

Groundtruth

By Nick Hershenow

Excerpts

I.

San Miguel at night was dark and quiet and shut down. One or two shadows moving quickly through the streets, footsteps sounding on the cobble, low muttering voices, silence. A campfire or trash fire glowing in some dead end or alleyway. Once, skirting the edges of what looked like an abandoned fire, Chele's foot crunched on gravel and a giant shadow rose up. Firelight flashed on ape-hairy shoulders, a malevolent bearded face. A stick or club swung from the brute's hand or waist, blunt and threatening. Or was it...? Chele turned and ran, forgetting to look at the feet.

Certainly he was afraid of his grandmother's demons, even if he didn't quite believe they were real. But his fear wasn't great enough to keep him off those empty night streets, a spooky playground he had mostly to himself. He played stalking games, hiding and spying games, hunting games. He moved quickly and silently in and out of streetlights, house lights, firelight, the shadowy places between. On the far edges of town, mine tailings spilled into the streets and there were no electric lights at all, though the pale ground still gave off a faint glow – the refraction of starlight and moonlight in the shattered crystals, or some extracted incandescence from deep inside the earth?

But even a town as demoralized as San Miguel could not permit a seven year-old to indefinitely prowl night streets leading into hills where mine tunnels had never been closed off and explosives were left lying around to blow people up. Twice a priest came to talk to his grandma. The second time she gave him a knapsack and told him to put his things in it and made him promise to say his prayers. Then she lit a candle and he got in the priest's car and they drove into the city and the priest left him with some nuns in a Home. There was enough to eat and no one was mean to him and he lived in the Home until Alvaro came.

Alvaro squatted down and looked straight at him. His eyes were very black. He had a thick mess of hair, also very black, and a thick black beard and thick eyebrows and, when he finally talked, a voice so thick and deep he was hard to understand, at first.

"Chele. Where's your home?"

"San Miguel."

"Which San Miguel?"

"San Miguel in the mountains."

"Okay, which mountains? It doesn't matter." Alvaro smiled. He opened his arms and Chele ran forward and Alvaro folded him into his chest. His beard was soft and scratchy at once. His voice rumbled, Chele felt as much as heard it. *Do you miss the mountains?* He didn't think he missed the mountains but he couldn't remember anyone ever holding him like that, or speaking so softly into his ear. Then Alvaro said he was building another Home in other mountains and did he want to live there, and Chele said yes.

II.

Lena scanned for smoke, that was the job. Methodically moving around the catwalk and scanning through binoculars along invisible transect lines, back and forth over ridges and valleys, forest, brush, rock, a dozen times a day. Every now and then something would catch her eye. She'd hold the binoculars as still as possible, tighten the focus, and gradually perceive the illusion that had deceived her. Not smoke caught in a slanted light over the West Fork but just a dusky stand of dead trees, killed by insects or wildfire. Not smoke choking the Red Mountain saddle but the great pile of unmilled ore left behind when Galen McKeane's Ledorah Mining Company suffered its literal and figurative collapse. Not smoke rising from the hidden cleft of Poison Springs but the sulfurous steam of hot springs, where a row of algae-stained bathtubs and shallow travertine pools were all that remained of Olympus Springs, Josie McKeane Pratt's visionary spa resort. Not smoke hanging over the Blue River highlands but a dustcloud kicked up by the sheep and horses of Peruvian herders, moving their bands along the old driveways into summer pastures. Not smoke but a strand of mist rising out of the canyon above the McKeane Ranch at Confluence Bar, where Jimmy McKeane was resurrecting the homestead, or pretending to, moving irrigation pipe and pasturing horses and trying to make up his mind which of the thousand or so things that were broken he would try to fix next.

III.

Chele spent the first half of his nineteenth year – nineteen, the age of peak testosterone production in the human male, he'd read or heard somewhere – with Padre Jaco and his angels in the City of Light, amid the wreckage of the hurricane and a host of other disasters, where he and two nuns-in-training were the only people who were not old, insane, terminally sick, brain-damaged, or terribly deformed. Or all those things at once. In a previous era Ciudad de Luz had been a convent and a single old nun, Hermana Belén, still resided there, caring for the infirm, overseeing the novices, and shuffling down to the gate each morning to squint through a peephole and see what fresh human calamity had washed up on her shores.

The novices were young but in no way compromised Alvaro's cure. Stiff, grey habits obliterated the contours of their bodies and also, it seemed, their personalities. At dusk they went into darkness and silence and at the first birdcall emerged from pre-dawn shadows to set about their endless and repetitive chores. They washed clothes, dishes, floors, bodies. They drew water out of cisterns in the back of their compound and poured it into barrels and sinks to store against the time when the cisterns would surely go dry. With kitchen knives and machetes they chopped at things – vegetables, chickens, firewood, the encroaching bush. They read the Bible, or just sat motionless in the garden, eyes closed, lips moving, silently praying – for a way out of their circumstances, or a way deeper in?

IV.

At dusk, alone and without saying a word to anyone, Chele drove the Mazda down to the gate of St Jerome's Gardens. He spoke to the guardia and the guardia unlocked the gate and swung it open and he drove out of the Gardens and down the winding road to the highway and across the darkening plain, past the perpetual flame of the crematorio and into the city and its valley of the shadow of death. Which wasn't a shadow at all but a dim and poisonous light. He kept descending, all the way to the foaming, stinking river, where in the lowest neighborhoods streets narrowed and darkened and the density of buildings further compressed the streets, distorting and amplifying sounds of engines and voices. In diminishing crowds people hurried past, seeking what refuge they could find before night fell. The sky disappeared. A ceiling

closed over the emptying streets and it seemed to Chele that the descent continued, that he had entered the forgotten network of tunnels beneath the city.

How do you find your way through a mine? Bumping over winding, hemmed-in passages, praying they don't squeeze in on you entirely or drop you into some unmarked pit or caved-in tunnel with no exit. He'd thought he knew the city but now recognized nothing. In his childhood rescue fantasies he had always known exactly where to go and had gone there and found the girl and swept her up on the horse and escaped. But now he just weaved and wandered, turning onto random streets and arriving at Morazán Plaza more or less by chance. The maze of dark passageways and low buildings and cement walls glittering with glass shards ended and suddenly there were trees, he was looking at great trunks lit by yellow streetlights, at pathways and benches, dry fountains, a stone horse rearing up beneath a stone Liberator.

Beside the statue the girl rising from a bench looked very small. She wavered on the sidewalk, then veered into the street and yanked the passenger door. He unlocked it and she tumbled in with a wave of perfume, her shoulder bag clunking on the floor.

"Just get the fuck out of here, Chele. They'll cut your balls off."

V.

The Ledorah Road was blocked by rockslides, slumps, fallen trees. Some the Jeep could squeeze around or push aside with the plow but others they had to clear as best they good with shovels, rock bar, chainsaw. Then ease their way over the top of the slide, the Jeep swaying and tilting at an angle that, fingers crossed, was not quite steep enough to roll. Or they'd clear the outer edge of the roadbed and sneak around the toe of the slide, tires clinging to the very rim of a black precipice that, fingers crossed, was not too undercut to hold their weight.

Ben was loving it. Jumping in and out of the Jeep, grabbing up a tool and digging furiously through dried mudslides, rolling rocks and logs, firing up the chainsaw to cut through a fallen tree or snag. Work, it had to be done and you just did it, no bullshit.

Jimmy felt energized, too. Working like this, side by side with his brother, when was the last time that had happened? And he liked the driving, threading the needle again and again, more exhilarating than nerve-racking. More skill than luck. But a little bit of luck.

