

## **“Lord Of The Finca”**

**by Elliot Manches**

One hour south of the sprawling asphalt jungle of Guatemala City, there is a dirt track turning off the Inter-Americana highway that snakes through the countryside to a place called Finca Santa Ines.

Here, at the top of a hill, is a large white house overlooking the farm. Outside is an anarchic green backdrop, at dawn draped in dense morning mist; at dusk the red glob of sun melts between purple steaming volcanoes Pacaya and Fuego. Residing inside, is the Ladino landowner, Eliezar Alvaro. Probably in his late forties, Eliezar is cagey about giving his exact age:

“I am old enough to know better. But young enough to have a go,” he says.

He is slim, short and camp, of Italian descent, and well educated - having been sent to study in both Germany and the United States. As the child of a long line of international diplomats, he now runs a chocolate factory. Or more specifically, he makes the chocolate in hot chocolate. He also owns more houses than he has time to see.

Separated from his wife, though often visited by his two teenage sons, he lives alone, surrounded by the antique furniture of his late mother. The rooms have high ceilings and red carpets. There are renaissance paintings and portraits of family members and favourite horses on the walls, and chandeliers hanging from above. Around the solid wooden tables are chairs painted gold with thick padded seats and high backs, and on one of the arms is a very miniature leather saddle, with stirrups, that is used as an ashtray.

“You think I like this shit?” Eliezar says, waving his cigarette around aloofly, “No man. Is all my mother’s stuff. From her old house. I didn’t know where else to put it. Now have another drink my friend!”

The furnishings may not be to his taste, but the equestrian theme certainly is. Eliezar is passionate about horses. He has thirteen of them.

For a while, his pride and joy were managed by Prescilla, a young French-Canadian, who also ran the finca - Spanish for 'farm'. In the eight or nine months that she lived there, Prescilla saw Eliezar take his horses out only twice. But when the busy owner finally paid Prescilla for her hard work, he also threw in the patch of land she had had her eye on to build her own cabin.

Eliezar's finca is simply a large organic vegetable allotment and a small field of coffee plants, tended to by anyone wanting to lend a hand, in return for a bed in a converted tin-roof barn and the use of an iron wood-stove kitchen. Home-comforts are never far away though, as Eliezar invariably invites the labouring gringos back to his house for an evening tittle. There, empty glasses are forbidden. The refrigerated bar is never closed, and whiskey is always the flavour of the month.

At such spontaneous soirees, Eliezar, otherwise weary eyed and softly spoken, comes to life, waving his arms about and stamping his feet in jest. The Best of Frank Sinatra, a double-disc collection, spins forever in his 5-tray CD player, and he is soon dancing around with the gringo girls.

Reticent to discuss anything in detail, Eliezar prefers to make flippant but surprisingly accurate statements regarding any trivial matter, such as: "melons are 15 dollars in Japan", and: "in life, the big fish eat the little fish." But as much as he likes to quip and tell everyone to "take it easy, man", he can sometimes come across as somewhat sad and lonely.

He has two dogs, which he proudly says ate his neighbour Randall's cat. Living down the hill, the tall elderly Scotsman now has a fluffy little white pooch that he hobbles after with his cane, the animal pulling at the leash.

"Every time I see Randall walking that thing," Eliezar says, "I shout: 'Hey, Randall, when you gonna get yourself a real dog? Tha's a gay's dog! A real dog follows, not leads.'" Eliezer laughs and adds: "He don't like that.

He tells me be quiet, but I say: ‘Your dog is gay! We could get rid of it like your cat, just like that!’”

Eliezar is also an exceptionally keen chess player. And as I discovered first-hand, he is as shrewd and devious as he is intelligent, showing next to no sportsmanship when it comes to the game. In a sly effort to distract his opponent, his erratic gesticulations become wilder, and his inane articulation more frequent, with added predictive commentary.

“You gotta go with the flow, man. Don't think, feel! Just play, man. Ah, the horse, huh? Tha’s clever, my friend. But now I go here and take your horse, and so you come and take me. Come on, less go, you know it! Make your move man. Pawn to bishop, pawn to bishop!”

And whilst he was carrying on, I kept my eyes down and ears deaf, and took his queen.

“Oh,” he said, and turned to his large friend: “The son of a bitch ate my queen! He ate my queen. You ate my queen. Puta!”

Apparently his father had been chess champion of Central America and Eliezar himself was known to have lost only one game. He went into animated overdrive. His arms gyrated about his sides, as if attached to the wheels of an out-of-control steam-train, broken only by the loud clapping of his hands in front of our faces.

“Have another drink, my man,” he suggested between turns, “Loosen up! The game's yours! Tha’s cool!” And so on, until he moved his knight to challenge my queen. “Take him, man. Go on! Take him or be taken. Tha’s right, queen to horse. Don't be afraid!”

Reluctantly I did. And before my hand had reached my side, I was slapping my forehead.

“Shit!” - I'd been duped.

“Hey, no bad language, man!” he said. And then he took my queen, before going on to reclaim the game. “You ate mine, now I eat yours! Tha’s the way it goes, man. The big fish eat the little fish.”

Eliezar knows what he is talking about. Despite an end, in 1996, to forty years of US backed military dictatorships, the subsequent genocide, brutal guerrilla fighting and civil war, Guatemala today is still marred by inescapable social inequality and persistent human rights violations.

“I met the President before he came to power,” explains Eliezar, “He was nobody with no money. Just a little man. Now he has bought a house in Miami for 20 million dollars. How did he get the money? He stole it! This place is all messed up. But, it's not America, and I don't pay taxes!”

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