

IN THE
WAR ZONE
OF THE HEART

WILLIE CUESTA MYSTERY STORIES



JOHN LANTIGUA

"A clear, forceful writer."

—*The New York Times*

PRAISE FOR THE WILLIE CUESTA MYSTERY SERIES

“The narratives are consistently straightforward, light and crisp.”
—*Publishers Weekly* on *In the War Zone of the Heart*

“The rich and varied characters in this intriguingly twisty tale spring organically from the sandy soil of South Florida. This intelligent, timely novel is sure to win Lantigua new fans.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Remember My Face*, a 2021 Shamus Awards
Nominee in the Best Original Private Eye Paperback category

“Miami private eye Willie Cuesta is sent to central Florida to track down a missing person. Maybe persons. A heartfelt account of the risks Latinos face in modern America whether or not they’re undocumented.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *Remember My Face*

“This thoroughly entertaining crime novel flirts with a number of the genre’s central themes—kidnapping for ransom, drug dealing, betrayal, revenge, the silky seductiveness of a whole lot of money—filtering them through the special sensibility of Miami PI Willie Cuesta. A real find for crime-fiction fans.”

—*Booklist* starred review of *On Hallowed Ground*

“The fast-paced action is well matched by concise prose, making this a treat for Elmore Leonard devotees.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *On Hallowed Ground*

“Nonstop action and an exciting ending make this a good crime novel. In addition, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lantigua’s use of Argentina’s tragic recent history as the basis for his plot adds depth, and his insider knowledge of Miami’s Latin American subculture provides spice.”

—*Library Journal on The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“Cuesta is a noirish kind of chap, and the novel is appropriately atmospheric, with a large cast of villainous types and a beautiful client who may not be entirely what she seems. Readers familiar with the Cuesta series will note that, with this novel, the author is tackling a theme of greater sociohistorical importance than previously; but even though the story centers on a politically volatile period in recent history, Lantigua never forgets he’s writing a mystery, not a polemic.”

—*Booklist on The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“Lantigua combines a sympathetic, imperfect lead and plausible characterizations with a well-paced plot. Fans of contemporary PI fiction will be pleased.”

—*Publishers Weekly on The Ultimate Havana*

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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, I read an article about the writer Dashiell Hammett, who began publishing in the 1920s and is often called the dean of the private eye genre in American literature. Hammett is best known as the author of the classic crime novels *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*, but he wrote other novels and shorter works that originally appeared in the old pulp magazines, such as *Black Mask*.

According to the article, Hammett saw the private eye as a modern version of the knights errant of medieval times. They were the warriors who wandered out from their castles on horseback to slay dragons, rescue damsels in distress and deal with the bad guys of the era who were afflicting the general populace. These adventures were known as quests.

In 1998, after publishing three stand-alone crime novels, I decided I wanted to create a private eye of my own. I was living in the Miami area, as I do now. I'm half Cuban and I knew I wanted to make my character a Cuban American and a former cop. I could picture him in my mind's eye, but I didn't know his name. I kicked around some ideas, but nothing sounded quite right. Then I remembered the article I'd read all those years before about Hammett. I wanted my private eye to be a modern knight errant, who went on quests to right wrongs, especially in the Latino communities of Florida. Suddenly, the Spanish surname Cuesta popped into my head. Moments later I heard his first name, and Willie Cuesta was born.

Since then, Willie has starred in five published novels: *Player's Vendetta*, *The Ultimate Havana*, *The Lady from Buenos Aires*, *On Hallowed Ground* and *Remember My Face*. A sixth novel is finished and on the way.

Willie has also plied his trade in numerous short stories. All except one of the stories in this collection were originally published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, one of the very last surviving pulp magazines, now in its eighty-first glorious year.

I think Hammett, if he were still alive, would approve of Willie Cuesta and his quest for justice. I hope you do too.

THE JUNGLE

Willie Cuesta drove over the Intracoastal Waterway and entered Palm Beach at about 10:00 a.m. that Tuesday morning. He had made it from Miami in a little more than an hour and a half. But, of course, there was no way to measure, in either miles or minutes, the distance between his blue collar neighborhood of Little Havana and this posh play ground of America's aristocracy—home to the Vanderbilts, the Kennedys, the Pulitzers and the Posts.

It was his friend Alice Arden, riding shotgun, who put it into words.

"Make sure you don't hit anybody in this town, Willie," she said from behind her sunglasses. "The locals here have lawyers who eat human flesh."

"I'll do my best," Willie assured her.

Willie followed the directions he had received from his old police colleague, Arnie Corcoran. They took him onto Worth Avenue, the main drag, which was no commonplace shopping strip. It featured Saks and Chanel, Ungaro and Armani, lots of galleries and a Gucci instead of a Gap.

Alice's eyebrows arched. "It's Worth Avenue, but I bet it used to be Net Worth Avenue. They shortened it."

They turned and traveled along the oceanfront, but Willie wasn't sure where he was going. So, they stopped and talked to a young man dressed in white linen, just getting out of a lemon-colored Lamborghini. They asked him how to get to the Breakers Hotel, where they were supposed to breakfast with Corcoran.

The man pointed up the road in the direction they were going.

“You go to the estate on the corner that used to belong to Estée Lauder. You turn left, go the length of a good three wood shot, hang a right at that street and you’ll see the twin towers.” They thanked him, took the dogleg he described, and found the place.

The Breakers was a legendary hotel, hard on the water and also hard on the wallet. They valeted the car in the porte cochere and entered a lobby that looked something like the Palace at Versailles. Lots of columns, tapestries, mythological figures painted on the arched ceiling and large chandeliers out of the Middle Ages. Willie offered Alice his arm and she took it regally, accepting her chance to play Marie Antoinette in sunglasses.

They found Arnie Corcoran in a circular dining room topped with a leaded glass cupola. Arnie was a former patrol lieutenant in Miami who had taken the job of assistant chief in Palm Beach. He was a tall, sandy-haired, red-faced guy, in a summer suit, bright pink shirt and no tie. They ordered breakfast and Arnie addressed the issue at hand.

“It’s like I told you on the phone, Willie. We have an extremely old and wealthy man, one of our leading citizens, who has received anonymous messages that his life is in danger. The messages, left on an answering machine, are in Spanish.”

“But this gentleman isn’t Latino,” Willie said.

“No, but his family made its fortune in Latin America. They were officers and principal stockholders in a firm called the Central American Fruit Company, based in Guatemala. Very big banana importers. He worked down there part of the time, running things. His name is Harold Usser.”

“He was the big banana.”

“Exactly. He said his Spanish was never great because he had managers to actually convey his orders and oversee the native workers, but he understood enough about the messages to comprehend that someone wanted to kill him. The messages are still on the tape. They mention his family and supposedly certain crimes they committed down there.”

Willie frowned. “What crimes?”

Arnie shook his head. “Usser insists he doesn’t know what the messages mean.”

“Does he have any idea who might have left them?”

“No.”

“What kind of security does he have?”

“A gardener lives on the property and doubles as a security guard. Usser also has a houseman, a cook who’s married to the gardener and a maid. All of them live on the premises.”

“Sounds like a big spread.”

“You’ll see. Anyway, his niece, who lives nearby, feels he’s not safe no matter how many servants surround him. She says these threats are the kind that political terrorists in Central America make, maybe because the family took all its money from down there. I don’t have anybody on my staff who has ever handled this kind of stuff. But you have, Willie.”

Willie shrugged in acknowledgment. Before becoming a private investigator, Willie had worked for years in the Intelligence Unit of the Miami Police Department. He and his colleagues tracked all the political organizations in Miami Cuban commandos, Central American freedom fighters, Colombian guerrillas, Haitian patriots, Israelis, Bosnians, etc. The unit also helped guard visiting diplomats and other dignitaries. It was a busy beat.

Arnie sipped his coffee. “The hotel manager here has very generously given the department use of a suite for the rest of the week, plus access to the health club, golf course, tennis courts, sauna, et cetera. You look into the case, Willie, and tell me what you can, and then you can wile away the rest of the week with Ms. Collins here, on the house.”

Willie had a couple of questions, but Alice didn’t give him a chance to ask them. She beamed at Arnie. “In the name of Willie Cuesta, I’d like to accept the assignment.”



A half hour later they had checked in, Alice had been deposited happily at the pool and Willie and Arnie were on their way to the Usser mansion. They followed the oceanfront road south and as they did the mansions seemed to swell. Behind the high walls and the wrought-iron gates guarded by stone lions, Willie saw palaces in different designs—Mediterranean, Spanish Colonial and some in a

style that could only be called Classical Gaudy. Arnie noticed Willie's wide-eyed gaze.

"A lot of these were built before there was an income tax. They had some extra change to spend."

"So I noticed."

A minute later they pulled up to a pair of those tall gates. A gold plaque embedded in the wall announced that this particular bungalow was called LA SELVA. In Spanish that meant "The Jungle." The white stucco wall was about twelve feet high and vines crawled over it from the other side.

Arnie spoke into an intercom and the gates swung open automatically. A long, winding stone drive, at least a quarter mile long, led them through a lush tropical garden, a few acres across, which explained the name on the plaque. There had to be a hundred varieties of palm trees in there, not to mention banyan trees, *flamboyanes*, air plants, and several peacocks strutting about.

The road emerged from the trees and became a driveway that swept up to the front door of a two-story, Spanish Colonial fortress. It was about a block long, complete with bell tower. The roof was red-tiled, the walls white stucco, the railings and window grilles black wrought iron. All that architecture seemed to be held together by leafy green vines that had almost consumed the construction. The jungle indeed.

They were met at the marble front stairs by a short, stocky, serious Latin man about forty, dressed in a camouflage shirt and cap, with a rake in his hand and a pistol on his hip. He introduced himself as Juan, the gardener and security guard.

Then the houseman appeared at the door. His name was Carlos, a slender and slightly older man with salt and pepper hair, who wore a crisp white shirt, and pants and bow tie that were both black. He led them into a dark foyer as big as the lobbies of some hotels; then through a high-ceilinged drawing room large enough for a national dance contest and so dank it felt as if a torrential rain would fall inside at any moment; and, finally, into a cluttered study that smelled of books rotting from humidity. Each room was crowded with pre-Columbian ceramics, old paintings and studded Spanish Colonial furniture, so that you might have been in a minor and badly lighted museum south of the border. In between those artifacts stood potted

banana plants, lots of them, maybe to remind visitors where the money had come from to buy everything.

The man they had come to see also resembled a museum piece. Harold Usser sat in a high-backed red chair and a beam of light fell through the arched window right on him, although he looked exactly like the physical type who shouldn't be in the sun. He was a heavy-set, red-faced man, with a bald dome, who had to be at least eighty years old. It looked as if he were dressed to match the banana plants, in a green silk robe and green slippers. His expression was disgruntled, maybe because of what he was seeing on a nearby television screen, where stock prices crawled by. His yellowed teeth were bared in a growl. A cigar burned in an ashtray next to him, clouding the room.

Near him stood a slender, middle-aged woman, expensively dressed, who Willie figured had to be the niece. He was right. Her name was Nadine Usser.

After introductions were made, Ms. Usser simply pushed the message button on the answering machine next to her uncle. A man's voice was heard, speaking somber Spanish.

"This is a warning that Señor Harold Usser has very few days left to live. The crimes committed by him and his family in the past will be the cause of his death. His sins have finally caught up with him."

That message ended and then another came on, the same voice, but recorded several days later, according to the dates given by the machine. It was basically the same warning, but it ended differently.

"Now you are even closer to your undoing, Señor Usser. The spirits of the past will put you in your grave soon. Very soon! You know your crimes and you know why you will die." That was it.

Arnie asked to hear them again. Willie listened as he glanced around the room. The walls were decorated with old, framed photographs, some of them sepia tint, most of them taken in the tropics, particularly on banana plantations. They depicted lush stands of banana plants; a few large, white-faced men, some in sun helmets; and lots of small, dark local workers. Other photos depicted fancy social occasions where the white people were dressed more formally and the local workers, dressed in white, helped serve the food and refreshments. Those workers all had the same dazzled look on their

faces that peasants seemed to get before cameras—like deer caught in the headlights.

The messages finished playing and Willie sat down before the old man.

“Mr. Usser, you’ve said before that you don’t know what these messages mean—the reference to crimes. Is that still true?”

The old man fixed him with rheumy eyes and that bitter expression, as if he’d just bitten into an unripe banana. He spoke loudly, the way people do who don’t hear well.

“I said I didn’t,” he shouted in a gravelly voice and turned back to the television.

His voice indicated he had smoked too many cigars, his belly reflected too many bananas, and his face was fissured not only with time, but with rum and maybe other drink. Mr. Usser had not only been a producer of bananas, but a consumer of “the good life.” Although it appeared he didn’t have much good life left. He looked like a very unhealthy man.

“And you have no idea who issued these warnings?”

The old man erupted then. “I just told you, didn’t I! Do what you’re paid for and leave me alone! All of you, get away from me! Get away from me now!” He waved his hand irritably, as if to strike at Willie, and turned back to the stock ticker on the television screen, as if it were his own heart line on a hospital monitor.

The niece rolled her eyes and then she, Arnie and Willie left Harold Usser to keep track of his largesse. They went into the drawing room and Nadine Usser apologized.

“Excuse my uncle. He doesn’t sleep well. He’s been under the weather.”

Willie suspected that Harold Usser’s climate had always been somewhat unpleasant.

“I take it you also have no idea what those messages mean,” Willie said.

She shrugged. “For years I’ve heard what everyone in my family has heard. That the company always paid off politicians down there, that we controlled a corner of Guatemala, that if the family had trouble, labor trouble, it just hired the army to go in and take care of it. I’ve heard that people were killed in those disputes. Now some say those were crimes the company committed. My uncle insists it was

a jungle and that's the way business was done back then in the jungle. He says he has committed no crimes. Period."

As the niece spoke, Willie noticed a maid in a black uniform dusting a table just outside the room, her back to them. He nodded in her direction.

"I've seen three of your servants and noticed they're all Latin. I imagine they all speak Spanish."

She nodded. "All the servants are from Guatemala. My uncle has always had people from there working for him."

"Do you think any of them might know who's behind these threats?"

She shook her head. "I can't imagine it. These are good people, Mr. Cuesta, not terrorists. And they've all been with him for a while. The truth is my uncle can be unpleasant, as you've seen, and he has had trouble keeping servants. But this group has been very steady, very loyal. In fact, lately one or more of them has been staying up at night to make sure he is safe."

The maid was still dusting that same small table just outside the door. She was within earshot and had been for a while. Of course, servants would always be curious about strangers in the house, such as Willie. He turned back to the niece.

"Does this house have room for a guest?"

"Of course."

"Then, I think I'll spend the night."



Arrangements were made. Arnie went back to the hotel to pick up Willie's toiletries and a change of clothes and Willie called Alice. She had just come in from the sauna.

"A lot of ladies only in towels, Willie. You would have liked it. I've been invited to play croquet on the back lawn later and drink martinis. We'll miss you." Willie told her it was good that at least someone was enjoying his vacation and that he would see her the next day. He hung up then and headed outside.

First, he wandered into the extensive garden, drifting around, then examining some orchids, until he felt eyes on him. It was Juan, the somber gardener, watching him through the vegetation. He was

replanting a small palm next to a fern-lined pond when Willie approached. Willie spoke to him in Spanish, complimented him on his green thumb, and they exchanged pleasantries.

“How long have you worked here?” Willie asked finally.

“Two years now, Señor,” he said, still working his shovel.

“I understand your wife is the cook.”

“That’s right, Señor. Her name is Naomi.”

“Did you come to work here together?”

“First I came and then my wife, after the other cook left.”

“I understand quite a few servants have left over the years.”

Juan shrugged and plunged the shovel into the rich earth.

“I don’t know about that, Señor.”

“And how was it you found these jobs? You just got lucky?”

Juan glanced at him from under the brim of his camouflage cap as if he were peeking at him from behind a bush. He was a watchful, wary fellow, which maybe was fitting since he was the security guard.

“No, we came because I knew Carlos, the houseman. He helped get us the jobs.”

“So, Carlos has been here some time.”

“Yes, Señor.”

“Is he the one who has been here the longest?”

Juan nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He seemed increasingly uncomfortable at the questions and now he put down his shovel.

“Excuse me, but I need to bring more soil.” He turned and disappeared into the dense foliage.

Willie waited a few minutes for him, but Juan didn’t return. The soil must have been far away. Willie then found his way back to the house and went looking for a glass of water to fend off the afternoon heat. He found it in the kitchen, a dusky, high-ceilinged cavern full of ovens and cupboards, at the rear of the house, where he also found Juan’s wife, Naomi. A small, dark woman of about forty, she had a stocky build like Juan. But unlike her husband, she was friendly and smiling. She wore a long apron with black and white cows imprinted on it.

Willie gulped his water. “Do you like working here, Naomi?”