

A Poem in a Ditch

The bus slows down. My voice booms out with the remains of a dumb question I've been trying to form to my taciturn seatmates about the parasites in the water. All conversation on the bus instantly ceases.

“Hello, Mike? My name is Sally. I'm on the Bay Area Central American Solidarity Brigade. Do you remember signing our petition and filling out our card?”

“What's he say?” Charlie asks. The poor guy looks so lost. I never thought I'd feel sorry for a Republican. The funny thing is that from my cityboy point of view Charlie looks just like them, with the same weathered, wrinkled country face. Only he's a foot taller and a thousand acres of California grapes and a cattle ranch richer.

“I know it's short notice,” the woman from the committee said. “He really let us down, quitting at the last minute. We can't go without an experienced truck driver.”

We stand up and file out of the bus with the others. I always said I wouldn't go down without a struggle, like those who would meekly stand next to the open pits or even dig their own graves. But the few survivors left for dead always said the shock and disbelief of what was about to happen numbed you, and you did what they said, be it in Germany, Poland, El Salvador or even Mississippi.

*

*

*

“He says he'll wait for us right here with the truck till we get back with the visas,” I tell Charlie. “He says there are two buses every day.” Charlie works his jaw muscles.

There they are, right out of my dreams, waiting for us as we get off the bus. I knew they'd be there one day. I've been seeing this scene in front of me all my life, and now it's finally happening. So much to do. Will she be all right? I wonder if she'll be mad at me for going, mad at me one last time.

“Well, I used to be a truck driver myself, actually,” I said. “But I can't go. I just got back from Cuba.” But they knew that on the committee. I wondered if they knew I used to be a truck driver.

“Besides, my wife's sick.”

Charlie says, “Ask him why can't we just drive the truck back to Escuintla to get the visas?”

The soldiers ring the bus on the right side, hemming us in, and we line up outside with our backs to the bus. No one speaks.

“Why can't you just ship everything down there by boat?” I asked her. “I know there's an embargo, but can't you do it from Canada?” That was the first call.

A couple of rich ranchers stand apart from the soldiers, a group of partly uniformed irregulars around them. Like Mississippi in 1964, I remember. The ranchers wear well-pressed clothes and new boots, with sunglass cases clipped to their belts. The irregulars look eager to please. They avoid eye contact with us. I'd feel better if they'd look us in the eyes.

*

*

*

“He says that once a truck gets to the border it doesn't turn back. It would look too suspicious to the army. He has to stay with the truck—he's the guide and he can't leave the truck until it crosses the border. So we have to take the bus back for the visas by ourselves.”

“That's right, Republican. Somebody from the Moravian church on the Atlantic Coast came to his church on a speaking tour and he thought he'd help out and donate his truck. Oh, also there's a woman named Donna going. She's some sort of, oh, she's hippieish, you might say.” The woman from the committee giggled. “She's going down there to be married. She's taking her wedding dress with her. You could pretend you were her fiancé. It would be a perfect cover.”

An officer with aviator sunglasses and the same type of sunglass case clipped to his belt as the ranchers approaches the first person in line. She has her internal passport ready in her hand for him; she's done this many times before. Just routine.

“The first thing I'm gonna do when we get back is eat a big, thick steak,” Charlie says. “Then I'm gonna take a nice long hot bath.” He giggles “inappropriately,” as the shrinks say. Donna and I look at each other. The mist turns to a light drizzle, and still we lay on the ground next to the truck. If it really rains we'll get up and squeeze into the truck cab again.

“Charlie and Donna can always drive, of course,” the woman from the committee said. “What we really need is someone who is bilingual and can fix the truck if it breaks down along the way.” That was the second call.

*

*

*

There's the ditch. Just like in the poem.

My husband is disappeared,” the maid says. “Four years ago. I have a daughter from him.” I hear Charlie coming back from the hallway shower and I give him the high sign when he gets in sight and I point to the maid making the bed, but he walks in in his underwear anyway. You wouldn't do that back home, I think.

Ben Linder's father spoke at the Unitarian church. He said if he had to lose his precious son he was glad that at least it was for a good cause. In La Habana in May it was a mother from New York beside her daughter's grave. Again I felt goose pimples form up and down my body, and tears welled up and hung just inside. Solidarity . . .

“Well, I used to be a mechanic, actually,” I said.

The ranchers stand by, their arm folded against their chests, and scrutinize everyone lined up against the bus. Charlie, Donna and I are foreigners, so we have nothing to fear from them, but the local people avoid their gaze. I wonder if Charlie sees himself in them; I dare not glance over at him.

“I have sad news to tell you,” our comandante told us at the Venceremos Brigade camp. “We just received this bulletin.” He held up a piece of paper and grasped the microphone as he read. “The Northamerican internationalist Ben Linder has been reported murdered by the Contra, the first from the United States to fall. He was constructing a hydroelectric plant in the northern part of Nicaragua, near the hamlet of El Cuá.” We all looked at each other. “He joins eight other internationalists who have

given their lives . . . ” and then we were standing, showing our respect by bowing our heads and observing a minute of silence. A long, long minute. Internationalists . . .

Pooo-tt-t! Donna lays a big vegetarian fart. I keep on reading. Then we hear Charlie in the can lay an even louder, wet one. BRRR-TT-T! Donna and I look at each other and grin. After so long together in such close quarters you lose your standards; you just don't give a shit anymore. All I know is that I'm getting that truck there if I have to pull it like a plow, I think. Charlie cuts loose a long stream of diarrhea on the other side of the thin plywood wall. “You learn a lot about somebody on the road,” I say. Donna laughs.

“It'll just take a couple of weeks or so,” the woman from the committee said. “But if you can't go . . . ”

“I've got an uncle on a chicken ranch near here,” Donna says. “It's just twenty miles the other side of Indio. He works on his truck himself, has all his own tools. Do you think we can get that far?” I look at the plume of steam rising from the radiator.

There were poems that spoke about the Original People of the Americas, of what happened to them when the Europeans came. There was a satiric prose piece on “revolutionary tourists” and a moving ballad on Che. Someone from the Atlantic Coast gave a talk on that region's history, the CIA's recent maniobras with the Miskitos (we were going to turn over the truck to them after dropping off the drill press for the project Ben Linder died for, the water pump for Managua, all the woodworking machinery and tools for the high school woodshop in Acoyapa, the lathe for the windmill project in San Juan del Sur). I'd been to probably hundreds of similar events through the years, for civil rights and

antiwar activities, women's liberation, Cuba, South Africa, political prisoners here and on and on. You'd think I'd be jaded, but you always need your morale raised, your resolve reenergized. I knew I did. I needed something to pump me up, make me see why this had to be done.

I can't believe it, I brought just enough wire to go from the light switch the length of the truck to the tail light, with maybe an inch left over. What luck, I think, making the connection, and then the trickle of rainwater from the storm squeezes between my back and the asphalt, then the lightning, right on cue. This is living.

The officer takes a small object out of his shirt pocket and taps on it, reading the first passenger's papers. Donna stiffens next to me and I feel her tremble through her clothing. Oh, yes, she told me about this. It's a pocket computer developed by the Israelis to use on the Palestinians, and now they've sold some to the Guatemalan army, which the U.S. Government pays for. Another kind of internationalism. The little toy computer contains the death list.

“Can I help you, Mike?” Donna asks, leaning over the truck fender. She eyes all the parts laid out on the now bare motor block and on cardboard spread out on the chickenshitty ground. She and Charlie look at each other. It's all on me now. I grunt and plunge my hands back in the grease and pull the second head loose. Rusty water and oil spill down on the dust.

“Mike? Sally again. From the solidarity committee. Look, I hate to be a bug, but Charlie called and said there've been intermittent electrical problems with the truck. He'd like to get it fixed before he and Donna begin such a long trip. Do you happen to know any electricians?” And that did me in, the third call. I couldn't get out of it.

*

*

*

We get the last room at the border with El Salvador. There are two tiny beds for the four of us. We pull down the top mattresses from the two beds and squeeze them on the floor between the beds. It's wall-to-wall mattresses, with maybe two feet to stand up in in what remain of the small room. A lizard climbs a wall. It's as humid inside the room as if we were outside, in the hot rain.

“You think I enjoy enforcing the law out here in the middle of nowhere?” the agricultural control guard asks us. “Days at a time alone, sometimes without any water? But what can I do? The law is the law.” We lead drivers exchange glances. Here it comes. The guard turns to the Guatemalan drivers in our little convoy. “I'd like to help you, but you need a certificate saying you've been fumigated.” Ah, the opening; the first time he said we needed to be sprayed, period. Now it's the certificate. Donna follows the Spanish fairly well, but misses the nuances. Charlie is completely bewildered. The guard turns back to me. “Put yourself in my place. Mexico has no industry, the Northamericans on top of us,” and I inwardly smile as he points toward the north; he can't tell. “What else is there? I have to support my family,” he says to us all, spreading his hands wide. We nod to each other and reach for our wallets.

I clasp Lloyd's hand very tightly. He saved our butts with the tools and all, but mainly I just appreciate him, a salt of the earth type they don't make too many of anymore. He squeezes my hand back and looks hard at me. “You take care of my niece, now.” He looks out at the topheavy truck leaning over the curb. “Hold her steady, under fifty or so the first five hundred miles till the valves seat. Change the oil by two thousand miles, just to make sure. That ought to get you through to . . . Texas, all right.” I purse my lips and nod as he locks eyes with me again. He's not buying that Texas story, that's for sure.

*

*

*

At intermission I checked out the literature tables. Phil was presiding over a pile of petitions on clipboards at the CISPES table. I sidled up to a liberal teacher type with glasses hanging from his neck on a chain perusing a petition and I muttered, “Don't sign anything. You'll get in trouble for that one day.” His eyes widened and he dropped the clipboard and scuttled off. “Geez, Phil, doesn't anybody have a sense of humor anymore?” Phil smiled and handed me a pen. Oops.

“You've got a lot of knots here,” Donna says, working on my back. I sneak a peek at Charlie, lying on his springs. He's fast asleep. I turn my head and check out our guide, on the springs of the other bed. He's facing us with his eyes closed. A single ray of light enters the room from the bare light bulb in the courtyard outside, sheltered from the rain by the overhang of the corrugated iron roof. The light is the size of a coin on the guide's cheek. I wonder if I should turn over on my back, naked as I am. It would have been all right a minute or two ago. Not now, though.

We look up from our meal and watch the military convoy roll by. Soldiers look down at us from their vehicles as they are carried along. The troubadours stop playing but keep their eyes cast down on our table. So much for “Maria Elena.” “You know,” Charlie says, waving his rolled-up tortilla at the tanks, half-tracks, jeeps with mounted recoilless rifles and machine guns, “with the money they spent just on what we see rolling in front of us they could build a good, modern water system from here to the border. What a waste.” Donna and I look at each other. Some Republican, we think.

“All right, I'll do it.” I took a deep breath. I heard Sally breathe on her end of the line. “I can get away for a couple of weeks. But don't tell my wife. I don't want her to worry.”

*

*

*

I turn over, but I draw up my leg, in case Donna can see anything in the dark. I don't want her to know. She works on my pecs, kneads the muscles in the shoulders, works her way down, down. She reassuringly pushes down my leg. I do her the same way, finessing my way past her breasts. All the lines are blurring now. I go all the way down, down to her pubic hair. We rest our hands on each other's pelvises. It's everything but, and the intimacy es ya más allá de lo que se llama "el sexo", beyond what they call "sex." The moment is sublime.

They announced the last poet of the evening, and he planted himself solidly before us and let the words out. He was all poets before all audiences; we were all people hearing tales told around a fire in the whole existence of humanity. He told the epic history of the people of Latin America with such authority that a stone would have known it was so. He told of Quetzalcoatl, Cortez, Coronado, Pizarro, recounted one slaughter of peaceful people after another (some of them were not so kind-hearted themselves, he reminded us). Three hundred here, two hundred there, sometimes thousands at a time, whole villages destroyed, from the edge of Asia down to the last human habitation south before Antarctica, the utter extermination of whole peoples in Cuba (Hatuey burned at the stake, saying if heaven were filled with Christians like these he'd rather spend eternity in hell), Florida (Andrew Jackson tricked them into laying down their arms, then had them massacred), the Matanza of 30,000 peasants fifty years ago in El Salvador and the recent one of eight hundred villagers in El Mozote that rivaled the horror of My Lai, the unpublicized genocide still taking place in Brazil, the first and second actions at Wounded Knee. He told of a Guatemalan child walking through a field and finding his schoolteacher's headless body in a bloody ditch, of Father Camilo Torres being tied across the mouth of a cannon and blown to pieces, but he didn't stop at such images of inhumanity. Being a poet he could and would lift us up to the grandeur of which human spirit is capable. He spoke of how struggle was not throwing your life away, but giving it meaning, finding yourself as you gave your life to humanity

at large. To find yourself beside a bloody ditch was to find grace, he said, and I wasn't too crazy about such imagery on the eve of our trip, but he did have us all breathing as one, as if we were in church, which we were. I looked around as he soared on in his unstoppable poetic sermon and I saw a few chosen ones in the large crowd seem to glow in the dim light as if already approaching sanctity. Phil, for one, was luminescent, and he turned around and beamed beatifically at me and I felt myself pulled toward a place I had not been anxious to know. I could see the grace before me, but within I knew deep, deep fear would be mine until my own appointed time beside the bloody ditch that awaited me.

There is nothing like imminent death to turn you on, I think, dick throbbing. My eyes have now adjusted to the light and I can tell that from her angle Donna sees what she has created. The guide is still asleep, the little spot of light yet on his cheek. Donna and I look openly at each other and smile. By unspoken mutual agreement we have both stopped at the Moment of Truth. She has someone in front of her, and I someone I left behind. "It's really a moot point by now anyway, isn't it?" I whisper to her. She smiles.

The officer takes Donna's passport, checks her name on the computer, nods, looks her in the eye behind his ominous shades and hands back her papers and moves on to me.

"It's like we've already done it," Donna whispers next to me on the floor. I caress her head. "Better," I whisper back. "Yours and mine would bust us if they saw us now, but we've kept faith in our own way, haven't we?" Our smiles are like soft kisses. Something makes me turn and I see the guide has shifted position slightly so that the little shaft of light falls squarely on his open eye scoping us out as in *The Telltale Heart*. Eat your heart out, motherfucker, I think.

*

*

*

Donna got through all right so I know it will be the same for me as the officer punches my name into the little computer. He holds it up like Phil holding the petition clipboard back in San Francisco. I fight down the urge to smile. His eyes narrow and he puts the little machine back in his shirt pocket and pulls down his silver sunglasses and looks me dead in the eye, and I know I will remember his eyes as long as I live. “Éste,” he says. “This one,” and the soldiers take me by my arms, and they are indeed numb, and the ditch will soon be bloody, as in the poem.