

FRESH WOUNDS

HONEYBUNZ RUNZ GUNZ

I didn't really plan to get back into gun-running; it just sort of happened on its own steam. I wouldn't have planned to do it because it's so dangerous. Gunrunning is not just a job, it's an adventure. And I'm not into adventure, I'm just a simple smuggler out to make an easy buck. But these things have a way of getting out of hand.

Sometimes things just seem to come together with a will of their own; other times they just fall to shit the same damned way. Both processes accelerate when guns, women, or money get involved. I'd long since repented of selling guns in Latin America (before NAFTA at that) but just when I backslid I had a chance to do a story on gun-running for the effete local tabloid that was my usual outlet for such "yuppie noir".

I'd been hanging with this Ofelia, a dancer in Tijuana. Well, actually she was just sort of hanging out at my apartment, but she used to bring all her friends over to show them her pet gringo. Then she'd fall asleep, or pretend to, and her buddies, who were mostly top-priced skin dancers and prostitutes, would jump my bones. What with one thing and another I was getting pretty fond of her. A lot of people were. She dangled about ninety-eight percent naked in Los Patudos, which is a major hangout for various levels of gangsters, mostly sort of mid-management types. I guess. Even people involved in Mexican "mafiosos" don't really know how far up it all goes or how widely it's connected. But some of those boys in the corner booth at Patudos are about as heavy as anybody I'd want to meet.

Anyway Ofelia was a hot ticket with these mobsters. I could never figure out why. She's decent looking but nothing spectacular. She's tough, but not as hard-boiled as some of those "rucas". Maybe just because she was the star dancer at the place they hung out and everybody wanted to tag up. Mexican gangstas have a fairly locked-in mindset; they all dress alike, think alike, drive the same sort of car, carry the same sort of gun, listen to the same albums. That's what makes them belong to gangs, I guess. So Ofelia knows the ones who like to pretend they're bigtime *narcos* from the ones who really are. And she prefers the real thing. She told me she likes "dangerous" men.

So she was in luck. They don't get more dangerous than a real psycho Culiacan cowboy she started seeing. He was a *pistolero* who sort of became an independent contractor. A hired killer who couldn't keep straight who not to cross up—not the type looked up by insurance salesmen. The first time Ofelia went to his apartment, the place was littered with "cuernos de chiva", which is Sinaloa slang for an AK-47, since they think the curved magazines look like goat horns. He told her, "Baby, I've messed up bad and they're after me so we'd better have a real good time while we can." I think most girls would have been out the door before a man even finished a remark like that. But it would start Ofelia making her own gravy.

Just her luck she wasn't around when the guy got nailed to a fence up in La Presa and shot about a hundred times, mostly about the face and crotch. But she heard about it right away. And not only was she the only one who knew where he lived, she'd copped a key. So she came to see me about it. That's when I finally figured out what she saw in me. She a whole fan club scary enough to turn her on. But how many could she trust? I do a lot of dirty work with Mexicans just because they figure they can trust a gringo more than another Mexican. And she was right—if she'd gone to one of her gangster pals with her idea, they'd have just slapped her around, boogied her, and taken it all for themselves.

She let us into the *pistolero's* place up in Lomas, pulled the curtains and turned on the lights. For a minute I just stared at the interior decor. What you might call Narco-Deco. Everything was blood red, black or gold. Almost every non-functional object was in the shape of a naked woman or some portion, like a gold shaped like a tit. One whole wall was a sort of sculpture made out of beveled mirrors in gold frames, so you couldn't move without the wall buzzing and jumping with a hundred little images. The walls were red, covered with pictures of sports cars, jet fighters, Gloria Trevi naked, saints and Virgins. And a Rambo movie poster in a frame about six feet square. There must have been eight remote controls on the coffee table, which was a sheet of smoky glass held up by the knees and elbows of a naked brass woman. If I hadn't known the tenant was a Sinaloa drugboy I think I could have guessed.

The bedroom was even more of a circus, but I didn't pay much attention when I saw the guns. I suddenly realized I was standing in an apartment full of the most illegal contraband in Mexico, way worse than heroin or coke. And that if somebody came in, the owner, the mob, the cops, the *federales*, I'd be guest of honor at an execution-style shooting. Ofelia saw my face in one of about three dozen mirrors and started laughing. She didn't have all that much trouble talking me into helping her take the guns. No way would I have walked out of that place unarmed. I stuck a Ruger .357 and a Smith 9mm automatic in my belt under my shirt and we wrapped the rest of the stuff up in this huge red velvet bedspreed with little gold Playboy rabbit beads sewn all over it. Black silk sheets he had. Two different stereo systems just in the bedroom. Oil painting of Vincente Fernandez and Elvis in mariachi drag on horseback with blazing six-guns. No dresser, just clothes on the floor, a closet full of black western wear, and boxes of bikini undies. Not to mention nine assault rifles, two Italian pump shotguns, matched Ingram MAC 10's in a presentation quality briefcase, and a dozen large caliber pistols. Also an ornate machete with an eagle handle and the blade engraved, "I avenge Life with Death, and Honor with Blood." I still have the machete somewhere. No cash or dope that we could find. I made Ofelia carry the bundle out to my truck. I had my hands under my shirt and was soaked with sweat. We loaded up, pulled out, then just drove on home. When we got there, Ofelia was blatantly hot for my rod. I was fairly turned-on my own self.

Getting rid of the guns didn't even figure to be as hard as getting hold of them in the first place. I made about a dozen calls around San Diego and Baja before I got hold of Wally, kicking back in Cabo. I asked him if he could frog the guns, he said he could turn them in a New York minute right up in La Paz, so to come on down. And bring some American peanut butter. *No problema*.

Better yet, I quickly figured out how to pay for the trip by doing an expose on gunrunning for the incredibly gullible tabloid rag I mentioned (OK, OK, the San Diego "Reader"). I showed them pictures of a little storefront on the main drag in San Ysidro: no sign, no markings, no windows, just a very serious steel door. I'd staked the door out and stepped in as a customer was stepping out and had assault rifles, big-caliber handguns, and combat add-ons. They wouldn't even make eye contact with me, but it was pretty obvious that the place, four blocks from the Mexican border and without a scrap of advertising in the U.S. was selling guns headed abruptly south. Big biz, guns into Mexico. They bought the story idea, promised two grand on delivery. So far, so good.

Except when I was calling trying to get hold of Wally (and a few quotes from assorted smugglescum) I happened to talk to the mother of a surf Nazi named Claypool who'd done a bit of pot trafficking with Wally in the past. At which point the story threw me the kind of curve that the writer in me just cringes all over but makes the vestigial human being inside me cringe. I'd gotten a pretty good lead on a kid named Claypool who was a sure bet for running. I called the number but got his mother, who asked about him with a fine edge of panic and heartbreak that twisted my tail so bad I almost didn't show up in her house in La Jolla like I promised her. But I did. She gave me his picture, a thumbnail bio, and the fact she hadn't seen him in a month and was getting worried. She thought maybe he was moving drugs, which evidently he had done. She begged me to look out for him while I was down in Mexico—let her know. I could send the information to her since they were moving back to Houston where the old man would design weapon systems for somebody other than General Dynamics. I told her sure I would. You know, sure I would. But it gave me a bad feeling about the whole project.

Wally is a major maniac, even among the lunatic fringe of the smuggling industry, a legend in his own time-share. The first time I met him he impressed me with an evening of extremely nuts shit, culminating with Wally slamming two garbage can lids together on the head of a Mazatlan cop, then marching off clashing them together singing, "Oh the monkey wrapped his tail around the flagpole, and all the people could see his asshole," to the tune of a Souza march. There wasn't a dry eye, believe me.

But my favorite Wallylogue came down in Guadalajara. See, a major difference between selling guns and selling watches or VCR's is that nobody is going to pick up one of the watches and kill you with it. The fact that it is possible to do with a gun (remember "Terminator"?) is one reason for all the concern about security. We'd been selling low-end pistols, and I mean beaters you'd find abandoned in alleys, to this clown who was supposedly leading some Mickey Maoist cell allegedly affiliated with the insidious Tecolotes at the Autonomous University of Guadalajara. Fancied themselves a local Sendero Luminoso. Wally had a case of the ass at him for some reason. I heard there was a woman involved. There so frequently is.

Anyway, this knucklehead struts in with his grizzled teenaged henchmen and starts critiquing the merchandise he's getting at bargain-basement rates. He's bitching about the condition of one big .38 six-shooter with plastic "antler" grips so Wally loads it for him, telling him he can check it out, then starts riding him, insulting him. He's getting madder and madder in front of his shock troops and Wally manages to goad him into pointing the Buffalo Bill model gun at him. Everybody just freezes and Wally freaks out, falls on the floor crying and begging for his life. Their glorious leader just sits there, a little dumfounded, and Wally goes completely apeshit: jumps up, starts screaming at him, cursing him, tears the shirt off him, falls down and starts biting him on the ankles and howling like a dog. The guy is pretty shook up and he's sitting there holding a loaded gun but doesn't pull the trigger. Wally starts humping his leg like a horny dog and yapping at him. Finally he gives up the mad dog act and just takes the gun away and sticks it right in his ear.

By now Comandante Clown is just along for the ride, his mind totally blown. His merry men are goggle-eyed but not moving. Wally lines them up against a wall, shakes them down, takes all their money, drops their drawers, rubs one *muchacho's* girlfriend's picture in his crotch pretending like he's coming. Then he sticks all those Salvation Army guns in their pants, which are down around their ankles, and tells them to get the fuck lost. The main Mao-Mao starts to say something and Wally starts screaming and gibbering, points the had Fanner Fifty right between his eyes and pulls the trigger. He faints. Wally had taken out the firing pin (if it ever had one) just to see if he guy had the balls to use it to steal the shipment. He was pissed off he didn't. It's seems safe to conclude that if the *Sendero Ludicrous* is still in business they have new leadership. Wally mentioned that they haven't bought any more guns. He's pissed about that, too. Who else would buy all those old beaters?

Our main trade had always been pistols—not a glamour stock like UZI's or rockets, but a staple or real-world traffic and a mainstay for revolutions. Our real business in Guadalajara (with what you'd have to call real revolutionaries) was flogging some *pistolas* of a fairly complex pedigree, clones of Brazilian copies of the world-famous *Fabrique Nationale*/Excamb 9mm automatic, stamped with numbers and names of Nexcam (a Miami maker noted for Destruction Eve Specials) with the guts machined in a small Seattle shop by an ex-employee of DynoTech, known for their elegant cut-down versions of major calibers. Despite what newspaper writers and other nitwits try to tell you, a great deal of small-arm manufacture is cottage industry, real SBA stuff. Why not? Guns aren't that hard to make, easier than model engines or radio-controlled aircraft. The hardest part is making sure they fit the ammo. Ammo is harder to make, but almost all shooters do their own reloading. Wally sold one band of lunatics in Honduras a standard Sears reloading press at a two hundred percent mark-up, plus about a million spent brass NATO cartridges for a ridiculous profit, even after he threw in twenty thousand primers. And they didn't bitch about the price, were about as thrilled as commie crazos ever get. But you can see why people like Wally aren't all that popular in government circles. Governments are, by their very nature, opposed to citizens having guns, drugs, or unrestricted information. The worse the government, the more they hate having guns around. The worst ones don't allow them at all. I hate to be heavy-handed about this, but maybe you've noticed that the worse our own government gets, the more you hear about gun control. Mostly from newspimps, of course, who act like the NRA is some big scary outfit with a fraction of the power of a newspaper chain. Oliver Stone is naive: the Kennedys were probably killed to promote gun control and Doctor Junior got thrown in, too, because blacks generally tend to be suspicious of honkys who want the cops to have all the guns.

But back to the Ofelia deal. Wally had it all set up by the time I drove down to La Paz. A great bunch of guys with political aspirations and rich liberal money behind them, like the *Zapatistas*. Wally had dealt himself out (except for a finder's fee, probably from both parties involved) and I would meet them and do the deal; American cash over the counter. When they showed up I was covering them with two of the AK's, held like pistols in both hands. It's just salesmanship, really. For one thing it establishes a level of professional caution and intimidation right from the get-go. And weapons always look bigger, meaner and more desirable when they're pointing at you. Once you spook them a little, they're very definitely convinced that the weapons are deadly. When I considered rapport established, I pulled the magazines out, jacked the chambered rounds across the room (another nice effect and a bottom-line convincer), then let them get a load of the goods. They bought the works. At my low, low everyday prices. If you paid full price, you didn't get it from the Grinning Gringos. Those AK's should have been worth a grand apiece down there, but they got them for half that. Like so many of your modern revolutionaries and gangsters, they didn't really understand shotguns. I let them have one, worth a grand, for two hundred and kept the other one. Like the old-school gangsters, I do understand shotguns. Give me one over a machine gun any damn day. Which was the situation when they left. They had five hombres with a pile of machine guns, I had a shotgun. They could tell I wasn't worried. They didn't hang around outside in the hall, so Wally didn't have to step out of the communal bathroom and blow them away. When we saw them hit the street with their bundles, Wally and I got in his car and headed down to Cabo for a drink and some international banking. Three days of diving and drinking and I was hotwheeling back to Tijuana. Ofelia's half, less expenses, came to about forty-five hundred. She'd been hoping for more, but understood about not being able to go upmarket from our position. She also kept out a really nice little Walther automatic worth six hundred in the States, twice that in Mexico, and its weight in pink flake during those major moments. It was just her style. I'll never forget her stalking around my place wearing nothing but boots, Stetson, and net hose with the gun stuck in the garter. Profiling for the mirror. You talking to ME, *pendejo*? Perfect: "Taxi Dangar". What I'd really like to do with Ofelia is set her up with Wally, then hang around and video tape the results. Most documentaries don't have enough sex and violence.

But there's always one last little thing, isn't there? On my way back I was doing a little more research for my big gunrunning expose. I interviewed a few old smuggling pals around Mulege, who mentioned that there might have been a gun deal go down a few months before—some fool getting burned by the *Federales*. They told me where I might be able to get some pics for the story. Out at the dump behind the cemetery. The Mulege cemetery where the big stone arch says, "Here's where all your schemes and philosophies collide with the only reality."

I didn't even have to check the plates. The minute I saw the van I knew all I needed to know about that particular angle. It sat there in the sun like a skull, stripped of all life, hope, or argument; two shotgunned holes in the windshields giving it the endzone stare. I didn't have to look inside to know it was the last landmark—end of the trail for the hodad who would be bad. I think the pellet and bullet holes in the van were after the fact, from bird hunters. They wouldn't have needed to jump him in the van, he'd have walked right up to pointblank range like Bambi high on a jacklight, never even wonder what hit him. He should have stuck with drugs. There's a twentieth century epitaph for anyone who wants one

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