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HUNTING SEASON

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METRO EDITOR John-somebody snapped his fingers and motioned me over to his desk. “Sheriff’s deputies found a man’s body out on the high plateau just west of the National Guard Armory,” he said.

Having just arrived in town, I had not known there was an armory. I didn’t even know where the newspaper’s candy machine was yet. I had been on the job for, what, fifteen minutes?

Only an hour earlier I had told the young woman at the reception desk that I wanted to apply for a reporter’s job. As a single guy, I was so busy appreciating how attractive she was that I almost didn’t see the tall woman in her 40s walking toward me. The woman reached out for my hand and shook it firmly.

“I’m Mary Dolan,” she said. “I’m the managing editor. So, you want a reporting job?”

I nodded, temporarily off balance at the suddenness of the job interview. Things usually didn’t go this easily for me.

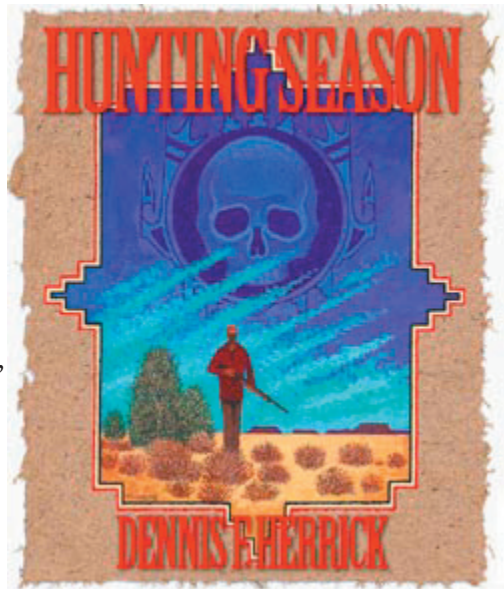
“What’s your experience?” she asked. She was still hanging on to my hand, which felt like it was caught in a warm vise. I tugged ever so slightly, and she released me.

“I worked ten years as a reporter for The Tucson Sun. Covered the police beat, was city hall reporter, and did a lot of feature writing.”

We were still in the lobby. The receptionist seemed amused.

“So what are you doing in New Mexico?” she asked.

“I want to work for a daily and still stay in the Southwest,” I replied. That seemed simple enough to me. I could tell I was at a bigger paper. Mary Dolan wore a stylish



blouse and creased slacks. My last editor smelled vaguely of horse sweat.

Apparently the reasoning was simple enough for her, too.

“Are you an Indian?” she asked in blatant violation of three or four federal employment laws.

Gee, I wondered, what gave me away?

“I’m a Yaqui,” I said. When she looked puzzled, I added, “Yes. I’m an Indian.”

“We’ve never had an Indian reporter before. Maybe it’s about time we did.”

“When was your paper founded?” I asked.

“1885.”

“Then I guess it is about time,” I said.

I expected to get thrown out after that wisecrack, but instead she smiled and said, “You’re all right.” She started walking to her office. “Let’s see your clips,” she said over her shoulder. She splayed clippings of my Tucson stories across her desk, asked some questions, and seemed satisfied.

“Your lucky day,” she said. “We just lost our police reporter. We can start you at thirty-five thousand. Today, if you want.”

“Sooner better than later,” I said. I tried not to act astonished by a salary that was seven grand more than what I had been making in Tucson. Someone had at last recognized my genius.

She pointed down a hallway. “Go to Human Resources and they’ll get you signed up. I’ll call and tell them you’re coming. Then report to our metro editor. John. I’ll let him know, too.”

And that was it. John greeted me with the briefest hello—I could see he was a busy man—and he pointed toward a cleared-off desk.

That was why I still did not know his last name when I found myself a few minutes later standing in front of him.

“A man’s body,” John-somebody repeated. “You’re a reporter. Commit some journalism. We pay thirty cents per mile, so use your car today.”

He turned back to his desktop computer and started pounding again on its keyboard. “Let’s see what you got,” he muttered.

“Sure,” I said. I looked back at the terminal on my desk. It had a white dot blinking at the blue screen’s upper left hand corner. I guess that was where I was supposed to start typing when I came back from wherever it was that I had to find this story.

I did what any skilled investigative reporter would do. On my way out, I asked the receptionist for directions to the armory.

THE PLATEAU'S high desert country was a landscape of chamisas, bunch grasses and fifteen-foot-tall juniper bushes undulating to the horizon. The flashing police lights were easy to spot. I parked my car on the highway and walked in.

I could tell at a glance that Deputy Joseph Romero was an Indian. Of course, I didn't say anything. I wouldn't have said anything if I realized that he was Italian, either. But after I introduced myself, Joseph turned to face me squarely and said, "Well, I'll be. Are you an Indian?"

"I've got to quit wearing moccasins," I said apologetically, looking down at my dusty boots. I plucked at my hair. "And these feathers have got to go."

Joseph laughed. He shouted to his partner, "Hey, Ray, the Albuquerque Sun actually hired an Indian finally. As a reporter, no less."

Raymond Sanchez was opening an entrance in the yellow police tape that was looped in a large circle around several junipers. The body of a hunter was sprawled on its back at one end, the legs and feet poking out from under the gray tarp covering the body. A shotgun lay nearby. The body had been found nearly two hours ago and an ambulance was now bumping its way across the desert's rocks and a shallow arroyo.

Raymond motioned the ambulance toward his opening in the tape and then he walked over to me. Shaking my hand, he said, "I'm from the Pueblo of Santa Ana. Joseph is from Jémez. What's your tribe?" He studied my face. "Apache?"

"No. We used to shoot Apaches where I come from."

"We did, too," Joseph said, laughing again.

"I'm Yaqui," I said. "From southern Arizona. Near Tucson."

"Oh," said Raymond. "We don't see many Yaquis around here."

"I've never seen one," Joseph said, scrutinizing me with renewed interest.

And so we became friends. The enemy of my enemy—even an ancient one—makes for a quick ally. Joseph was solidly built, while Raymond was slim and muscular. Both had easy grins. I would have liked them even if their ancestors had not shot Apaches.

"Detective Wilson says it might be a hunting accident," Raymond said, gesturing toward the body. "Rabbits are thick in this desert, so hunters come out here, too. This happens sometimes. Folks get careless."

"Looks like a .22-caliber wound," Joseph said. "A .22 is for rabbit hunting, all right, but we can't find a shell. By the looks of that saltbush, maybe the shell ejected there and someone busted the bush apart looking for it."

"Detective Wilson had the area swept with a metal detector," Raymond said. He shrugged. "No shell."

"Who's the victim?" I asked.

"He's from Jémez, like me," Joseph said. "His name is William Baca. Twenty-nine. His wife reported him missing yesterday. Poor guy. He was left out here overnight."

Like many Pueblo Indians near the Rio Grande—and Arizona’s Yaquis as well—the victim and both deputies had Spanish surnames. Joseph said he knew Baca and his wife and young daughter. Baca was a mostly unemployed handyman.

“Jémez is one of the few pueblos without a casino,” Joseph explained, “and with twenty percent unemployment I’m luckier than many Jémez men because I have a decent job. Baca didn’t have a regular job, so he drove over here every week shooting rabbits to feed his family.”

Raymond left to walk the ambulance attendants to the body. Joseph watched with his hands on his hips.

“If we had a shell we might find a fingerprint of the shooter on it,” he said more to himself than to me. “Or if we had a weapon we could match it to the fired bullet. Without either a shell or a weapon....” His voice trailed off.

“I better get back and start writing the story,” I said.

“When’s your deadline?” Joseph asked.

I was running to my car. “I don’t know,” I shouted back.

THE STORY ran on the next day’s Page One—thanks to beginner’s luck and an editorial that was planned for that day anyway urging hunters to be careful as bear hunting season opened on the nearby Sandia Mountains. A hunting accident with rabbits seemed like a good warning for bear hunters. Hey, you go with what you’ve got.

I even received a byline. “By Edward Valencia.” It’s nuts, but even after more than a decade in this business I still love to read my name at the top of a story.

The byline, of course, is why Baca’s widow LaDonna and their four-year-old daughter Sage were looking for me when they entered the newsroom. I was surprised to see them waiting by my desk when I returned from the candy machine still chewing my chocolate lunch.

LaDonna Baca was dressed in an indigo western blouse and skirt. She held her daughter’s hand. The girl was like a tourist’s postcard, with hair as black and shiny as obsidian framing a warm-toned face and dark eyes. She was dressed in a blouse and skirt like her mother, but she also wore the soft leather leggings with moccasins that are favored by Pueblo Indians for formal occasions—such as funerals. She was so cute that even John looked up from his computer and smiled. I didn’t think that guy could like anybody.

THAT NIGHT I didn’t sleep well. LaDonna’s visit had been my first opportunity to talk with her. She had no phone, so with Joseph’s help I had tracked down her brother just before deadline and he told me the family’s information. Frankly, I had been relieved when I couldn’t reach the widow. I’ve always hated making those calls. But what

she told me in the newsroom haunted me—she didn't think William Baca's death was a hunting accident.

The next morning I called on Detective Wilson. He was one of those growling cops who doesn't trust reporters. The only way you can get information from a cop like Wilson is to convince him that you're not going away. So, when he was too busy to see me, I returned a couple of hours later, and then a couple of hours again after that. On the fourth try he ushered me into his office with a weary look.

"It's probably just a hunting accident," he said after we had talked for a while. He was exasperated with me for becoming such a nuisance. "We're checking out other guys who hunt around there," he added.

"The widow thinks her husband might have been killed by a drug dealer from Albuquerque who hangs out at Mountain Spirit Casino. They didn't like each other. Some guy that everyone calls Burro. Ever heard of him?"

"Yeah. We suspect he handles some runners of Mexican cocaine to the Midwest. But they keep a low profile around here."

"Baca worked occasional odd jobs at the casino," I said. "He and Burro got into a fight once, and Burro threatened him at least twice. Where was he on the day Baca was shot?"

"You know, Mr. Hotshot Reporter, we don't just sit on our hands around here. When LaDonna Baca reported her husband as missing, we talked to your Señor Burro. He's got all kinds of friends vouching that he was at the casino all that day."

"All kinds of friends." I snorted in derision.

"We've got nothing to tie him to anything. I wish we did. I don't even have enough to ask for a search warrant on him."

"No shell was found from the shooter's gun. A .22-caliber, you say. Baca is shot through the heart, and then someone picks up the ejected shell. That doesn't sound like a hunting accident to me."

"The hunter probably picked it up when he got scared about what had happened."

"I think a person who shot someone accidentally while hunting would call the police and stick around," I said.

"Then you're an idiot," Wilson retorted. He took my arm and marched me to the door. Apparently our interview was over.

"I'm going to keep looking around," I told him.

"Good," he said. "While you're looking around, look for the ejected shell. Just like on flashlight batteries, there's sometimes a fingerprint on a shell from the person who loaded the weapon. Especially if that person plans to pick it up afterward. Until then, we'll try to carry on the best we can without your advice."

He turned back into his office and slammed the door.

SATURDAY was my day off and the soonest I could make it back out to the plateau. I located the large saltbush with snapped branches where Joseph had said the shooter must have been looking for the ejected shell.

Wilson assumed that the shooter had found the shell in the bush. But what if he hadn't? After all, it's a big thick bush. I started rummaging in the branches, but finally gave up.

That's when I saw small rodent tracks in the soft clay around the saltbush. I dropped down on my hands and knees and peered so closely at the tracks that even the ants started looking impressive. I tried to follow the tracks, hobbling along on my knees. But it was impossible. I stood up disgusted and brushed off my pants. The Great Indian Tracker can't even track a mouse.

In front of me, however, about twenty yards away a shelf of sandstone rose nearly five feet high. It was pitted with smooth holes from millennia of wind and water erosion. If I was a rodent, I thought, that would be a luxury condominium.

For nearly an hour I walked along the sandstone examining its holes, prodding into them with my pen, shining my car's flashlight into the deepest ones. The October sun was so hot on my hatless head that it felt like my brain was being fried into an omelet.

One hole was camouflaged behind stems of grass. As I pushed the grass down, I could see that the hole tunneled ten inches into the sandstone. With difficulty I stretched flat on the ground and shined my flashlight inside.

At the back was the black mass of a packrat's midden. And on top of the midden a .22-caliber shell gleamed in my flashlight's beam like a nugget of gold.

I called Wilson on my cell phone so he could retrieve the packrat's treasure.

It was satisfying to later learn that cyanoacrylate fuming—whatever that is—of the shell revealed a latent partial print of Burro's right thumb. I missed the serving of the warrant that found a .22-caliber rifle hidden in Burro's attic. But Wilson was nice enough to call and give me the scoop. He's turned into a good source.

John-somebody gave me another Page One byline. I'm going to make a point today of finding out that guy's last name.

