the last few months. But the thought faded in almost the same instant it suggested itself, and in its place came visions of a beautiful, enraged Ameriga.

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### **During the congressional hearing**

At a K Street restaurant-bar near Farragut Square in downtown D.C., only a couple miles from the Dirksen Senate Office Building, a grey-haired man, perhaps in his mid-sixties, wearing a suit and tie, sat watching the hearing live on an overhead TV tuned to C-Span. He had a worried, almost guilty look to him, like that of a man who bore a heavy conscience. He called the bartender over and ordered a beer.

“Getting started early,” said the young bartender.

“That’s right.” The man did not take his eyes off the TV.

“So, you’re interested in this whole Mexican water business?”

“Yes,” said the old man. He added under his breath, “or, perhaps, I should say it’s interested in me.”

“Why’s that?” asked the bartender.

The man looked startled as if he had not expected the bartender to hear his remark. “Well,” he said, “that’s my nephew testifying up there.”

“You don’t say,” the bartender looked up at the TV.

Senator Scrope: “Mr. Delgado? Mr. Delgado?”

Gonzo Delgado (jolting forward): “Yes!”

Senator Scrope: “I’ll repeat the question. What is your relation to the company called Gonzo International?”

Gonzo Delgado: “I am the owner and CEO.”

Senator Scrope: “And your company was responsible for importing this product into the USA?”

Gonzo Delgado: “Correct.”

Senator: “Would you first tell me where the idea to export water to the USA came from?”

Gonzo Delgado: [*Speaking through an interpreter*] First, I want to say that I was working very hard in my normal job, and I was quite happy there. But I realized that under NAFTA, it would be possible to find new ways to enhance trade and raise the quality of lives of both the American and Mexican people after my uncle gave me the idea...

Bowen Cohen, sitting to Gonzo’s right, leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

Senator Scrope: What do you mean your uncle gave you the idea?

Gonzo Delgado: Well... he was retired. He told me he was sitting alone at home one day without much to do, and it just came to him. It was not for profit that we should do this, he told me, but for the benefit of the people of both nations—

Senator Scrope: I’m not sure the American people are happy to be the beneficiaries of your business. But very well, Mr. Delgado. You claim you were distracted from your former job by your uncle. Maybe, you can clarify how this all began. Your uncle was the inspiration for the idea? Did he play any part in starting up the business?

Bowen Cohen whispered again in Gonzo’s ear.

Gonzo Delgado: Oh no, no. He only suggested the idea in passing and I occasionally bounced some ideas off him, just a sweet old man who's not really all there...

The bartender lowered his head and turned away in embarrassment. The man at the bar spoke in a strong voice: "My nephew is a clown who has learned to lie, which is the most dangerous type of clown." He ran his hand through his hair. "But how does one blame a clown?" He took a long swallow from his beer and turned to the bartender. "People only look after their own self-interest, these days. No one is interested learning in truth."

The young bartender perked up. "I'm interested in learning the truth," he said.

"What makes you so sure you want to know the truth?"

"I'm studying international trade. It's right up my alley."

"Ha! A student of international trade, are you? I'll need to perform emergency triage on you before you can understand the truth." The old man held up his empty glass. "Get me another one of these before we start." The bartender began filling another glass as Manuel thought back to that fateful day in Mexico City...



## MANUEL'S MISTAKE

**Mexico City. In the high plateaus of south-central Mexico. [8:30 AM, 90 minutes before Father Natividad's visit to the Ocampo cantina.]**

A tall man in a black suit loped down a narrow, crowded sidewalk in downtown Mexico City. The loose movements on his large frame unfolded in an oblivious and awkward manner, like a dazed fighting bull in its final passes. He was talking on a mobile phone as his foot knocked over a panhandler's cup, scattering coins along the sidewalk and into a gutter grate. The panhandler shouted in protest, but the man appeared not to hear. A stray dog curled in its tail as its eyes followed the bull's loping progress.

The panhandler collected what coins he could and quickly set off in pursuit of the offender, who was then standing in front of the entrance to a 60-story glass office building, still talking on his phone.

"But Lily, you're Gonzo's secretary! What do you mean you have not seen him for a week?"

"Well, Manuel, maybe he's been here and I just didn't notice."

"Don't cover for him, Lily."

"I'm not covering for him. I'm just saying it's possible he was here when I was not. Why do you need to know? Wait, Manuel! What's that voice in the background?"

The pandhandler shouted, "Hasta la victoria siempre!" - *Until the victory forever!*

"I don't know. A beggar, I think," said Manuel.

“Tierra y libertad!” - *Land and freedom!*

“What’s he yelling about? Is he yelling at you?”

“No, no. I think he’s just yelling about a revolution, Lily. What were you saying?”

“Tu dinero es sucio!” - *Your money is dirty!*

“Oh, nevermind then! Did you hear my question?”

“Which question?” Manuel pivoted a bit to evade the shouting.

“It sounds very loud there! I’ll call you back.”

“No, Lily. I’ll be up in a minute.”

Manuel hung up and saw two security guards walking directly towards him from the entrance of the GASMAX office building. He turned around. *The panhandler was shouting at him!* A small crowd had gathered and was staring at Manuel and the madman. One of the guards smiled at the panhandler. “Hey, take it easy, friend. What’s the problem?”

“The man owes me 50 pesos!” shouted the beggar.

“Is that true?” the guard asked Manuel.

“It’s not true. I have no idea what he’s talking about.” Manuel shrugged his shoulders and showed his hands.

The guard grabbed the beggar by the arm, took him a few meters to the side and spoke quietly, "Do you know who this man is? He is not someone you want problems with." He cut the air as he made his points. "There's no reason he would steal your measly 50 pesos."

The beggar gestured pleadingly. "But it's the *truth!* He spilled my coins into the gutter."

"Then go pick them out of the gutter or you'll have more problems than a few lost coins. Am I clear?"

The beggar immediately turned and walked back from where he had come. The crowd dispersed as the officers escorted Manuel towards the entrance. "Let us know if this lunatic gives you any more problems, Mr. Gonzalez."

"I will," said Manuel. "Thanks both of you for your help."

"That's what we're here for," said one of the guards as he opened the door. Inside, Manuel scanned his ID next to an eight-and-a-half foot high floor-to-ceiling metal-toothed revolving door. A computer identified him to an attendant as Manuel Gonzalez, a department head at GASMAX, the Mexican state-owned petroleum company whose offices took up the entire building. After the locks clicked up from the floor, he carefully scuffed along in a half-arc, then exited as the locks clicked back into place. He crossed the lobby, entered the elevator, got off on the ninth floor and walked for a while past mostly empty offices. Few GASMAX employees had arrived yet, but Lily was early.

"Good morning, Lily. You're looking beautiful today."

"Good morning, Manuel," Lily smiled. "How are you?"

"No complaints, except for Gonzo. His mother is looking for him. She has not heard from him in days." Manuel ran his finger over his mustache, as if hiding a small lie. "I didn't have a chance to ask you on the phone when he might be in."

“Let me check his schedule.” Lily scrunched up her nose. “Mmmm, he doesn’t have any appointments. I’m not sure when he’s coming.”

Manuel frowned. “Do you know if he got my phone messages last week?”

“I left the messages on his desk.”

“What’s he working on now?”

“Eh, he’s doing some research for a report.”

“What report?”

“It is, eh, let me find it,” Lily shuffled through some papers on her desk. “It’s better I read it to you than rely on my memory. Here it is: *Revisiting the Siesta: Napping and Worker Productivity in Mexico.*”

Manuel rested his forearm heavily on the chest-high partition screen in front of Lily’s desk.

“How many pages so far?”

“So far, there is only the title page, Manuel.”

Manuel averted his gaze. “How long have we known each other, Lily?”

“Well, I started working here twenty-five years ago. You were already here. We met then.”

“Twenty-five years we’ve been colleagues and friends and I always avoided favoritism and kept my nose clean, right?”

“Of course!” Lily looked surprised. “You chaired the Transparency Committee. Everyone knows that.”

Manuel shot up rail straight at the compliment and allowed himself a rare smile. Then, he turned back to Lily, frowned again and gestured towards Gonzo’s office. “Now you know why I always try to follow the rules.” He lifted his index finger high in the air. “Next time my wife asks me to do a favor for her favorite sister, remind me that her favorite sister’s son already has a job here.”

Lily eyed Manuel the way an adult looks at a misbehaving child. “I’ll remind you,” she said.

“My one mistake,” Manuel muttered as he turned and walked back down the hallway. He took the elevator to the 58th floor, sat down at his desk and logged on to his computer to check for emails. There was only the one he had seen the night before. It was from his young 45-year-old boss, the new CEO 20 years his junior, who was supposedly possessed of wondrous new visions for GASMAX.

*Please come see me in my office tomorrow morning at 9:00 o’clock sharp to review some production figures. Other solutions are needed. See attached. Two federal deputies from the Mexican Congress will be present. A recent hire, Gonzo Delgado, may be right for an upcoming project.*

- Jose Hatem

Chief Executive Officer, GASMAX

Manuel felt chills at the mention of his nephew. He could not think how Hatem would know Gonzo’s name nor of any project that Gonzo would be good for. *But why worry?* Only Lily knew about Gonzo. And nothing about the email really made any sense, anyway. As Department Head of Legal, production strategy was not his expertise. The attached figures were simply very general numbers that documented GASMAX’s well-known decline in oil and gas production.

Just as he was about to head to the meeting, his phone rang. It was his wife, Mariela.

“Mani, my sister found Gonzo,” she said.

“Where?”

“He’s wintering in the desert.”

“Wintering? What on earth do you mean?”

Manuel heard Mariela inhale and exhale from a cigarette. “It’s cold here. It’s warm there. And it’s the winter. That’s what I mean.”

“Where exactly is he?”

“He’s in the north, near Ocampo.”

“Ocampo?” Manuel’s eyes moved up and to the left for a moment. “That’s hundreds of miles away in the desert. The desert isn’t safe for GASMAX employees. They get kidnapped there!”

“He hasn’t been kidnapped.”

“But nothing exists there.”

“Our nephew exists there.”

“Why in the world did he go there?”

“He’s in love, Mani.”

“What? This isn’t a time to talk on tangents, Mariela. Tell me exactly where he is and maybe we can get him back safely.”

“Somebody is on their way right now to talk to him.”

“Already?”

“We’ve arranged for Father Alcazar to help us retrieve him.”

“Father Alcazar will *retrieve* Gonzo?”

“Not exactly. He knows a priest in Ocampo, and the priest claims to know where he might find Gonzo. Father Alcazar assured me they will be discrete. You know Gonzo always looked up to the clergy when he was a child. I think he will listen.”

“I haven’t seen Gonzo in church in more than a decade,” said Manuel.

“All the better! Priests love to convert those who have strayed from the flock. Besides, who else should we send?”

Manuel thought for a moment. “You didn’t tell me exactly why he went there to begin with.”

“You said not to talk on tangents.”

“I take it back.”

“He’s doing... something-I-don’t-remember,” Mariela said in a secretive staccato.

Manuel's voice wavered wearily. "You don't remember?"

Manuel heard his wife inhale and exhale again. As she told the story of Gonzo's unrequited love for Ameriga, her words reverberated inside his head like the plot of a second-rate Mexican soap opera. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, while his normally light-skinned placid visage took on an indignant indigo hue.

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### **During the congressional hearing**

"Why'd you give your nephew a job to begin with?" asked the bartender.

Manuel's mouth twisted askew. "My wife and I never had children. So, she always wants to help her nieces and nephews. And she comes from a rich family..." Manuel shrugged. "Anyway, I only had six months until retirement. I figured what harm could it do?" He cringed as he heard his nephew try to negotiate another question. "Please," he said, "get me another beer. You know, if he finishes his testimony without saying something he shouldn't, maybe it will be safe for me to go back to Mexico."

"What's waiting for you back in Mexico?" asked the bartender.

"Sometimes, it's better not to ask too many questions," said Manuel.

"I don't mean to pry. But it's just what I'm doing my graduate research in."

Manuel's brain was buzzing from the beer. "Very well," he said. "You see that Senator up there, looking for the truth? He won't find it. The truth is there is nothing straightforward about international trade, least of all in Mexico. The truth is I was a confident man with integrity before this whole mess began..."



## YOU GOT THE PESO YOU GOT THE SAY-SO

### **Mexico City. [9:00 AM]**

The lights dimmed and a blurred map of Mexico and nearby countries whirred down from the ceiling, bringing the countries and cities of North America into focus. First came Canada and its vast frozen provinces followed by the northern U.S. states. Next 'SONORAN DESERT' and 'CHIHUAHUAN DESERT' appeared in large font across the southern parts of California, Arizona, and New Mexico, extending far south of the Rio Grand into Mexico. Then came Baja California on the left, with Mexico City near the bottom.

Manuel sat at a conference table with Jose Hatem, and Pablo Urdiales and Ricardo Traficante, two elected members of the federal Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Mexico's legislative body. When the screen came to a stop, Manuel shifted his attention to Pablo, who stood next to it, bouncing the end of a long pointer stick on the floor. He was short enough so that, when the stick bounced up, the tip reached the crown of his head. Across the table, Ricardo twirled a pencil in his hand and slumped so far down that his double chin appeared to rest on his chest.

"Quite a big map," said Hatem.

Pablo abruptly stepped forward, grabbed his stick with both hands, looked intently at his audience, then, raising his chin, swung around on his heel and with a simultaneous arching motion smacked it squarely on Mexico City.

"We are here!"

The pointer's downward perturbation against the screen kicked in the automatic retraction mechanism. Mexico City quickly disappeared. Pablo grabbed the screen and jerked hard, causing the retracting mechanism to malfunction and jolt the screen up and down while emitting a throaty cat-ball noise. The suits gave a start! Pablo jerked hard again, this time causing the screen, and with it the whole of the North American continent, to come crashing to the floor.

Large motes of dust and debris dashed about in the projector's afterglow. Hatem got up and hurried across the room. "Are you OK, Pablo? Anything hurt?"

"I think I'm fine." Pablo looked around at his audience. "Please excuse me, gentlemen. We did not anticipate such an event."

"It's entirely our mistake," said Hatem. "We need to get the screen more securely fastened."

"Maybe, we can just give a quick summary for now," said Pablo.

Hatem smiled and gave the OK sign. "That's all we need," he said.

Pablo began again. "Essentially, the map shows how the same export routes for Mexican crude oil to the United States can be used for bottled water export." He stood in one place and looked only at Manuel. "Some of the distribution routes to gas stations in the U.S. are right in the areas with high concentrations of Mexican-American communities. That's where we are likely to find the most customers for Mexican bottled water."

Ricardo broke in and also addressed Manuel. "There's an obvious demand in the very hot American Southwest. There are also many Mexicans living in those same areas who might like the idea of buying bottled water from their homeland." He started looking back and forth between Hatem and Manuel, who remained silent. "As for pricing, we've done some research that shows we can undercut the average price for bottled water by 20%. The cost of bottled water in the States is high, almost the same as for soda. Looking at the whole picture, we think there is real potential. But most importantly, we've got to think about distribution."

"And that's where we'll come in," Hatem said to Manuel.

"Do you have any more information on that?" asked Ricardo.

“Not yet,” said Hatem. “We want to make sure everything is set up on this end before we make contact with the distributors in Texas.” He turned to Manuel, “We can use our connections with petro-product distributors to sell throughout the southwest.”

“We’ve discussed much of this before,” said Ricardo. “But Manuel, you being a lawyer, I’m curious to get your reaction from a legal standpoint.”

*Water export for a state-run oil company?* Manuel studied the faces in the room but no one was laughing. He touched the end of his long drooping mustache for a moment, then ventured what seemed like a safe response. “There are water shortages here in Mexico. Look at the problems the locals gave Negra Modelo in Mexicali when it worked in secret with the government to tap into the public water supply for beer export.”

Ricardo threw out his hands and maybe gave a little shrug, though there was so much fat hanging on his torso it was difficult tell. “No my friend! No need to worry about water shortages on this side of the border.” He closed his eyes and laughed. “Mexicans are a resourceful people. No, no. The main issue is finding the cheapest way. The water will be sourced from here in Mexico City.”

Manuel blinked rapidly several times. “You mean tap water? What about purification? And why not source it closer to the border then?”

For a moment, Ricardo stared wide-eyed at Manuel, as if he hadn’t expected any real objection. “These are not legal considerations.”

“But they might give rise to legal challenges,” said Manuel.

Ricardo looked away and twirled his pencil between his fingers while addressing Manuel in a flat tone. “We need to keep close tabs on the business. We think we can find ways to defray transportation costs.” He nodded perfunctorily as he made his points. “Tap water is inexpensive to begin with. And most bottled water goes through unnecessarily expensive purification processes.”

"I see," said Manuel, sensing he should not press the issue, but instead get to the one point that, as a lawyer, he could not avoid. "I should mention that the Mexican Constitution bars the public sale of municipal water without a concession from the government, which is very difficult to get."

Pablo broke in, "Manuel, we are the government..."

Hatem cleared his throat, "You gentlemen can get into more details later after we get our legal team working on this." He looked at Manuel, who did not respond.

"Good," said Ricardo. "With our timeline, the sooner we meet the better. What about tomorrow afternoon, 3:00?"

"Yes," said Hatem. "If it's convenient for everyone, you could all meet at the revolving restaurant in the high-rise, in Santa Fe neighborhood."

"Good idea!" Pablo said, walking over to the table. He threw up his hands, as if framing a picture. "It has a great view of the city! Manuel, will you be able to make it at 3:00?"

"He's free then," Hatem answered for Manuel. "And after you gentlemen sort out the details, we'll contact the distributors." Hatem stood up, smiled and slapped Ricardo and Pablo on the back. "Things are moving ahead. I can feel money rolling in already!"

"Positive thinking!" said Ricardo. He lifted a finger. "That's the kind of attitude your predecessor lacked." Turning to Manuel, he said, "Manuel, I look forward to working with you." Ricardo reached out his hand.

Manuel stood up, shook Ricardo's hand, and offered a noncommittal response. "An interesting proposal, indeed."

\* \* \*

After the federal deputies left, Hatem motioned for Manuel to sit down in one of the chairs close by that was arranged around a coffee table.

“Manuel, I’m sorry I didn’t have time to fill you in. They called at the last minute.” Manuel acknowledged the explanation with a nod of his head. Hatem sat down, rested his elbows on his knees and brought his fingertips together. “What do you think?”

Manuel wasn’t sure whether to laugh. Everyone knew GASMAX was a state-owned company constitutionally barred from doing business in any commercial sector except oil and gas. He tried to accommodate the stupidity of the question.

“We could attempt to get permission from the government,” he said. “Though, it would probably be easier to get the government to incorporate a separate public company, allowing that company to make use of GASMAX resources as needed.”

“You mean the way we already incorporate subsidiaries for the different facets of our petroleum production?” asked Hatem.

Manuel shrugged. “More or less. But it would have to be a separate company, of course.”

“A separate company. That’s interesting,” Hatem rubbed his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “What about making it private, instead of going through the government?”

Manuel leveled his gaze on Hatem for a moment before replying. “That option is not within the mandate laid out for us by the Constitution.” He paused to wait for some indication that might signal a glimmer of understanding. But Hatem only returned a blank stare. “Indeed,” continued Manuel, “it could be construed as using public assets for private gain, which is illegal.”

“True enough, Manuel. I appreciate your frank assessment.” Hatem leaned back, crossed his legs, and rested his elbows on the armrests. “However, we are somewhat constrained by circumstance. It’s always wise to test a new business model on a small scale before it becomes fully operational. Otherwise, we risk wasting taxpayer money.” Hatem gave a few hand twirls. “It could prove profitable with time though. Especially for those who are in on it early on.” Hatem inclined his head and raised

his eyebrows at Manuel. “You are the one who has decades of international legal experience with NAFTA, and regulations in the States—not me, not the federal deputies.”

Manuel had resisted such blandishments before. His reputation was clean and he intended to keep it that way. “Jose, I’m flattered. But I’m not that experienced with NAFTA and U.S. regulations, especially when it comes to consumer products. And besides, my hands are full with GASMAX work now.” Manuel shrugged to indicate he had no choice in the matter.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Hatem, who was taking a moment to check a message on his phone. Manuel began to sense relief. He had stood his ground with his new boss. The upstart CEO would back down and they could both pretend this meeting had never happened. After Hatem checked his message, he looked back up and raised his index finger. “That’s why I wouldn’t let it take time away from your regular responsibilities.”

Manuel saw that Hatem assumed he must be used to participating in high-level corruption after 30 years of working at GASMAX. Something like 15% of GASMAX’s budget was lost each year, paying for unneeded services provided by private shell corporations that were awarded ‘contracts’ for ‘work’. Manuel took a deep breath and was about to respond before Hatem pressed on with his pitch.

“Don’t worry my friend!” Hatem smiled. “You’re part of the elite. You’ll be well-rewarded, and nobody here gets into trouble for thinking outside the box.” He bunched his fingers together, touched them to his heart and leaned forward. “Especially, when I’ve got their back.” Hatem paused, as if to let that sink in. “Now look, GASMAX owns many trucks that before were used to transport oil to the U.S., but now they sit idle in parking lots around the country when they could be hauling water to the border. What a waste!” He parted his hands, creating an empty void. “With a little reconfiguration, those trucks could be hauling bottled water to the border. Plus we’ve got drivers on the payroll who we can’t fire because of red tape. Oil is not the only thing that the U.S. economy needs. It’s a win-win.” Hatem smiled.

“Jose, I’m sorry. I have to say I’m not your man. I may not know NAFTA as well as you think. And I’m too well known in the legal world. My participation, or even presence, could undermine the project. And it’s only a matter of months before I retire, Jose. I won’t even be around that long.”

Suddenly, Hatem turned quiet and didn't move, as if realizing for the first time that Manuel wasn't making pro-forma protests—that he may in fact have *principled objections*. It was the one contingency Hatem appeared unprepared for...He got up, walked over to a table and began to pour some water while he continued the conversation in monotone with his back turned. "By the way, there is that recent hire in the legal department that I mentioned in my email. A man named Gonzo Delgado. Do you know him?"

Manuel flinched, but Ricardo had his back turned. "Oh, yes. I think I've met him," said Manuel.

"He's a dual U.S./Mexican citizen from what I hear—must speak reasonably good English after getting his one-year LLM in the States—or at least read it." Hatem took a drink of water still with his back to Manuel.

"Indeed. I recall seeing that on his resume. We're lucky to have him," said Manuel.

"Is he any relation to you?"

Manuel's heart skipped a beat. There were more than 10,000 employees at GASMAX. It was one of the largest companies in Latin America. *How could Hatem know about his nephew? Had he been investigated?*

"I'd rather not answer that," said Manuel.

"I understand." Hatem turned back around, raised a reassuring hand and gave a nod. He rested an elbow on the table behind him and leaned back. "The main reason I mention him is that he might be a very good person to help manage our new company. It came to my attention that he has law degrees from both the U.S. and Mexico, in addition to being a dual citizen. And he must know U.S. culture. That's right, isn't it?"

Manuel felt he had no choice but to respond with the truth. "I don't know whether he's that familiar with U.S. culture," he said. "He is a citizen of the United States because his mother gave birth to him on U.S. territory 25 years ago and then came

right back to Mexico. He only returned to the U.S. for a graduate one-year LLM degree in U.S. law. And I don't know about speaking English, though he reads it well—and he managed to pass the Texas bar. But, I must tell you Jose, he is untested. I cannot say what sorts of decisions he might make in real world situations.”

“That’s fine,” said Jose with a wave of his hand. “Someone with U.S. citizenship and a reasonable familiarity with the country’s legal system and culture is enough for this project. Perhaps, Gonzo could take what he learned here at GASMAX and apply it to a new endeavor where he might...” – Hatem paused and looked away, as if searching for the right word – “*accomplish* more. You can keep an eye on him, of course. And then as you say, you’ll be retiring soon. There’s a nice pension and lucrative consulting work, waiting for you in a few months.” Hatem took another sip of water, shook his head and clucked his tongue. “I wouldn’t want Gonzo’s working here to jeopardize that in any way.”

Manuel felt blood rushing to his head, but he maintained his composure and met Hatem’s stare. Hatem set down his glass and shrugged his shoulders. “All I’m saying is the sooner Gonzo pursues a career elsewhere, the better it would be for everyone, don’t you think? On top of that...”

Manuel stopped listening and did a quick assessment. GASMAX’s code of conduct could be used to protect him, specifically section 1, rule 3.5: “Any employee who becomes aware of a breach of these rules will report the breach directly to the Ethics Committee.” He could report Hatem. But, of course, his boss might retaliate with a valid charge of nepotism. And, besides, Hatem had just been appointed CEO of GASMAX by his friend, the President of Mexico, a mere two months earlier... Manuel started paying attention again...

“...and this product is sold at a premium,” said Hatem.

“Now that you put it that way, it sounds like an interesting idea.” Manuel blinked.

Hatem smiled again. His posture relaxed a bit as he walked up to Manuel and put a hand on his shoulder. His voice was warm and welcoming. “I’m very glad to hear that you’re interested in teaming with us. And it’s better, I think, to explain the details to Gonzo yourself. I’ll let Ricardo and Pablo know that Gonzo will be joining you.” He sat back down and held Manuel’s gaze for a moment before continuing. “Remember, it will be more convenient for you and Gonzo to meet with these men



directly in the future, and there's no need for either of you to reveal that you are related. It would only cause the federal deputies needless discomfort. Explain to Gonzo that your family relationship with him remains confidential."

"I see, but—"

"And I'll want regular progress reports, but never written. Understood?"

Manuel sat up straight, pulled his jacket tight and raised his head in an expression of pride that resembled the dignity that emanates from a handsome but beat up old antique. "Of course, Jose. I'll do what I can to help," he said.

\* \* \*

Back in his office at his desk, Manuel tried to clear his mind. If he could just think of a way out, some graceful exit or an insurmountable obstacle that would scuttle the entire project and keep his integrity more or less intact... There was the question of his nephew's competence. It might throw a wrench in the works. And if Gonzo's work ethic and inexperience alone were not enough, Manuel would surely have opportunities to mismanage him—the man behind the curtain, as it were. He would be retired by the time the business collapsed. But what if Ricardo and Pablo did not agree to bring Gonzo on? A good first impression would be essential.

Manuel felt a sudden pang of guilt at the thought of sacrificing his nephew like this. *On the other hand, hadn't he already given Gonzo more than a fair shot at honest work? And besides, Gonzo's continued presence at GASMAX would risk embarrassing the entire family!* Hatem's words from the meeting echoed inside Manuel's head: *The sooner Gonzo pursues a career elsewhere, the better it would be for everyone...*

Manuel pulled out his iPhone and wrote: NEW PROJECT. TOMORROW AT THE SPINNING WHEEL RESTAURANT. BE THERE 3 PM, SOBER. A GREAT NEW OPPORTUNITY AWAITS YOU IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR!!! Then, he hit 'send.'

His thoughts drifted as he stared out the window at the storm clouds approaching the city from the north. They reminded him of how the strange story of the genesis of Mexico City seemed to contain an elementary contradiction that no one ever questioned. Long ago, a nomadic group of Aztecs who had been wandering in the desert for no one knows how long—but probably long enough to become dehydrated and hallucinate—believed they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a

snake in its mouth. They decided this was a sign from their God, Huitzilopochtli, that they should stop wandering and create the settlement out of which grew Mexico City. But the city was built on a circular lake-basin where there were frequent rainstorms, nowhere near any desert cacti. Manuel had always wondered: When does an eagle eat a snake on a cactus that grows in the middle of a lake basin? *When the all-powerful government tells you it does*, he thought.

But the lakes had been drained long ago, and the former basin was now a swath of disorganized humanity so vast no one could rightly say how many millions dwelled within its sprawl. The chock-a-block buildings where these souls lived and worked, formed a pastiche of whites, reds, blues and yellows, with occasional runs of green stretching along wide, upscale avenues and residential tree-lined streets. Farther out, brown slums wound their way helter-skelter up steep mountain slopes. The urban jumble resembled a roiling stormy sea with barrio flotsam on the margins, slamming like waves against the mountains, ready to fall backwards and inundate the city at any moment, perhaps, in some as yet unfulfilled Aztec prophecy.

END FREE SAMPLE

Full text of Gonzo Global Inc. at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

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