

# **Where Angels Fall**

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1598. In the city of Amsterdam, a Flemish engraver and cartographer known as Jodocus Hondius decided to make a map showing a marvelous land located in the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Guiana. A land tremendously rich in natural resources and filled with many legends. Hondius made a living by selling maps. To get the attention of the public, the cartographer created a map where he mixed solid facts, some speculation, and fantasy. In between two big rivers, the Orinoco and Amazon, there was a rich land where one could find cannibals, headless men, amazon women, and a set of fantastic animals. To describe this amazing place, Hondius used words in Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and native Indian dialects. For the Europeans living in the Age of Discovery, it was easy to understand the meaning of “Castilia del Oro”, but few of them were able to figure out the exact connotation of words like “Epuremei” or “Wikiri Pro.” The exotic world created by Hondius caught the eye of the general public. In mysterious ways, the vision of the Flemish cartographer propagated through time. Four hundred years after the creation of the map, many people still go to Guiana, or Guayana, searching for fortune or to see a magnificent land. I have a replica of the Hondius’ map in front of me. Today, after watching the evening news on TV, I felt a strong need to examine the map once more. There is trouble in Venezuela. On the TV screen, I saw an old friend, Laura Vallejo, protesting in the streets of Ciudad Guayana to remove a malicious dictator from power. Laura’s gestures made me remember a time in which she, Éner Marquina and I were chasing dreams in the stunning territory depicted by Jodocus Hondius. The three of us were in heaven. That magic time lasted less than a month. It came to an abrupt end in one night when we truly discovered the dark side of human nature. After that violent moment we drifted apart. I have always wondered about secret meanings hidden inside Hondius’ map. Laura experienced odd sensations when reading the cartogram. Was the map really telling us something about man’s dark side?

I first saw Hondius’ map when I was a teenager growing in Caracas, in the late 1980s. One afternoon, with my older brother, I went to an art house to watch the movie Orinoko Nuevo Mundo. Director Diego Rísquez had put together an unusual film challenging myths linked to the conquest of America by Europe. There was not dialogue in the film. The storyline was conveyed by a series of captivating images embedded in a complex musical score which combined classical and electronic music. At the beginning

of the movie, the camera moved over an old brown-yellow document, displaying sections of the Hondius' vision of Guiana. Instead of looking at the detailed traces representing rivers or mountains, my eyes focused on a beautiful half-naked woman who held a long archer's bow in her left hand: An amazon. From her body I jumped to other parts of the cartogram. Sure, I immediately knew that only a fraction of the information displayed on the map was correct but I kept looking and looking. I had a vague idea of what was going on. The figures and characters drawn by Hondius centuries ago were connecting with desires nested deep inside my soul. As a normal human being, I welcomed three basic things: A good fortune, the opportunity to have sex, and a chance to visit an exotic place. It was a perfect beginning for a film that dealt with the myths which brought many Europeans to America in the Age of Discovery. After watching *Orinoko Nuevo Mundo*, I tried to learn more about the conquest of the New World by Europe and the contributions of Jodocus Hondius to this major episode in human story.

Hondius never visited the New World depicted in many of his charts. He was born in Wakken, West Flanders, in 1563, and moved through Europe living in Ghent, London and Amsterdam. From an early age he displayed a special ability for engraving maps. He gained fame as a cartographer after using his charts to publicize the voyage of Francis Drake circumnavigating the globe in 1577-1580. The maps were based on travel journals and eyewitness accounts. Material provided by European travelers who saw the world in a particular way. Some facts were more interesting than others. And Hondius certainly knew how to capture the imagination of the public. In Amsterdam, he became a premier publisher of charts and globes helping to disseminate recent geographical discoveries and the idea of a marvelous America. The Flemish engraver was a big defender of technical innovations which improved the handling of data in the field of cartography. For him, a map was a mixture of science and art. Observing his representation of Guiana, I wondered about the rich geographical details contained in the map. Where did he get all that information? Many of the Indian tribes who populated the region disappeared in the first one hundred years of the colonization process. The Guiana map was filled with names of valleys, rivers, and mountain chains which did not hold-on and vanished in a distant past. Hondius references to a rich and exotic land were not unique. In the Age of Discovery, many people believed that El Dorado was located

within the Guiana region. In his book *The Discovery of Guiana*, Walter Raleigh mentioned the existence of gold deposits, headless men and amazon women in a territory explored by him in 1595. His expedition was not successful, the British explorer conquered no lands or located El Dorado, but Raleigh's book was very popular in the Europe of the seventeenth century. Explorers from Spain, Portugal, England, France and the Netherlands fought to own a piece of Guiana. In my youth, I switched from reading adventure novels written by Jules Verne and Emilio Salgari to searching stories associated with the conquest and colonization of Guiana. It was an easy transition. Reality and fantasy walked together during the colonization process. In a world which was evolving at a fast pace, maps were representations of knowledge and instruments of power. They were far from being innocent guides. European nations used cartograms to move their troops around the world and to extract resources from colonized regions. To me it was a fascinating topic. I majored in history through my college education paying particular attention to the development of modern cartography in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, always keeping an eye on Hondius's chart of Guiana. A series of trips to the states below the Orinoco River in Venezuela allowed me to establish key facts in the origin of the map. Mysterious words and figures in the chart acquired a clear meaning. I wrote a sharp paper on the subject which gave me a good reputation in academic circles and eventually led to the heart of this tale.

In the year 2002, I was in Caracas re-organizing my life to go and do the necessary studies for getting a PhD in colonial history, searching for money to support myself for two or three years, when I received a "God sent job offer." A French-American consortium was interested in filming a movie focused on the discovery of the tallest waterfall on Earth, Kerepakupai Vená in the Auyán-tepui range within Guayana, showcasing the adventures of the aviator who made it known in modern times, Jimmie Angel. "Where Angels Fall" was the tentative title of the movie. The moviemakers were in the pre-production stage of the film and wanted to trace the steps of Jimmie Angel before and after discovering the famous waterfall in November of 1933. They could not waste part of their precious capital money in unnecessary shooting. The French-American consortium needed the help of a person familiar with the geography and history of Guayana. The job was offered to one of my professors at the Universidad Central de

Venezuela. He rejected the offer claiming that he was too old to climb tepuis or handle the heat and humidity of the Amazon jungle. The professor mentioned to them my name: Eduardo M. Cabreiroá. I accepted the job offer. They would pay \$ 10000 flat rate plus an extra \$ 20000 if the quality of the information collected was satisfactory. All that money could be very useful to support part of my future PhD studies. In a few days of intense reading, I became an expert in the life of Jimmie Angel and how he discovered the Kerepakupai Vená. Did Jimmie Angel see the Hondius' map of Guiana at some point of his life? I could not tell for sure but it was clear that he did travel to Guayana searching for gold and fascinated by the beauty of the Amazon jungle. Somehow he got the message!

At the international airport of Maiquetia, I took a plane and flew to Ciudad Guayana in the confluence of the Orinoco and Caroni Rivers. The city was one of the major industrial centers of Venezuela and the main gate to visit Canaima National Park and the Gran Sabana. Two strategic points for reaching the World's tallest waterfall. Three persons were waiting for me at the airport of Ciudad Guayana. The pre-production team. Arsen Stephanopoulos, a Greek known in the movie business as The Bee, was in charge of the operation. Stephanopoulos had worked in the film industry for more than thirty years. Short and diligent, he had experience as a camera-man and director and was a master when dealing with budgets. The Bee was waiting for me holding a copy of the film script in his right hand. A sign. My eyes saw him for only a second before jumping to a lovely brunette also standing in the airport waiting-hall: Laura Vallejo. Laura was the youngest daughter of a man who owned the biggest tour company in Ciudad Guyana. She had visited the Kerepakupai Vená many times. Her knowledge of Canaima and the Gran Sabana was essential to follow the steps of Jimmie Angel. Laura was not half-naked or holding an archer's bow in her hands but she certainly could be an amazon woman in Hondius' map. The third member of the pre-production team was Éner Marquina. Officially he was a biologist doing field work in the Amazon region, collecting information about insects and snakes, searching for hidden clues in Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution. This scientist spent most of his time hanging around with Laura Vallejo. The two were in love. When I met them in Ciudad Guayana, Laura and Éner

were in the sweet-spot of their sentimental relation. One day, Éner learnt about a possible film focused on the discovery of the Kerepakupai Vená. The biologist was a huge movie fan who knew well the ecosystems surrounding the waterfall. He offered his services for free and was accepted as a member of the pre-production team. Éner and The Bee talked in the same language.

The afternoon of that day, we had a long meeting in a functional two-story house located at the outskirts of Ciudad Guayana where Stephanopoulos was living and coordinating the work. In a precise way, The Bee outlined our objectives. The French-American consortium interested in filming liked the main story behind the project and was expecting an honest report on the weak and strong points of the original script. An important issue was historical accuracy. Before starting the shooting of the movie, it was necessary to know how much the script was bending or ignoring well known historical events. In principle, major historical errors would be removed in a first revision of the script. On the other hand, minor historical inaccuracies could remain in the script if they helped to gain the sympathy of the film future audience or to reduce costs of production. Marketing would be used to minimize the negative effects of these “soft” historical errors on the movie profits. Being a historian, I should have protested after hearing these instructions, but I needed the job to finance my PhD studies, and no major historical inaccuracies would be allowed in the film. A second important issue was feasibility. The shooting of the film in Guayana would not be easy. We have to move around to visit different locations collecting data for the distribution of capital resources during the shooting. Following the original script and the history associated with the discovery of Kerepakupai Vená, essential scenes for the film should be identified and planned. At this point, I mentioned the absence of the film director in the pre-production team, where was he or she? ‘Two or three persons are being considered for the director position ... But do not worry, if the movie is finally made, you will receive a good reward and your names will appear at the end in the credit list’ was the answer of The Bee.

Next, we discussed central topics in our work. Kerepakupai Vená is located in the Canaima National Park within the Gran Sabana region. An area with vast valleys, dense rainforests, strong rivers and a complex network of tepuis with summits located 900 to 1700 meters above the surrounding terrain. The waterfall drops over the edge of the

Auyán-tepui from a height of 979 meters. During the rainy season, when there is plenty of liquid at the top of the tepui, the flow of Kerepakupai Vená is a magnificent spectacle, one of the most dazzling marbles of nature. As part of our job, we had to explore film-takes of the waterfall from the air and from different places on the ground. When the Europeans arrived in Guayana at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Indian tribes living in the Gran Sabana already knew about the existence of the waterfall. The Pemon Indians gave it the name of Kerepakupai Vená, which means: ‘Waterfall of the deepest place.’ In the traditions of the Pemon tribe, the Auyán-tepui was a cursed mountain, its top was the home of malign spirits and powerful temptations, men could lose their heads when visiting the origin of the waterfall. In terror, the Indians stayed away from the Auyán-tepui. European explorers were not afraid of transforming into headless men. Walter Raleigh and Fernando de Berrio may have found the waterfall while searching for El Dorado. In the Hondius’s map of Guiana, there was a group of mountains and a small lagoon which could represent the Auyán-tepui range and the lagoon of Canaima. In modern times, the real discoverer of the waterfall was Ernesto Sánchez who reported his finding to the Venezuelan Government in 1910-1912. However, Sánchez did not publicize his discovery. In 1927, Felix Carmona reached the slopes of the Auyán-tepui and saw the waterfall. As in the case of Ernesto Sánchez, Cardona did not publicize his discovery. The World became aware of the existence of the waterfall at the end of the 1930s when Jimmie Angel visited the Auyán-tepui and landed a small airplane on its summit. Following the steps of Walter Raleigh, Fernando de Berrio and other European explorers, Jimmie Angel was looking for a mountain of gold when he found the waterfall. He did publicize his discovery. It is not clear why the Venezuelan Government ignored the finding of Ernesto Sánchez and made Jimmie Angel the official discoverer of the waterfall. In an official map elaborated in 1939, the Venezuelan Government gave to the waterfall the name of Salto Ángel or Angel Falls. It was a poetic name. Nowadays, most people know the waterfall by that name. All these historical facts were correctly represented in the film script.

Jimmie Angel had an amazing life. It has been said that he lived for adventure and the love of flying. Our aviator was a perfect subject for a movie. Several texts describe him as ‘a hero’, ‘a liar’ or ‘a scoundrel’. With episodes of his life one could fill a 10-hour

TV series. We had to be careful choosing essential parts of his endeavors for a film that would be two hours long. Jimmie Angel was born in the United States, near Cedar Valley, Missouri, in 1899. At the start of World War I, he crossed into Canada and joined the Royal Flying Corps serving in England and France. Was Jimmie Angel an Ace pilot during the war? No document exists to prove his claim. By the 1920s, he was a civilian pilot barnstorming across the United States with his own flying circus. He also worked as movie stunt, test pilot and flight instructor. A daredevil aviator who could land a plane on a dime and, according to his own words, loved to be involved in “minor” illegal activities. In the 1930s, his pilot skills found him employment in enterprises which were looking for gold, diamonds and oil in remote and unexplored regions of Latin America. The message encoded long time ago in the Hondius’ map got to him: Guayana was the fabulous land where he could find an immense fortune. He was ferrying men and supplies through dense tropical forests when an old prospector, a veteran geologist and explorer, mentioned to him the existence of a mythical golden river flowing at the top of a tepui in the Gran Sabana. On November of 1933, while flying a solo flight, Jimmie Angel saw Kerepakupai Vená dropping from one side of the Auyán-tepui and wrote in his pilot’s log: ‘Found myself an amazing waterfall.’ In his mind, there was no doubt, he had located the place loaded with gold mentioned in the tale of the old prospector. The aviator headed back to the United States to raise money for starting a thorough exploration of the Auyán-tepui.

In October of 1937, the wheel was again in motion, Jimmie Angel tried to land a Flamingo monoplane, named El Rio Caroni, on the main mesa of the Auyán-tepui. His second wife, Mavis Marie Angel, and two male friends, Gustavo Heny and Miguel Delgado, were flying with him. The travelers had a master plan: Land the airplane on the tepui, search for gold near the waterfall, and then fly back home with a fortune in their possession. It would be the greatest stunt in the life of Jimmie Angel. But things evolved in an awkward way. The plane landed on a swamp and was trapped in six feet of mud. They could not use El Rio Caroni to return home. Survival became more important than finding gold. The travelers were forced to find a path to descent from the tepui and cross on foot the rainforests of Canaima. Gustavo Heny knew the area and Miguel Delgado was an expert handling the rope and machete. It took them eleven days to reach the safety



of Camp Guayaraca, an outpost of civilization located in the middle of an open plain near the base of the Auyán-tepui. Their survival captured the attention of newspapers in Venezuela and the United States. Jimmie Angel intensified his efforts to explore the Auyán-tepui. His actions triggered expeditions by the Venezuelan Government and the American Museum of Natural History aimed at visiting the tall waterfall and mapping the Canaima region. Jimmie Angel never found his mountain of gold. For years he was involved in diverse enterprises associated with gold mining. He died in 1956 as a consequence of head injuries caused by a plane crash in Panama. Four years later, his wife Marie spread his ashes on top of the Auyán-tepui, close to the big waterfall, Angel Falls.

In the script of the film, Stephanopoulos identified two sets of scenes which were essential for developing the storyline and grabbing the attention of future viewers. The first set of scenes involved an aerial view of Kerepakupai Vená showing the first time Jimmie Angel saw the waterfall from a plane. These scenes had to display the dazzling characteristics of the waterfall, shaking the viewer, inspiring on him or her the same feelings that the aviator had when he discovered Kerepakupai Vená. The four of us would find the basic elements for these scenes by taking a plane and flying around the Auyán-tepui. The second set of scenes dealt with the trip of Jimmie Angel, his wife and friends through the jungle of Canaima and their fight for survival. A substantial portion of the movie would be focused on that trip. We had photographs taken by Gustavo Heny as a starting point to elaborate the corresponding scenes but it was necessary to trace the trip on foot from the summit of the Auyán-tepui to Camp Guayaraca. At the end of the long meeting, Laura, Éner and I were extremely excited with the job. ‘We can do it!’ Laura offered her services. She could make a couple of phone calls and in the afternoon of the next day we would be flying around the Auyán-tepui. Stephanopoulos did not get trapped by our enthusiasm. The Bee had other plans. ‘Before going to the big mountain you have to see Jimmie Angel’s plane ... See the aircraft, and through it, feel the soul of the man who was flying it.’

Next day, Laura, Éner and I drove all the way from Ciudad Guayana to the airport of Ciudad Bolívar where El Río Caroni was on display. After the crash of 1937, the

Flamingo plane was abandoned and remained immersed in the mud at the top of the Auyán-tepui until the year 1970 when the Venezuelan Air Force mounted an operation to rescue it. The aircraft was dismantled and brought down using helicopters. The restoration of the plane was a big success. In the same year, the Ford Motor Company put on the market the Mustang Boss 302, a muscle car known by its powerful engine. Éner drove us to Ciudad Bolívar's airport in an authentic Boss 302. He and Laura had restored the vehicle by cannibalizing other Boss 302s sold in Venezuela. It was a red color fastback model. The outside of the car was so-so, it urgently needed a new painting, but the engine was in top form. On our route we discussed some of the legends surrounding the life of Jimmie Angel. Our hero had a tendency to embellish his actions. Was he really an Ace in the Royal Flying Corps during World War I? Did he teach flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker how to operate a plane? Was he a scouting pilot for Lawrence of Arabia? Amazing things we could not prove. 'My duties involved classified operations ... Top secret missions' was Jimmie Angel usual explanation to dismiss his lack of solid documentation. We did have photographs of him visiting his family all dressed in a military uniform. Happy and proud. He must have been a good soldier or army pilot somewhere. His plane made a strong impression on us. It certainly was a solid functional machine. El Rio Caroni was a single-motor plane which could accommodate eight persons plus some merchandise in its cabin. To fly a small Flamingo plane like that over isolated jungles, day after day, a pilot had to have courage, a lot of courage. And felt the conviction that he was an invincible person who sooner or later was going to find a big pile of gold. That conviction kept Jimmie Angel in the air. He had some serious plane crashes. In 1942, he went down in an isolated rainforest of Guayana and several planes were sent by the Venezuelan Government to rescue him. He survived that adventure but the injuries caused by his plane crash of 1956 in Panama eventually killed him.

In the return from Ciudad Bolívar's airport to Ciudad Guayana, I had the pleasure of driving the Boss 302. What a machine! I truly had power in my hands. Laura and Éner rode in the back seat of the Boss. They were in love and were able to squeeze together in that limited space. I gave to them a copy of the Hondius' map of Guiana. They read it and agreed that the old chart was far from being an obsolete document. Laura was familiar with the culture of Guayana and the people who came and went in a continuous search

for gold, diamonds and any mineral that had value. She felt odd sensations when reading the cartogram. ‘Something really bad is hidden behind these diagrams and letters ... It marks the destiny of people.’ Éner, being a biologist, was fascinated by the many creatures drawn by Hondius in his map. ‘A fantastic zoo.’ Most of his attention was focused on a headless man. ‘This being could be just a metaphor for a stupid man... He certainly violates Darwin’s Theory of Evolution ... Nature has moved the head away from the body of men to allow the growth of the brain and rational thought.’ We started a lively conversation about images of headless men in different cultures. They were a common myth in antique times. Headless men were mentioned in texts of Herodotus, Pliny and Solinus. They appeared in European medieval maps which placed them in distant lands like India or Ethiopia. In the Age of Discovery, the image of the headless man was used to represent primitive people who should be civilized following the norms of European culture. Headless men appeared in Hondius’ map and in Walter Raleigh’s text *The Discovery of Guiana*. According to Raleigh, the ‘Ewaipanoma, which are those without heads,’ were common in Guayana. Interestingly, the concept of the headless man was also used by some Indian tribes in the New World. For them, a European explorer who wasted a good part of his life searching for gold was a headless man.

We were making good progress. Stephanopoulos was satisfied with what we saw while examining El Rio Caroni. The Bee had studied Jimmie Angel’s plane many times, in person by visiting Ciudad Bolívar’s airport, or through the use of old photographs. The aircraft would appear three times in the film. It would be used to represent strengths and weaknesses in the human spirit. Opposite to the plane would be the waterfall, Kerepakupai Vená, a majestic and powerful force of nature. Around the waterfall, humans would move like small ants fueled by obscure desires. We had to find the right balance between visual symbolism, the main message in the script, and the need to capture a big audience for the film. ‘The movie has to make money ... Three of us are receiving a good payment for doing our work’ was the sharp remark of The Bee.

Two days later we were in a small aircraft flying over the Gran Sabana. Laura had done a similar journey many times, as part of her regular job as a tourist guide, and explained to us the names and history of the complex network of rainforests, rivers and

tepui appearing under the plane. It was a new experience for Stephanopoulos and me. We had never seen the region around the Auyán-tepui from the air. Éner held a portable video camera in his hands recording our sensations and the beauty of the landscape. Seeing that beauty, it was hard to believe that substantial parts of the Gran Sabana were not explored and mapped until the beginning of the twentieth century. Our objective that day was to establish a set of scenes to show the first sight of Kerepakupai Vená by Jimmie Angel. Historical accuracy was almost impossible. According to the testimony of his friends, Jimmie Angel was an unorthodox pilot. Our aviator kept one or two bottles of beer in the pilot area, did not trust the readings of the plane instruments, and wrote very poor flying logs. It is not known what exactly happened on that day in November of 1933 when Jimmie Angel identified the location of Kerepakupai Vená. In subsequent years he changed several times key details associated with the event. In one of his most accepted versions, it all happened in a sunny day while his plane was flying through a blue sky searching for a golden river on top of a tepui. A popular belief affirms that the man was enjoying a beer when suddenly saw the tall waterfall. The Auyán-tepui covers an area close to 700 square kilometers. An immense island which rises over a sea of green vegetation. One can cross the tepui along its south side and miss the sight of Kerepakupai Vená. The tepui is incised from the north by a broad valley, the Cañon del Diablo or Devil's Canyon, where the waterfall sits. Travelling over a magic line which comes from or goes to the northeast, one should be able to see the waterfall at many kilometers away from the Auyán-tepui, but the tall walls of rock which give shape to the Devil's Canyon block the view. In our approach, the plane was slowly tracing the walls of the canyon, showing stunning mixtures of rock and vegetation, when in a turn Kerepakupai Vená appeared. In a first sight the waterfall shocks you and you really cannot grasp the nature of that liquid stream moving and making noise in front of you. The native Indians claim that each person sees a different thing in the waterfall. Jimmie Angel saw a golden river which was falling from the sky. Employing the instruments in his plane he estimated a height of one thousand meters for the waterfall. The tallest uninterrupted waterfall in the world! ... And he had found it. Using our imagination we tried to reproduce the actions of Jimmie Angel. Our plane moved around the waterfall for a while with Éner recording views of the liquid stream from different angles. Then, we flew over the tepui to find

Jimmie Angel's golden river and the origin of the waterfall. Over the mesa there were many small streams of water which formed a medium size river. On the land near the river there were patches of plants and rocks. In many places the ground was soft or covered with mud. The day of the waterfall discovery Jimmie Angel inspected the summit of the tepui to find a landing place. No luck. He did not dare to land his aircraft. For four years, our aviator dreamed and talked about collecting a big fortune gaining the courage necessary to land a plane at the top of the Auyán-tepui.

In a tourist camp situated within five kilometers from the Canaima Lagoon, we prepared the next phase in our pre-production work. We were operating in a comfortable bungalow from where we could see dense rainforests and parts of the Auyán-tepui. Things had changed since the 1930s and the discovery of Kerepakupai Vená by the "civilized" world. There was no need to live in the jungle. We had available several campsites and well-established trails to move around the tepuis and see the many waterfalls in the area. At some point during the modern mapping of this region in the first decades of the twenty century, Felix Carmona, one of the key explorers of the Gran Sabana and other parts of Guayana, was in conflict with the Pemon Indians. The Venezuelan Government sent a plane to save the white explorer from the angry natives. Nowadays, the Pemon Indians run a network of tourist facilities and some of them also fly planes to move visitors around the Gran Sabana. In a capitalist world, the natives are exploiting the beauty of their land. To elaborate the film scenes dealing with the visit of Jimmie Angel to the summit of the Auyán-tepui, we used documents and photographs generated by people involved in that adventure. Initially, most people did not believe Jimmie Angel's story about a kilometer high waterfall in an isolated place of the Gran Sabana. He was always erasing the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Our aviator was a picturesque character who had a very low credibility among his friends in Venezuela and the United States. For a while he was not able to find investors for financing his plans of extracting gold from the Auyán-tepui. Eventually, he was forced to form a partnership with two explorers who also had seen the tall waterfall: Felix Cardona and Gustavo Heny.

In the second half of 1937, Jimmie Angel gathered enough support to put in motion a bold plan. His master plan included the creation of working camps at the south-

side base and summit of the Auyán-tepui. The Camp Guayaraca at the base of the tepui would be in permanent contact with the “civilized” world and with the camp at the summit where operations of exploring and gold extraction would be conducted. El Rio Caroni would be used to establish the camp at the top of the tepui. Felix Cardona and Gustavo Heny had explored the summit on foot and were not sure that a plane could be landed on such a rough terrain. ‘Who is the expert pilot here? ... I know what I am doing, trust me!’ was the reply of Jimmie Angel to the objections of his partners. According to him, the first flight to the summit would be a simple thing: Land the airplane on the tepui, search for gold near the waterfall, and then fly back to civilization with a fortune. Three persons accepted Jimmie Angel’s scheme and boarded El Rio Caroni: His second wife Marie, Gustavo Heny, and a handy-man named Miguel Delgado. In the back of the plane, they loaded enough food for fifteen days, a small tent, a couple of machetes, a rope, and minor tools for the extraction of gold. At 11:20 am, on October 9 of 1937, El Rio Caroni departed from Camp Guayaraca. Twenty minutes later the aircraft was flying above the Kerepakupai Vená and began its initial approach for landing on the Auyán-tepui. Jimmie Angel looked for a clean and smooth spot on the mesa. The plane touched ground without any problem but it sank into a thick layer of mud when its weight was transferred from the wings to the wheels. ‘Pull out ... Jimmie pull out!’ begged Gustavo Heny in a desperate voice. It was too late to escape. The aircraft jolted and its nose tilted forward to be trapped by the mud.

After verifying the loss of El Rio Caroni, the plane could not be moved and there was serious damage in its single engine, Jimmie Angel jumped into the river which fed the Kerepakupai Vená. There was no gold at the bottom of the river. For three days, with the help of his wife, he searched everywhere for the precious metal. It was a huge disappointment. They only found minor traces of the elusive gold on the water and grounds of the tepui. After repeated pleadings from Gustavo Heny, the group started his long trip to return on foot to Camp Guayaraca. It took them eleven days to move towards the south of the mesa and climb down the Auyán-tepui. Meanwhile at Camp Guayaraca, Felix Cardona was worried due to the lack of news from the expedition. Five days after the departure of El Rio Caroni, he sent emergency radio signals asking for help. A rescue plane was sent to the Auyán-tepui but due to bad weather in the area the rescuers were

not able to locate Jimmie Angel's aircraft or its occupants. What happened to these people? Newspapers in Venezuela and the United States printed the story, transforming it into a hot topic of conversation. The tale of the crazy bush pilot was true: There was a kilometer high waterfall in an isolated mountain of Guayana! For days and days, no real news, 'I think they are all dead' mentioned Felix Cardona to a journalist, but at the end Jimmie Angel, his wife and friends reached Camp Guayaraca in good health. They were just exhausted with their bodies covered by scratches and bruises. Our hero took advantage of his new fame. As usual he embellished his actions. 'Yes, I did find the tallest waterfall in the world ... And there is plenty of gold in that mysterious mountain.' He told to a magazine how he masterfully guided his party through the jungle, in life-or-death situations, and was able to perform an emergency appendectomy on Gustavo Heny in a dark rainy night. A trivial thing for a man who was a consummated Ace pilot in World War I and a scout for Lawrence of Arabia.

All these details on the life of Jimmie Angel were in the script of our movie. We had to find images to support the dialogs in the storyline. Stephanopoulos asked for suggestions on the best way to achieve this. 'Movie viewers think through their eyes ... Give them something unique to watch.' Our aerial visit to examine the Auyán-tepui and Kerepakupai Vená had a profound effect on my thinking. For years I had been dealing with maps and their two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional spaces in Earth. I knew that maps were an approximation to reality, but the view of that tall waterfall showed me how poor the approximation could be. Jorge Luis Borges wrote an engaging story about an old empire where the cartographers wanted a perfect map. They were not satisfied with poor two-dimensional representations of the world. Their ambition demanded something better. After several attempts, they finally produced a map which was extremely rich with detail: A plain copy of the three-dimensional world. Clever guys! The map was so big that it was not practical to use it. I guess that when dealing with maps one has to find a balance between the transmission of knowledge and the effective use of the map. A regular movie can be a much more powerful representation of reality than a simple map, but it is still a two-dimensional approximation. At the end of the sixteenth century, when making his chart of Guiana, Hondius did a top notch job. With limited resources he was able to capture the concept of a "marvelous place" and

delivered the message in a powerful way. He was playing with signs. In his map, he drew mountains, rivers and fantastic animal creatures to capture the attention of the viewer. Thus, in our film, we could follow a similar approach when designing the scenes for displaying Jimmie Angel's trip from the summit of the Auyán-tepui to Camp Guayaraca. The viewer should walk into a "marvelous place" filled with splendid tepuis which had unique plants and animals. I made my pitch to other members of the pre-production team. Laura and Éner smiled. 'Yes, indeed, the approach of Jodocus Hondius will be our moneymaker' said The Bee giving his approval to my suggestion.

A couple of helicopters flew us to the main mesa of the Auyán-tepui. In the choppers we carried food and other supplies necessary to wander around the tepui's top for a while. Éner was holding a small video camera, Laura and I had regular photographic gear, and Stephanopoulos was carrying a big notebook. Our main objective was to collect information for showing a "marvelous place" from different viewpoints. The Bee assigned me the task of 'seeing the mountain through the eyes of Jimmie Angel.' Laura was Jimmie Angel's wife Marie and Éner was explorer Gustavo Heny. I had a very difficult time performing my task. Jimmie Angel's obsession with gold was problematic. I could not keep searching for the precious metal after seeing so many amazing things over the summit of the Auyán-tepui. Laura and Éner gave me a hand and frequently pointed to spots in which I could find gold. First, we got to the place where El Rio Caroni sunk in the mud and from there we went to the river which fed Kerepakupai Vená. The water in the river flew at a fast pace. It was a cold day. I did not jump into the river like Jimmie Angel did. Doing team work, Éner and I used our imaginations and common sense to design scenes for the movie. Ignoring the cold weather, Jimmie Angel removed his clothes, and eagerly jumped into the river. He had been waiting for that moment years and years. 'His body and the water should melt into a single fluid of desire' suggested Éner while filming the river flowing over the tepui's edge to generate the waterfall.

We spent five full days crossing the top of the mesa. In our path was a diverse array of ecosystems evolving from semi-desert rocky landscapes to thick forests. We had sunshine and we had rain. Under the light of the sun or the shadows of clouds, we collected images, some of them truly breathtaking, and then at nights we dreamed about



those images and how they could be used to represent the life of four persons who were desperate to reach the safety of Camp Guayaraca. Laura and Éner slept in one of the tents and Stephanopoulos and I shared the other. Every evening, before going to sleep, we analyzed details of the film script. The Bee had big plans for our movie. ‘It can be a different thing ... L’homme et la terre de ses rêves ... The cost of filming will be high but the movie will make good money.’ One morning, following the footsteps of Jimmie Angel in his quest for gold, I had a good omen: I saw an armadillo! The creature was dozing inside a group of small bushes. He or she might have been a regular habitant on the tepui or a visitor from the lowlands. In several Indian cultures armadillos are blessed animals which bring good luck. The species originated in South America and from there moved to other parts of the New World. The Aztecs called it “turtle-rabbit” and many Europeans who found the animal in the Age of Discovery thought that it was a “horse with armor.” The Spanish conquistadors gave it the name of “armadillo” or “little armored thing.” Armadillos were very popular in the Europe of the sixteenth century. An exotic representation of the New World that appeared in manuscripts, printed books and maps. Sure, Hondius included an armadillo, a big one, in his chart of Guiana. It was believed that armadillos knew the route to El Dorado. I played with that idea: Perhaps my armadillo could take me to the secret location of gold on the tepui. From a distance I watched its moves. After walking for a while up and down among the bushes, the armadillo went into a cave. It was a big hole in a rock formation made of quartz and clay. The inside of the cave was deep dark. I did not dare to enter that black hole. My needs for adventure and gold were limited. Jimmie Angel probably would have gone into the cave searching for the precious metal. Instead of doing that, I got closer to Laura who was taking pictures of a group of orchids. She looked lovely under the soft light of a sun partially covered by clouds. I snapped a photo of the young woman doing her work. The orchids were quite abundant around us showing diverse shapes and colors. Laura and The Bee were fascinated by the flowers and the birds which populated the mesa. Éner was busy filming many aquatic insects present in every pond and stream of the summit. ‘Insects rarely sell movies ... Most people don’t like them’ commented Stephanopoulos. The biologist ignored the comment of our boss claiming that we had a unique opportunity to show species isolated in the Auyán-tepui. ‘Find the right type of insect and people will

watch over and over.’ He lectured us about some characteristics of the native insects and key aspects in Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. ‘See how they move constantly in the liquid water...They flow and flow ... What do they want?’ Some of the insects looked like tiny dragons. Beautiful creatures in black and blue. ‘Very impressive bugs ... They come directly from fantasy land ... We will use their image in our movie’ concluded Stephanopoulos after looking at the insects through a magnifying glass in my photographic camera.

Our original plan involved an eleven-day journey like the one done by Jimmie Angel and his party. But soon it was clear that we were not crossing a virgin land. Things had changed on the tepui since the systematic explorations of the 1930s. Humans had become part of the landscape. From time to time, we saw groups of people walking on the mesa. One day we found a couple of guys riding mountain bikes! The sight of the bikes shattered our plan. ‘Unknown territory? ... No way, this is crazy, we are fooling ourselves ... The past is gone’ remarked Stephanopoulos. We decided to jump to the final leg of the trip. Laura made the necessary arrangements by radio and two helicopters took us to a point where we could perform the final descent from the tepui and walk to Camp Guayaraca. The descent was a singular experience marked by rapid changes in the vegetation. Camp Guayaraca was built on one of the main plains in the Gran Sabana. A small post located far away from any major town. A human tear in a sea of green. In the master plan elaborated by Jimmie Angel and his partners, the Camp was their link to civilization. The travelers did not know that a lot of people in the outside world thought that they were dead. These people did not realize that Gustavo Heny knew the route, previously he had done the trip at least twice. At this stage of their journey, Jimmie Angel and his party were tired but they pushed harder to reach the end of their adventure. We drafted scenes with images of motion, suffering, and joy. Covers of newspapers reporting the miracle of four persons who narrowly escaped death in a treacherous jungle.

It took us two days of hard work to organize all the material collected during our visit to the Auyán-tepui. At the bungalow located near the Canaima Lagoon, we prepared a detailed report for the French-American consortium which was financing the film. Stephanopoulos had to fly to Los Angeles, California, to discuss another pre-production

work and in that trip he would present a summary of our progress. We moved to the next phase of the project. It was the dark side of the story. After the “failure” of his operation at the Auyán-tepui, Jimmie Angel kept searching for gold in Guayana and other parts of Latin America. His gold searching was far from being a romantic enterprise. Our aviator got involved in some dubious businesses. He made promises about rich gold mines, he got money from investors, and the money disappeared without bringing any profit. People from Ciudad Bolívar, who knew Jimmie Angel well, claimed that he was an adventurer specialized in cheating the native Indians with candles and liquor to steal from them gold and many other things of value. A twentieth century version of a conquistador from the Age of Discovery? Perhaps. We had to establish the best approach to deal with this complex issue on the big screen. To move our film forward we needed a good perspective on gold mining in the rainforests of Guayana. While The Bee was flying to Los Angeles, Laura, Éner and I took a plane to Santa Elena de Uairén to visit mining areas located near Mount Roraima in the border between Venezuela and Brazil. Mount Roraima, the highest tepui in Guayana, known by its rich flora and fauna, was a reference point for Jimmie Angel and many miners of his time who were searching for gold and diamonds. Initially Stephanopoulos did not like our idea of visiting the Roraima region. He thought that it was too risky to do an excursion through a violent zone where law and order almost did not exist. Alarming acts were being reported in newspapers and TV programs. We insisted. ‘The film needs this visit ... Jimmie Angel was living within a culture which did not follow conventional rules ... Within that culture was he a saint or a demon?’ Eventually The Bee provided the money necessary for our visit to Santa Elena de Uairén and the mining village of Arakaeles.

In Guayana, lives can cross in curious ways. Things seem to be marked by a common destiny. Long time ago, in a clear day, Jimmie Angel took in his plane a young girl and her father for an aerial excursion over Mount Roraima. The young girl had never flown in a plane before that day. At the beginning of the flight, she was scared, to flow in the air was a strange sensation, but the aerial view of Mount Roraima erased all her fears. ‘I felt like a free bird enjoying all the marvels of nature ... Mr Angel, my godfather, in a kind and gentle way explained to me his secrets on how to control an aircraft.’ The experience changed her life. She felt in love with planes and flying and later-on became

the first woman in charge of running an airport in Latin America. The name of the young girl was Elena Fernández Peña. Jimmie Angel helped her father, Lucas Fernández Peña, to map the border between Venezuela and Brazil. The two men shared a common interest in gold mining. In 1923, Lucas Fernández Peña, attracted by the gold and diamond mines located in the Roraima area, founded the city of Santa Elena de Uairén. He combined in the city's title the name of his daughter and the Indian name of a river that crossed the settlement.

From the air, Santa Elena de Uairén looked like a beautiful town surrounded by forests and mountains in an extreme of the Gran Sabana. A singular mark made by men in a land dominated by tepuis. I saw a nice church and colorful arrays of houses painted in white, yellow, blue or red in an attempt to overcome the green of the surrounding forests. The notion of an idyllic place in a corner of Guayana was broken by the sight of buildings guarded by heavily armed men. 'Keep your hands out of my sack' was the clear message. The guarded buildings were owned by people involved in the trade of gold and diamonds. Greed was floating in the air of the city. Violence was a problem. In Santa Elena's airport, we were met by a group of soldiers who drove us to a secluded hotel using military vehicles. Laura's father had used his connections with the authorities to make sure that his daughter would not be in danger during our trip. 'Cuanto hay pa'eso? ... How much do you want? ... La niña está haciendo una película de interes nacional!' Using his influence, money, and the claim that a very important movie was being planned, Laura's father made the necessary arrangements to get us a military escort. We would be filming several mining areas using a helicopter of the Venezuelan Air Force.

In Santa Elena, information was collected on many places visited by Jimmie Angel. Our hero played a significant role in defining a tortuous frontier between two countries. 'Yes ... The gringo established well-defined landmarks in the maps of Venezuela and Brazil' told us the Mayor of Santa Elena. In his constant search for gold, the aviator discovered the unique geography of the Gran Sabana, and this modern explorer was never shy when talking about his discoveries. The habitants of Santa Elena were fascinated by Jimmie Angel's tales about a golden river flowing on top of a tepui and ...He had something even more interesting ... A mysterious Lost City located somewhere in the rainforests of Guayana! A place filled with gold and many other

treasures. He had a good idea of where this Lost City could be found. While flying in the midst of a strong storm, he saw, or thought that he saw, a vast ruined city partially covered by the vegetation of a jungle. Over the years Jimmie Angel told variations of the tale to many people living in Santa Elena or Ciudad Bolivar but he never mentioned the exact location of the Lost City. In a few occasions he talked about the existence of a secret map. Archeologists have been busy looking for that map. The story of a Lost City in Guayana was already known by Hondius and many other Europeans at the end of the sixteenth century. Hondius decided not to include this Lost City in his chart of Guiana. Walter Raleigh and other explorers in the Age of Discovery thought that the Lost City was part of the Kingdom of El Dorado. By phone we communicated our findings to Stephanopoulos. ‘Nice pieces of information!’ His meeting in Los Angeles with the financiers of the film went well. The French-American consortium gave a green light to the project. ‘I have to stay here to elaborate an initial budget for filming the movie... You three are on your own ... Do a good job.’ He gave us some instructions on how to proceed in our next task. ‘Record the day-to-day life in the mining village of Arakaeles.’ That simple suggestion changed everything.

At the south of Mount Roraima, in a wide area which covers hundreds of kilometers along the Venezuela-Brazil borderline, one can find a large collection of human settlements working on the extraction of diamonds, gold and other precious metals. Most of them are embedded deep into the rainforests of Guayana far away from the control of the authorities of Venezuela and Brazil. In these settlements, obeying the law is an optional thing. The Europeans who came to America after seeing Hondius’ chart or hearing stories about the richness of Guayana soon realized that, in the middle of a jungle, they did not have to obey the laws or rules imposed by kings who were living far away in the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Those kings could not punish their bad behavior. Many modern settlers established in the Roraima area have a similar attitude towards the rulers living in Caracas or Brasilia. The garimpeiros represent an extreme case. In Brazil, the word “garimpeiro” is used to denote two different things. It can describe a poor worker of the gold mines who is exploited by the system and lives in inhuman conditions. It also serves to describe a bandit, a person who traveled to

Guayana in search of fortune, and one day crossed to the wrong side of the law using violence to achieve his objectives. In Santa Elena, and other parts in the south of Venezuela, a *garimpeiro* is an outlaw involved in theft, extortion, kidnapping and sometimes killing. At that time, armed gangs of *garimpeiros* moved through the rainforests ignoring borderlines, establishing small towns and zones where mining was done following their rules, ignoring environmental concerns and the needs of the Indian population. For obvious reasons we wanted to avoid any direct contact with the *garimpeiros*. The mining village of Arakaeles was an ideal place for doing our study. It was not under the influence of the *garimpeiros* and had an army post which could be easily reached by air.

The thirty-year old helicopter that flew us from Santa Elena to Arakaeles was a machine stolen from the past: An authentic Bell UH-1D from the 1970s which should have been on display in a museum. The Huey shocked me when I saw it standing on an airfield in the outskirts of Santa Elena. My mind was expecting a Black Hawk or an Apache helicopter. The flying machines that one usually saw in Gulf War movies. Furthermore, I knew that old helicopters had a tendency to explode in the air! Not a pretty thing if one was inside the machine. The crew of the Huey, Lieutenant Antonio Barbosa and Sargent Major Atanasio Miralles, assured me that the helicopter was fully functional. ‘This Huey flew in Vietnam ... And still can kick ass!’ commented the Lieutenant. He told us the history of the old chopper. After buying military equipment in the United States, the Venezuelan Air Force received as a gift three Bell UH-1D helicopters which had served in the last years of the Vietnam War. To me, it was a very strange gift, but the crew of the Huey was honored by flying a machine which had seen action in Vietnam. Two of the Bell UH-1D helicopters stopped working and were cannibalized to keep the third one flying. Our Huey was used to transport personnel and materials through the rainforests of Guayana. I saw the weapons loaded in the front and sides of the chopper. The old Huey could do serious damage to any enemy. ‘*Garimpeiros* are afraid of this bird ... They will not dare to bother us’ said the Lieutenant at the end of his explanation. Laura and Éner accepted his words. Hell, they were truly delighted by flying in a vintage Huey. People in love! I invoked the spirit of Jimmie Angel, ignored the possibility of an explosion, and climbed inside the machine carrying a backpack and a

video camera. We had a smooth flight from Santa Elena to Arakaeles. From the cargo area of the chopper, I recorded images for three waterfalls, none of them as tall as Kerepakupai Vená. Cutting the green carpet of the rainforests one could see dark brown holes produced by mining operations. Humans were desecrating the ancient woods of Guayana.

The military post of Arakaeles was a small compound: Four wide barracks and an open field for landing helicopters. A medium size fence and four soldiers were in charge of guarding the outpost. The night of our arrival we slept in one of the barracks. The following day we walked through the mining village. It had a population close to 100 persons living in 30-40 buildings. A few of them were well built two-story houses but most were just plain shacks. Among the well built houses, we identified two stores for groceries and mining supplies, a so-so bar/restaurant, a colorful bordello, and an eye-catching place dedicated to the trade of gold and diamonds. The church of the village was a big open shack. Arakaeles grew on the bank of a river. The river was its main line of communication with the outside world. A place filled with misery and high hopes. All the regular habitants of the village, including the priest and prostitutes, were engaged in mining activities. During their free time, even the visiting soldiers in charge of the military post went into the jungle to try their luck and see if they could find a big fortune. The village miners were young teenagers or mature men and women who had been in the business for decades. Usually they found only small gold nuggets or minute diamonds but their high hopes were maintained by a large number of fantastic tales. For them, a golden river at the top of a tepui or a Lost City in an isolated jungle were part of the real world. Thus, Jimmie Angel was not a crazy guy in that land. ‘The man could fly and dream’ told us the priest of Arakaeles. Father Mendoza was a veteran of the mining fields. He knew the story of Jimmie Angel well after talking with three or four miners who had met and done business with our hero. ‘They all lost their money after financing Jimmie’s enterprises ... And Jimmie also lost his dinerito ... This is a risky business.’ Indeed, in Arakaeles we only saw one rich person: The dealer who bought the gold and diamonds from the miners.

In the afternoon of that day, the old Huey took us in a long trip over several settlements and a big portion of land owned by a company focused on the extraction of

precious metals from the ground. Before leaving Arakaeles, Lieutenant Barbosa warned us: ‘We will be flying over enemy territory ... They may shoot us.’ He put a soldier in charge of a big machine gun located in one side of the helicopter. For dealing with garimpeiros and mad miners, the soldiers of Venezuela and Brazil followed a simple policy: If you hit me, I will hit you two or three times harder, and you will never forget the incident. Thank God, nobody shot us in that trip. On several places, we saw angry armed men on the ground, not happy with our filming, but they did not attack the Huey. Legal and illegal mining was devastating the rainforests. There was no such a thing as clean gold. Groups of miners were cutting trees or diverting the course of rivers to localize the noble metal. A majority of the gold was extracted from open pit mines where tons of rock and soil were removed and processed. We recorded images of pits which were 10-15 meters deep and had the size of 2-3 football fields. Powerful pumps syphoned water from artificial rivers into the pits. Men holding flexible hoses aimed the water at the walls of each pit tearing away chunks of earth. The chunks of earth formed a fluid mixture with the water which was pumped out from the pit to be treated with mercury to extract the gold. The mining operations were a complete ecological disaster which involved deforestation, erosion, and the release of mercury into the air and the watershed. ‘You cannot control these people’, commented Lieutenant Barbosa from the pilot seat of the chopper, ‘they do not obey the laws and fight constantly to possess more and more land.’ The real owners of the land were the native Indians who were being pushed out by small groups of miners and big companies. Some mining companies hired garimpeiros to remove the Indians from gold-rich zones and modify the landscape for mining. When the dirty work was done, the mining companies took legal possession of the land. Bye-bye to Hondius’ idea of a marvelous place. The systematic destruction of the Guayana’s ecosystems started in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time Jimmie Angel worked as a bush pilot for a cartel of gold mining companies. His contribution to the aerial transport of supplies was essential to keep going the operation of these companies in isolated places. He was servicing one of them, the Santa Ana Mining Company, when he discovered Kerepakupai Vená.

It was the end of the pre-production work for the film. In the Huey he went back to the military post in Arakaeles. The evening of that day we organized the final material



for the movie. Next morning, a helicopter flight would deliver us to Santa Elena de Uairén for a phone conversation with Stephanopoulos. The Bee was finalizing the budget for the future filming and needed our input. Laura, Éner and I were happy and sad at the same time. For almost a month, we had been involved in an amazing adventure. It was time to go back to our normal lives. Laura would return to help his father to run the biggest tour company in Ciudad Guyana. She had identified a few locations which could be of interest to wealthy visitors from Europe and the United States. Éner was planning a trip to the southern banks of the Orinoco River to chase a tarantula which, according to him, had evolved in a strange way through history. The insect's genetic code was challenging some fundamental principles in Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution. I had a hard time following Éner's explanation. For me, it was time to think about my future PhD studies in history. We slept again in one of the barracks of the military post. I tried to channel my dreams in a useful direction, analyzing the life of Jimmie Angel, could I write a biography explaining the actions of this man?

It was an intriguing idea but my dreams evolved in a totally different direction. My brain elaborated an escapist narrative based on pieces of old Hollywood movies. I was an intrepid explorer mapping an exotic land. This land was populated by tribes of amazon women and headless men. They were at war. In a distant past, the headless men had stolen a golden idol from the amazon women. At the time of my arrival, the amazon women were losing the war. In a forest, I saw a woman and three headless men engaged in a mortal combat with spears. From my backpack I took out a revolver and shot towards the three headless men. The primitive creatures ran away scared by the sound of the shots. The woman in distress was the Queen of the amazons. 'You can save us' told me the Queen. Soon she put me in charge of the amazon women. They had nice faces, they had long legs, they had gorgeous breasts, and they were all ready to follow the instructions of a wise white male. Using my superior intellect, I organized a series of attacks against the tribe of headless men. Slowly they retreated from the territory of the amazon women. After a dramatic battle it became clear that at the end of the dream I would recover the golden idol, get one or two girls, and do a superb job mapping the exotic land ... Well, Jimmie Angel was not the only one who could dream pleasant things ... My dream was interrupted when a series of knocks on the barrack door woke me up.

Around 4 am, Sargent Miralles came to the barrack asking for help. All the lights in the military post were switched on cutting the darkness of the night. There was a lot of activity in the compound. Soldiers were loading the armament of the old Huey. They had received a distress call from a mining village located near the borderline with Brazil. A gang of garimpeiros was attacking the village. A military alcabala with three soldiers was destroyed. 'The bandits stroke by surprise ... Los muy cabrones ... The alcabala could not stop them.' Several persons in the village had been killed in the fight. Lieutenant Barbosa was trying to organize a force to go in the rescue of the village under attack. The officer could only use two of the four soldiers guarding the Arakaeles's military post. He needed our help. The face of Sargent Miralles was in extreme pain. Fellow soldiers in his army were being slaughtered. In a matter of seconds, Laura, Éner and I dressed up to follow the Sargent. In the communications room of the military post, we found Lieutenant Barbosa and two habitants of Arakaeles: Father Mendoza and a mute miner called Vinicio. The other people in the settlement ignored the call for help. They did not trust the soldiers or did not want trouble with the garimpeiros. That type of violent incident was not rare in the Venezuela-Brazil border. Through the radio system in the communications room, we could hear a grave voice saying the words: 'Ayudennos ... Ayudennos ... Nos están matando.' Just like that. The same words were repeated over and over. The noises in the background changed, sometimes one could hear yells or shots, but the voice kept saying the same five words. It was horrible! According to Lieutenant Barbosa, the initial distress call had been sent by a second voice, probably a soldier, who had disappeared. We could not lose more time. 'Miralles provide pistols and helmets to these people ... We are moving' ordered the Lieutenant. The Sargent obeyed the order. Father Mendoza accepted the helmet but rejected the pistol. 'I am carrying a Bible.' Éner, Vinicio and I grabbed our helmets and pistols. The Sargent stopped near Laura. 'You cannot come señorita Laura ... Your father will cut our balls if something happens to you' said the Sargent. 'Miralles is right ... Miss Vallejo only men will go in this trip' ordered the Lieutenant. Laura considered the possibility of protesting the officer's decision but the voice coming out from the radio system froze her words. A group of four soldiers and four civilians got into the old Huey. The helicopter was fully functional.

Quickly it rose to reach the sky. From the back of the chopper, Éner and I waved goodbye to Laura. It was the end of our fantastic journey.

The Huey moved fast over the dark rainforests. Using the light reflected by a half moon dressed by clouds, I tried to differentiate the amorphous features appearing below the chopper. I was able to distinguish only large entities: Woods, rivers and the open pits of the gold mines. Inside the helicopter, Father Mendoza was reading the Bible in silence. All of us could hear in the Huey's radio system the repetitive call for help: 'Ayudennos ... Ayudennos ... Nos están matando.' Nobody liked those words but that line was our only connection with the village attacked by the garimpeiros. After receiving a pistol from Sargent Miralles, I put it in my waist, and forgot about the existence of the gun. In contrast, to kill time, Éner confirmed the good operation of his weapon. It amazed me the way in which he took apart and played with that gun. Months later I learnt that it was a Colt M1911 semi-automatic pistol. That night I realized that I knew very little about the previous life of Éner. He had been a very good friend since the moment in which I saw him at the airport of Ciudad Guayana. I knew that very well. In modern society things change very fast. We evolve continuously giving and receiving a limited amount of information. Enough to keep our movement. It can be a chaotic movement. The connections between past, present and future may not be clear. A few hours before that helicopter flight, instead of touching a pistol, the hands of Éner were caressing in a tender way the body of Laura. Perhaps he made love to her while I was dreaming of amazon women and headless men. Éner never used the Colt M1911 pistol that night.

When we reached our objective, the garimpeiros were already gone. From the air, we saw a totally destroyed village, with three houses torched and dozens of shacks fallen on the ground. In a careful way, Lieutenant Barbosa moved the Huey in the air to verify a complete withdraw of the enemy. Most habitants of the village were hidden in the jungle. They came out into the open making noises when they saw a helicopter loaded with soldiers. We touched ground in an open field used for landing helicopters and small airplanes. Sargent Miralles and one soldier were left behind to guard the chopper. Lieutenant Barbosa and the rest of us, weapons in hand, walked through the remains of the village. Our hearts broke down seeing the destruction. Before the attack of the

garimpeiros, the local miners were living in shacks and possessed almost nothing. The villagers were going through the rubble to recover utensils necessary for eating and tools for doing mining in the rainforests. A group of persons, women and men, surrounded Father Mendoza asking for confession. 'Not now ... We will talk later.' Inside the bordello, we found six corpses: Four prostitutes, a soldier and a miner were dead. The four women had been badly mutilated. 'The Devil lives and flows with our desires' mentioned Father Mendoza in a hollow voice. We kept walking. The alcabala located in an extreme of the village was under the control of a Corporal and two soldiers. The military post had just two barracks. One had been looted and torched, in the other was the radio system from which the distress call was being transmitted. The door of that barrack was blocked from the inside. We could not enter. From a conversation with the villagers, Lieutenant Barbosa established the identity of the person making the distress call. At the door of the barrack he yelled: 'Corporal Ruiz your family is very happy that you are alive ... Please, open the door, they want to talk with you on the radio ... This is Lieutenant Antonio Barbosa.' Twice more the officer yelled the same information to induce the opening of the blocked door. Inside the barrack we found a man in state of shock and a second dead soldier.

The attack to the village was done by a gang of 25-30 garimpeiros. Slowly they emerged from the rainforests in small groups surrounding the alcabala, the bordello, and a store where the villagers bought food, liquor and utensils for mining. First the garimpeiros looted the store and drank all its liquor. The real conflict started in the bordello. Two young prostitutes, intimidated by the extremely aggressive behavior of the visitors, did not offer their services. The garimpeiros decided to impose their wishes by force. One of the young prostitutes had a sentimental liaison with a miner. He and a soldier tried to stop the aggression. Shots were exchanged and both men were killed. The garimpeiros destroyed the bordello and then turned their anger against the alcabala. The Corporal and soldier guarding the post realized that they could not hold the angry mob and asked for help to other military posts along the Venezuela-Brazil borderline. It took the garimpeiros less than one hour to destroy the whole village.

'Help will be coming' mentioned Lieutenant Barbosa to the villagers. I assumed that the authorities would be sending doctors to take care of the injured and people to

remove the corpses and help with the reconstruction of the settlement. The Lieutenant did not think that the incident was caused by a nasty brawl at a bordello. 'This was an operation aimed at cleaning the area ... The garimpeiros or a big mining company want to move in.' In the dark of the night, some of the villagers were already rebuilding their shacks. In Guayana, shacks can come down or go up very fast. Éner and I helped with the rebuilding of the settlement. Vinicio the mute was a very good handy man. Laboring with the villagers I heard the story of Fabricio Brizuela, a poor conscript soldier from Caracas, who had the good luck of finding a vein of gold and the back luck of being killed while defending a prostitute. 'After finding that gold, Fabricio thought that he was Papa Dios ... He died defending a whore ... Una puta baratona ... Imagine that!' The villagers did not know where the vein of gold discovered by Fabricio Brizuela was located or how much gold was in that vein. Several false hypotheses were mentioned on purpose. Those who had a good idea of where the vein of gold could be found did not open their mouths. A few villagers barely described a drawing, a poor man map with detailed instructions on how to find the vein of gold, sent by the dead soldier to his mother in Caracas. 'Mama Rosa doesn't know how to read or where Guayana is ... Malo, malo.' The number of shacks rebuilt in the village kept growing and growing. It did not matter the treat of a second attack by the garimpeiros. The villagers could not understand the attitude of the outlaws, both groups shared common dreams, they should joint forces. Why were the garimpeiros so violent? 'Greed is a deadly sin ... A passion that can ruin the soul of a man ... Quieren robar el oro!' Vinicio the mute gave a five-minutes speech. Everybody listened to the inspired humms coming out from his mouth and learnt basic truths about life in Guayana.

Towards the end of the night, when a red-yellow sun was rising in a corner of the firmament, three Black Hawks appeared moving like a murky cloud in the sky. The helicopters landed in the open field at a close distance from the Huey. No doctor or other type of emergency personnel came out from the choppers. The Black Hawks were loaded with soldiers. Men dressed in dark brown uniforms and armed for combat. 'Cazadores.' A special ranger unit. We never learnt if the soldiers were from Venezuela or Brazil. The two armies had a common enemy. Only one person came out from the Black Hawks. The officer in command of the rangers had an intense conversation with Lieutenant Barbosa.

‘We will be leaving soon’ said Éner. Both of us headed towards the Huey. In the interior of the helicopter, we joined to Sargent Miralles and the two soldiers who had come from Arakaeles. For a few minutes we waited without saying a word. The villagers also stopped their activities and watched with expectation the outcome of the conversation between Barbosa and the commander of the rangers. The two men were alone in the border of the jungle drawing on the air something that looked like a map. It was clear that they were preparing an attack. One could sense a change in the mood of the villagers: The garimpeiros would be punished! Barbosa and the commander of the rangers reached a final agreement. The Lieutenant rushed towards the Huey. ‘Red code ... No van a escapar!’ said the officer while taking the pilot seat of the chopper. The four helicopters rose from the ground in a synchronized movement.

Under the morning sun, the military convoy flew in search of its target. The crew of the Huey was really excited with the possibility of avenging the dead soldiers. Neither Éner nor I wanted to be heroes. Jimmie Angel claimed that he was an Ace in the Royal Flying Corps during World War I. To reach the status of Ace, a pilot needed to shoot down a minimum of five enemy planes. In his tour of duty over Europe, Jimmie Angel only shot down two enemy planes. At that moment, while flying towards an unknown target, those two “kills” looked to me like an immense achievement. The Huey had no trouble keeping with the pace of the three Black Hawks. In fact, we were almost at the front of the military convoy. It occurred to me that our chopper had been involved in this type of punitive action during the Vietnam War. Thuy Bo, My Lai, Binh Tai. Sad places to be. Perhaps I was being too harsh on the Huey. It was only a flying machine. A very good one! At one point, I had the feeling that we were flying over Brazilian territory, moving into an ill-defined zone within the Hondius’ chart of Guiana. My mind did not recognize the singular twists of the rivers or the vegetation growing in the rainforests. In our path, we found an enormous pit mine which was fifty meters deep and covered an area as big as a dozen of football fields. I did not have my photographic camera or a video recorder, the pistol in my hands was useless to capture that apocalyptic image. Éner joked with me: ‘Don’t worry, in our movie, they will recreate this monster using special effects.’

The military convoy had a difficult time localizing its target. We were in an area which did not appear in modern maps. People had the option to hide in odd places. Eventually, after moving in circles a couple times, the convoy found its target. It was a small mining village. Twice the size of Arakaeles. Shacks everywhere. The garimpeiros saw the four helicopters advancing in the sky. By instinct, many children, women and men ran into the jungle. A good number of garimpeiros had been in direct confrontations with soldiers before. They pulled out their weapons and started to shoot towards the choppers. It was a big mistake. The Black Hawks and the Huey responded with all their fire power. Machine guns and rockets from the air against rifles and pistols from the ground. In a few minutes the main resistance of the garimpeiros was broken. Their village was being destroyed by explosions and fire. Three of the helicopters descended from the sky to release the soldiers who did the final fighting. When the Huey was on the ground, Éner yelled: 'We have to help the women and children', and rushed from the chopper towards the center of the village. I tried to follow him but after a few steps the explosion of a rocket or a grenade cut my path. The blast of the explosion threw me towards a shack and my body fell to the ground among pieces of wood and tin. Disoriented I searched for a route of escape. Near me a ranger and a garimpeiro were exchanging shots. I ran to get out of the village. My nose was bleeding, I felt a tremendous pain in my neck and lower back, but kept going. A tree in flames and an ill-shaped pit appeared at the border of the rainforest. My mind considered the possibility of hidden inside the pit. Things were evolving fast, more and more shots, red fluid all over the village. In panic my body jumped inside the pit. Then, I saw the three shattered corpses at the bottom of the hole. A mother was trying to protect her two young children with her body when the wave of a rocket explosion hit them. They were all dead. I was paralyzed by that vision. Éner found me there, in that hole. He was carrying a little girl who had an injury in her left arm. He saw the dead bodies of the woman and her two children. Around us the jungle of Guayana was on fire. We said nothing. Tears dropped from our eyes.