



An old man, his closest friends, and kids these days. Fulita the Wonder Dog can put on her vicious act and bears the marks of a rough life in a rough neighborhood. Actually she's a moosh, but loyal she is. When five young hoodlums came to attack the author and demand that he abandon his home to them -- or more probably to a rich and politically connected man who put them up to it, hoping to thus expand his real estate empire -- she was unavailable to bite them, but she came back to help in a time of need. And the maleantes? They knew not of the Popeye legend, so foolishly attacked a guy who not only eats his spinach, but grows it.

Surely you know that “Fido” means “The Loyal One”

It has been nearly a year since things came to the crisis point. It still isn't over. But tempers have come to a boil, simmered down and cooled to tepid several times. The apparent concussion's effects have been wearing off, even as the aging process marches inexorably on toward what's inevitable for all beings. I'm ready to write about the events of June, 2021 and their ongoing aftermath.

It had begun long before. Teenage jerks cutting the water line to the available spigot when the neighbors had to fill water jugs during an eight-month water outage when the aqueduct brought nothing to our homes and our representative would not show his face on our street. A neighbor lady sending her kids to strip my fruit trees. People installing a wire from my house, to my troublesome neighbor's house, then back to another house under construction behind me, running through my meter. Children being squeezed through the bars that keep adult intruders out of my home. These guys gathering to drink and party next door on weekends, and things being stolen from my

house often enough when they were there. My water tanks being drained. My garden tools being taken. The tools of my main trade – cameras and computers – being stolen from where I work. The police laughing and jeering when I tried to call in a police report, putting me on hold and never investigating.

Uncle Sam subsidizes Panamanian law enforcement and at least pretends an interest if it's about drugs. However, Uncle Sam's main reason for foreign aid programs with respect to policing is to promote sales of US-made police cars or other hardware or software. If, in dealing with Panamanian cops for ordinary crimes it so often seems to be blown off as someone else's department and/or the victim's fault, Washington subsidizes this dysfunction as an assist to US companies. As to individuals if it's not the War on Drugs and there isn't an American citizen for a consular officer to visit in jail, the American Embassy would say, in all diplomatic correctness, criminal law on the isthmus is a Panamanian affair in which it can't interfere.

Do I want to go on and on about poor, persecuted me, picked on for being the only gringo in El Bajito? Except it wasn't just that. It's a maleante culture that picks on all easy targets, in my vicinity just about all of the senior citizens. Be a man living singly but for gangs of dogs and cats, with no woman of the household? They'll pelt the roof of your house with stones, and scream out "¡CUECO!" (That's "queer" for those of you who know no Spanish.) When my house was being broken into, so were the homes of the others de tercer edad (senior citizens) of the neighborhood.

(I heard something about the crime wave in El Bajito from talking to a few fellow 60-or-over neighbors about their complaints of this nature. Sometime later, I took a walking photography tour through the neighborhood, going by places where I don't generally visit and where the dogs don't know me, and noticed several homes that, like mine, were adapted to the climate with breeze block windows. Which blocks had been smashed to open holes through which people could enter. There was a common *modus operandi* at work around where I lived.)

Thug behavior? That's learned behavior. But it's also along a cultural continuum, where certain things are considered "taking" and not "stealing."

Some of the older physical evidence of this continuum of thinking and acting in the Republic of Panama can be seen in the homes of many people in the modern-day Panama City neighborhood of Panama Viejo. The modern neighborhoods arose from and around the ruins of the first European city on the Pacific Ocean, founded by Pedrarias the Cruel on the site of an ancient indigenous settlement known for the skill of its goldsmiths. That first iteration of the Spanish city was destroyed by the bigoted and crown-chartered Welsh privateer Henry Morgan in his 1670-71 raid on Panama. As a provincial capital it had little in the way of natural defenses, so Panama City – its churches, government institutions and the homes of rich people who decided to stay on – was moved several miles to the west, to a more easily defended promontory

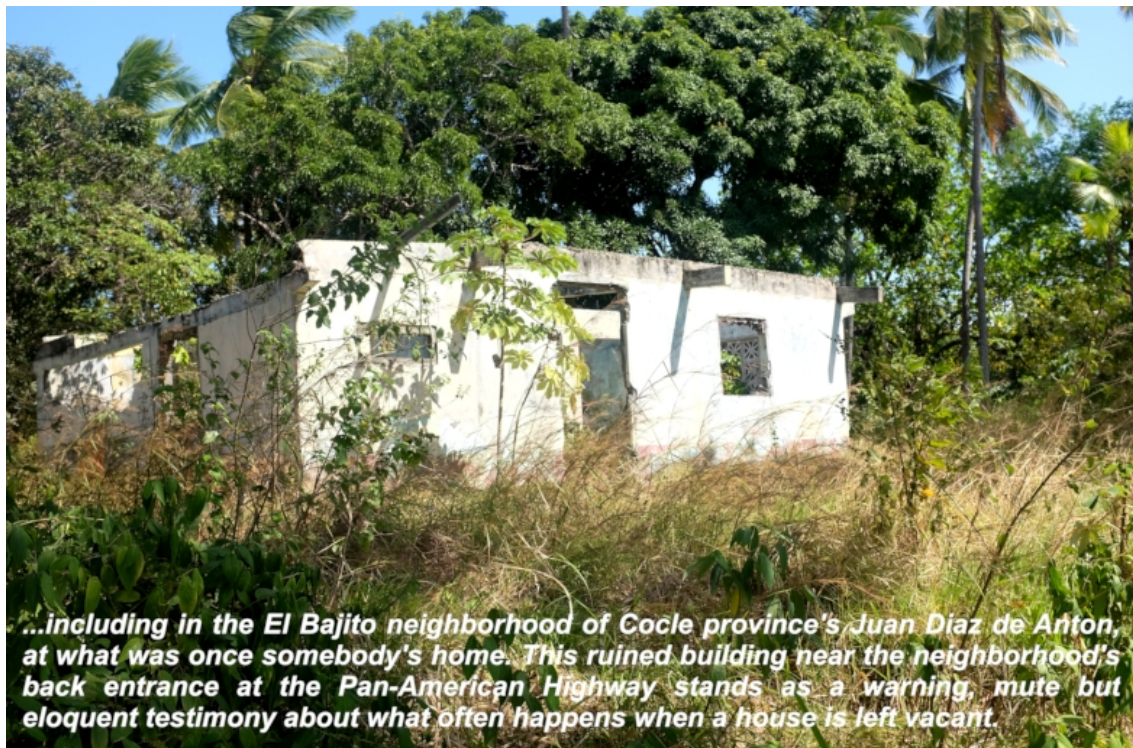
that's now known as the Casco Viejo, and the capital city we now know grew out from there, only later to sprawl over the abandoned Panama Viejo.

The fabulous golden altar that Morgan's boys missed because quick-witted monks painted it with whitewash so that the sea dogs would think it made of wood? That, too, was moved to the new San Jose Church, within the walls and moat of the new Casco Viejo.

(You can still see that altar, made on a carved mahogany base and covered with gold leaf. The particulars of the sources of materials and identities of the artists? Might those details be gleaned from the Vatican archives, only recently opened to scholars? It appears not to be of enough interest to the Panama's government and academia to give somebody who can read Church Latin a grant to go to search for these data.)

However, there were folks who decided to stay, to rebuild in a now quieter neighborhood amidst the ruins, to calmly tend and extend their gardens, to add onto or replace their homes using bricks and stones from the ruins. It wasn't until many years later that the remains of Panama Viejo were declared a monument and the "rescue" of building materials from Pedrarias's city was prohibited by law. In the meantime Panama Viejo arose again, this time as a hardscrabble residential area miles from the new government and commercial centers. Many of the buildings of the present corregimiento include bricks or stones from the old city.

If you get into the archaeology, you will realize that this was old behavior when the Spanish conquerors brought it with them. Travel the roads of Panama's Interior enough and you will see examples of how it lives on:



It was and is a special terror for people living alone during COVID plague times. The person who gets sick and has to stay in the hospital may get out and find that there's no home to which she or he might return. When the epidemic hit President Cortizo was at least sensible enough to do some things to limit its spread and prevent mass starvation, but on the economic side he thought of the banks first and small-time homeowners hardly at all. Count out members of his party and their families, arguably not at all. Perhaps, as construction is one of his businesses in addition to cattle ranching, it was his interest rather than an oversight.

In any case the 2020 lockdown weighed especially hard on those who live in the informal sector of the economy – about half of all economically active Panamanians, and perhaps worst of all on those informal workers who sell goods and services on the streets. Those who sell fruits and vegetables on makeshift sidewalk stands, who sell little bags of produce at street corners, who juggle or perform other acrobatics at intersections, the ladies who custom-paint fingernails or toenails on Panama City's Avenida Central – those people were hit hard and fast.

The foreigners working in such ways have always been harassed and in many cases their way of life has long been flat-out illegal – retail sales jobs are reserved for Panamanian citizens in the national constitution, for one thing. There didn't have to be massive deportations in COVID times. Chased off of the streets where they made their livings, a great many people opted for voluntary repatriation. So-called. It was coerced, although it was not as if Nito was aiming at the foreigners. The written laws, the special emergency decrees and the less explicit operations of economic forces conspired to run a lot of people out of Panama under their own power, often with assistance from the governments of their countries of origin.

It was not as if due to the exodus of a lot of Venes, Nicas, Paisas, Ecuatorianos and so on all these jobs opened up for local people. Those headed for the exits included those who the flights back to the USA, Canada or European countries. Many individuals from the richer countries, some of them economically active in contravention of Panamanian labor laws, but the great majority just retired and annoyed about the quality of life under lockdown in a foreign country, just left. The emigration of the "expat communities" might have been even more dramatic had the epidemic not collapsed the real estate market so that people could not sell their homes here. People left, or were stuck, or stayed here but withdrew from the shrinking economy. That didn't mean that all of a sudden there were all these job openings for Panamanians, but rather that an upscale part of customer base for a lot of local businesses was gone, and those enterprises laid off employees, or cut their hours, or were squeezed out of operation entirely.

Construction, a largely unionized sector of the Panamanian economy, slowed to a near

stop, but in turn that spawned a little boom in informal building, of people with a bit of land here or there, of their own or in their family, building new houses, generally small ones, for themselves or their families. Panamanian census numbers have never been all that precise and certain subjects are considered taboo, but to the naked eye it looks like COVID-19 prompted a bit of migration from the metro area into the Interior. Planned retirement homes or holiday cottages were built and became the principal residences of some of their builders.

Mostly, though, there were hard times that set in.

And the local crime scene? At the end of 2019 a split in Panama's main drug gang, Bagdad, erupted with spectacular violence on the streets and in the prison system. As COVID arrived on the isthmus an atomized criminal element struck wherever it could. People who has lost income and hope took desperate chances. Young people so foolish as to think themselves invulnerable to plague, police and rival criminals took desperate chances. So on top of an epidemic and an economic depression, we got a crime wave.

It included upscale crime, like illegal logging and politically connected land grabbing. Low-rent economic crimes like burglary and robbery flourished. Miserable people of various social classes lashed out in their frustration at being cooped up, or just because that was a convenient excuse at the time – very especially men getting into domestic violence against the women and/or children of their households. Violence against, or abandonment of, a great many cats and dogs may not have been taken to seriously by the police – although animal abuse is a crime here and it's one of the matters about which the Ecological Police units will be sent in – but it, too, was part of a wave of domestic violence that beset Panama during COVID plague times.

On this writer's street in El Bajito, it was petty enough crime from one perspective. Kids, with adults standing by observing, throwing rocks or mangos onto the roof of my house. Adults coming in taking water from my tanks, as kids are generally not strong enough to carry it. Kids climbing my fruit trees not to take a piece or a few pieces to eat, but stripping them and bringing the harvest home. I caught them in such acts often enough over the years, but also, people got to know that if they were in a bad way and asked me, I would generally share water or the produce of my little subsistence farm.

In my case the theft of the tools of my trade, apparently using children to get through the openings between the protective bars on my doors and windows, was way over any line. This had been ongoing for years, often on occasions when friends of the people next door would gather and drink.

The lady next door would sit and watch, and when I came back from work or shopping errands, things would happen like a line installed from my electric meter to her house,

and to another house behind me. And after I got all these hate stares from those assembled after the installation I cut that line with my wooden-handled large garden shears I let it be known that if the sizzling death trap left attached to my meter were not promptly removed the police would be called.

Some cyclone fencing that I had been intending to reuse and kept in what was a carport but a place that this bus rider used for a storage place disappeared. First suspicion was that someone sold it to the metal recycling guy, but then at a second glance it looked an awful lot like some guys building this house behind mine, to which the wire from the thug connection to my meter had run, had made it THEIR fence. Proving that would be a difficult matter, as construction materials are fungible.

But then the break-ins, not only against me but against other senior citizens in the neighborhood, began to pick up in earnest as the hardships that accompanied the viral outbreak set in. The other native English speaker in the neighborhood, the retired lady of West Indian roots, had her house broken into and among other things her groceries were stolen from her refrigerator. She told me of the situation down the street, with the familiar tale of guys gathering to drink and the frequent outcome nothing too good.

These were curfew times, when it was illegal to gather and drink. And the police did come around a couple of times that I saw, making an arrest for a curfew violation, slapping one of the area drunks around, driving police cars down our muddy lane where previously they never went.

But the break-ins kept coming, and a guy from a little farther away, on the main paved road through the corregimiento, would come around visiting the boys known to be trouble and those too dumb to avoid it, sometimes bearing goodies.

My Nikon D-90 camera was taken, surely by a kid slipped through the bars and under adult direction. The call to police elicited derision, getting put on hold, getting hung up on. Since it wasn't the drug gang turf in the Panama City corregimiento of Juan Diaz, the guys answering the National Police hotline were not interested in Juan Diaz de Anton, in Cocle province. See, the Americans pay the Panamanian police with so many forms of training and assistance to fight the "War on Drugs," not to fight the garden-variety crimes that skyrocketed during the COVID crisis. Panama's national independence -- our society's right to set our own law enforcement priorities -- was sold to the USA for a few shiny new Ford police cars.

The slow-witted boy next door I caught peeping into my computer room window. Two young boys from down in the hollow, the older one taught by the adults in his life to throw rocks at dogs and cats, came by offering to sell stuff that I was pretty sure had been stolen. Those latter two entered my home when I was taking an afternoon nap and ran when I woke up, grabbed my machete and yelled for them to get out.

“Slow-witted?” When he was in third grade he wasn’t reading. He’s a big kid now, but I’m pretty sure that his lot in life took an early turn for the worse by his mother’s poor nutrition during pregnancy or his own hunger during early childhood. I am no expert to diagnose such things, but I have seen so much of the stunted growth and learning disabilities resulting from these sorts of malnutrition enough to make that guess.

(What to tell a third-grader from a hungry family who isn’t yet reading? At the time I told him to keep on trying, to know that there are more than one or two ways to learn, that there are many things to learn, and besides, the best-remembered founder of Western literature, a Greek dude known in Spanish by the name of Homero, could not read. Put a sheet with ancient Greek written upon it and he would not be able to read it because Homer, known for The Iliad and The Odyssey, was blind. We don’t know if he was born that way, but one of the ancient ways to learn that’s still with us in today’s world is the training of an eidetic mind that may precisely remember imagery, or may precisely remember words. As in the kids in the Muslim madrassas who can recite the whole Quran, or today’s kids who remember a large repertoire of hip hop lyrics, or old anglophone buzzards like me, who remember the words to a lot of the Beatles songs.

Adapting to a personal limitation to get on with one’s life, sometimes that’s all that can be done. It doesn’t make the consequences of widespread hunger any less of a national disgrace.

Panama does not export pictures of emaciated little kids with empty bowls, but hunger is a huge impediment to our national development. In Cocle’s Anton municipal district the problem is historically so bad that the town of Anton was chosen as the site to build a Ministry of Health maternity clinic. It’s not just a delivery room but a facility in which a wide range of the health issues that affect small children and their mothers are addressed.

There are limits to the health services to families, and the gaps among the jurisdictions are some of the limiting factors. Plus there are considerable cultural, political and economic constraints.

The man of the house drinks a large proportion of his meager income and the kids don’t get properly fed? To make that common problem less prevalent, it would be necessary to attack the ingrained cultural presumption that poverty is the lot of most people. Then, on top of that, the high and mighty local beer and spirits industries might not like it.

The kids grow up on a tiny farm, which is “kept clean” by chopping away the grass and weeds from time to time, which are burned rather than composted, such that the land becomes ever more barren and incapable of feeding a family? There are good people and organizations in Panama who teach better ways, but it’s not done as systematically in the schools as it ought to be. The Ministry of Agricultural

Development (MIDA) is oriented toward agribusiness, especially for export, rather than Panamanians feeding themselves.

Too many people in the neighborhood couldn't afford to pay for trash pickup, the mayor and representante don't insist, so it's left for everyone to burn their trash? One might complain about how that leaves a frequent toxic and carcinogenic stench of burning plastic over the neighborhood. A stink about that might precipitate out into allegations against Coca-Cola et al and counter-charges of a leftist plot against some powerful companies. Getting truly leftist about it might lead one to rail against the gamut of neoliberal dogmas inherent in the prevailing scheme of globalization on terms set by multinational corporations. For public consumption, the usual politicians would accuse anyone advocating proper solid waste management of wanting to raise taxes and fees on people who can't afford them.

To avoid such uncomfortable campaign issues, the politicians have more or less banned the science of environmental health in Panama. There are no maps of leukemia hotspots to correlate with maps of places with no garbage pickups. Nor similar studies which might reflect badly on the agricultural chemical business by correlating cancers with places where herbicides and pesticides are liberally sprayed. Yes, there is a department of the Ministry of Health that tries to keep track of disease vectors, but it focuses on individuals who might be shamed for piles of garbage or stagnant mosquito-breeding water on their premises rather than the broader social, economic and political forces that contribute to such behaviors on a massive scale.

Shall we get into family medicine as affects every neighborhood, rural or urban, rich or poor, in Panama, and which has its implications in penal law? That would be domestic violence, which is common enough but broadly disapproved in society. There is so much more to do on this front, but compared to how it has been that social disapproval is one of the great feats of Panamanian feminism. But what do you do with the displaced kids? Relatives who live more decently is the default placement strategy, but woe to the kid who gets placed in one of the shelters. Those have been a mess of scandals involving political patronage, corrupted religious institutions, individual sticky fingers and sometimes the lowest-down of rapists. The police take an ever-harder line against domestic violence, but picking up the pieces after the arrest has been problematic. Add the epidemic's effects, directly with the lockdowns and via the associated economic troubles? Panama has seen a spike in domestic violence and it would be naive to expect that spikes in juvenile delinquency will not be one of the effects of that.

In any case there are little maleantes in the neighborhood – there always have been. They grow up to be jerks or to find better things to do with their lives. Sometimes a combination of these things. Am I, possessed of TWO JDs – the law degree and the earlier juvenile delinquent record -- one to talk down to people about that?

In my mind there is a suspicion that things would have been a bit different with the troubled kids were they in school in 2020. During the epidemic-induced switch to online learning, the business decisions of the companies that dominate Panama's telecommunications industry made a FURTHER mockery of the privatization concessions that specified full national coverage. Infamously that condition wasn't met a few years earlier when a couple of Dutchwomen, lost on a mountain jungle path in the western highlands, tried to call for help, got no cell phone coverage and were drowned in a flash flood. Come COVID times and El Bajito was one of the many areas left outside of decent wireless Internet coverage. All around the peripheral areas of Panama a lot of kids in effect stopped going to school when online learning was the decree but they had neither the equipment nor a strong enough signal to effectively study by Internet.

Panama is not a very warlike country, not only because of our size and population. The war that more than all other events made Panamanians sick of being Colombians, the 1899-1902 Thousand Days War, is an example of that. Coclé province was the center of most of the fighting that took place on the isthmus, although the conflict also engulfed much of what today is Colombia. Between the Colombian Liberals and Conservatives who had battled through most of the 19th century it started over a stolen Colombian election. Around Panama City began with an initial Liberal victory in a skirmish at Corozal. Then, after ruinous macho gut-checking, it turned into a Liberal rout in a suicide charge into machine gun fire at the Calidonia Bridge. Some 500 Liberals were killed and the Conservatives held Panama City for the duration of the conflict.

The Liberals' guns? A lot of those were saved, and sent by sea to the Interior, landing on the beach in San Carlos. The Conservative mayor of San Carlos and his crew intercepted the arms, but were ambushed by the Liberal former corregidor Victoriano Lorenzo's force. The mayor was killed and the Liberals began an uphill trek to cart the weapons to a mountain redoubt northwest of El Valle. There began the most ferocious of civil wars in Coclé province.

Lorenzo, "El Cholo Guerrillero," might by his bloodlines and the languages spoken in his home when he was a kid be called more indigenous than cholo. The latter term, in Panamanian parlance, generally means of mixed race, part of which is indigenous, and assimilated into Spanish culture. Lorenzo looked up to Belisario Porras as the political leader of his party on the isthmus, but in the boonies of Coclé he and his army were sort of on their own – EXCEPT for the many local people who rallied to his cause.

A big difference between Colombian Liberals and Conservatives is that the latter were for the Catholic Church being the official state religion while the Liberals were for a secular government with freedom of religion. Although Lorenzo had a Catholic education, and although he tried to maintain a disciplined army that didn't commit atrocities, on the ground below his mountain stronghold it was neighbor against

neighbor will bigotry and violence turned way up. Churches were burned. So were most farm houses, barns and crops growing in the field. Liberals and Conservatives killed their adversaries' farm animals. Rape, torture and murder ran rampant. Most of the population fled to the cities. Lorenzo's guerrilla army swept down from the hills to take Penonome, then Aguadulce, finding a countryside in ruins en route.

Cocle's devastation was Panama City's problem, because at the end of the 19th century this area was the city's breadbasket. Conservatives being what they tended to be – within a few years after Panamanian independence from Colombia “extinct” – they took a let-the-devil-take-the-hindmost approach to famine. How bad did it get? There was Conservative censorship during the war, but not long afterward, in January of 1904, the first US Army medical mission to the newly independent Panama found that the leading cause of death in Panama City was beriberi, a starvation disease.

There was nothing like a US Defense Production Act whereby the Conservatives mobilized the economy to meet the emergency. There was no food rationing to make sure that everybody was fed. That part of war making, civil defense, was dysfunctional during the Thousand Days War and a century and a quarter later it was also deficient during the COVID crisis.

Lawyers sued about the 2020 COVID emergency decrees, which were founded in the war powers provisions of military dictatorship's 1972 constitution. The president didn't refer to the bit about how every Panamanian is obliged to take up arms against the enemy. However, the mask mandates and later vaccination drives were more or less that. Most Panamanians rallied around the flag to comply.

The Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) administration of Laurentino “Nito” Cortizo took care of the banks first. On the food front, the program to avert mass starvation was run by local politicians. Favoritism, nepotism and corruption abounded. If it was war against the virus, on the economic front the war effort was a fiasco. The government did not mobilize people for garden production – the cattle rancher president was committed to market economics regardless of the demands of a crisis.

When the crisis hit El Bajito with full force, there were break-ins to steal food.

In June of 2021, relatives were visiting from the States and we took a drive into El Valle. The road from the Pan-American Highway to and through Juan Diaz continues up to Altos de La Estancia, on the rim of an ancient volcano. El Valle is the crater and the drive down into the valley from the heights is steep, winding and beautiful. El Valle was quiet That day due to the epidemic. We ate at one of the restaurants, went to the El Nispero zoo and plant nursery, and made our way back to my place.

Turning onto my street, the guy with the goodies for the troubled boys and another man were standing on the corner. When I got home I discovered that people had

smashed their way into my house, breaking a hole in a breeze block window into my bedroom, ransacking the place, cleaning out my food stash, tearing the mattress on my bed as they climbed over it, but neglecting to look under the mattress to find my two laptops hidden there. Things were passed from inside the house to others waiting outside on my back porch. One of the gates to the back yard had been forced open.

The lady next door and her boyfriend were not there, but a guy whom I had seen before and I would see again soon enough was. A crowd that I recognized but with which I had no desire to mingle had been drinking there the day before.



June 8, 2021, the first major smash-in, near the water tanks, through the breeze blocks and into my bedroom. My operating presumption is that strong adults did this, and forced the closed gate to the back yard, but sent in kids to go in and out, ransack my house and pass things out to them. I might be wrong about that.

Being a bipolar from a long line, and whose kidneys won't tolerate lithium carbonate, I more or less arrange my life around the mood shifts, the irregular sleep cycles and so on. But if you want to set me off into a manic state, set up a fight or flight emotional situation. Physically attack my person. Or invade my home. Or stand around watching at a scene where you know this has just been done.

The people next door surely heard the smashing of a hole into my house. If it was people familiar in the neighborhood they likely knew just who did it. Might have been just a coincidence but those two guys hanging out on the corner, without work tools, living half a mile away across the road from the nation's main drag to Altos de La Estancia and loitering in a place where buses don't go, all the while giving off certain looks and body language, were lookouts. Perhaps one of them was a *reducidor* – fence in Spanish. Their photos, and shots of the crime scene, were taken and sent to the police, who did nothing to indicate that they cared.

I more or less knew the drills and the written, spoken and unspoken languages – the cops', the robbers' and some of the neighbors' and their friends'.

I threw rocks onto the roof of the house next door at which trouble generally gathered, and shouted, in Spanish, "Hey, *maleantes*! This is the last time you steal from me!" Loud enough for neighbors to hear. For a neighbor a little too far away to hear to hear it through the grapevine. It was a serious escalation of the crimes aimed at me and my home and I was not disposed to put up with it. I called out the thugs in a most public way. The guy looking after the neighbors' household came out with a machete.

This crazy old gringo was calling out the *maleantes*.

It was not the last time that the thugs came to steal. Over the next couple of weeks they returned to enter my home through that hole they had punched to steal, at least three more times. They took my weed whacker. They took my best machete. They took food – white rice, chicken with *achiote* flavoring, Italian-style pasta, the cans of ground sardines that I feed to my cats, coffee, fresh and powdered milk. Leaving the brown rice, the tea bags, the packages of shrimp flavor, the ramen and chow mein noodles. From a local perspective, theirs were a banal set of culinary tastes.

The interesting thing was how finely they ransacked my house. Never any books missing, but they rifled through my papers, several times. It wasn't until July, after the string of break-ins, after the five *maleantes* came to personally attack me and demand that I abandon my home, after the arrests and my visits to hospitals and prosecutors' offices that I began to sort through the rubble and noticed which of the papers that they rifled through were missing. An expired old US passport. Documents related to my ownership by transferred rights of possession of my home.

Some extraneous circumstances seem to relate:

A few years earlier, there was a sign up near the entrance to El Bajito offering eight hectares of land for sale. Dominion was asserted over about five hectares, right across the street. A lot on one side of me was sold to a professional couple, who built their holiday and weekend cottage on it. I asked a guy who was representing the sellers who he and they were, and the answer was "a corporation."

If they were offering to sell eight hectares, they were almost certainly offering to sell adjacent properties, including my house and little farm. The sale of a non-contiguous real estate parcel was ever a possibility, and the guy to whom I talked said that my house and 900-square-meter farm were not in the eight hectares offered for sale. Seemed like an insincere assurance to me, but I am not such a good judge of such things.

On the five hectares across from me, this corporation or whoever it was proceeded to remove or alter all signs of previous habitation – remove the remains of a casa de quincha, alter the terrain to obliterate an old driveway, remove old fences, remove old surveyors' markers. It seems that one of the main people connected this corporation, very difficult to ascertain due to Panamanian corporate secrecy laws, is the son of a former legislator.

The guy coming to supervise a work crew cutting down trees, spraying herbicides – including on the banks of a wetland – and as Panamanian real estate folks put it “to clean” (limpiar) the property came on a frequent basis in a white SUV. But after the June 20 attack on my person and household several people who had frequented the neighborhood no longer came around. The guy in the white SUV was one of the suddenly scarce ones.

Papers seized for destruction or future use, and time to lay low?

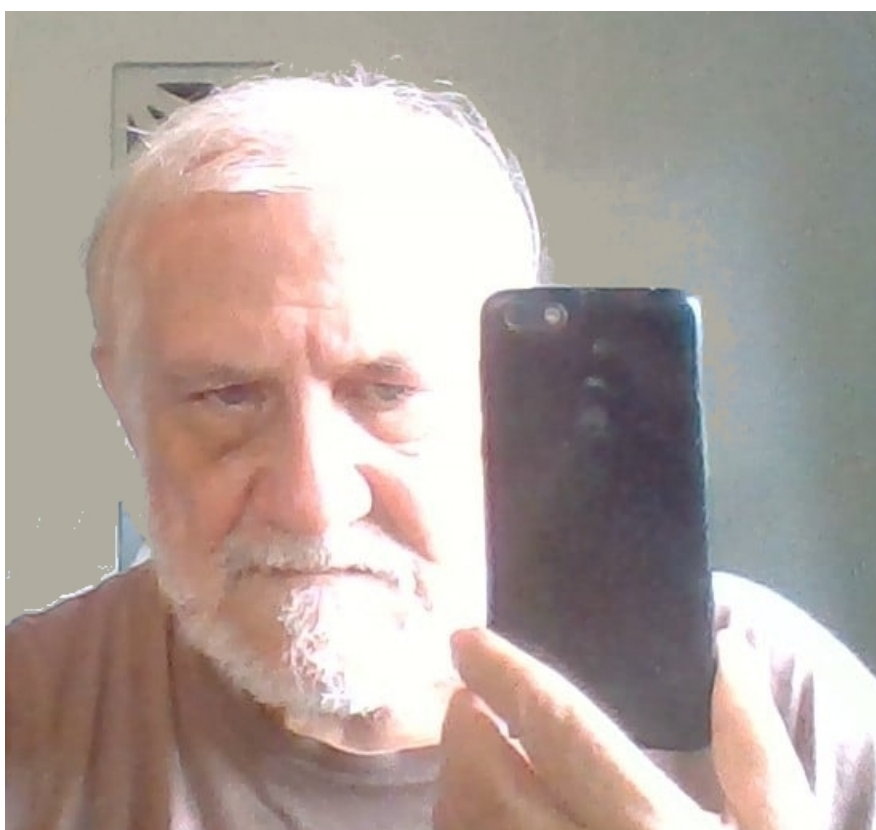
And speaking of the felling of trees and spraying of herbicides, to do that on anything but micro-basis, a company is supposed to get an environmental permit and post a large green sign with the number of the Ministry of the Environment – MiAmbiente -- permit and where it's on file. None of this was done here.

Consider Panama's land tenure laws. Fifteen years of continuous adverse possession, at least on paper, perfects ownership. That continuity may be transferred. The homeowner who bought right off possession land from someone who had 11 years of continuous possession and lives there for five years theoretically owns it. But of course it's not only land titling authorities, but surveyors and keepers of public records among those who might be bribed to certify otherwise, or refuse to accept filings which are rightfully registered.

Forgery? One of my favorite Spanish legalese terms, “falsedad ideológica.” Only in a sick mind like this writer's might it bring up thoughts of some unfortunate flat-chested woman being put on trial for politically incorrect falsies. But the reality is that fraud is one of the sub-specialties of the national sport of fraud in Panama. In Cocle, where land tenure has been messed up ever since the Thousand Days War, it's pretty common.

One might get into past acts, family or other ties and from these build a reasonable model of what was probably going on. If rich enough the bad guys would hire shrinks to swear that such a model is paranoia. Corporate secrecy laws would inhibit anything of the sort from being proven in court. Moreover, circumstantial proofs are disfavored in the Panamanian courts. They want eyewitness identification and confessions.

Under pressure from a prosecutor who wanted witness ID – even though I didn't have my glasses on at the time and didn't know some of the people, I had a bit of proof that I suspect might have been revealing. In the days after the crime wave peaked, when I felt good enough after my head injury to start sorting through the rubble inside my house, I found a cell phone that was not mine amidst the debris. I took a photo of it on a laptop camera, then went into Penonome to turn it over to the prosecutors.



Captured enemy communications? I suspect so, but I didn't have the ability to open it and see. Police and prosecutors surely do have those capacities and I wonder if they even tried. Looking at with whom a home invader had exchanged phone calls -- even if unable to know the contents of such communications -- might turn up damning circumstantial proofs.

I can't prove much, but I suspect that a part of El Bajito's crime wave was not just a problem of young people who see no honorable future for themselves, but of more powerful forces at play.

However, if that is the case we must also consider how inept Panama's dominant

elites are. I could recite a litany. But land grabs of lower and middle class real estate miles from the capital, the mountains and the beaches? And even in those more valuable places, COVID turned the real estate market into a dud. Long-term planning perhaps, or maybe plans based on some inside scoop about what's to come, but to me it looks more like compulsive behavior.

Perhaps more precise details of who and why will some day be confirmed.

If privileged “untouchables” were behind this? Isn't that how the system has often been? The cynical view – commonly held – it that this sort of thing is by original design. More likely it has roots like that that go deep, but the particulars of who gets impunity evolve, as do the dodges by which this is accomplished. We therefore see a slowly changing social pecking order. Those arrested were low in that hierarchy.



1:11 p. m. · 25 jun. 2021 · Twitter Web App

An announcement from the Public Ministry, in which the nation's prosecutors work. It's about three of the people who attacked me and a preliminary order to jail them for it. I learned of the arrests via Twitter.

So, how did the main event come down?

After the first smash-in on June 8 and call-out of the maleantes that afternoon, then several more entries and thefts later, I was fulfilling The Prime Directive around 5 p.m. on June 20. (For that ancient wisdom, look to the Egyptian tombs of antiquity. Old-time religion, before Moses added his gloss, is FEED THE CAT.)

I was in my kitchen, with my glasses off, filling cat bowls with canned ground sardines and kitty crunchies, getting ready to feed the dogs some rice with chicken and achiote flavoring, soy protein and meat.

Then there were a series of blows to my closed front door, grate and adjacent walls. I went to see, and there at the door was this guy I had not seen before, subsequently identified by prosecutors as Eliecer Flores Araújo, telling me “¡Hay que caminar!” -- You have to leave. There were rocks and beer cans littering around my front door, and three males and a woman throwing things at me, and the house, from the middle of the street.

The guy said that he knew who broke into my house and stole, and that if I paid him he'd tell me. Right. He said that he was from somewhere in the area, but I didn't recognize him. He said the he would kill me, or have one of his gang friends kill me, if I did not abandon my home.

The others moved in from the street. The one woman, with a rock poised to throw in my face, screamed “No es de aquí! ¡Hay que salir!” (You're not from here! You have to leave!)

The others joined in. The guy who had been at the neighbors' house and came out with the machete on June 8 grabbed me around the neck with the crook of his arm, locked hands and put me in a choke hold. I bit him as hard as I could on his arm to break it. The woman kept menacing me with the rock and shouting that I had to leave, and I showed her my cedula, the Panamanian identity card that shows that I was born in the Panamanian city of Colon and am a citizen.

She hit me over the head with her rock hand and I went down hard hitting the back of my head on the concrete. I momentarily dazed some of the others started to trash the furniture on the front porch while one of the guys from the house behind me that was stealing electricity stood over me. The woman ran into my front door and I got up, went inside, locked the front grate behind me and pursued.

That woman, whom prosecutors identified as Yanis Arrocha Hernández, sure looked like she had been in my house before. She knew where to go and was loading my laptops and cameras into a bag when I grabbed a coa and confronted her next to my work station.

You can kill someone with a coa – a metal tipped digging stick – but kill someone over property? I jammed it athwart her solar plexus, hoping to stop her from taking my stuff and to leave a bruise from which she could be identified.

By then the others were smashing in the front breeze block window, smashing on the door, screaming for me to open the door, and they were getting through.

I went to confront as best I could, and Yanis Arrocha grabbed the bag with my stuff, shouted “¡Yo robé TODO!” (I robbed EVERYTHING!) and was through the kitchen and out the back door. To me, another indication that she had been in my house before.



My front door and breeze block window, after the maleantes had broken through.

The guys smashed in, started throwing things at me, and the one from the house behind who had been standing over me moments before went after me with a hollow aluminum mop handle, beating over the head rather than jabbing with one end. It hurt, but lucky me that the guy didn't really know how to fight.

The trashing and commotion was brief, then all of a sudden all of the guys ran.

I did not pursue. I went back to preparing the dogs' and cats' dinner. Got that Prime Directive to fulfill.

A few minutes later I heard somebody call through the ruins of my front door if anyone was home. It was two police officers. I asked them to let me finish feeding the animals and lock up as best I could. That I did, and they told me that neighbors had called them. I saw three middle-aged women standing nearby and thanked them. The cops, either looking at my physical condition, or at the way I carried myself and responded to them, said that first thing, I needed to go to the emergency room in Anton. They took me there.

The doctor examined me, did a cursory medical history, and said I needed to go to the hospital in Penonome for some tests. His handwriting I could not entirely decipher, but one of the things was a CAT scan and another was either an EEG or an EKG.

So, two other cops took me and the doctor's slip off in another police vehicle.

NOT to the hospital in Penonome. To the prosecutor's office in Penonome, where I was subjected to a some six-hour browbeating, with constant threats of being charged with filing a false police report – and I wasn't even the one who called them, as prosecutor Brenda Flores surely must have known from reading the police report.

First thing that Ms. Flores told me is that I know nothing about Panamanian law.

Second thing was that events leading up to my ordeal were irrelevant and not to be taken into account.

She demanded eyewitness identification, without even asking me if I had my glasses on in the assault.

She implied that I am a racist for mentioning that one of the assailants was black.

She was not interested in who was positioned where, nor who said what.

She mentioned that there is a right to a victim's rights counsel, but I was never offered the opportunity to consult with such an attorney.

She gave me this "You wimp!" expression when I said that I used a coa to defend my home but did not draw any blood so far as I could tell.

Before the police returned me to my broken up home sometime after midnight, she told me that I had to stick around there for investigators coming the next day.

And while in the dark hours unable to sleep anyway, the police came by with the young man who had put me in a choke hold. The prosecutor might be doing her thing but the police were following leads and making arrests. They let the guy go pending

investigation. The others were not summarily released. I think it means that the machete on June 8 / choke hold on June 20 guy – with bite mark on his arm to identify – flipped state's evidence. That I have not seen him since? It's dangerous for a snitch to hang around. Perhaps I draw connections that are not there.

Early the next morning, a pickup truck without any official markings stopped in front of my troublesome neighbors' house and a man got out and talked to the boyfriend of the lady next door. At various times in the day someone was coming by, peering through the hole that had been smashed in the breeze block window.

Recall, I had been threatened with death the day before, if I did not abandon my house. But Brenda Flores didn't seem to think that this was of any legal or practical consequence.

Understand that I am bipolar – the diagnosis back then was “cyclothymia” and the family history goes back generations – and had been put through a traumatic ordeal both by the attack on my home and person and by Brenda Flores's night of bullying at the prosecutor's office. So I was in a manic state, trusting of nobody, and when some strange guy in a pickup visited next door and had the guy from their try to call me out of my house, I didn't respond. I hid as quietly as I could with a machete by my side. When I noticed a guy peering into my broken home, I armed myself with a can of insect spray, and sprayed out at him whenever he appeared on my front porch, causing him to retreat several times.

Some hours later, cops, forensics investigators and an entourage of Public Ministry people showed up at my house. The guy who had been looking into my house was lying next to it, dead drunk or pretending to be. I reacted to that, and got a “You get excited about a harmless drunk on your front porch?” sort of belittling look from one of the cops. Yeah, a drunk and his friends, stripping everything I own and much of the house itself. I know what goes on in the area when it seems that a home is left unwatched and undefended.

And some guy who was curious, looking for an opportunity, and blasted out of his mind? Or some guy sent to add to the emotional pressure of an ethnic cleansing move, maybe not for the purpose of anti-gringo hatred so much as to remove me as an obstacle to somebody's real estate empire? I have no idea. The police made the guy go away, but did not arrest him or really question him in my presence.

The forensics people didn't ask me to show them where I was, nor where others were during the attack. More than a year later, another forensic investigator came by and did ask such questions. On this day after the attack, photos of the impacts of things thrown at my door at the start of the incident, photos of the inside of my house, photos of my injuries – none of these were taken. Brenda Flores went down the street with a few other Public Ministry women, whispering, pointing and giving the hate stares in my

direction. Classic “ghosting” tactics to tell a person that he and what he has to say don’t matter, the stuff of hostile environment cases in various fields of US law, but all the clever creative rage in Brenda Flores’s operation.

And in sorry shape I truly was. Exhaustion, fright and lack of sleep were taking their toll. Time and sequences were getting blurred. Convenient conditions in a witness for whom a perjury trap is to be set, if that was the intent.

The ordeal was not over. I tried to get some sleep at a friend’s house in Penonome, and he took some photos of the marks the attackers had left on me. I came back to my house to feed the animals and start on cleaning up, and found a cell phone that one of the attackers had dropped. I took that to the prosecutors’ office to turn in as possible evidence, and showed Brenda Flores the photos. She had seen my bruises anyway, but said that the photos and what I said were not valid evidence, that only what was recorded at the medical examiner’s office was acceptable. I went there and they made me wait outside, and demanded a US passport instead of just accepting my Panamanian ID.

Unspoken subtext – “You are a foreigner, outside the full protection of the law here, no matter what the law says based on your birth in the Republic of Panama.”



Master Po would laugh. When things are being thrown at you putting your left arm in the way may keep them from hitting you in the head, but your left arm will hurt the next day. And a prosecutor who’s trying to set you up on a false police report rap will say it never happened.

I complained about the discriminatory treatment and eventually was allowed to be seen and photographed by the medical examiners.

Back at the prosecutor's office, cops had found a phone that looked like my trusty little \$17 Nokia in the course of arresting three suspects. Brenda Flores wanted me to identify it by just a superficial look, but I insisted on being an honest witness who makes sure. She gave me a big argument about how the thing could not be turned on to check because of this or that chain of custody argument, but cops and her superior were in the room and she was overruled. Sure enough, looking at the saved numbers the first thing that came up was my mother in Colorado. Positive ID, a damning piece of evidence, support for an aggravated robbery count.

The prosecutors wanted to sit me down for another questioning ordeal and I refused. They'd have to charge me with whatever accusation if they wanted to keep me. For one thing, it was more than two days later, I felt pretty woozy whether from manic exhaustion or lack of sleep or a head injury, and the Public Ministry had delayed the tests I was supposed to get at the hospital in Penonome.

Finally got that arranged, and after a wait they ran a bunch of tests, and when I told the ER doctor that I was still manic and had not slept in more than two days, she gave me some sort of sedative via an intravenous tube.

The CAT scan said cerebral hematoma, but not then bleeding. (Had it been they'd have admitted me to the hospital.)

No electro-encephalogram, for whatever reason. If there is a doctor in the house correct me, but I think that an EEG would pick up a concussion. There is legal significance here. A man in his 60s with a concussion is not likely to be fully recovered all that quickly. But Panamanian law makes a distinction on this point – conk someone on the head and that person is fully recovered in a month or less, it's a relatively minor crime. If it takes more than a month to heal, then it's a more serious crime.

If the prosecutor's theory of the case is to call it a feigned injury in support of a false police report, then a medical diagnosis of a concussion is inconvenient.

According to Brenda Flores's estimate of who and what I am, I am not supposed to know this point of Panamanian law. However, I have been covering the Panama beat since the mid-90s, and I also know that the public health facilities here lack many things.

Did prosecutors or police make a decision that if there was a concussion, it would not be diagnosed? Or were human resources or readily available equipment in such short supply that any point of law that pertained to me wasn't a medical priority, given all of the other demands on the hospital at that instant? Cutting away with Occam's Razor, the latter possibility seems more likely to me.

In any case, without the money to get a private second opinion but with the ability to look things up, take cognizance of what I could do and couldn't do and figure it out as best I could, it does seem that I had a concussion, the effects of which only slowly dissipated over the course of about one year.

And it wasn't as if prosecutors and law enforcement weren't on my case in the hospital. After x-rays and the CAT scan, while I was lying on an emergency room gurney with an IV tube dripping the sedative into my body, I was visited by a National Police second lieutenant, who questioned me under sedation.

His questions seemed based on Brenda Flores's theories of the case, that this was a made-up false police report and that if anything happened it was my fault. At least the guy let me tell the whole story as I saw it.

He saw the defensive bruises on my left arm. Did he see the CAT scan result, showing the brain bruise?

After questioning and listening, the cop said that it looked like a drug gang, which to me seemed like a very weird and stereotypical thing for him to say.

Upon my release from the ER I was given a prescription for half a dozen medications, but it was at night and the pharmacy was closed. I went with my sister and her boyfriend to sleep at her house on the beach in San Carlos. The sedative had worked and for the first time since the attack I slept soundly.

The next morning I got up early, made my way to the bus stop on the Pan-American Highway at the "front" entrance to El Valle, and went back to the hospital in Penonome with my prescription. I had to wait in a long line.

If someone goes to a public health care facility on doctor's orders having been taken to said doctor by the police after having been the victim of a crime, the prescribed medications are supposed to be free at that facility's pharmacy. The pharmacy only had one of the items on the list. For the rest I'd have to go to a private pharmacy, which I did. The rest of it cost me \$68, which I had on hand but really couldn't afford.

Not a thought about "They're picking on me" here. I had been covering that story about the slow-motion de facto privatization of Panama's public health care system. If it was a pain for me, think about the HIV and other chronic care patients who had been protesting about this situation for years.

Getting a ride back to my house with a friend, I found the bag with my laptops and camera on my front porch. With the heat coming down, had some would-be fence, or some concerned parent, insisted that THESE bits of evidence be removed / returned at once? I figured something like that, but I really don't know.

Were this in another place I'd have taken the computers, cameras and bag to police or prosecutors to be dusted for fingerprints. But in Panama the authorities don't DO fingerprints. Plus, turn those things over to them and they were the tools of my craft, which I likely would never see again.

I had been using a borrowed computer to keep up at least some presence for The Panama News notwithstanding the fear, injuries and rapid succession of events. That's my livelihood, such as it is. I can be quite tenacious in defense of the project upon which I had been working for more than a quarter-century, even if the usual pay is just poverty rations. It's what I want to do, and it's something I do without a boss for both better and worse.

(It's nice to have someone to edit and criticize. I don't need someone to browbeat or redact on the bases of commercial or political convenience through eyes and according to interests other than mine. Do I defend freedom of the press? Hell, I PRACTICE it, and recognize it as a universal individual right, not as the exclusive property of businesses of a certain size or larger. On the many occasions going back to when I was a teenager working on the hippie underground press that I have been dismissed by some would-be authority figure who only talks to "real journalists," I have tended to get dismissive about suits who are not "real people" too. It doesn't matter if the suit is of a corporate tool or a wannabe party boss, nor of whatever company or political organization. Somebody else who has ideas contrary to mine? She, he, they or it have freedom of the press as well, which I will defend against the censors even if I trash the thinking that may be exposed through a communications medium.).

Had I not found a way to stay online in the wake of the robbery and beating, I might have missed the prosecutors' announcement, on Twitter, that three of the five maleantes who attacked me had been arrested and were being held without bail for aggravated robbery.

It was a whirl of rapidly unfolding events on several fronts:

- Brenda Flores had been taken off of the case, a Public Ministry decision about which I am not privy to the reasoning or arguments. I'd be dealing with a new guy, I think her superior, Gonzarck Gaitán.
- There was to be a bail hearing for those in custody at the relatively new court complex in Penonome.
- Some cops came by to visit, with questions that didn't seem to pertinent to the investigation of the crime against me, some words of sympathy, and maybe the whole point, one of the officers inspecting my garden. He was shown the beans and greens and roots that are much of my diet. He saw the various herbs. I

showed him the aloe vera and turmeric plants, and the cecropia tree, all parts of my modest hippie peasant pharmacopoeia. Was he disappointed not to have found a coca bush, opium poppies or marijuana? I could have discussed my years as a pothead, and gotten into my history major lore about how Rastafari was not known to have smoked the sacred ganja weed, but did own a brewery. We didn't get into those things.

- A clinical psychologist and a social worker came by, "for the case" although I was never entirely sure for which ministry or ministries they worked. I was candid as I knew how to be with the psychologist, and sort of afraid that she'd report that there's this nutcase who needs to be put in a psychiatric ward. So yeah, the bipolar diagnosis, the family history of suicide, the childhood trauma, the admission of living with a certain amount of fear in my life that the violence just visited upon me would come back and escalate. Might the social worker have found my way of life unviable, or unbelievable, so as to remove me from my home as if I were a wino found living on the streets of Panama City, or so as to tell some judge or cop that I was living with no visible means of support and thus obviously had to be some sort of racketeer? I interacted with them on the supposition that they were gathering background information about a crime victim and possible witness, rather than any idea that they might be in league with somebody who actually agreed with the notion that "You're not from here! You have to leave!" My dysfunctional instincts about trust would impair me from readily telling the difference.
- A generous reader and her work crew came by, patched the holes in my house and put up a fence and a gate.
- A dead cat, many beer cans and a bunch of dirty diapers were left in front of my house.
- Once the fence was in, I could see the places where someone was climbing over it, I cut a palm tree that made it harder to do that I the front. The next day the folks whom I suspect to have been using that way in, kids with an adult, came up from the hollow and looked carefully at what I had done.
- I found a ramp made against my back fence, using an old hardwood plank that had taken two strong adults to put into place.
- Someone came in a truck and took some personal belongings from the house behind mine from which one of the guys had been removed to jail – a friend or relative rescuing personal belongings? Shortly afterward that house was dismantled by neighbors.

Reset and turn down the terror dial, but the ordeal was not, in some ways is not, yet over. As Mr. Gaitán kept telling me, it's a continuing investigation. I can't even figure out of whom. I could try to glean some inferences from ongoing developments, but I am not keep abreast of developments in the cases as Panama's laws mandate.

The tales of crime, punishment, plea bargains, a court hearing from which I was excluded after a couple of bus rides into Penonome and a long walk, the Supreme Court's move to massively fire all of the prosecutors, judges and public defenders in the Accusatory Penal System? All gravy, all beside the point.

MEANWHILE, with a house that I could not close up, let alone begin to adequately defend until the holes were patched and the fence put in, Fulita and The Mama Dog were holding down the fort. The Mama Dog would come in and check on me with a wet nose every now and then. Fulita would come up to me and lick my bruises. Isn't that the essence of the long friendship between people and dogs?



The Mama Dog, in need of a bath and a toenail clipping



Fulita, who is also a mama dog and came to me from the same abusive place as The Mama Dog.