



# CLEARING CUSTOMS

A NOVEL

Martha J. Egan



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Santa Fe

*Fate is unmoved  
By one's pitiful hopes.  
What changes,  
Bowling to fate,  
Is what one hopes for.*

--Lady Murasaki  
*The Tale of Genji*  
twelfth century



## **ONE**

*January, 1988*

Beverly Parmentier stepped out of a taxi in front of Puerto Escondido's Hotel Santa Fe, and the brilliant Mexican sunlight hit her like a photoflash. Squinting, and a little wobbly on her legs after hours in airplanes, she fumbled in her purse for sunglasses and the money to pay the driver. He took the bills, deposited her suitcase at the entrance to the hotel, and drove off in a cloud of dust that left her blind and coughing.

Once she could breathe again, she put on the sunglasses and took in her surroundings. Inland, a ridge of dense vegetation held clusters of beach houses facing a beach that gleamed pearl-white along an azure bay. Above, gulls winged through a cloudless turquoise sky that tented the Mexican

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coastline to the north, south, and west, and disappeared in the milky haze hanging over the mountains to the east. A brick arch framed the entrance to the colonial-style hotel, and a pretty courtyard of tropical foliage and flowers beckoned.

Grinning like a lottery winner, she set a straw hat atop her mop of curly auburn hair and strode into the patio, her huaraches creaking and the wheels of her suitcase rumbling across squares of river rock like a seaside squall. As if in welcome, a playful, teasing ocean breeze lifted her hat brim, ruffled the hem of her gauzy dress, and rattled the fronds of tall palms overhead. She stopped in the courtyard, breathed in the essences of sea and sky and greenery, and restrained herself from screaming for joy.

Suddenly, a raucous, cawing laugh Beverly had known all her life burst forth from a nearby thatch-roofed *palapa*, where tanned beachgoers sat eating, drinking, and enjoying protection from a searing mid-afternoon sun. She knew she was in the right place. Scanning the crowd, she quickly found her Aunt Magdalena, a striking older woman with shoulder-length hennaed hair. Wearing Maria Callas sunglasses, Magdalena presided over a drink-cluttered table with a trio of men half her age. Just then, she slapped a hand of cards on the table and let out a resounding whoop. Heads in the *palapa* turned toward the poker players' table. The other cardplayers put down their cards in disgust. They caught sight of pale, plump Beverly trundling her suitcase across the patio and stared as

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she approached their table. Magdalena turned, screamed, and jumped out of her chair to enfold her niece in an *abrazo*. The women were oblivious to the stares they drew.

Beverly plopped into an *equipal* chair, draped an arm around her aunt's shoulders, and released a deep sigh. "You can't imagine how I need this, Mag," she said. "Pinch me. I think I'm in heaven."

Just after Christmas, Aunt Magdalena had called from New York.

"Bev! What would you say to a week on the beach in Mexico? I'm going to Puerto Escondido in a couple of weeks. There's a wonderful little resort right on the shore, and I'd love to have you join me."

"Mag, it sounds fabulous, but . . . I don't have the money and . . ."

"Silly girl. I'm inviting you. This is on me!"

"Really?"

"Of course. Ticket, room, food--my tab."

"Gosh, Mag, that's tempting. But who'd take care of my business?"

Beverly ran a small, struggling import store in Albuquerque with the help of Lucille, a part-time employee working her way through the University of New Mexico.

"Couldn't your employee manage for a week?"

"Maybe. She'll be on semester break for most of January, but I've never left her alone with the store before."

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"Darling, say yes. Things will be fine. You always tell me what a sharp cookie Lucille is, dependable, honest, hard-working . . ."

"Well, I'll talk to her and get back to you in a couple of days, OK?"

Beverly hung up the phone. She was in a daze. *¡México!* A week at the beach! Free! She immediately called her friend Pancha Archibeque, who managed a gallery in Santa Fe, and told her about Magdalena's invitation.

"How could you possible say no to a week at the beach, *mujer?*" Pancha scolded her. "If you don't go, I will. There's hardly any business from now until Valentine's Day, Lucille will do a great job, and if she has any questions, she can call me anytime. You need a vacation. You told me Christmas had been worse than usual."

"It was exhausting. Ten-hour days, seven days a week from Thanksgiving until after New Year's. Lucille had the flu the week before Christmas, and I couldn't find anyone else to help out. Now I'm working on my odious year-end bookkeeping. Ugh. But I'm almost done."

"You need this vacation, Bev. And you've always told me you wanted to spend more time with your aunt. Call Lucille, and if she can do it, you call Magdalena right back and say yes. That's an order."

"Ayyy, ayyyy, Pancha."

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Puerto Escondido was a visual and sensual feast. The Hotel Santa Fe's cozy whitewashed rooms, decorated with bright-colored furnishings, were set in a compound of thick greenery around a turquoise pool. Except for the chorus of birds that noisily heralded dawn and dusk, the resort was tranquil. Mornings and evenings were cool, but by midday the sun's heat encouraged guests to seek respite in the shade of their rooms, the *palapa*, or hammocks in the leafy patio.

The barren gray chill of the Albuquerque winter Beverly had left behind quickly became a remote memory. In Puerto Escondido, she and Magdalena reveled in Mexico's gentle and colorful January and enjoyed a beach bum's life. They took long strolls along the shore, then leapt over the rolling surf to paddle in the tranquil ocean beyond. They meandered through the shops and the market, or lounged around seaside restaurants nibbling shrimp and avocado cocktails.

Although Beverly's aunt was well over seventy, she had the stamina of a twenty-five-year-old tri-athlete, thriving and energetic even in the sultry heat of coastal Mexico. One day, however, Beverly came back from an early morning swim to find Magdalena in bed, writhing in pain.

Beverly was alarmed. "Should I get you a doctor?"

Magdalena waved her off. "It's just a stomach thing. *La turista*. It'll pass. Can you get me my pillbox and a glass of water? I'll be fine in a minute. Go on to breakfast without me, OK?"

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By the time Beverly returned, Magdalena was sitting in a chair outside their room reading a book and sipping a cup of tea. Although pale, she seemed much better. For the rest of the day, they took it easy.

By the following morning, Magdalena was her old self again and soon engaged in a marathon poker game with the same three men who'd shared her table the day Beverly arrived. Beverly didn't mind having time to herself. For years, she'd lived alone and treasured solitude. While her aunt played poker, she read her favorite trashy mysteries, swam for hours in the ocean, and devoted herself to *il dolce farniente*. Often she went to bed long before Mag was ready to fold her cards for the evening.

Magdalena was easy to be with, and Beverly especially enjoyed their long soulful talks about life, love, and invariably, their family.

"I wish they supported me," Beverly said late one afternoon as they sat beneath slowly twirling ceiling fans in the *palapa*, sipping fresh pineapple daiquiris while watching the sun slide beneath the western horizon in a gouache of *rosa mexicana* and tangerine orange. "I don't mean financially. I simply wish they were proud of me, even a teensy bit. I always get the feeling I'm an embarrassment to them--especially to Mom--because I haven't done the only thing they ever expected of me, to get married and help populate Upper Michigan with more Parmentier offshoots."



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"Your family has its limitations," Magdalena said. "They don't understand anything beyond their own small world, and maybe they don't want to. I've always thought your mother was jealous of you and what you've done with your life."

"Mom, jealous of me? You've got to be kidding."

"No, I think you've done things she always wanted to do, but maybe never had the courage to try. She always talked about becoming a pediatrician like her father, but she married my brother right after high school and started having kids. Maybe she was afraid to leave home. You, on the other hand, hopped a train to New Mexico by yourself at seventeen. You put yourself through college, you went into the Peace Corps, and now you've got your own business, all of it with no help from anyone."

"Not true. You've always supported me, Mag. You helped me get through school emotionally and financially, and you gave me seed money for my store."

"Peanuts, kid."

"It wasn't peanuts. It was the difference between my being able to squeak by or lose my shirt, especially that first year. More importantly, all along, your believing in me helped me believe in myself. I'll always be grateful to you." Beverly reached across the table to squeeze Magdalena's hand.

From time to time, one or another of Magdalena's poker pals, especially Al, the tall Texan with acne scars, tried to chat Beverly up in the swimming pool or on the beach.

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"He's too interested in me," she told her aunt. "It's fishy. I'm not date-bait. I'm short, fubsy, and forty-two. Like Woody Allen said, I'm not sure I want to belong to a club that would have someone like me as a member. Even I, liberal that I am, might not ask me out."

"Woody stole that line from Groucho Marx. Enjoy the attention, Bev," Magdalena said. "You're not as unattractive as you think, and you're approachable and friendly. It's one reason why you're good at retail."

"Al's more interested in my import store back in Albuquerque, my travels, and my politics than he is in me. And so are his pals. There's something cold and steely about those guys that makes me uncomfortable. I know they've invited us on a deep sea fishing expedition tomorrow, but I'm not going. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind, " Magdalena replied. "But be nice to them, kid. They're paying for our trip."

And indeed they were. At the end of the week, when it was time to check out of the hotel, Beverly watched in amazement as Magdalena piled twenty, fifty, and hundred dollar bills atop the cashier's counter, a look of smug and impish satisfaction on her tanned face. One of the poker pals cruised past and wordlessly glared at the heap of rumped bills.

Beverly and Magdalena's farewell lobster and margarita lunch in the Hotel Santa Fe's *palapa* ended with them a little drunk and teary-eyed.

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"We've got to get together more often," Mag said.

"This has been my best vacation ever," Beverly said. "I can't thank you enough. Promise you'll visit me in New Mexico soon so I can give you the grand tour."

Magdalena smiled and kissed Beverly's forehead. "You're on."

At the Puerto Escondido airport, they shed more tears when they separated. Magdalena began her journey back to Manhattan, and Beverly boarded a flight to Dallas-Fort Worth on her way home to Albuquerque.

Bright white lights, blank walls, and shiny metallic fixtures in the cavernous customs clearing area at DFW International gave off an antiseptic, arctic glare that reminded Beverly of a hospital operating room when she emerged from the maze of corridors leading from the jetway into the airport. Only two lines at the immigration counters were open, and through her half-closed eyes she soon saw she'd chosen the slower one. With resignation, she shuffled slowly forward with dozens of other tired passengers. Suddenly, lights went on in additional booths, and more immigration officials appeared. Travelers madly changed lanes, like freeway drivers, trying to outrun each other in a dash toward the new booths. Beverly was too tired for the chase and stayed put. Eventually, it was her turn to cross the yellow line, step up to the counter, and slip her passport under the Plexiglas window.

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The official peered over the top of his glasses and stared hard at her. She wondered if he was trying to determine whether she was as ugly in person as she was in her five-year-old passport photograph. After a week at the beach, she felt like a new person. Maybe her looks had changed, too. The gray in her thatch of reddish hair had been joined by a few beach-blonde streaks, her eyes were a little bloodshot from one margarita too many at lunch and hours in airplanes, and her newly acquired sunburn had tightened her wrinkles and crow's-feet.

The official turned to his computer, typed, then read. And read some more, his eyes following the words that marched across his screen, words Beverly couldn't see. Several minutes went by, but still he read on, typing in a few words now and then. She began to fidget. What was taking him so long?

The businessman in line behind her groaned and dropped his attaché case with a slap on the linoleum floor next to his shiny loafers. He folded his arms across his Armani suit and glared at Beverly, as if the delay were her fault. She shrugged him an apology. He scowled and began to shop for a line that was moving faster, but just then, the official scrawled a capital A on Beverly's customs declaration form with a red pen, circled it, and shoved her papers back under the window. "Next!" he called out.

The businessman nearly trampled her as he rushed forward.

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Her paperwork and carry-on in hand, she approached the luggage conveyor belt that snaked in and out of the airport's backstage area. As she searched the carousel for her battered suitcase, she saw Magdalena's poker pals and waved at them. They'd been on both of her return flights, the propjet from Puerto Escondido to Mexico City, and the connecting 757 to Dallas. They nodded a silent greeting to her, collected their luggage, and passed quickly through the customs inspection station into the airport.

One by one, the other passengers retrieved their luggage, loaded it onto carts, and wheeled away toward the customs counters. Soon the carousel was empty, and with a thunk, the conveyor belt stopped. Beverly's heart sank. She was luggageless and alone.

Just as she was about to storm the airline's freight office, she heard another thunk, and the conveyor belt began to move again. Like the Red Sea, the rubber flaps parted, and her suitcase, the much-abused and duct-taped veteran of her many trips south of the border, jerked toward her on the shuddering belt. Sighing with relief, she dragged the heavy bag toward the customs line. A uniformed inspector intercepted her, glanced at the red scrawl on her declaration form, and pointed her toward a table at the far end of the room.

Oh, boy, she muttered to herself. Siberia.

At the table, a Latina inspector was giving an elderly Mexican Indian woman a hard time. The *mexicana*, unable to

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understand the inspector's garbled Spanish, was nearly in tears.

Beverly spoke quietly to the Indian woman. "*Ella solamente quiere ver lo que usted tiene en los paquetes,*" she said. "She just wants to see what's in your packages."

"Step back and stay out of this!" the inspector yelled at Beverly.

Beverly jumped. "Just trying to be helpful," she said, retreating to the far side of the yellow stripe.

The Indian woman hastily unwrapped several parcels of food. The inspector poked at them with gloved hands. Then, with a scowl and a grunt, she ordered the woman to pack up her things and go on through. When the woman looked at her blankly, the inspector barked at her. "*¡Vaya!*"

She quickly rewrapped her bundles, tossed them into plastic shopping bags, and hustled away on short, thick legs, her braids swaying across the back of her thin sweater. The inspector motioned Beverly forward.

She handed over her documents, hoisted her luggage onto the metal examining table, and went to open her combination locks, but both were already open. "That's odd. I made a point of locking this suitcase back in Puerto Escondido," she muttered aloud.

"What did you say?"

"Just talking to myself."

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The inspector grunted. As she rummaged through Beverly's luggage, she fired off questions. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I have a store."

"Where?"

"In Albuquerque."

"What do you sell in your store?"

"Folk art."

"Where were you in Mexico?"

"Puerto Escondido."

"Where else did you go in Mexico?"

"No place else."

"How long were you there?"

"One week."

"How often do you go to Mexico?"

"Maybe once every year or two."

"What did you buy?"

"Gifts for my family."

The inspector let the lid of the suitcase fall and glanced at the declaration form. "Twenty-two T-shirts?"

"Yes, I have fifteen nieces and nephews, five brothers, and a sister."

"That's twenty-one, not twenty-two."

"Right. One of the T-shirts is for me. Is that OK with you?"

"Don't get smart."

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"I'm not getting smart. I'm just wondering what this is all about. I have receipts if you want to see them. I don't sell T-shirts in my store, if that's what you're wondering. I don't know why you're giving me the third degree, and I'm worried about missing my connecting flight."

"Do you want me to really give you the third degree?" the inspector said, her voice rising, her face flushed, her hands on her hips. At nearby tables, heads turned toward the inspector and Beverly.

Just then, a male customs official stepped up. "I'll handle this, Pérez," he said smoothly. "I think you're due for a break here."

The woman thrust Beverly's paperwork at the man and stomped off.

Beverly knew her face was flushed, and she could hear her heart pounding. As upset as she was at the inspector for hassling her, she was even more annoyed with herself for losing her temper. Being tired, sweaty, and short-tempered after a long day of traveling was no excuse. From fourteen years of professional dealings with customs, she knew that whether you're right or wrong, you keep your cool with border cops.

The new official, a tall, balding Anglo with hairy arms emerging from his short-sleeved shirt, narrowed his ice-blue eyes and attempted a smile. He reminded Beverly of a snake about to strike. He motioned the two men in line behind her to another table. Bad sign, Beverly thought. But she took a



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deep breath, forced a smile, and watched the official page through her passport, turning it this way and that to look at the stamps before he handed it back.

"You seem to go to South America often," the inspector said, flashing her a mouthful of large, shiny teeth. "Can I ask you the nature of your trip to Mexico?"

"My Aunt Magdalena and I spent a week on the beach in Puerto Escondido," she said evenly.

"And what kind of business are you in?"

From the way he peered at Beverly, she knew he knew exactly what kind of business she was in. "I import folk art from Latin America. I have a store in Albuquerque."

"Hmmm," the inspector said. "And what did you buy in Mexico?"

"It's all right there on the declaration form . . . sir."

The man shifted his weight from one foot to the other and smiled. "Well, of course. But what did you buy for your business?"

"Nothing. If I'd bought commercial goods, I'd have prepared paperwork for an informal entry, sir. The items I bought are personal. The truth is, I rarely buy in Mexico for my business. Things are too expensive, the quality's not that great any more, New Mexicans prefer to buy in Mexico themselves, and the exporting is a hassle. I was in Mexico for a vacation."

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"Hmmm," he said. "So what do you handle in your store-- clothing, wood carvings, wall hangings, pre-Columbian art-- that sort of thing?"

"I don't handle pre-Columbian art."

"No?" The inspector raised one of his furry eyebrows and grinned broadly.

"No. I've had my store for fourteen years, and there have never been any irregularities with my import shipments. Is there something going on here, sir?"

"Why, no," the inspector beamed. "There's nothing going on here. Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Parmentier." He handed her passport and declaration form to her. "Have a nice day."

Later, aboard her flight to Albuquerque, Beverly munched peanuts, sipped a screw-top burgundy, and ruminated on the scene at Dallas-Fort Worth. A veteran of dozens of trips to Central and South America, she hadn't been questioned like that by customs since 1975, when she was returning from a two-week visit to the village in Colombia where she had served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the late sixties. Then, like anybody getting off a plane from Colombia, she'd expected extra scrutiny from border officials, and she'd gotten it--the drop-your-drawers-bend-over-and-say-ah routine. The DFW experience wasn't nearly as hideous or humiliating, but it was unusual. Pestering her about a bunch of souvenir T-shirts? Asking her about pre-Columbian art?

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It was almost as if customs had been waiting for her at DFW. It was a scary thought, but within the realm of possibilities.

With computers and airline cooperation, customs could easily track anyone's border crossings, she knew. But why would they track her? If the agency was any good at discerning who was involved in illegal activities and who wasn't, they'd know she wasn't worth a second glance. For one thing, if she were involved in illegal activity, wouldn't she have money?

Beverly thought her threadbare life style and pitiful bank accounts made it obvious she was almost penniless. Moreover, she didn't hang out with shady characters. She'd gotten a few parking tickets in her day, and if tortured, might admit to driving over 25 in a residential zone a time or two, but she'd never been in any real trouble with the law. Customs was probably on some new kick, she decided. No doubt one that meant more hassles for small importers like her.

She leaned back in her seat, gazed out the window, and tried to put the experience at DFW behind her. As the jet chased the sunset westward, cottony clouds just beyond the plane's windows turned a faint rose against the deepening indigo sky. Puerto Escondido's pristine beaches, its swaying palms, grenadine sunsets, and the tropical torpidity of the Mexican January she'd left just hours before suddenly seemed long ago and far away.

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The plane soon tipped earthward on its approach to Albuquerque. Beverly pressed her nose against the cold glass and peered through the pastel dusk at the earth below. In her absence, snow had blanketed the plains of eastern New Mexico. The outlines of roads, waterholes, salt lakes, and irrigation-system circles were now only lightly traceable beneath the cold, white flannel that covered them. A wintry chill settled into her bones. She drew an alpaca shawl around her sunburned shoulders.