

Two Ships Passing in the Desert

Short Stories & A Novelette

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These stories are a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are either used fictitiously or are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to other events or persons living or dead is coincidental. With the single exception of *For a Heart that Bears a Canyon*, which was based on a revision of a true story that happened to Albert Herrera Vigil.

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TWO SHIPS PASSING IN THE DESERT

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Short Stories
& A Novelette

Rorry Nighttrain East

To the late Albert H. Vigil
(1919 – 2008)

FOREWORD

As a writer and a teacher of writing, I've developed a sense of writing. In the generic sketches

in this work one catches the glimmer of a mind at work in catching the essence of life and transmitting that essence to the page—not an easy task. But Rorry Nightrain has captured that essence stunningly with a wry sense of life that prompts a concealed smile at the deftly wrought characterizations in the works.

Felipe de Ortego y Gasca, Ph.D.
Scholar in Residence
Western New Mexico University

Introduction

Two Ships Passing in the Desert, was written for our humorous friend Albert H. Vigil, who was still alive in its early beginnings. The overarching theme is that we often just miss connecting with each other—on a daily basis – as human beings.

What I hope to accomplish with this work is to find that certain and triumphant part of us which may have seen this world as a trifle bit crazy and to bathe in the fact that that part of us may actually be correct.

Rorry Nightrain East
Silver City, New Mexico

January 2, 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Ship One

For a heart that bears a canyon

The first bridge to span the pacific

Ship two

He fell for her .38's – detective spoof

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

SHIP ONE

FOR A HEART THAT BEARS A CANYON

Whenever I dream of the past, there are still a few unconscious things that try to darken the deepest corners of my mind. Yet, there are so many kindly people around me who just say, "Easy, Pepe." Pepe—that is my name, Pepe Mazon. They always say calm down and take it a bit slower. "You've got a long ways to go."

You see, I run a mystic fruit and vegetable truck stand on the highway en route to the Mimbres river valley of beautiful New Mexico.

The highway leads through some wonderful farmlands and just within range of a cool, winding stream; then it seemingly narrows back into a tight box-fit canyon, even today.

Oh, and a modest dam that was built there in the early 1950's has risen to become quite a serene body of water now called "Bear Canyon Lake." A very striking place in the autumn to be sure, where the leaves of the trees on the farthest shore can turn orange-like and every other yellow-red hue. So alive. It is the sort of place where one might initially think that nothing of any import had ever happened in its depths, except a few days catch of nap, or maybe, a good fishing trip or two. But something did happen there. I remember it so vividly, like it was yesterday, even though a gut-wrenching fifty years had passed. I was a young man of thirty-four back then. It was the 4th of July, as I recall: People were moving about with abandon and celebrating the warm holiday. I thought back to that time when my ex-girlfriend and I were on the far side of a blue lake; yet we were like two ships passing in the desert. For we were talking about breaking-up instead of picnicking, and ...

"Help! Help.... Help!" Came a man's tortured voice from across the rippled lake. "Help. Help!"

"Mamasita? Someone is calling." I jumped to my feet and ran toward the Bear Canyon dam face. "What-is-it? What's going wrong?" I inquired of the young man when I got there.

"I was teaching two teenage girls how to swim and one fell in off the ledge and the other jumped in after her friend and down into the water they both went—down into the deep." He exclaimed in a loosely garbled-tone that made me realize he was probably drunk, or something. "I . . . I tried to dive down there, but—I can't find the girls now. Can you help me?"

At that moment—I just dove down into the chilly waters; it was out of sheer terror or pity, I think, but I was unable to find either of the girls. Then after several tries, I took a breather, and I noticed that the young inebriated man had run off to get the police or maybe to even get the girl's parents. Pensive people had begun to gather in a crowd around the dam's sorrowful face.

A small rowboat with people that had been fishing on the lake began moving towards us and I asked the folks to try and use their fishing lines to snag even one of the girls so that I might swim down while following the line and hopefully bring someone back up to the surface.

"Hey, I've got something!" A fisherman called over from his aluminum boat, in spite of the fact that twenty minutes had already passed. "Okay. Hold it right there. I'll check it out." Pepe said, "That's me, remember Pepe?" So I swiftly dove down with the line in hand and just as suddenly popped back up with one of the sixteen-year-old girls.

A few people who were on the lake that day now waded out onto a ledge of the dam and brought one of the limp and lifeless girls back to the dry bank. By this time, the drunken boy had returned with one of the girl's parents. The mother was *now* crying something terrible. It was all very difficult to bear.

"Oh. Oh, my poor baby." The mother screamed.

"Oh . . . my, my."

"Help me get this girl breathing again," I ordered, as the frantic father suddenly dove into the deepwater for a second girl and brought her up.

"It's no good." I struggled with the words, "A little water has come out of this girl's mouth. It's not enough."

By that point in time, the police and ambulance had arrived just as a few mischievous kids along the lakeshore were setting off firecrackers on the other side, as if nothing had ever happened. I guess they didn't know about the accident. Yet it was then that we gave up on the first girl and we started on the second girl. Things began to look hopeful for a moment when no water came out of the second girl's mouth. Howbeit, no life was left within her.

The policeman that was hovering over us, he just shook his head and quietly said, "She must have died of fright."

"My poor, poor baby," the mother wailed on some more. "She was so afraid of the water." I just looked over at her in sorrow for a second. Then before I knew it, I had already leaped clear up into the rear of an ambulance that was beginning to move away toward the hospital, more than thirteen unlucky miles away.

It had been some lousy 4th of July, so far, for Pepe, I thought. When I finally arrived in the city limits at the hospital it was deemed that there was no more hope left for either of the girls. And I cried.

I was later asked by a policeman about my plans for the rest of the July 4th holiday, and we then both realized that in the mix-up I'd forgotten to make plans for a ride all the way back to the lake. He then drove me. Although, if it had been a lousy day for me, I could only imagine how much more of a lousy day it now was for the girls' relatives. I paused, and withdrew from such alarming thoughts as we safely returned to the lake. For after all, my day had been comparatively wonderful, considering someone had just lost a child in such a helpless manner.

Fifty years have managed to slip by since that flash of two girls before my eyes—and strangely, as if to be some kind of a reprieve from sad old memories. I was working by the side of the highway in my retirement and lo and behold; the girl's father; the same man I had seen on Bear Canyon Lake that explosive day so many years ago, now came up to me and said, "Do you remember me?"

"I'm not sure." This now aged Pepe squinted, "You look familiar, sir. Have you purchased some melons here before?" "No. No." The man looked even more deeply into my tired soul, "I just wanted to thank you for trying to help my daughter when she drowned so many years ago."

"I'm so sorry that my help wasn't enough at the time," I had to confess. "Is your wife okay now? Is she at least better?"

"My wife fell sick and died a few years ago. Uh, I think she must have died of a broken heart because she never got over the accident." The man's voice now cracked and quieted. "Anyhow, life goes on, right?"

"That's true" This story-telling Pepe tried desperately to somehow cheer the man. "I'll never forget those girls."

"Well, uh . . . it was good seeing you after such a long time," said the now daughterless father as he began to awkwardly stroll away.

"Wait. Wait-just-a-minute." I nearly burst a lung. "It seems we have a way of only meeting on the holidays; so I, uh... want to uh...give you some melons and a free pumpkin. Here! These are for Halloween. Take them, please."

"Thanks. B-But why?"

"Let's just say: It's for a heart that has had to bear a canyon." Then the father just ambled away, like that.

I think, that that will be the last time I ever see the heartbroken man a man who once had a teenage girl who left this world for something elsewhere. And well, I'm getting on in years too, eighty-five now, to be exact. So I

wouldn't be a bit surprised if those two sweet teenage girls were the first two people that I saw on the other side of the veil, when I get there.

Nonetheless, I suppose . . . even if you'll never get to see our Bear Canyon Lake near the Mimbres River Valley, then this brief remembrance can simply stand for every heart that has ever had to bear the depths of such personal tragedies and such canyons themselves.

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