

## The Missing \$17 Million

I spent most of the past week in Guatemala, and much of that near the small village of Rio Dulce in the eastern part of the country. It's a crossroads town of sorts, located a number of miles inland on either side of the river by the same name and near the start of Route 13, a semi-paved track that disappears into the indigenous areas of the north before wending its way through the jungle to Belize.

Rio Dulce is a bit atypical as Latin American towns go, having several dozen marinas that cater to boats traveling up and down the Caribbean coast, often seeking shelter in its coves during the summer and fall hurricane season. Here one speaks English as easily as Spanish. The



yachts and sailboats of the wealthy plow the waters cheek-on-jowl next to the dugouts of fisherman living a subsistence existence. In the afternoons the bars fill up with old men—American retirees, many—who nurse

their beers while doting on their young female friends, attracted no doubt by Social Security checks that allow them to live a life of relative luxury in a country where the per capita income is only a bit more than \$400 per month. Life is easy. Anything you may want or need is available for the right price. No one asks too many questions. It's here, and in other spots like this throughout Central and South America, that people go to disappear.

We sat in a bar on a pleasant knoll overlooking the river one afternoon, the three of us, my brother, the banker and me. There were three others there also, two men chain-smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, arguing for some reason over the fine points of the American legal

system. The older fellow, with his heavy tan and Australian accent, had little positive to say about it, decrying the aggressiveness of debt collectors in the ‘States. The other fellow, with large glasses and sporting a mustache that would have looked appropriate on one of The Village People, commented that his bail bondsman had been good to him, but didn’t elaborate. The third actor in this strange scene was the proprietress. Her age was indeterminate—somewhere between forty and seventy, I’d guess. Her skin had been rendered a leathery brown by the tropical sun, and tattooed across her exposed back was a huge map of the Lesser Antilles. She volunteered that her “old man” had used it as a sailing chart in their tropical travels, but he’d died the year before, thrusting her now into her new role of cook and bartender. A strange scene, but typical, I was told.

I had a long conversation one afternoon with an older woman who said she was Guatemalan but spoke with a flawless American accent. She told me in that part of the world people are assumed to be who they say there are, but was quick to add, “Most everybody here is running from something.” A history of failed marriages and failed businesses are common. Other times there may have been legal problems. “Every now and then,” she said, “the U.S. Marshalls will show up and take somebody away.” She had several stories and examples to back this up. After a bit of thought, she continued, “A lot of times, though, people are running from themselves.”

This brought to mind the recent tale of Aubrey Lee Price, who disappeared a couple of months ago with some seventeen million dollars embezzled from The Montgomery County Bank & Trust Company, centered in tiny Ailey, Georgia. Oh, and there was an additional twenty-three million in investment losses from other clients, according to various reports on the internet. It seems that Price left a “rambling” suicide note in which he confessed to everything. Video recordings show him boarding a ferry in Key West bound for Ft. Meyers, but he never arrived. All this is well and good, except for the fact that he was said to own two large boats capable of navigating on the open sea. According to the Huffington Post, he was a frequent visitor to Guatemala and Venezuela, owning land in the latter country. Just so happens that Venezuela doesn’t have an extradition treaty with the U. S. at the moment. The cops think he faked his suicide and is on the run. They’ve offered a modest reward. I’d suggest they start looking in Rio Dulce.