

PART FIVE

Raphael, Gardo and Jun-Jun (Rat):

The Day of the Dead is about the biggest festival of the year out here – bigger even than Christmas and Easter together. It's when ten million candles get lit, and the ghosts come up and walk around arm in arm, and everyone goes to see their departed ones, who stand up out of the ground and say hello.

That was why the traffic soon got slow, and before too long we were in a long jam – at last the taxi dropped us on the road that led off to the cemetery, and we walked in the smell of flowers.

There were crowds pushing everywhere.

People walked with kids and babies in their arms, whole big families, and some of the men had tables on their heads and chairs in stacks, on trolleys; they had cases of beer, great big bottles of water, and the ice carriers were dragging great slabs of ice, shouting for a way through. Little stoves, bags of food, and people dressed up as best they could, as if for a carnival – little girls in new dresses and the boys in ties, even though it was a hot morning. This is the day when your family is together again. You set up house by the grave, and sit and chat and eat and drink right on to midnight. By the time it gets to evening, the whole cemetery is glittering with the candles – and that's when they say you need an extra chair, and an extra glass. That's when you can turn round, and dead Grandma's right beside you, old bones in whatever you buried her, smiling away with a hundred stories to tell. That's when the kid you lost is playing around at your feet again, and if you had some quarrel with a brother who died, you can talk it through and settle it. Father Juilliard told Rat all about the resurrection one time, and I guess it's this that he was talking about.

Rat says: I've never seen it, of course, but then I have no family here.

I do believe in ghosts, though, and on Sampalo island, where I'm from, people say they come out of the sea sometimes, if a boat goes down. They come into the village, sad as sad, and cry by your door all night. What do I know, though? I'd seen nothing like this.

Around us, the flower stalls got thicker and were overflowing with flowers till the scent lifted you off your feet. There were stores with sweet little Bible verses, plastic statues, plaques and postcards. The lottery sellers were everywhere, carrying wads of tickets and shouting. After all that, we came to the candle stalls – so many candles, thick and thin, tiny as your finger or too big to carry. Back from them there were food stalls, doing good business – and the three of us stopped and ate some fish, because we were hungry

again and hadn't had breakfast.

Raphael: I cleaned the blood off my arms, and Gardo said it was time for a plan. Opening up the Bible, we sat eating and reading, and nobody bothered us, because who's going to get upset about even street kids, if they're reading the Bible on All Souls' Day? There was that breeze again, getting stronger still with all that flower smell, and we could feel the freak typhoon coming in on us again, ripping at the tents. It was going to be hard keeping the candles lit, so there were lots of people buying little jars for that reason.

I said, '*Where we lay,*' and I scratched my head. 'I guess he's buried here. Does that make sense?'

'He won't be buried anywhere,' I said (this is Gardo). 'If the police killed him, he's going to be burned up by now and in the trash. Also, he must have wrote all that before he died.'

That was true and we all agreed. But we also thought, *What if his wife's buried here?* If that was the case, then *Where we lay* could mean the family grave. And that was what we decided to look for.

* * *

Rat now: I felt bad then, because that meant reading was needed. I couldn't read, and that meant I'd be no use. There was nothing for it, though, so we finished our fish and started, and I carried the papers and the book and followed on.

Like I said, it's the biggest graveyard in the city. Once through the gates, there were walkways spreading off to left and right, stretching for miles. We were soon lost in graves, trees and monuments. There were bushes and shrubs, and as we walked, great big angels would suddenly appear at you out of the leaves. Peaceful-looking Madonnas looking into the distance, and weepy little Jesuses on tiny little crosses, and then big-brother Jesuses stretched out, with eyes up to heaven. I had never been watched over by so many saints and I nearly got split up from the boys looking at them.

The tables were going up and picnics were opening. The parties were starting, and soon Raph and Gardo knew they'd never find one name in all these millions.

'We can ask,' said Raphael. 'There's an office with lists of names ... is that a big risk?'

'Everything is,' said Gardo, looking around, still looking mean. 'Everything has been.'

That was when I said I would do it. I said, 'I can pretend Mrs Angelico did me a good turn and that I've come to say hi.'

So Gardo counted me back a bit of my money – he'd become the money-man after the deal with Marco. 'Get her some flowers,' he said. 'That'll make it real.'

That's what I did, and it took three hours or more. There was a big queue of people, and I kept getting shoved back. When I got a guard to see me, he said he needed twenty

to check the record – which was a lie, but I gave it to him. Then he went off and took ages, answering all sorts of other questions from people, so I just sat with my flowers, hoping he wouldn't forget me altogether. It was late afternoon when I got my slip of paper, and Gardo thought I'd been off drinking.

'B twenty-four/eight,' I said to Raph. 'He says, "Top of the slope and look for a pink angel."' '

'It's getting dark,' said Gardo. 'Can you see pink in the dark?'

Raphael led the way, strong again, and ready.

Raphael now.

It was getting busier and busier because the evening is the busiest part of the day. There were barbecues starting up now, and people selling snacks. We were amongst wealthy people in very fancy clothes, and we felt even greyer and dirtier, but there was nothing for it, and still nobody was worrying about us – no one seemed to see us, like we were the ghosts.

After twenty minutes we got to the top of the slope.

I saw so many angels, and the light was way too bad to see a pink one, and I was ready to curse the guard who wasted our time – but then Gardo saw one made of marble, on a grave the size of a truck. In the candles it was pink as a salmon, and it was staring back over the city, arms up like it had just scored one hell of a goal. A great big family were sitting all around it, playing cards, and there were brandy bottles everywhere, and more people arriving, hugging each other.

We left them to it, and went in and out of the neighbouring graves, wondering what B24/8 might mean, and looking for the name 'Angelico', and finding nothing.

Soon it was completely dark, and we couldn't read the names any more. So we went back to the pink angel, and climbed up on a wall nearby, and wondered what to do.

And that is when we saw *the brightest light*.

Raphael, Gardo and Jun-Jun (Rat):

We'd been looking in the wrong place, and the fool of a guard who took our money must have thought we knew the cemetery and didn't bother to explain, or was just too lazy. The cemetery, you see, is divided by a wall – and that was the wall we were sitting on. The wall divides the rich quarter, where the dead get buried in earth, from the poor quarter, where the dead get stacked up in boxes.

We'd wasted the day walking among the rich when we should have been on the other side of the wall. The brightest light was the poor part of the cemetery, where thousands of candles were coming together as everyone streamed in after work. It was bright as day, bright as a furnace, and the candles were moving in great rivers as people made their way to their loved ones. It was like a little town down there, with narrow streets through all the tombs.

B24/8 would be the number of one of the concrete boxes.

Raphael: I remember Gardo looking at me and smiling, and then Rat gave me a hug because we'd cracked it again. We jumped down and came to a little broken doorway that let you into the other side. Right away, we saw a sign in the candlelight, high up on one of the grave-stacks. It said *G9*, so we moved past it, trying to work out the system.

It really was like a town: people lived in this part of the cemetery – they had houses there. There were little shanties built round the back of the grave-boxes. There were shacks up on top too – little huts and bits of plastic, and to get to them you climbed ladders. We could see kids running on the tops with a kite, getting it up into the typhoon breeze. So many people always, and it struck me again what my auntie used to say: there is nowhere people will not live.

We passed so many graves.

Saddest were the open ones – the ones that were broken open – and everyone knows that story, and I found myself looking away. Each little concrete hole costs the family two thousand-five for five years. You cannot buy a box, you see – you can only rent one. After five years you pay again, or the box is taken back. And people move away, or people spend the money, and sometimes the payment just doesn't get made – so what happens? The sledgehammer is what happens. They break open the seal, and out comes the body. There's a part of the cemetery where old bones are thrown and left to rot amongst the trash. Somebody's child, or somebody's grandma – out on the rubbish like a dog. The empty holes scared me, because nothing is more sad than that, and I didn't want to look. They leave the bodies in there for a few weeks sometimes, hoping they'll be claimed, because I guess nobody likes throwing people away like that.

Gardo.

I was working it out, though.

I led them round the back, and talked to some kids perched up on the grave-stacks. They pointed, and we found the track that was D, then C, then B, so then we came along, counting – fifteen, twenty and twenty-two. Four graves up, and there she was, we found her: *Maria Angelico, wife of José Angelico*, picked out on a little stone plaque. Raphael and me climbed up and leaned in to read, because the words under the name were small. *The brightest light*, they said, and I went cold, because those words were the ones we'd been following, and what we'd seen, and it was all coming together – we were close to the end. Around the words were scorch marks, from the candles that had been lit. Raphael read the words out to Rat, calling out loud because there were people everywhere and a lot of drinking going on and a lot of laughter. I looked at the box underneath, and I called that out too:

'Eladio "Joe" Angelico,' I said. 'My good, good son.'

Raphael grabbed me and said, 'We're where we're supposed to be! This is his boy.'

I said, 'I know that.' That was clear. But I was also thinking ... *What's there to find? We've found the poor man's family grave – is that really such a big deal now? This sad man, whose face we first saw when we found a wallet on the dumpsite ... he loses his wife and his boy and we're poking around, hunting his money? He couldn't have hidden it here.*

'We're where we should be,' I said. 'But he can't have put it in a grave.'

'I agree,' said Rat. 'How would he do it?'

'What's that one there?' said Raphael, looking up. 'Is that his as well?'

He was looking at the stone above the man's wife, and I had to climb higher up to see that one. It was clean and new, and the words were harder to read because the light was bad, so Rat handed me up a candle, and I figured them out slowly, Raphael helping.

'*Seeds*,' I said. 'Something about those seeds again ... Then it says: *To har ... vest. My Child. It. Is ...* Something long, I can't see.'

'Accomplished,' we said, together.

'*It is accomplished*,' I said. '*It is accomplished. Love and ... hope.* And there's a name – just a little name,' and I traced it with my finger.

* * *

Raphael.

The name on the stone was *Pia*. Then, *Dante*. *Pia Dante*. I looked down at Rat. 'Oh my,' I said, and I felt so sad. 'That's the little girl.'

I thought of the photo, of the little schoolgirl with her wondering eyes, and felt so bad. We'd all thought she was alive, or hoped she was.

Rat said, 'He lost everything, man ...'

‘He was sending her to school,’ I said. ‘That’s what the paper said.’

‘It was in the letter too,’ said Gardo. ‘The letter to Mr Olondriz. *If it comes to your hand, then you know I am taken. Ask after my daughter, please – use any influence you have, for I am afraid for Pia Dante now.*’

We were quiet a moment, and then I jumped down.

‘What now?’ I said. ‘What are we expecting to find here? What do we do?’

Gardo said, ‘I don’t know.’

I said, ‘A message, maybe? Look for another message ...’

‘Where?’ said Rat. ‘Where’s he going to put it?’

We all looked around wildly, maybe thinking there’d be a letter, or some other clue – but it seemed pretty hopeless – it all seemed like a dead end.

‘We’ve got this far,’ said Gardo, getting angry like he does. ‘There must be something!’

‘Nothing,’ said Rat. ‘Where’s there to look, and what are we looking for? I think he was taken and killed before he could do anything.’

‘Maybe the police have been and got it?’ I said. ‘They tracked it other ways, maybe.’

Gardo sat down again. ‘Why is this so crazy?’ he said.

I sat next to him, and we thought and thought, but there was nothing to think. Then, right by us, a big family arrived, pressing into the graves with a load of candles and a cooking stove, so we moved off across the path and found a quieter place, higher up.

‘Look,’ I said. I couldn’t let it go. ‘If he had all that money ... If he got away with it – if he really had a fridge full of money ... Are we thinking he buried it here, with his wife and kids? Why would he do that?’

‘To come back later and get it,’ said Rat. ‘No one’s going to break open a paid-for grave, are they?’

‘The police would,’ said Gardo. ‘If they had even one slight suspicion. That’s why the code. If the police had got the letter we got – if they did what we did – went to the prison and saw Mr Gabriel ... he would not have let on about the Bible and the book-code. So they would never have got this far.’ He smiled, and said what we all knew: ‘The man was smart.’

‘OK,’ said Rat. ‘So José Angelico knew he could trust Gabriel Olondriz. Gabriel was like the ... guardian of it. Without him it’s never found. If it’s in there, even.’

‘You think it’s in there?’ I said.

‘It’s in one of them,’ said Gardo. ‘Maybe.’

‘You want to break open three graves?’ I said. I couldn’t believe I was even thinking about it. I knew I couldn’t do it.

Gardo stood up then. He walked up and down, and I could see him thinking so hard his eyes were bulging, getting madder and madder. ‘It can’t be!’ he said. ‘You don’t do that, do you? You don’t bust open your family grave! What about an empty one? Maybe

there's a broken one nearby ...'

We looked around, and there were several. You could see what looked like trash, or maybe bones. Who wanted to sort through that? One thing for sure was they weren't places you'd leave anything valuable. Gardo was beginning to really lose his cool, and I could see why – we'd come all this way, and had the police all over us – he'd been almost taken, fought his way out ... and all for nothing? He looked at me and said, 'What do we do, Raphael?' and I didn't know. I just looked at him, and Rat was looking from him to me then back again.

It was just at that moment, as we were gazing around, that we heard a voice.

It was a small voice, and it was calling down to us, and was almost blown away by the wind. But we just caught the sound, and looked up to see a tiny little girl.

'What are you looking for?' she said.

Raphael, Gardo and Jun-Jun (Rat):

She was sitting up on the graves, higher than us, so she was looking down. She was hard to see, because like I said she was so small, and there weren't so many candles there. She had long black hair, and was sitting patiently, her hands in her lap. She was wearing school dress.

Rat said, 'What did you say?'

The little girl said, 'Who are you looking for?'

Raphael said: 'José Angelico.'

'I don't think he's coming,' said the child.

We didn't know what to say for a moment, and then Gardo said: 'Did he say he would? When?'

We were all staring up at her and she was just staring down, so still. The breeze blew her hair, but she was like a little statue.

'About a week ago,' she said quietly. 'I've been waiting.'

Gardo said, 'I don't think he's coming either – why don't you come down here?'

'What's your name?' said Rat softly. 'What are you looking for?'

'I'm not looking for anything,' she said. 'I just came here to wait for him.'

'But where do you live?'

'Here. I don't know now.'

'By yourself? What's your name, *chele*?'

'Pia Dante,' she said. 'My name is Pia Dante Angelico and I'm waiting for my father, José Angelico.'

Now, I (Raphael) speak only for myself and not for the other boys, but I went stone-cold all over and I nearly fell down. I heard Rat breathe in sharply too and take a pace back. Her hair was still blowing and she looked solid enough, and her voice was a child's voice ... but my first thought was that we must be talking to a ghost, because we'd seen her grave with our own eyes.

The child was looking across at it – B25/8 – the grave with her own name on, in brand-new stone. And she was waiting for her dead father on the Day of the Dead. What kind of miracle was that?

Raphael, Gardo and Jun-Jun (Rat):

She was no ghost, of course, and when we got ourselves together, we helped her climb down. Rat went up and helped her, because she was small – and we decided to take her out of there fast. Things were getting so strange, and we were all having the same idea straight away, but we needed to get clear for a while. Little Pia was so weak she could hardly stand up, and we all realized none of us had eaten properly, and we thought, *We've come this far – the police aren't going to trace us here – can we just get a moment to think?*

Gardo counted out the money, and we were low – our stash was down to a few hundred only, but we all needed food – little Pia most of all. I tell you, she was skin and bone to touch, and dirty all over – she smelled bad. We went right out of the cemetery and found a shack and ate chicken and rice, thinking we might as well eat good – we so needed it. We were at the end of the trail, we had to be, and even at that point – before we talked – we knew what was happening, and we were getting excited, frightened, jittery. Cold and sweating – like a fever.

Rat and Pia were just about the same size, and he could see she was in a bad way more than me and Gardo. He's been starved like that and scared out of his wits, so he knew what to do. He made her eat really slow, mixing gravy into the rice and feeding her. He got her water and made her drink it, and then he found her some banana, which he chopped up small like she was a baby. In a way she *was* a baby. She was scared, but she was so weak she didn't know what to do, and we still think Rat saved her life.

She told us she'd been in Naravo for a week, to meet her father. It was a place they often went together, because her little brother and her mother were there.

Some children had found her and taken her to one of the shanties – she'd been fed a bit and asked questions. She kept going back to her mother's grave and waiting, and of course she wasn't tall enough to read her own name on the grave above – or if she did, it didn't mean anything to her – she never said anything about it. Her father had sent her a message to meet him, and whoever looked after her had taken her there and left her. They must have read about his death, and knew they were well rid of her, what with no more rent coming in.

Pia Dante was alone.

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Gardo: We talked to a boy at the eating house, and for fifty got her space out the back for the night, and Rat laid her down, and got an extra blanket because a typhoon wind is cold for a child. I saw him smoothing out her hair, wrapping her up, talking to her and promising we'd be back to look after her. Then he came over to me and Raphael –

he was crying. I'm putting that in because I think it's important – it's the only time we ever saw Rat cry.

All of us knew now that this was the time to thrash it all out and do the final, final plan. We ordered tea, and I – Gardo – spent seventy on a bottle of brandy, and I made us all take three fingers, because what lay ahead was the hardest, and yet in a way it was also just free-fall now, the plan so clear we couldn't go outside it. Three fingers was enough, because we needed to be brave for the next bit – braver even than my friend and brother Raphael in the police station, because nobody goes among the graves on All Souls' Night after midnight, because that is when the dead are left to themselves again, so the ghosts are getting sad. We knew we had to, however – there was no question – because it was the only time we could do what we had to do. Can you blame us if we stoked up on drink?

'We need tools,' I said, and we worked out what we needed.

'We're going to need a way out too,' said Raphael, and we planned out our route.

I said, 'What does six million dollars look like?' I think the brandy was hitting me and making me smile. All of us then, we started to laugh – for the first time in what seemed a while. And do you know what, we knew it wasn't ours, even then – and couldn't be ours. We knew that a piece of it was all we wanted, and we knew we were so close, the air was buzzing around us, as if the ghosts were above us! That much money, if it really was there – six million. I promise you, the one thing we all knew was that it was not ours and we would not even try to take more than a little.

We split up to look for tools, saying we'd meet at the grave as soon as we could. We knew it without saying it: we had to go back and smash in the slab and get inside. I am sure we agreed that, without quite saying it. Raphael went off and found a sack and a cheap old broken knife. I went scavenging close up under the shanties where the graveyard turns to swamp and sea: I found a strong iron spike. It was tying up someone's boat, so I tied it to a wooden stake, and took the spike, quiet as the breeze. Rat found rope and a plastic sheet, which was everything we needed.

I'd said to Raphael, 'We do this job fast – once we start, we do not stop,' and we hugged each other.

I'm Raphael. I said to Gardo, 'It's going to make a noise. We do it fast, OK?' We finished the brandy and felt stronger and better.

* * *

Gardo again.

We climbed up to little Pia's grave-box. I think there were ghosts everywhere, just watching. Raphael held the spike and Rat passed up a stone.

Everyone had gone, and most of the candles had blown out, because the typhoon was

getting closer and the wind was strong and cold, nagging at us – I didn't have a shirt and I could feel it, right in off the sea. I swear I could feel them all, those dead, around me still, watching me with wide-awake eyes. Dead men above and below, and dead kids and dead mothers – I could almost see them, watching and watching, and I so didn't want to look up.

The stone was good in my hand, just the right size. Raphael had the spike in the corner, and I leaned back and gave it the most almighty crack. The thing moved right off, and the noise was more of a thud – a real, deep, dead sound. I guess because the seal was so new, it hadn't got itself all fixed and hard, but the second blow punched it right in, and it fell on itself in three big pieces, one of them falling nearly on Rat's feet, so he jumped back. Then he was up with rope and candles, right up against me, and we were lighting them fast inside the grave-hole where the wind couldn't get.

The air was musty, but there was no bad smell. There was a coffin, white as white – for a child – and we all felt scared, I guess. It had a layer of dust, and the flowers on it were very dead – other than that, everything was fresh. No smell – and we all knew what dead things smell like, because people throw dead things out on the dumpsite. I found a dead kid once, and there's no mistaking that particular stink, once you've had it in your face.

We threw out the other bits of broken stone and eased her out.

Back to me, Raphael. Like Gardo says, the wind was getting up and it made us want to work faster than ever. Rat got the rope around the coffin. Then, as we slid her out, he squeezed right into the hole so he was safe and firm. That meant he could let it down to us, because six million dollars in a wooden box ... I tell you, six million dollars in a box is heavy, if that's what was in the box – don't forget we didn't know that for sure. We only thought we knew, but it felt as heavy as that kind of money ought to be. We got her on the ground, and though we'd all said we'd move fast, we had to see what it was inside, right there and then.

The knife was our screwdriver. Eight screws held the lid, and I know, lifting a coffin lid ... you think of all the evil things in the world – in a graveyard, in the middle of the night – but I think all three of us knew in our hearts now, so we just did those screws and lifted it, and like Gardo says, the ghosts were around us, watching.

Oh sweet Lord, the money was there.

The money was there. It was packed in so snug it was like the box was made for it.

You want to know what six million looks like? I will try to tell you.

To me, sitting next to it, it looked like food and drink, and changing my life – and getting a way out of the city for ever. It looked like change, it looked like the future. I don't know what it looked like. We stared a moment, and nobody spoke. We had the plan, and the plan was not finished yet, and none of us suddenly thought, *Let's keep it all* – nobody even suggested we change the last part of our plan. We knew the money

wasn't ours, because even though I never met that man, Gabriel Olondriz – the way Gardo had told us about him, I knew he was a good man, through and through. It was All Souls' Night, and he was there, I hope and believe, at the front of the ghost-crowd! Right there with us. I think he stayed with us too – I hope with José Angelico, arm in arm – with us all the way.

Jun – no longer Rat. My name is Jun-Jun.

And the boys have given me the last part of the story – I guess because the last part was my idea. They dispute that – Gardo says it was his, because he was the only one of us who met Mr Gabriel, but I was the one who knew how to do it – and it did get done at what was once my home, or just above it.

Also, Raphael – he had the whole first part of the story, and I think he knows we tell it together, better, because we are a team now. Who cares, in the end? Who cares who did what when the whole point was we did it together?

We'd talked it all out, asking the same questions: what do you do with six million dollars? How are you going to spend it? Or what would we do, the three of us? Line up in the bank the next morning and ask to put it in a safe? Bury it some place else?

The one thing we knew is that as soon as we had it, it would be taken away – you think we stood a chance of keeping even a million? So I said we should take it to Behala and put it in the trash for anyone who finds it.

Maybe it was the brandy, but what I remember is the boys just laughing at me, and laughing at each other.

We shook it all out of the coffin into the sack and the sheet. José Angelico's money: the money stolen by the senator-vice-president from hell, from all his own people. We roped up the sack and the sheet and got them on our backs. We took them over the wall, just in case the gates were guarded – every gate in this city is ... We stopped off for Pia, of course, and she was so sleepy I had to carry her on my back, so Gardo took one sack, Raphael the other – and off we went into the wind, which was getting strong now, racing along the streets and making a noise, rolling trash ahead of it.

Who did we meet? Who else could we meet but a little gang of baby trash boys doing the night shift, scavenging about with a cart. Gardo showed them a note, and it was like a charm. Half a minute and our bags were in the cart, and Pia was on the crossbar, and we were pedalling through the streets, all of us clinging on and singing out. Who's going to stop a crowd of filthy trash kids fooling in the night? We passed a police car sitting by a junction, and we even waved. It was the early hours of the morning and the wind was behind us all the way, and we sailed past statues and all the quiet office blocks until we found the road that goes up to the dumpsite. We put Pia on the saddle, and the rest of us got off and pushed, running as fast as we could, so she was laughing too.

No police cars, nothing – but we still took no chances, saying goodbye to the cycle boys finally, and creeping in sideways up the canal.

My first thing was the school – the Mission School. So I took a great handful of notes, put them down my shirt, and I did just what Gardo had told me we'd do. I skinned up the corner and was in through the bars. It seemed my good old friend Father Juilliard –

you still hadn't fixed them, sir, I could still get through: maybe you were hoping I'd be back – I'm joking. I put the money on his desk and grabbed a pen. I put my name again, big and black – and next to that all I could think of was flowers, so that's why I drew you a bunch, fast as I could, bursting up and open. Then I had my next very brilliant idea which – who knows? – maybe saved our lives like all the other times. Gardo says all I do is brag and take credit – we all had good ideas all the time, but this one was genius, because how else would we have blended into the morning?

Why it hit me, I don't know – I guess all of us have to keep thinking ahead and looking out for danger, or maybe Gabriel and José were still with us even this far – maybe they'd been pushing that bike with us. Or maybe I just saw the cupboard, I don't know. The point was – this was Father Juilliard's office – there were cupboards full of odds and ends, and one of them was the crazy school uniform store.

Little shirts and shorts! They'd been donated to us years before by some charity volunteer who thought all the kids ought to look the same, like proper schoolkids – but it never caught on. To make us feel like a real school, I imagine, this kind person had given about a hundred white shirts, and a hundred blue shorts and a hundred little dresses. There were packets and packets, little slippers too. There were backpacks – the kind kids put their schoolbooks in, but there was scarcely a book in the place! What are the kids here going to carry apart from trash? The backpacks had the charity name, big and bold, all over them so you'll never forget who's being so nice.

So I grabbed a load of everything, and pushed it out of the bars. Then I followed them down where they fell, and we didn't even need to speak – we knew where we were going.

First we opened up four of the backpacks and stuffed them with dollars. We stuffed them full and zipped them up.

Then we turned back to what was left, which was most of it, and we took off every paper band – the bands that keep hundreds bundled into ten thousands. They were blowing around already, so we got them in the sheet and the sack and bundled them up again. I tell you, the dumpsite was alive now, because of the wind. Dust and grit was blowing about, and little bits of trash were whirling. The plastic roofs were flapping too, and a bit of metal sheet was banging. There was a very little bit of light in the sky, way over by the dock cranes, but no one was about just yet – or nobody saw us. We probably had ten or fifteen minutes before dawn, before the ghosts had to say goodbye and slip away. So we hauled everything to my old home, to where the big broken belt – belt number fourteen – just points up at the sky doing nothing.

No, I did not go down to see my friends the rats! Pia stayed on the ground, looking up at us, with the clothes and the bags. Then I went up first with the rope end, and pulled on it. Gardo and Raphael came next, taking the weight, and I went up and up and up. The wind was just getting stronger, and my shirt was flapping – I felt like I was up on a ship because the whole belt-frame was moving. We got the first bundle up right to the top, right to the top, and I could see way over Behala, way over the city, way out to sea!

Then Raphael came up next to me, crying out he was so happy – just shouting into the wind – and we held each other and howled. We took handfuls of the money then, and threw them up into the sky. The notes spilled out and whirled, and it was a storm of money. Typhoon Terese, I later heard, racing in from south China – and the next day the rains would burst. Right now, the wind got under all the cash we could throw, and pushed it up and out, and spun it right across the land.

Soon my arm was aching.

Raphael stopped shouting and just clung there, exhausted. We did the next bundle more slowly, and as it got lighter, Gardo came up too, right up to the top of the belt, and he had strong arms, and he helped us throw the rest. When Gardo came, the wind rose up even more, and we were clinging to that crane! It was a hurricane, and a hurricane of money. We must have thrown five and a half million dollars out over the dumpsite, and that wild wind took it all over the whole of our big, beautiful, terrible town.

At the bottom of it all, what did we find? We found another letter, slipped in with the cash. It was from José Angelico, so Gardo stuffed it down his shirt. We dropped the sheet. We slowly climbed down, and we were dizzy.

Pia was waiting for us by the rucksacks. She'd unwrapped the clothes, and put the plastic packets into a pile, and was sitting on them. We changed. We washed our faces by the school tap. Then we made our way out of Behala.

I wanted to watch. I wanted to hang back and see what happened when the first trash boy of the morning hooked up – not a stupp, but a hundred-dollar bill. Gardo was firm, though – and I'd come to see that you didn't cross Gardo, not to his face.

Raphael had goodbyes to say, and I could see him lingering. Then again, so did Gardo. In the end I think they knew it was easier to go without goodbyes – there was no choice – and I saw Gardo put his arm round Raph and lead him on.

He said we had a train to catch, so we went off and caught it.

Raphael, Gardo, Jun, Pia.

We are writing together for the last chapter.

Thank you, Father Juilliard and Sister Olivia. Thank you, Grace, and thank you, Mr Gonz, for helping us to tell our story. We are at the end, nearly where we started – just catching the train ...

We caught it on the curve it makes south of Behala, where it slows down nice and safe. Yes, we were just three schoolboys and a little schoolgirl, in through the windows and onto the seats. There weren't many people on it at first, but at Central loads of kids got on, most of them dressed like us, and we bought our tickets with the last of our pesos.

Like those kids, we had our school bags. They carried books; we carried dollars. Soon they were getting down for their schools, and we just carried on.

It was a long way to Sampalo, but we always knew we'd get there. The train took us through the night, and put us, just before dawn, at the ferry port. We crossed over the sea for nine hours, to a little place called Fort Barton. Then we caught a bus to the eastern shore. We got a cycle rickshaw from there to the jetty, and another little boat took us way out, to where the water changes colour – to the deep turquoise you can see right through. It is paradise.

We stepped out at last onto a beach, and we started walking.

Yes. You walk far enough and the earth does turn to soft sand, and now we are in a place more beautiful than creation.

That was some time ago. We have since bought boats, and learned how to fish, and we can tell you the truth, for the lying is finished. We will fish for ever and live happy lives. That is our plan, and nothing will stop us.

THE END

Appendix

A letter from José Angelico:

To whom it may concern:

I am writing this knowing that if it is in another man's hands, then I am dead or soon to die. I took this money hoping that I would be the one to return it to where it belongs, and I had my schemes for doing that. But I write as a dead man, I think: for they will not take me and let me live.

My daughter is Pia Dante Angelico, and she has nobody in the world now. Perhaps I can appeal to you to make her safe and help her? She is as innocent as they are all innocent; I know I am betraying her. Pia, if ever you get to see this, know that my mission was simple, and what I did, I did for you and children like you. From the day I came to know Mr Gabriel Olondriz – and I was a very young boy when I met him – a fire burned. He set me ablaze, as he started so many fires. He taught me many things, but he taught me most of all that Senator Zapanta's crime – the crime he uncovered and was jailed for – was monumental. Senator Zapanta stopped a nation in its tracks. He stopped our country making progress. Worse than that even, he gave other countries an excuse to stop helping us. For the millions he took, how many millions did he prevent even being offered? Worse, worse even than that – he reassured other politicians, officers, clerks, teachers, shopkeepers, neighbours that to steal is to rise, and to rise with your foot on the face of the poor is natural law. Even the poor believe that, and it is one of the reasons we stay poor.

Pia, I got tired waiting. There is a saying from St Matthew, 'Knock, and the door shall be opened' – and maybe that is true of God, but it is not true of man. The locks and chains that I have seen. The seals on the doors, my child. In our life, the doors remain shut. That is why I set my life to serving Senator Zapanta, in the hope that one day he would leave his door ajar, and let me through it.

I waited many years before he did, so let me tell you what happened, just so there is no mystery. Just so you know how simple it can be, to rob those who rob us.

Senator Zapanta has a traditional, frightened mind. His smiles are false: he is worried all the time. He has lost money in bad deals, and he despises banks. His own father lost a lot of money when a bank collapsed: Senator Zapanta trusts only cash. That is why in the basement of his home he built a vault, and that is why the dirty money from his crimes is kept under the ground.

He moves money from the vault to a smaller safe upstairs. He only moves small sums, keeping the main chamber locked. It requires a key and a combination. How do I know this? Because he came to trust me with both. To live without trust is difficult, and tiring. What he came to trust in me, Pia, was what he thought was my sweet, obedient stupidity. I have spent the years being only willing and obedient. I have followed orders, and smiled. I have spent a lifetime nodding, serving, providing, assisting – and no task has ever been too great, just as no task has ever been left undone. For those reasons, I rose and got closer. I became essential to Senator Zapanta, because I was one of the only men in whom he placed trust.

He took me down to the vault eight years ago. The door is metal, and so heavy it runs on wheels. Inside the room are locked boxes, but the cash was kept on a shelf, in bricks. Those bricks came and went. He told me he liked to have six million there, because six million filled the shelves. When the bricks of cash ran down, he would move money from his banks, and a briefcase would arrive. He started by always taking me down with him. Then – one day, three years ago – he gave me the key, and the combination, and sent me down alone. He would change the combination after every trip, of course – so there was never any danger of me visiting the vault without permission. I came to see that he only used five sets of numbers. He had five sons, so he used the birthdays of his boys. He thought I was too stupid to memorize numbers, and the key – he knew – could not be copied if it never left the house. He did not imagine that in my room I kept notes, and memorized them, and worked out the variations of numbers. Pia, I burned my notes in the kitchen stove lest anyone check. I learned from Gabriel Olondriz, and I burned them as soon as I made them.

He was right about the key, of course, but – once again – he did not think his houseboy would draw it and take the drawing to a locksmith on the other side of the city. He did not think the houseboy would return, and try the copy the next time he got a chance, and note how it failed to match, drawing revisions carefully and crumpling the paper to look like trash, to smuggle it out again. He never thought that, just like my god father in jail, with years to think and plan – I, José Angelico, thought in years rather than days or hours. Sixteen times I tried the key-copies before we got it right. Then it was a question of waiting for the right combination of circumstances. When Senator Zapanta announced a three-month trip to Europe, it seemed the time. The house staff was scaled down. Repairs and re-decoration of several rooms was announced – this would mean so many visitors. I started to worry about the fridge in the servants' kitchen, and I broke the thermostat twice, and mended it again. When someone suggested we call in the repair man, I told my friends that I'd run out of patience and would buy a new one myself, out of my own wages. The housekeeper promised she would try to make it a house purchase, but I told her that in this hot country we needed a reliable fridge, and I would not wait.

The housekeeper trusted me. The guards trusted me. The thing I worried about most was that once I'd filled the fridge with money, we'd be stopped at the gate and searched – we are routinely searched, of course. But I was José Angelico, with the right papers, and there were delivery vehicles going in and out all morning, and I'd wrapped the thing in plastic and roped it ready for loading. We sailed through.

Getting the money from the vault to the fridge? It took two trips. I chose a Thursday, which is when I pull all the household trash together for the dump truck. Nobody is surprised to see the houseboy dragging two, three or four awkward bags of trash around – especially when the builders are at work, making so much mess. When Senator Zapanta discovers the simplicity with which six million dollars disappears, I hope that he will fall to his knees and howl. Remember, Pia – and remember, Senator – whatever is said about me, I was no thief. I simply took back the money that was ours, and now I am about to put it in this coffin.

I have, of course, created the alternative route: if you have travelled this route, it is only with the help of Mr Olondriz – so I hope you are a friend. My final letter to him will lie in box 101, for 101 is the thing you cannot resist. With it lie instructions that only he will understand. The key to the box will stay safe with me.

Now I am so tired.

I am about to place the coffin in a grave that will be marked with your name, my child. I mean to find a way of returning it to the people from whom it was stolen. But if someone is reading this, it means I am almost certainly dead and the money is in their hands, and I can only say, 'Beware, because this money belongs to the poor. That is what you cannot resist.'

It seems fitting that the Day of the Dead is approaching. We will meet again, Pia Dante, but in the brightest light.

It is accomplished.

A Note from the Author: What is a book-code?

I first came across the device in a novel by John le Carré. It was explained as a very simple code that relied on two or more people having exactly the same copy of a book. For example, if I know that you have the Penguin 1975 edition of *Under the Volcano*, I can get my own copy out and communicate thus:

234•15•1•3•3•7•4•16 •4/8• 2•6 •15•5•3•16 • 2•3•4•19•16•

The most important number is the first: it identifies the page. Now you're at that page, you count fifteen lines down. At line fifteen, you go just one letter in, which gives you a capital 'B'. Now go to line three, character three. It gives you an 'e'. On you plod and you end up with *Best*. You now hit an oblique stroke, which means you go onto the next page. Eight lines down and two characters in give you 'w', and soon you have 'wishes'.

So oblique strokes signify the turning of the page and the creation of a new word. Counting characters left to right must include spaces and punctuation marks. To avoid confusion, indented lines can be avoided – but there are endless variations, and you can personalize the rules to your own satisfaction, making things as complex as you wish. The joy of a book-code is that you can make it entirely your own.

The code can be cracked if you know the book the messengers are using, but it's impossible if you don't. The code used by José Angelico is revealed if you have the 1984 New King James Thomas Nelson edition of the Bible. Gabriel Olondriz had a copy, and those wishing to send him secret messages had copies too. They had personalized the code, working right to left, and turning pages backwards rather than forwards. I presume the messages exchanged were never of great importance, and it was done simply for the joy of encryption. But it was how José concealed the most important part of his trail, and he invoked his God at the same time.

940.4.18.13.14./53.6.4./9.1.12.10.3.3./12.9.2.3.25.32./6.1.6.
2.1.11./33.3.2.1.6.15.5.1.6/5.11.1.6./2.4.5.25.4./3.1.4.1.4.1.
13.28/2.16.4.7.7.1./5.9.11.2.5.6./2.7.6.2.7.2.21.7.7.3.75.1.2.1.
1.75./16.3.7.9.12.6.4.3.5.1./1.4.11.3./2.6.3.1.1.2.1.9.1.4.

Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to Jane Turnbull and Joe, without whom I would not be in print. I am grateful to my own family and to a number of close friends, most especially Jane Fisher for her support, and Michael Hemsley, who gave me the idea that sparked the plot.

I wrote this book whilst teaching the children of British School Manila – a truly fine school that offers what every child is entitled to, but so few receive – and I thank them, as well as my colleagues, for their kindness.

I would also like to thank Linda, Hannah, Bella and David at David Fickling Books, as well as Clare and the whole Random House team. Ken, Sally and Jenne have also been – and continue to be – dynamic.

Behala dumpsite is based loosely on a place I visited whilst living in Manila. There really is a school there, and there really are children who will crawl through trash forever. If you come to the Philippines, do what Olivia did. See everything, and fall in love.

The characters and the plot are, of course, invented.

About the author

Andy Mulligan was brought up in South London. He worked as a theater director for ten years, before travels in Asia prompted him to retrain as a teacher. He has taught English and drama in Britain, India, Brazil, and the Philippines. He now divides his time between London and Manila.