

THE RIO COSTILLO STING

A NOVEL

A fictional account of a series of actual events that took place in the late 20th century in the San Luis Valley, which spans the borderlands between New Mexico and Colorado, USA.

1.

They rode the spine of the ridge in the raked light and made camp in the stand of firs where they had camped as boys with their fathers, and theirs before them. They roasted meat and warmed beans and tortillas and once eaten, sent the boy across the scree to a snowmelt to rinse the skillets.

Lest he slip the boy kept his good arm free, and tucked the pans under the stump of his left, the remainder of which had perhaps been lost by chance; but back at camp, when he stooped to set the skillets clumsily on the fireside rocks, the truncated fingers, jutting like maggots from a carcass, proved the limb to have been ill-wrought in the womb.

The men stood in the open meadow, in closing shadow. Two had drawn rifles from leather scabbards. The third stood by, sipping from a flask, a second at a duel.

“That snag, yonder?” Esteban Benavides pointed across the valley to a standing dead, its bleached trunk bright in the late light. He leant his Marine Corps issue Remington M24 against a fallen ponderosa pine and crouched to rest the Swarovzski spotting scope on the log.

Cisco Gurule nodded and sprawled, legs akimbo, and spread the legs of the bipod on the Mosin-Nagant. “Three fifty?” he hazarded.

“Three hundred and thirty two meters.” Esteban Benavides adjusted the focusing ring. “Wind, five mph, across, westerly.”

“MOA?” Cisco Gurule inclined his eye socket to the eight-by Unertl scope.

“A centimeter.”

“MOA?” Dr Mike Howell tilted the flask.

“Minute of angle,” said Benavides.

“Minute of arc,” said Gurule.

“Ah,” said Howell, none the wiser.

“Hung out since we was old enough to steal a beer, went through a couple wars together, still can’t agree on nada.” Benavides sucked a breath through his teeth. Gurule chuckled, settled, exhaled and squeezed the trigger.

The crack of the shot and the repeated crack of the shot crashed through the alpenglow and shattered the quiet dusk in the high cirques of the Sangre de Cristo range in the border country of New Mexico and Colorado, still stippled with stained snow patches in the late spring. A muster of ravens, heading to roost, mobbed each other and scolded the shooters. A hawk pitched from a fir with a slurred cry; a herald sent to warn them off.

The boy, who had come from the fire, started at the report, then squatted behind the men. He kept the heel of his right hand jammed against one ear, while lifting the deformed remnant of the other arm and, by inclining his head, was able to affect a muffle.

Gurule twisted his shoulders away from the cold ground and stared up at the hawk; Cooper’s, bonito, kinda high for a Cooper’s, he thought.

“What’s with you and them goddamn hawks, Cisco?” Benavides did little to quiet his needling tone. “You know Doc,” he shot a glance at Howell, “every country we been in, Cisco here stares at them goddamn hawks. The kites in Kandahar, the falcons in Iraq, and them lambe guys in the mountains above Kabul.”

“Lammergeyers.” Gurule cranked the bolt action, settled, and shot five more rounds, pausing to deliberate between each.

Benavides peered through the sixty power spotting scope and grunted. “Not bad, for a viejo.” He took his M24, lay prone, took aim, and loosed the round. The noise was less arresting than the concussion of the Russian rifle. Benavides checked his first shot through the Swarovski, made an adjustment on the riflescope, and fired five more rounds. Gurule then shot four more, as did Benavides, in a ritual, it seemed, they had oft repeated.

They viewed their work through the spotting scope.

“Wanna check it out, Doc?” Gurule asked.

Dr Mike Howell approached, wondering, not for the first time, if he’d chosen wisely. Six months ago he had completed his residency at the UCLA School of Medicine and yearning to get as far as possible from a freeway, had accepted a job in the ER room at the Taos hospital. Gurule had brought his mother in, one day, after the old woman had suffered a mild stroke, at their home, eighty miles North, in the San Luis Valley, and the doctor and the former marine sniper had struck an unlikely bond. He was now as far from a freeway as it was possible to be in the lower forty eight, and encamped with two men who could shoot, it would seem, without hyperbole, the eye off a gnat at a hundred paces, and with whom, he was about to commit a felony.

“Damn.” The doctor gasped in surprise as the smiling face filled the frame through the crystal Czech optics. “That guy has a hell of a grin.”

“Eyes need a little improvement.” Benavides said.

“Yours, or the target’s?” Gurule grinned.

“Pendejo.” Said Benavides.

“Take a look, Joshua.” Howell called to the boy.

“No.” Josh snapped.

“Mira j’ito.” Gurule called softly to his son. “Come see your papa’s shooting.”

Reluctantly the boy scuttled forward on his knees trying to keep his ears covered. He bent to the eyepiece, looked for a spell and when his head lifted his face was creased

with a smile as wide as that adorning the face shot into the trunk of the Douglas fir, a fifth of a mile hence, across the alpine bowl.

Later they lay against their saddles about the fire, ducking their heads, now and then, from the smoke. Joshua turned and whispered to his father.

“Son, there’s nothing to fear out here. You can go alone.”

“Por favor, papa.” The boy’s face was upturned, beseeching.

“OK!” Gurule rose, a couple of joints cracking; his jaw awry as he grabbed his rib cage; the broad shoulders and barrel chest heaved briefly in pain; his mouth ovalled a hiss through the umbra of his brown beard. He walked the boy out of sight among the trees.

“Doc,” Benavides spoke, “Cisco’s been hurtin’ bad recently. Wanna tell him to go down to the VA? He won’t heed me.”

“What seems to be the trouble?” Howell cursed himself for the cliché.

“He’s been complainin’ about a pain in his side. He’s sure he’s got cancer.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Depleted uranium. He was on a mission in Helmund Province in ‘99. Had to go into the mountains, take out an Al Qaeda dude. He got spotted and had to hole up in a burnt out Sherman. The ragheads threw everything they had at him. Their 30 calibers and RPGs are coated in DU. And our armor is clad with that crap.”

“I thought the Department of Defense said we don’t use that stuff anymore.”

“Doc. Palease. You believe any of the bullshit the government throws your way?” Benavides thumbed a nostril and snorted a curl of phlegm into the flames. “Cisco was washed in that crap for a couple of days till they could chopper him out.”

“Jesus.” Howell glanced through the trees towards the man and the boy. “Did he get his man?”

“Damned straight he got his man. One shot. In the chest.” Benavides said. “You know how else DU is reckoned to fuck you up? You bein’ a doctor ‘n all.”

Howell racked his brain. Benavides looked across the fire glow, the sallow cheeks drawn tight, brown irises exposing black in the darkness, the thick moustache incongruous on the lean face, then chopped at his bicep with the beer bottle he’d just drained.

“Oh my God. Of course. Birth defects. He thinks that’s why Josh....” Howell’s voice tailed off.

“Man’s sure of it.”

“You were with him in the military. You were a team right? Sniper and spotter.”

“Yep. Two tours together. Always fightin’. The enemy, each other. Never apart.”

“Does one always spot and the other always shoot?”

“No. No way. Both shoot, both spot.”

“But one must be a better shot than the other.”

“Yeah. He was always a couple of ‘mil-dots’ inside of me.” Benavides head sank a little at the confession. “Some say Cisco was as good as Hathcock.”

“Hathcock?” Howell asked.

“Carlos Hathcock had ninety three confirmed kills in Nam.” Gurule’s voice startled the doctor; father and son came into the light. “But you have to have a third party confirm each kill so he maybe had three times that.”

“Chuck Mawhinney had one hundred and three, official.” Benavides stirred the coals and laid on lengths of pine. “Forestry ranger these days. Up in Oregon. Quiet man.”

“Mawhinney is recognized as the best then?” Howell glanced between the men.

“It’s him or Hathcock for the Americans in Nam. Hathcock is said to have shot a guy through his scope and clear through his eye. Like the guy was zeroed in on him.” Gurule’s beard tilted as he drank from a cola bottle of mescal, and passed it to Howell.

“How many did you guys....?” Howell’s voice fell away as he looked up and saw the cold stares from the men. “But there were good Europeans? And Russians? During the second world war.” The young doctor drank, twitched as the coarse liquor hit his throat, capped the bottle with the corn-cob, and pitched it over the fire to Benavides.

“Who was the Ruskie at Stalingrad?” Said Benavides

“Zaitsev. But the guy with most confirmed kills of all time is the Finnish guy, Haha or some such name.” Gurule’s tone lightened. “They say he had over five hundred. In the Winter War, 39-40 against the Russians.”

“Used a Mosin Nagant. Like Cisco here.”

“And all with iron sites.”

“No scope?” Howell whistled.

“Wanted to keep his head down.” Gurule and Benavides laughed at the worn joke. Howell looked bemused; Joshua smiled and shifted against his father. They stared at the fire. A cold wind slipped off the snow-mantled slopes above them, and rattled the crowns of the pines. The men tugged the blankets about their shoulders.

“Better get set to turn in.” Benavides said. “If we’re gonna shoot us that elk tomorrow.”

“Poach the elk, you mean.” An uneasy silence followed Howell’s statement. He pressed on, aware of the tension. “Not that I have a problem with it. But strictly speaking it’s poaching.”

Again a pregnant pause.

“Not if you’re from the Pueblo.” Gurule spat the words. “Them fellers can hunt any damn time.”

“But they’ve got their own laws, they’re a sovereign nation.” Howell spoke quietly.

“The Indians have been here a spell, no doubt.” Benavides’ voice was strained.

“But then so has la raza.”

“Our grandfathers learned from the Indians to live off the land. Mud for bricks, trees for vigas, game for food.” Gurule stared at Howell. “They took care of their families from these mountains. They didn’t need no permit to go hunt or cut wood.”

“If the ski resort hadn’t shut down we’d be working there.” Said Benavides. “Or at the molybdenum mine if they hadn’t cut the work force. Wouldn’t need no elk or white tail. In or out of season.”

“We risked our asses over there for Uncle Sam. Now we’re back home there’s little work, less thanks, and a shit load of orders and regs.” Gurule did little to hide his bitterness. “Wonder we didn’t stay in ‘Ghanistan, eh vato.” The look this time to Benavides. “We’re livin’ like them peasants out there anyways.” Joshua stirred in his sleep. “How’s my boy here goin’ to feed his family? Tough enough job with two arms?” His voice wavered an octave as he looked down at the boy. “An’ a bunch of ricos movin’ in, buying up the land, closing off roads.” He shot a glance pointedly at the doctor. He hawked and spat. The bile hissed briefly in the bright heart of the blaze.

“It isn’t just happening here, Cisco.” Howell responded. “You should see the development in California, my home state. Rampant construction into all the open space. At least until the property crash hit.”

“Property crash don’t seem to have affected these rich asses out here any.” Cisco snapped. “Something needs to be done to slow these people down. Maybe stop them.”

“How you going to do it?” The doctor said, “Legally that is?”

“Legal ways have been tried.” Cisco’s stared into the fire. “Maybe time to try other methods.”

“You gonna make a stand, vato?” Benavides asked.

“Quien sabe?” Cisco cast a glance at his friend and then to the doctor. “Who knows, who the fuck knows?”

Silence, the men absorbing the thought. Gurule carefully lowered his son away, swaddled him in the blanket, and stood. “Cold still, up here, this time of year. I sleep good in the cold.” He walked away to where the horses were picketed.

There was a long silence between the men at the fire, then Benavides spoke. “Cisco believes in sticking with the old ways. Takin’ an elk up here ain’t what he calls poachin’. More like keepin’ tradition. You need a house, go get the fixins. Your family needs meat, go in the mountains and shoot some damn thing. He don’t hold with this here permitting deal.”

“I can understand that.” Howell nodded.

“Course Doc, ain’t no-one a’holdin’ a gun to your head. You don’t feel comfortable,” Benavides rolled the word around his tongue, “you can surely ride on down first thing.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Howell’s tanned, surfer’s features and frank, naive expression darkened at the tone in Benavides’ sneer. He replied, more heartily that he had intended. “I want to see this through. That was some impressive marksmanship you guys showed this evening. I want to see you in action.”

“Barely call shootin’ elk action, Doc, compared to what Cisco and I seen overseas.” He rose, trod into the dark for relief. Howell heard him stumble on the uneven ground, and, no doubt, from the drink, and reflected again on the wisdom of his decision to join these two sour, old soldiers and one crippled child on an illegal hunt in the Southern Rockies in the late spring of two thousand and eleven.