

The Devil Be Not Drowned in His House

I**N** MAGDALENA DE KINO, at a highway eatery known as El Árbol Caído, Driller ordered a plate of yearling lamb. He ordered tripe, brains, and moronga. The lamb wrapped in maguey leaves and buried in a burned-rock midden dug in the stump of a fallen strangler fig.

Driller sucked the marrow from the yearling bones, wiping what dripped from his mouth with a folded tortilla. He had stood beneath the strangler tree in the years when it had shaded the eatery, then named El Macapule, and he had warned the owner that figs of this species attracted fulgurous groundings that made their sap vaporize and explode. So it had come to pass. Within days of Driller's departure, lightning had struck the fig. Later the tree was felled, the trunk too large to move, the eatery renamed.

When Driller finished his plate, he asked the server boy if any forked branches remained from the tree. The boy

DRILLER

returned with a pronged stick used by the pitman for fire tending. Driller inspected it to ascertain that its wood had come from the fallen tree. Then he tipped the boy and paid for the meal, leaving with a toothpick clamped between his large teeth.

At the crypt of Eusebio Kino, he stopped to view the priest's unearthed remains. Driller recognized the deformed gabbro in the excavated tomb as burial dirt daylighted twice. Catholic peregrines from Colima prayed before the relics. When their devotions ended, Driller told them that he had known Chevo Kino as a padre who had fathered many mestizos with Pima women. Children of a holy man, he said, whose descendants had paid for his rampant fornication with blood spilt on the desertfloor by the massacring Seri. Driller said that if holy bones unearthed were to be venerated, then the bones of these, too, should be made relics, being of Kino's blood.

The pilgrims crossed themselves and departed in tight formation, leaving the stranger to solitary communion with the sacred remains. Driller waited for them to leave before he flicked his toothpick into the tomb.

He drove south, routing through Opata territory, past Querobabi and Carbó, refueling in Pesqueira, known to Driller as Mátape. At a corner grocery he purchased cigarettes and a package of double-edged razorblades. Idle men seated on streetfront benches squinted at his passing, their sun-thinned eyes stretched by efforts to fully appreciate the stranger's size.

He bypassed Hermosillo, heading east on the Moctezuma Highway, a dustswept and deserted strip of broken asphalt running with the Sonora River. Above El Molinito he parked the rig and set off across the riparian scrubland. At the

river he removed his clothes and waded into the water, bending to drink. He tasted the ancient limestone washed from Madrean flanks. He savored the dysenteric urine from upstream villages. His thirst quenched, he defecated deeply into the river before returning to the rig.

East of Ures the high desert thornbush thinned, the gray land broken and rock-strewn. No birds flew in the pale sky, but a dozen men stood on the highway, obstructing passage. They wore ski masks and held their weapons with cavalier prepotence.

"Judicial," shouted the frontman. He ordered Driller to descend for a search.

Driller recognized ruthlessness made flesh, these men the sinister minions of blood brought to the Indianland by those who had stood with Cortés, their faces also hidden.

One of them frisked Driller, checking his pockets, finding nothing. Others scrambled onto the rig and inside the cab.

"¿De dónde eres?" asked a burly man, voice of the boss.

Driller said he came from nowhere and everywhere, but most recently he had come from bathing in the luxurious waters of El Molinito just off the scenic highway.

The boss eyed the big prieto who spoke like a native. "¿Eres paisano?"

Driller met his gaze. He grinned.

New ground for the burly boss, an old hand at outstaring those he sent to their graves, his masked face seared onto their lifeless foveae. He found it hard to hold the stranger's gaze. The prieto oversized him, forcing him to look up. Something odd in his eyes, no fear. And that grin. Was he crazy?

He turned to the rig. "¿Y esta chingadera . . . qué es?"

DRILLER

Driller said the machine drilled holes for extracting water so the thirst of men might be quenched and the devil be not drowned in his house.

Crazy, the boss thought. An imbecile. “¿Eres un perforista?”

“Sí, señor.”

When the boss addressed the searchers, asking what they had found, they held up empty hands. “Ni madre, jefe,” answered one.

The boss clutched his weapon. “So where’s the stash?” he asked.

Driller grinned. “I hide nothing, friend. I drill what is hidden.”

His interrogator drew near. “Do I look like fool?” he barked.

Driller shrugged. “That is difficult to say,” he replied. “A face behind a mask cannot be looked upon and so the fool not seen.”

“¡Hijo de tu puta madre!” screamed the boss. He pushed the gunbarrel into Driller’s gut, waiting for him to flinch. But Driller moved closer, the barrel seeming to shorten, his grin broad. The smell of something dead washed over the boss. He felt inexplicably short of breath, his ski mask hot.

“Why do you grin, you whoremothering son of fornication?”

Driller stood unfazed. “I grin because I rejoice,” he replied. “I rejoice to see that banditry flourishes in Mexico, that men steal in broad daylight. Men like you. Everywhere else they are caught or killed.”

The boss saw the stranger’s mouth open, lips thinned to reveal enormous molars and bloodred gums. He saw himself fall into the fiery yawning of hell that was this

man's mouth, his life swallowed, its deeds, the taking and sparing of lives, all of it engorged, crumbs to an abysmal appetite. Then he saw only a grin.

"I congratulate you," Driller said.

The boss released his weapon and backed away. "Déjalo," he commanded, waving his men off the rig.

Driller removed a fifty-peso bill from his pocket. He handed it to the man who had frisked him without finding it. "For drinks," he said before he climbed into the cab and started the engine. "Adiós," he called, the rig rolling forward, the men stepping aside.

So he advanced, as night advances upon day, as darkness eclipses an imagined land. Across the parched cordillera flanks and the basalted folds of igneous flows, he drove unhurried, time but another destination, his world without hour or dimension or end. He stopped in the Mulato Range to search the black scree-slopes for seashells left on ancient oceanbottoms uplifted by the gyrating bowels of the planet. He detoured on rutted sideroads to taste the noria water of solitary ranches unmapped on man grids. He ate the beans served in the mudbricked chozas of these same ranches, paying for his posada and for the water. The days not hot enough to warm the shape he took.

In the municipal seat of Moctezuma, known to Driller as Oposura, he left the federal highway and climbed east into the Madera Range past Tombabi and La Palmita, the road dropping out of the Silla Mountains into the Bavispe basin. He stopped at the plazuela of Huásabas to inspect the town's condemned waterwell. He stood on the plug of cyclopean concrete to read the cemented inscription—one word fingerwritten by local officialdom—CLAUSURADO. He scuffed the untroweled finish that topped two hundred feet

DRILLER

of rubble masonry hurriedly poured by godfearing men. He bent to sniff the untapped aquiferous swell beneath him. "So much for El Güero," he said to curious onlookers.

From the plazuela Driller drove to the local scrapyards. Knowing its owner to possess twenty-five lengths of wellcasing, he purchased the pipe at salvage price, paying cash and paying for its delivery within a week to the boneyard of Rolando Fermín Arenas in La Fortuna, there to be called for. The owner of the Huásabas yard counted Driller's money. He kept to himself his amazement. Many times he had tried to sell the wellcasing, offering it to scrapyards as distant as Hermosillo, including the yard of Rolando Arenas. "I know Fermín," he said.

Driller watched him count the pesos paid for pipe not his to sell. When the yarder finished counting, Driller took him by the shoulder, drawing him near to advise that if the pipe was not delivered as agreed upon, he would return to take his life and those of his offspring, which numbered six, including the newborn girl.

The Huásabas yarder felt his hand grasped. He looked into the stranger's eyes where he saw his newborn held by her feet. He saw her head swinging toward the guava tree in his yard, an old tree planted by his father, the child's brains dashed on the trunk. Then he saw a bloodied, short-fingered hand picking a ripe guava from the tree.

"I swear on my sainted mother's grave," he promised, crossing himself. He smelled guava on the stranger's breath.

Driller nodded, licked his lips, thanking the man for favors unpaid. Then he returned to his rig and departed Huásabas at dusk to drive the deserted Bavispe road north into the sierran night.