

"Clever and intriguing." —ALAN DERSHOWITZ



# THE **THIRD** PHASE

A NOVEL

JOHN C. ADAMS

# THE THIRD PHASE

A NOVEL

---

## COPYRIGHT

---

Copyright © 2026 John C. Adams. All rights reserved.

This reader's sample may be downloaded for personal, non-commercial use only. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, stored in a retrieval system, or shared in any form or by any means--electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise--without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations in reviews or critical articles.

This sample includes the Prologue and Chapters 1-5 from The Third Phase.

The complete novel is available in print and ebook editions.

Print ISBN: 978-1-5107-8760-5 Ebook ISBN: 978-1-5107-8767-4

Excerpted from the complete work published by Skyhorse Publishing, 307 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

# PROLOGUE

Gabriella's eyes snapped open, immediately taking in the familiar pattern the streetlight made as its light dispersed through the bedroom curtains. She checked the clock—2:00 a.m.—then the empty space beside her. Carlos was up again. A faint line of light seeped under the door. *Kitchen*, she thought. The nightmares had turned too many of his nights into restless vigils.

She slipped on her robe and shuffled out of the bedroom, only to pause when she heard muffled voices and a giggle. One of the kids must be up too.

The warm glow grew stronger as she tiptoed down the stairs, rounded the corner, and found her husband and their oldest daughter, Sophia, perched at the kitchen island sharing a sandwich and some chips.

“Ah, ah, ah. Does Nick know that someone snuck chips into the house?” Gabriella teased.

Sophia pretended to hurriedly hide them behind her back. Nick was the family nutritionist, who had been diligently policing her father's diet since his illustrious sports career had begun thirty years earlier. Now, for even better pay, he spent most of his time making sure that Sophia and her two younger siblings minimized sugar and processed foods. For Sophia, it was one of the many perks—and annoyances—of having a father who was arguably the most recognizable person on earth.

“Nightmare again?” Gabriella asked Carlos.

“Yes, I'm so sorry, angel. I really tried to not wake you. And I feel doubly bad because I woke Sophia when I turned the light on.”

“It's OK, baby, always OK,” Gabriella said with her typical gentleness. “We are in this together. Were ‘they’ both in it, like usual?” He nodded

affirmation. Even talking about it conjured up visuals he'd rather keep buried.

Sophia knew all too well who the "they" were that her mother was referring to. Carlos and Gabriella had long ago stopped bothering to hide anything from their oldest daughter, who had always been mature beyond her years. How scary and disturbing it must be for her dad to be haunted by these memories—some of which she had even shared in, albeit from a safe distance.

Gabriella shifted the mood. "Did you two talk about what happened yesterday?"

Sophia swallowed. "I don't think it was anything, I mean . . . I didn't see anything."

"Your security agent is a trained professional," her mother countered. "If he was concerned about someone following you, then we should all be equally concerned. You as well."

"I know. Of course I want to be safe. It's just hard when I get pulled away from friends at the drop of a hat like that. I don't want people to think it's a pain to be my friend."

"We know, honey." Carlos reached out and took her hand. "I hate that any of this impacts you. I'll talk to the security team in the morning, and we will put two people on your detail. One can investigate anything suspicious while the other stays with you."

"Great, now two babysitters."

"While we're on the subject"—Gabriella now turned to Carlos—"you and Rosey are hiring the additional security team that Jack recommended, right?"

Carlos hesitated. "Uh, I think so."

"Sweetie, this is really important. You are doing hugely impactful things. But you are stepping on many toes—some you don't even realize. Even your dreams are telling you to be careful."

"Uh-oh, my wife and my subconscious are teaming up on me now." He looked at his daughter. "I'm in big trouble." Sophia snickered, and her mom at least smiled.

"Look," she said first to Sophia, "you have the distinction of having parents who were both kidnapped as youths. There are people—resourceful, immoral people—who would love nothing more than to find a way

to get leverage on your father. So, you should be asking for three security guards instead of bemoaning having two. And you,” she continued, now turning to her husband, “have survived kidnapping, an assassination attempt, and perhaps the most nefarious nation on the earth trying to kill you with tanks and helicopters. So please, you two, give a mother and wife a little slack.”

Carlos was quick to answer. “Angel, yes, thank you, yes. I’ll confirm with Rosey first thing in the morning.”

Gabriella, having gotten the response she sought from one of her interlocutors, shifted her eyes to the second. “Mom, yes, of course I want to be safe. But my faith is in God. He chooses my path, and I go where He leads me. Ultimately, I rely on His protection.”

“Jesus Christ!” Carlos blurted out.

“Daddy! Don’t talk that way.”

Carlos took a moment to contemplate his next words. Gabriella stepped in. “Sweetheart, yes, of course, we are all in God’s hands. But He also told us not to test Him. For you and your siblings, there will always be costs and benefits to being the children of the father that you have, but to go out in public without proper security is ‘improperly testing.’”

Sophia thought a moment, eyes actively moving as she thought. “OK, Mom, that’s a fair point.” She nodded acquiescence, which rolled into a yawn.

Carlos glanced at the clock on his phone. “OK, good, let’s all try to get some sleep. I’m going to have a swarm of reporters in my face in, uh . . . six and a half hours.”

The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the trouble of states, or indeed of humanity itself, until philosophers become rulers in this world, or until those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands.

Plato, *The Republic*

PART ONE

# FAME AND FORTUNE

## CHAPTER 1

### “2”

“Goddamn it. ICE agents are in the driveway,” Alejandro shouted; his voice sharp enough to make his wife flinch.

“Oh no,” she said meekly. “I hope they aren’t here for Bella.”

“Of fucking course they are,” his voice even louder. “I told you I didn’t want any trouble over this.”

“I’ll sneak her out the back door.”

“The hell you will!” he barked. “This is ICE—you think this is their first rodeo? You think two women can just ‘sneak out the back’? This isn’t some TV show. I’m not going down for your sister. I told you she shouldn’t stay here once the deportations started. Go get her and bring her here right now. If you try to help her escape, that beating you got last month will be nothing compared to the version you’ll get now. Understand?”

She winced but nodded, tears burning behind her shuttered eyelids. She turned to go—but stopped, gathering a strand of courage. “Bella said that if this happened, Rosey has to stay with us. Rosey was born here, so she is legal. I’m drawing the line there. You can beat me if you want, but Rosey stays.”

He sighed and lowered his tone. “Rosey is a good girl. Yes, that’s fine. Baby, things are good for us right now. Things are good at work. I’m making money finally. But I’ll be super pissed if we get in trouble for harboring an illegal, even if it is your sister.”

“OK, but we *are* hiring a lawyer to get Bella back. With our own money.”

“If that was your plan, then she should have self-deported. Now she’s on the ICE naughty list. We’ll have to wait until the next administration or maybe the one after. The numbskulls in Washington are like ghetto kids

turning on and off a fire hydrant. We'll have to wait until it's on again. Who knows when that will be." He turned away. The conversation was over.

She just looked down—having no argument to counter his point—then turned to get her sister and her precious niece.

\*

Plump, but adorable five-year old Rosey, her naturally frizzy hair pinned back with a pink bow, struggled to get loose from her aunt's grip. "Auntie, let me go. Where are they taking Mommy?"

"Rosey, sweetheart, please don't make this harder than it is."

Rosey cried out as her mother turned toward her from the street and waved as best she could in handcuffs as the agents put her in the back seat of the car. "Where are they taking her? When will I see her?" the desperate girl asked her aunt while not taking her eyes off her mother as the car drove away.

"Oh, little baby." Her aunt knelt beside her. "It's so hard to explain at your age. It won't make any sense to you. It only barely makes any sense to me."

Rosey sniffed as she tried to stop crying, like she knew big girls were supposed to do. When the car was finally completely out of sight she turned to her aunt. "Splain it to me. Mommy always says I'm smart. I'll understand."

Her aunt hugged her. "Well, honey, we live in America. And we are very lucky to live in America, because it is the greatest place on earth. You understand that part, right?"

Rosey nodded. "Yes, America has . . ." she articulated very slowly, ". . . liberty and justice for all. I'm not sure what those are, but I know they are good."

Her aunt's first thought was that this was no kind of justice, but she didn't want to confuse her little niece, or shatter her embryonic dreams, so she merely chuckled through her own tears. "Gosh, you are a prodigy, just like your mom says. Anyway—you know how, when you are at kindergarten, only certain people, teachers and students and maybe sometimes parents, are allowed in the building, but no one else is allowed in?"

Rosey nodded, still sniffing.

“Well, America works that way too. Only certain people are allowed in. Your uncle and I are allowed in, and you are too. But unfortunately, your mom isn’t. So, they are making her leave.”

“But the school doesn’t let other people in because they might hurt the children. Mommy would never hurt anyone.”

“Oh yes, yes, that is so true,” her aunt said, her voice cracking. “Your mommy would never hurt anyone. But the problem is that some people from outside America come here, and they do hurt people, and that has gotten worse lately, so now America is sending *everyone* out who isn’t allowed.”

“But I want to go with Mommy if she has to leave.”

“Of course you do, sweetie, that’s wonderful. You have such a good heart. But above all your mommy wants you to be here and not back in our home country. It is dangerous for little girls there. We will work hard to get her to be able to come back, but until then you are going to stay with us. We will take very good care of you, and we will have lots of fun.”

Rosey kicked some pebbles while seemingly as deep in thought as a five-year old could be. “You were right. I don’t understand.” She looked up and confidently peered into her auntie’s eyes. “One day, I’m going to fix this.”

## CHAPTER 2

### “3”

“Anwar, get down! The drones are coming back!” his brother shouted. Anwar could only see out of one eye—the other caked with blood. The air vibrated with the metallic hum of circling drones, and explosions rattled the ground in soul-crushing waves. Dust and smoke choked the streets, filling his lungs as he dove under a fallen sign, curling up as tightly as he could. Another surge of tears rolled down his cheeks as he thought again of his father buried under the rubble of the collapsed school. They had to dig him out as soon as this strike was over.

“I swear,” his brother hissed, after diving under the sign with him, “I’m not going to just blow them up. I’m going to find a way to kill all the Israeli bastards slowly. I want them to suffer.”

A final blast shook the earth as more debris rained down on their makeshift shield. Then, finally, the sky fell silent.

“Come on,” Anwar said, voice trembling with desperation. “Let’s get Dad.”

The two brothers scrambled to the rubble-filled crater where the school had been. No movement. No voices calling for help or moaning in pain. The dying that they had expected to be forced to witness was eclipsed by the silence of death itself.

“NO!” screamed his brother as Anwar just sat and cried.

\*

After walking the handful of war-torn blocks to their apartment, the two Palestinian boys, now orphaned, washed the dust and blood from their

skin and drank what seemed like a full gallon of water each. Their home felt wrong—too quiet, too hollow.

“Maybe we should go live with our relatives in Jordan,” the one-year-younger Anwar, often the reflective one of the pair, suggested.

“No. No way,” his brother said, wiping his face with his gritty hands. “We are staying right here. This is our land, and these are our people. We are old enough to be real fighters. We are going to be patriots like our father and kill the infidel. That is exactly what he would want us to do. They are shameless and evil—satanic even. They fucking bomb schools.”

Anwar hesitated. “Why was Dad at a school?”

“What?” His brother’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m just wondering. Why were Dad and other military leaders in a school?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” his brother burst out angrily. “Are you blaming Dad for getting murdered?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying that we are at a crossroads, and we have to think about wheth—”

Before he saw or heard anything Anwar felt the fist smash into his cheek and then felt his back and shoulders hit the floor. His brother leaped on his chest and started pummeling him. All Anwar could do was cover his head and beg his brother to stop.

After five wild blows, his brother’s rage collapsed. He rolled off his little brother—in tears again.

Anwar sat up and rubbed his face. “Do you know what we are fighting for?”

“Yeah—you just said that stupid shit about Dad.”

“No, I don’t mean ‘we,’ you and me right now, I mean our people. What are we fighting for?”

“Are you dense? We are fighting to kick the fucking Israelis off our land and take back our country. I guess I hit you harder than I thought.”

They both smiled at that.

“Look” Anwar said, “Jeshia was telling me . . .”

“Oh great, you’re listening to that little bitch now?”

“Hey, she’s smarter than you think, and she’s kind of my girlfriend, so watch what you say.” His brother shrugged. “Anyway, she has spent time

overseas. She says that we are living in a little cocoon here and we are being brainwashed by our so-called leaders.”

“So, you are saying that the Israelis aren’t Satan’s minions after all? They just murdered your father, you stupid shit!”

“I’m going to ask again, and this time I want you to respond like an adult, like a brother, not a nutcase. What was Dad doing in a school?”

His brother glared at him again. “How should I know?”

“Well, what do you think? Come up with a plausible scenario. The only answer I can think of is what Jeshia says—that our leaders are putting our own innocent children at risk using them as what she calls ‘human shields.’”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You know what, I’m going to go kill that cunt myself.”

“OK—I’ll go do it with you. All you have to do is give me even one decent explanation why Dad was in a school—why, when our ‘leaders’ spend any time above ground, they are in schools, mosques, and hospitals. Give me even one good reason and I’ll kill Jeshia with my own hands.”

## CHAPTER 3

### “5”

“Hector, hold on!” Paco shouted as the two of them sprinted up the dim alleyway, guns in hands. “Hector, stop. If we do this, it’s going to start another turf war, and the streets have just finally settled down.”

“Exactly,” Hector said, now slowing down to briefly take cover behind a dumpster to make sure the corner, which often had dealers loitering, was still empty. “We always said one day we would control the neighborhood. This is our best chance, while they don’t expect it. If we take out Ramon and Garcia, the others will get in line.”

“It doesn’t have to be us or them,” Paco stated, but his lack of confidence whenever he spoke with Hector made it seem more like a question. “At least, we don’t know that yet.”

Hector straightened to his full height, about five inches taller than his accomplice. “What universe are you living in? Are you stupid or just pissing your pants? They killed Rigo! We both know it was them, and they did it to send us a message. They deserve what they’re about to get, so think of this as dispensing justice. And I’m telling you, we’ll have half the city within a year. We’ll be rich, friend. Don’t forget that part.”

Paco steeled himself and nodded acquiescence. “OK. So you are sure they’ll come this way?”

“Yes, it’s all set. Maria and two other girls are bringing them back to her place to party. She just texted me. They’ll walk by here any second.” He paused and checked his guns again. “Remember, always have a revolver ready, in case your semi jams up. I learned that the hard way when I watched my uncle get his head blown off.”

“There they are,” Paco whispered, but with exuberance that even surprised himself. He looked more closely at the two tattoo-covered

twentysomethings coming toward them with three girls in tow. *Yes, Paco thought, this is justice. They are murderous scumbags who don't deserve to live. We are making the world a better place. Hector is right.*

"You can hit the other girls if you have to, but goddamn it, *do not* hit Maria."

Paco nodded. And then they leaped out and started firing in rapid succession. The two men went down as they tried to pull their guns, but multiple shots at close range incapacitated them so quickly that they couldn't get a single shot off before Hector made point-blank kill shots on them both. One of the girls screamed, collapsing with a bullet in her leg.

Paco froze as her cry scraped his nerves. Hector barked at Maria to shut her friend up or he would do it "his way." Neither of them saw the third girl draw a tiny derringer from her purse. Two cracks snapped through the night. Hector felt a burn rip his shoulder as he fired back with his other hand, dropping her instantly. As the girl fell into a bloody heap he screamed at Maria, "What's wrong with that stupid bitch?" He noticed Maria's eyes looking past him—in shock. He wheeled around to see dark blood already pooling under Paco's right side. Paco's wound wasn't superficial like Hector's. It appeared he had taken one right through the liver.

"Shit, fucking shit," Hector said as he tried to outthink the panic brewing up inside him. The police were slow to respond in this neighborhood, but they would be there soon enough. He couldn't call an ambulance. *Shit!* He knelt beside Paco. Paco had his hand on the bullet wound and lifted his head enough to see his own blood making its contribution to the carnage on the sidewalk.

"Oh, God, no. I'm going to die. Hector, no. Don't let me die. I'm not ready. This wasn't how it was supposed to go."

"You're not going to die," Hector said, now kneeling and cradling his friend's head. Paco looked at Hector's face and saw that he didn't believe a word he had just said.

"Hector, am I going to hell?" Paco asked, now having trouble speaking as pain, faintness and horror overtook him.

"You're not going to hell, my friend." Hector glanced up at Maria, then back to Paco. "There is no such place."

## CHAPTER 4

### “6”

“Azadi, hurry,” her mother shouted up the stairs.  
“I’m still packing,” fourteen-year-old Azadi called back.

Her mother appeared at her bedroom door in a flash, frantic and tear-streaked. Two large suitcases lay open on the bed, overflowing with clothes, books, and keepsakes. “I told you that you could only bring a small bag, with a few days of clothing. It has to be a bag you can carry, while running if need be. You can’t bring all these things.”

“You haven’t even told me where we’re going,” Azadi said, her voice a mix of fear and confusion.

Her mother started to break down crying, but did her best to fight it off. “Azadi, please, we have to go, now.”

“Mom, what is happening, where are we going, and what is the huge rush?”

Her mother’s face crumpled. “Azadi, please, I can explain a little more when we’re on the bus. But right now, we have to be ready to go.”

Azadi stepped back, unsettled by the sight of her mother—usually so composed—losing control. “Mom, what is happening?”

Her mother rushed to her, now breaking down. “Oh, my sweet Azadi. This is the worst day imaginable. Your grandfather was just executed in the public square—”

“What? No, that’s impossible! You said they were just holding him for questioning. What? Grandpa is dead? No—no!”

She grabbed her daughter’s face, affectionally but tightly, having regained enough of her composure by sheer act of will. “Azadi, we are all in danger. We have to leave Iran, now. Right now. Your father will be home

any minute and we are leaving right that second—with whatever you have managed to put in that bag.”

“Leave Iran? What, no! We didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Azadi, sweetheart, it is dangerous here. Dangerous in general, as you know, but for us now, extremely. We have to leave.”

“You mean like—leave and not come back?”

“I don’t know. Our country isn’t a just country. It is run by people that are . . . are bad people. Criminals really. And now they see our family as a threat. I think we have to assume we will be gone until there is a regime change.”

“When might that be? And where are we going?”

“I don’t have an answer to either question. Your father will tell us where we are going next. As to the long term, I’m sure even he doesn’t know that.”

“Mom, this is crazy. I’m really scared.”

“Good, Azadi, good. You need to be scared because we are running for our lives. Now let’s go. Right now.”

\*

Azadi spent the next several hours in what seemed like a stupor. She had never, would never take drugs, but she had tried to imagine what it was like. *This must be it*, she thought to herself. *Experiencing your own life as if you are a spectator. Things happening all around you or even to you, but you aren’t totally there.* She thought back on the day thus far—the crowded, smelly bus, the suffocating ride in the trunk of a car separated from her parents, only to arrive after dark at what seemed like a warehouse. Who had planned all this? Who were these people helping them? Had she heard correctly or was it a hallucination from her self-manufactured “drug trip”? Grandpa was *Mossad*?

## CHAPTER 5

# “10”

The midafternoon sun gently blanketed the ground as Carlos and Manny kicked a worn-out ball across the makeshift soccer pitch where they spent most of their time. For as long as anyone could remember, the neighborhood kids had claimed this patch of land and turned it into a field of dreams—a small escape from the harsh realities around them.

Two wooden posts on each end served as goalposts. Three rusted, hollowed-out cars on the southern edge acted as impromptu bleachers. Carlos and Manny—both ten, Carlos taller and naturally athletic, Manny shorter and softer—chased the ball with breathless enthusiasm.

“Carlos, you’re so lucky,” Manny said, still winded but with a hint of sadness slipping through. “You always get picked first. The older kids want you on their team. They pick me last and then make fun of me.”

“Hey—don’t worry,” Carlos said, shaking his head in sympathetic agreement. “We’ll be the big kids before long.”

Manny nodded, his frustration still simmering under the surface. “They see you differently. You come from the outside, speaking all those languages. You’re . . . special. Maybe even protected. Maybe the other kids think that because your parents are missionaries, they’ll get in trouble with God if they do something bad to you.”

“I never thought about it like that,” Carlos admitted. “I guess I am lucky. I can run fast. And I have grandparents from all over who taught me their languages.” He blasted the ball between the wooden posts.

“Goal!” he shouted, and both boys took off in their familiar victory run, arms spread like wings, imitating their soccer heroes. They’d done it a hundred times, but it still felt magical.

When their laughter faded, Manny grew serious. “You’re my best friend. I just worry you’ll move again. You’ve been in Bolivia two years, but before that it was, what, Brazil, Peru, Argentina . . . And I heard your dad talking about maybe going to China.”

“I don’t know what my parents will do next,” Carlos said. “I hope we stay here a long time.”

Gunshots cracked the air.

Both boys dove flat, instinctively, without needing to think. Drug turf battle? Kidnapping gone wrong? Kids playing with stolen weapons? It could’ve been anything. They only knew to get down and pray it passed. They were poor local boys—too poor to be targeted for ransom—but that knowledge only blunted the fear. It didn’t erase it.

They crawled to the abandoned cars and pressed against the metal, holding their breath, trying to silence even their pounding hearts.

Carlos forced his mind away from the fear by returning to Manny’s question. Where would they move next? He loved seeing new places, but leaving friends—real friends like Manny—hurt more now. His parents did important work—building houses, digging wells, bringing doctors into remote areas—but Carlos knew his life had been somewhat sheltered. Only recently he had realized how rare his own situation was: both parents alive, all four grandparents involved, endless love and attention for an only child.

His father was a US citizen and Carlos himself had been born in the US, but his family left just a few weeks after he was born, and he had never been back. His father’s parents were an African American man from Detroit and a Chinese woman who grew up in China but lived most of her adult life in the US. Carlos got both his last name, Smith, and a lot of his looks from this side of the family. His darker skin and slightly Asian eyes made him look more like the indigenous kids of South America than the more European-looking types that filled the cities.

His grandmother on his mother’s side was from Colombia, and she had studied archeology when she was young. While in the Middle East working as a volunteer on a dig for a summer, she met a Palestinian man about her age. Love at first sight, they both swore, even all these years later. As a young man in a dangerous place, his grandfather jumped at the opportunity to marry his new sweetheart and move halfway around the world.

Reality snapped back at him as the gunfire started again—much closer. Within what seemed like just a couple breaths, two scruffy men appeared, guns leveled at them.

“Well, what do we have here?” one said. “On your knees. Hands on your heads.”

Carlos’s stomach lurched—this was the execution position.

“Local rats,” the other said. “Means your families don’t have a pot to piss in. Useless.” He spat on the dirt.

“Not so fast,” the first replied. “Look at them. They’re old enough to work for us.”

Carlos felt a breath of relief that they weren’t to be shot, but that quickly faded as he realized they were being kidnapped after all, and not for ransom, but to be some sort of slaves to these drug dealers. He had heard vague rumors that this could happen, but he had dismissed them as ghost stories, something parents told kids so they wouldn’t stay out too late. Carlos tried to remain calm and rein in the panic spreading from his stomach to his limbs.

His first instinct was to help Manny—he always felt like a protective older brother. And he also thought rationally—if Manny wasn’t with him, his own chances of escaping would be better.

Suddenly, almost without conscious awareness, he heard his own voice say, “I’ll go with you. But my friend—you don’t want him. He’s sickly and . . . not right in the head.”

He prayed that Manny would get the hint and play along, as they had used a similar ploy to get away from some bullies just a few weeks prior.

A gun went to Manny’s temple. “If his head doesn’t work, let’s get rid of it.”

The shock hit Carlos like a lightning bolt as the realization sank in that, of course, these were not teenage bullies, they were ruthless killers. He wasn’t sure if Manny played along with the setup or if it was his genuine reaction to mortal terror, but he dutifully collapsed into a heap on the ground and quite genuinely seemed to be having a seizure of some sort while rambling incoherently.

The other criminal grabbed Carlos by the collar and dragged him off, shouting over his shoulder, “Let’s go.”

“What about him?” the other man yelled, staring at Manny, still convulsing and mumbling incomprehensively.

“Fuck if I care. You can shoot that one or leave him. Up to you,” he replied without turning.

For Carlos, the world stood in limbo as he waited for the tormenting sound of gunpowder and metal. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally felt relief surge through his body as he caught a peripheral view of the second man catching up to them—with grateful silence ringing out around him.

The hazy sun was the last thing he saw before a hood was placed over his face, robbing him of sight. In quick succession and with the cruel efficiency, Carlos’s hands were tied, and he was thrown face down into the back of a pickup truck.

He held back his tears as thoughts of his family bounced around in his head and a swirl of emotions threw him into despair. Would he ever see his parents again? Would he—

His thoughts were interrupted by his bladder as he felt the warm urine on his legs. Despite his predicament, he was embarrassed. He heard laughing and then the roaring sound of the engine just before the force of the accelerating truck tossed him headfirst against the tailgate.

\*

Hours later, at dusk, Carlos sat near a campfire surrounded by a dozen gang members. The hood was gone, but his wrists remained tied. Dried blood crusted down his temple. His stomach heaved and he vomited onto the dirt. The gang laughed, passing joints and drinking.

Carlos tried to push the fear out of his head and think as clearly as he could. His legs were not tied, so if he could just find an opening maybe he could try to run for it. He painstakingly weighed the pros and cons of that idea. He could outrun even the older kids playing soccer, but could he outrun adults? And what would they do to him if they caught him? His next decision could be life or death.

About a half hour later, some of the women followers of the gang showed up and he saw that this might result in the distraction he needed. He bent over and started dry heaving, which caused one of his original

kidnappers to slap him on the back of the head and tell him that if he threw up again, he would use his face to clean it up.

Carlos doubled up on the ground and started sobbing. While these were natural feelings, he had the presence of mind to exaggerate them. If his kidnappers felt that he was paralyzed by fear, they might mistakenly think he would never consider trying to run for it. He finally settled down to merely whimpering and then, closing his eyes, lay perfectly still on the ground. As he had hoped, his assailant got bored with the task of watching him and began talking with one of the younger girls.

Carlos had surveyed the area and had already picked out the cart path where he would dart as soon as no eyes were on him. He didn't know where it led, but it was the route he could get to the quickest. If he got a good jump, he could get to it before they had time to pull their guns—after that, he was in God's hands. If the path was a dead end then he would be as well.

Only seconds later, his opportunity emerged as a loud argument burst out between two of the women. His head was saying *run*, but his gut and ultimately his legs were saying *no*. He stayed curled up on the ground and the moment passed. Now eyes were on him again. He spent the next twenty minutes cursing himself. Soon his cowardly self-loathing was overcome by rage, and he bolted for the pathway with disregard for who was watching.

“Hey, you little shit.”

Gunshots whizzed past his head as he ducked and cut sideways. He heard two more shots as he sprinted onto the cart path. It was still light enough that he could see that, thank God, it wasn't a dead end, but much to his horror, it led into a wide-open field. He'd be a sitting duck, but all he could do now was continue to bob and weave—and run as if his life depended on it—because it surely did.

\*

A few minutes later, the two kidnappers stumbled back to camp, guns dangling, faces alight with embarrassment.

One of the gang leaders cackled. “Oh, did your little fawn get away? No more beer for you two—tubby shits.”

THANK YOU FOR READING

# THE THIRD PHASE

A NOVEL BY JOHN C. ADAMS

---

**Continue reading the complete novel.**

Available in print and ebook editions through Amazon.

**PURCHASE THE FULL BOOK ON AMAZON**

<https://a.co/d/01U9EvOt>