

## The Final Voyage of General Lee

by Hale Shepherd

The General is dead.

Hellfire smolders on the horizon and the Stars & Bars ripples at my feet, half-buried in the sand. Sunrise is on the way, hotter than two rats fuckin' in a wool sock, and the wind picks up the dust so I can taste it. The tequila helps. I pull the flag around my shoulders and turn my back on the flaming horizon. Over the next dune stands the shady silhouette of my amigo, looking over the miles of bubbling sand that separate us from the lost highway.

The desert is quiet as church on Monday, silence broken only by the laughter of demons and the clicking of Vade's knife. "Jalisco is south, Kemosabe," he says.

That's when I grab the pistol, step forward, and center it on his forehead. "I won't forgive you," I hiss through clenched teeth.

Vade is surprisingly calm about having a gun to his head; he folds his knife and pockets it, then looks at me like he's waiting for me to say something. But before I pull the trigger, I realize that this isn't the beginning of the story. It's the end, or pretty damn close, which is no way to start.

The real beginning is three days ago, a carton of OJ and a bottle of Pepe Lopez in a rusty pickup, headed south. The Rio Grande was long behind us; ahead there was only desert. Just me, Vade, and the General.

We began the drive two sunrises into the night; Vade was pouring the cocktails directly into our open mouths. We had to make do without ice or cocktail spoons - when my mouth was full I shook my head vigorously. True, Vade was a bar-back by trade, but this was madness. He couldn't keep bartending and drinking two-fisted while rolling a blunt. It was just physically impossible. At my suggestion, he dumped the OJ into the Pepe to make a Sunrise Grande and flung the empty carton out the window. I watched it cartwheel down the road in the sideview mirror, much closer than it appeared. Daylight pooled to the west, burnt and amber like a shot of fine anejo. Morning was catching up as the bottle of Sunrise dwindled and "Low Rider" began to play, the only song allowed when driving to Mexico.

Vade turned off the radio just as War started singing about all their friends. Without a soundtrack our bold journey into the desert was just a half-assed road trip in a truck older than dirt. I reached for the dial with my tequila hand; Vade swiped the bottle and elbowed me hard under the ribs. I told Vade he was crazy, you couldn't have tequila without music, and he of all people should know, but he shook his head and took a long pull on the bottle.

"You play that song again, Kemosabe," he said, "and I hit you so hard, I'll fall down with

you."

My father's truck. My rules. "Don't think I won't pull over and punish you like I caught you hoppin' fence," I said, and took a swing at him. The punch was as wasted as I was; the General swerved into the other lane and back again, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with a truck full up with chickens. Vade laughed until we leveled out; I was going to cuss him and go for another right cross, but my crafty Latin friend sparked a swisher he had rolled tight and shoved it between my lips. I breathed deep, savoring the taste of sun-grown schwag, and all was forgiven. He smiled as we passed the swisher back and forth; the scar on his cheek stretched from a thin line into a brown gash that threatened to swallow his eye.

Vade De La Garza wasn't really a fence-hopper, to the best of my knowledge. I had worked with him for five years; he tended bar and I bounced at the Wild Wild Chest in El Paso. Management threatened to fire me many times for drinking on the job, but Vade was always quick to point out that nobody had dared approach the stage since I'd started working there. It set a stripper's mind at ease to know the six-foot-seven Texan with a rattlesnake tat coiled around his bicep was her chaperone. And whenever the state police came to inquire where Mr. De La Garza had been on the night in question, they always heard he'd been at the bar all night. Living in the asshole of Texas tends to bring people together like that.

Thursday night, after the last G-string was flung and Candy, Rocket and Clementine had all been safely escorted to their cars, I saw Vade waiting for me, perched on the General's hood with a bottle of Pepe Lopez and a carton of OJ in his lap. I yelled at him to haul his ass off the Stars & Bars, and to give me a swig. Bartenders were let go at last call, two a.m. on a Thursday, so I was left scratching my head as to why Vade was still here two hours later. He didn't offer and I didn't ask, so we sat in the cab for a spell, throwin' back shitty tequila and chasing with the juice. Didn't bother me none, it was just what the body and mind of a tired bouncer needed after a long night of teaching drunk frat boys to mind their manners. It struck me as wholly ironic, being paid to defend the dignity of women who danced naked for money. Wild Wild Chest wasn't the worst place in the world, but there was no doubt in my mind that there had to be better.

I took a long pull on the Pepe and let it sit and boil on my tongue before swallowing. "Ever wonder why the hell we stay here, Vade?"

"Only every day, Kemosabe. But where else would you go?"

"I don't know. I feel like I know everything there is to know about this place, but understand nothing." More silence, more drinking. I slid the key into the ignition. "Tell me a story, Vade."

He nodded, then flicked out his knife to gut a swisher, dumping the cheap tobacco through the rusty hole in the General's floor. I began to drive, southbound, as Vade spoke, the words floating thick and heavy from

his lips like honeyed smoke. Late-night prairie gave way to early-morning sand and fury as he told tales of home, Jalisco, the birthplace of tequila. Mexican men of knowledge ate the hearts of gods and journeyed into the desert to commune with the spirits that watched the living, to see what they saw. These men did not fear the demons who used the desert as a playground, preying upon the souls of men and leaving their victims cripplingly insane. Tequila was their ally, a spirit straight from the hands of gods; these men drank their strength and courage from the hearts of the agave. With nothing to fear of the demons, they delved deeper than any Mexica ever had, learning from the demons the secrets of the world, dark knowledge. Several hours and sunrises later, we crossed inevitably into Mexico and Vade's tale was lost in schwag-smoke.

The first road sign since the border flew by so fast I never even saw it coming, but Vade warned me to slow for the next one. On the side of the highway leaned a splintered wooden cross, the right arm pointing down a dirt road. As I turned onto it, I noticed something resting at the base of the sign. A straw hat waved in the wind from atop a head half-buried in the sand, a human skull grinning up at me as a snake wove back and forth, eye socket to eye socket. The sign was written in Spanish; Vade translated:

LOS PECADOS

FIFTY MILES FROM WATER, TEN FEET FROM HELL

"This has to be it," I chuckled, downing the last of the Sunrise.

Vade nodded as smoke jetted from his nose in two thin streams. He stabbed out the roach on a rust patch under his window and flicked it at the skull, tipping the hat forward over the snake. "Adios, vaquero."

Another twenty miles of sol-drenched dirt and the town materialized amongst the dunes. Thatched-roof houses and clay buildings bleached white by sun and sand shimmered against the desert sky. The cacti seemed to wave, welcoming us to a town that couldn't decide if it was real or mirage, here or there. Heat blanketed everything as mist; it was like driving through a cloud. Some saint was having a birthday, so everyone in town was drunk, or working on it. Old men sat on benches sipping cervezas and watching, firecracker boys chasing streamer girls round a decades-dry fountain, laughing and drinking mezcal by the jar-full. Town square was thick with people and confetti; the General had to stay behind, Vade said. I didn't move. "Not today, amigo."

A fool and his truck are soon parted in Mexico. True, the General was no prize. Oil went through him like a laser and the gate had fallen off, eaten away by rust. But I'd sooner fuck a cactus than leave that truck surrounded by drunken wetbacks.

General Lee and the flag he bore were the only things left to me by my father. The man was meaner than Hitler and stricter than Christ. If I limped the day after a beating, he beat me harder. But I rode with him to the ranch every day in that truck, every day but one, listening to whatever tall tale the whiskey was telling him. The radio had never worked, and he never gave a thought to fixing it. He told me old folktales of cowboys riding lightning, those rare days the devil decided to take a walk in Texas, and of a soldier who could not bear to raise a sword against his native South. It took until I was fifteen to realize he was just a drunken ass, a mediocre ranch-hand and an amateur gunfighter, which was why he was buried in an unmarked grave outside of Three Rivers, Texas. He was killed in an argument with Old Duke, an ancient wrangler who whistled through his remaining teeth when he spoke, and had survived being shot in the face a tragic number of times. Natural causes got Duke in the end, but I never forgave him for keeping my father's firearm. I sought solace in the knowledge that the Fates had my father outgunned that night. Vade knew none of this, but it would not bear explaining. "Relax, Kemosabe," he said. "None are stealing trucks today, muy entoxicado." Bullshit.

So Vade flagged down the nearest sparkler-waving ten year-old and made me give him a fistful of pesos and the rest of the swishers to guard the General. I was about to tell Vade to fuck off with this babysitting shit, when the kid gave a two-fingered whistle that cut through my buzz like a switchblade. He was joined in the truck-bed by a surly-looking mutt, black with dirt and age, a refugee from the fights. It snarled a mouthful of nasty teeth, assuring me the General was safe. "Even drunk Mexicano know better than to fuck with dogs," Vade explained.

He led me down a side-street, past doorways filled with old ladies begging us to buy beads and useless trinkets, young hustlers pushing Fauxlex watches and Jokeley shades, and peso-hookers put out to pasture-- Mucho sexo, papi. Muy barata! Before I could wonder where the hell we were going, Vade slapped me on the back and pointed into a clearing surrounded by cacti and liquor stores, both open and abandoned. But the oasis at the center was a long and low claybrick theater-house, with a wood roof and neon signs washed out by the sun. "The fuck are we lookin' at, amigo?" I asked. "The dry fountain's got more action than this shack. I didn't drive out to the asshole of the desert to watch a play."

"I do some business here, but no worry. You like the show, Kemosabe. Trust me." He led me up the steps and past a sign that read El Rancho Uno Noche. "We stay here the night. Rooms is muy barato."

"I'm still waiting to be impressed by all this freedom," I muttered. "Your demons and sinners party at the local theater?"

The gold tooth flashed and the scar stretched as Vade turned and pushed open the doors. They swung aside, revealing a hall like an indoor stadium, with a bar that stretched the length of the far wall. Off to my right was a small stage crowded with mariachi men playing a lazy tune, while a handful of young Latinas strutted about the tabletops and stage in an impressive parade of T & A. Our motel doubled as a skin bar to make ends meet.

"What a great country," I said.

Vade nodded. "Si, Kemosabe."

Without tearing my eyes off the red mini-skirt that was quickly becoming a belt two tables over for a crowd five deep, I pointed to the gold cross my friend wore around his neck. "And He doesn't mind? I mean, I thought you were all Catholics down here."

Vade followed my stare. "In Jalisco they have a saying," he kissed his cross, "If God wanted señoritas to wear clothes, he would not have invented tequila."

The dancing girl let herself down into the lap that had the most pesos to offer, wearing nothing but beads and stiletto heels. The other hombres cheered him on and raised their mugs to his good fortune and began to gesture and whistle at the other chicas. I was contemplating how expensive a handful of that ass would be when Vade tore me away and led me across the room to the bar, tended by the biggest shirtless Mexican I ever saw. He had a patch over his right eye and "HECHO EN MEJICO" tattooed on the left side of his neck. His eye was fixed on me like a rifle sight the whole time Vade talked to him. I glared right back. I was sober enough to know he could stomp me without breaking a sweat, but the liquid courage in me still wanted to see him try it. I silently dared him to even think about kicking my ass. They conversed in Spanish, so I couldn't really follow, but I heard the bruiser say "gringo" quite a few times. The third time he said it, he dragged it out, rolled the R off his tongue like it was made of fucking marbles, making sure I heard him. I stood up fast and my stool fell over; a loud crash and all eyes were on me. The banditos at table three and all the girls on the floor stared unabashedly as the band played on. I looked the bruiser right in his hostile little eye and spit on the floor.

"I understand 'gringo' you fucking spic," I said. It didn't really matter what he said next. I was planning to go for as many teeth as I could when he opened his mouth, but Vade stepped between us.

"Easy, amigos," he said. He began to speak rapidly to the bartender in Spanish. The bartender gave a few curt responses, never taking his eye off me, and I could tell we were gonna get along just famously. Eventually he slid a leather-bound guestbook across the bar. Inside were the signatures of countless Pancho Villas, each one scribbled in a different hand. Vade signed his own Villa and gave me a look that said "more money." I paid up, tossing the dollars on the table; the cyclops could pick 'em up himself. The

bartender then set out a bottle of 1800 Reposado and two shots, then brought up a small wooden box with rusted hinges and worn carvings and set it on the bar in front of Vade. Our one-eyed bartender also sold grass by the can, but I only wanted half, so he turned the can on its side and slashed it across the middle with a butcher knife. Every glass on the bar rattled with the force. I dollared up and he walked away from us, and continued to give a general menacing glare about the bar. Vade slid the half-can back at me when I handed it to him. His hands were busy with something in the carved box; he told me to tip Martillo and he would roll it if I couldn't do it myself. I could figure it out, I snapped.

"Try to be calm, Kemosabe," Vade pleaded in a whisper. "Martillo," he pointed to the bartender, "don't like you here, but he like our dollars. Just don't be stupid."

"Stupid was leaving the General with some kid and his dog. You're gonna have another scar if he ain't there, and it won't be as pretty as that eye-candy there," I replied, as the band struck up a rendition of "Low Rider." Vade took a swig from the bottle and we passed it between us, ignoring the shot glasses. "Hell, I coulda found people who hated me without leaving El Paso.... Here I know nothing, and understand even less."

"Soon, Kemosabe," Vade said, waving a wad of my dollars at a girl with a rack you couldn't climb with a ladder. "Soon we party with the demons. Soon the doors of perception and knowledge will open to us. For now, try to have fun." He returned his attention to whatever he was doing in the box. I heard the distinct click of his knife opening. In the meantime, thirty dollars got a round of table dances and two more bottles of 1800 with limes and salt. Luja and Dulce stroked and mounted each other on our table for no extra charge. It took another fifty dollars to get Luja to lick my cock with the enthusiasm a postal worker reserves for an envelope; I decided it was too expensive for a gringo to get a happy ending in Los Pecados. Without any more money flowing, the girls tired of me, and as they returned to dancing on the stage with the band I grew bored with them. I watched Vade working away in the carved box and recalled the story that had inexplicably drawn me here, and there was something I just had to know.

"Why is tequila so special?" I asked Vade, peering into the nearly-empty bottle before me. "I mean, why do the men of knowledge think it comes from the gods?"

He didn't look up. "Because it does. It is a drink handed straight from the heavens to our lips, since before Mexica even knew what a blue agave was..." Vade told me how a young Aztec scholar was walking out in the desert, meditating on life so that he might someday become a man of knowledge. On his walk he encountered a field of cacti where he had never known one to be. He was not surprised to find the cacti, but he was enchanted by the blue blossoms that they bore, faintly glowing in the

twilight. Without warning, the night sky split open and lightning struck a lone cactus in the center of the field. There was no storm, no rain, nor anymore lightning, just one strike. The young scholar carefully wove his way to the struck cactus, where he found the blue blossom, an agave, split open. A viscous fluid bubbled out, cackling with the energy of the heavens. The young scholar drank freely of the azul heart, melted by the bolt's heat into pure liquid mezcal, from the fingers of gods to his lips. He heard the voice of Quetzcoatl, a warrior-god, and was not afraid, for he told the young scholar how they might make more, so that all Mexica men of knowledge might learn from the demons without fear. "Now," Vade concluded, turning the open box toward me. "We join them, Kemosabe. Free your soul from the prison of your flesh."

Inside the box were two green peyote bulbs that he had carefully cut up into wedges like an orange. I took a bite--it tasted like sand-covered leather. I ate the rest quickly like Vade, and chased it with tequila, but the taste wouldn't die. Even as we sparked up some of the grass, I could feel the smoke winding down a leather highway to my lungs, cracking under the heat. The band began to sound like they were miles away; I looked to Vade, who told me to relax and wait - I would know when the trip began.

I nodded and began to vomit uncontrollably, thinking this was a bad idea, wider perception wasn't worth all this. Relieved of my guts, I raised my head above the table and looked for Vade, but found him nowhere. The band was gone, replaced by a swirling whirlpool of stars and velvet that occupied the whole stage. Behind the bar was a muscular totem-pole of a man with an eagle's head, with eyes of fire and smoke pouring from his beak. I staggered toward the bar, but the demon-bird asshole grabbed the tequila and smashed it upon the floor.

So much for knowledge.

"Which one are you?" I asked him. I'll admit-- the hell-flames flashing in his eyes were scaring me. He made a sound like a sigh, and pushed open a door behind him. The room was grainy and black and white, like an old movie. Two men were sitting at a table playing a hand of cards stooped under wide-brimmed Stetsons. One player was throwing his chips at the other player, whose hand was on his gun, under the table. One player was my father. The other was Old Duke. The demon-bird pulled the door shut as the shot sounded - I saw my father's revolver fall from his hand before the door clicked shut. I vaulted the bar and faked-out the demon, crashing through the door into a high-noon desert. Taking a face-plant on scorching sand hurt. A lot. Swearing at every name I could think of, I looked over my shoulder for the door, and instead found endless, unbroken desert that shimmered at vision's edge. At my feet were shards of rotted wooden door and my father's old shootin' iron. I ran my fingers along the

grip, tracing three tiny crosses he had carved into it, then shoved it into the waistband of my jeans.

Faced with no other choices, I began to walk toward the nearest horizon, only hoping that something would happen between now and my death. I watched the sand dunes rolling across the horizon in an unending march of giant snails in the dust. I took the gun in my hand and fired; a little white dot rocketed across the skyline into the snail parade. The bullet struck, a shell exploded into thousands of curled fragments shooting in all directions; I had to duck to avoid being crushed. My next shot flew straight up into blinding oblivion, until I heard the tinkling of broken glass and the sun went out. I asked aloud if Time itself was on drugs, and no one replied that night was by far the best time of day. But enough playing in demon country - I had to be on my guard.

Off to my left, I heard: "Ay! Kemosabe!" There was Vade sitting in General Lee's bed, smoking and drinking and dangling his legs from the back. The truck was surrounded by a close ring of cacti, and Los Pecados was nowhere in sight. He waved me over and gave me the blunt, but took the tequila into the passenger seat with him. "Did you meet him?" he asked.

"The bird-demon guy?"

"Si, Yaotzin."

I climbed behind the wheel. "And what's his story?"

"He is keeper of the dead. What he say to you, Kemosabe?"

"He said 'I'll see you soon enough, hombre.' What the hell would he say to me?"

Vade sighed. "Too bad," he muttered as I slid the key into the ignition and turned it. The General grunted to life and I heard a faint click. "I am sorry, Kemosabe, but I have a father once, too." My hand went for the gun, but Vade's knife pressed against my neck and I freeze.

Out of the corners of my eyes I saw pointy-eared dogface phantoms sidling out from the cacti like shadows with ruby eyes. They had the truck surrounded and were closing in when I grabbed Vade's wrist and shifted into drive, slamming on the gas. The dogface phantoms shattered like clay statues as the General plowed through them, the others dropped to all fours and gave chase, barking and laughing like hyenas. Vade tried to break my grip, but there's a reason I've been working the door and he's been serving drinks. I went for the gun with my other hand; Vade grabbed the steering wheel and pulled. The General swerved into a sand dune and jerked to a halt. I flew through the windshield into the sand, and with satisfaction I heard Vade's head crack against the dash .

The General is dead.

My mouth is full of dust and I've got a headache bigger than Texas. It's hotter than the devil's balls, but a slight breeze still ripples the Stars & Bars half-buried at my feet. I pull the tattered flag around my shoulders and turn my back on the dogfaced phantoms crouched hungrily in the dunes. They watch, wait and scratch their ears as though waiting for something, but sunrise approaches they fade into retreating darkness.

The desert is quiet, all I hear is Vade's click. "Jalisco is south, Kemosabe," he says.

I must have asked where we were. I grab the gun and center it on his forehead, ready to send him to meet Yaotzin. "I won't forgive you."

Vade appears utterly unimpressed with the gun-barrel pointed at his head. He folds his knife and pockets it, then looks at me like he's waiting for me to say something.

I pull back on the hammer and Vade's eyes snap open; he begins to reply as though I had asked him a question. He tells me of his father, Don De La Garza, a man of knowledge who grew bored of Quetzcoatl and Mescalito and went in search of Xolotl, a demon of the underworld who dealt in all matters of darkness. The phantom was possessed of powerful knowledge, and Don De La Garza was not strong enough to resist him. He was driven mad, his soul stolen by Xolotl. The phantom cut a deal with Vade in Los Pecados. He cared not which soul he had, so long as Vade could provide an exchange.

"I won't forgive you," I hiss again as I pull the trigger. Nothing happens. The hammer is jammed, and not giving up. Vade starts to laugh and I pistol-whip him across the face, aiming for that smiling scar. He grunts and goes down in the sand, rubbing his jaw, but keeps right on laughing, holding his sides as he gets up. I grab him by the shirt and lift him to eye-level. "I'll fucking kill you... what's so fucking funny?" My vision blurs and I feel light-headed as my muscles throb.

"Don't you see, Kemosabe?" Vade jeers. "We have both tried to kill the other, and failed! We can not be enemies - you are my ally on this journey."

I dropped him. "What? You saying you're my ally because you killed the General and I tried to shoot you? I never passed ninth grade and even I think that's dumb."

"Quetzcoatl has left us stranded in the desert, unable to kill each other. What else could he say?" Vade dusts himself off and picks up the tequila bottle. He starts walking south. "What he show you, Kemosabe? Yaotzin tell you something, I know."

I take the tequila and drink, then follow him Jalisco.

Hale Shepherd hails from Texas, where he was born and raised. He graduated from a small New England liberal arts college and came back to Austin to tend its bars and tell its stories. "General Lee" is just one of

Kemosabe's tales that will comprise a whole book of "redneck noir," inspired by Monte Alban, Chandler and ZZ Top.