

Reading the Footnotes

By John Stickney

My partner and I are sitting in a light tan Durango, kind of blends in with the desert dust surroundings. AC set on high and we need it. The outside weather is scorching and the inside weather - well, we are listening to Bob Marley's *Africa: The Singles* because it is my day to program the music. This music is hot, too. Not desert hot, Caribbean ganja hot. No surprise, you expect it to be hot inside and out when you're looking for the Devil.

In our line of work, we spend a lot of time in cars, driving somewhere to determine what has to be done. We act, then receive orders to drive somewhere else and repeat the process. We spend *a lot* of time in cars.

You know how it is when you're in a car and in your head you want to hear something, but the guy in control of the radio is playing something entirely different? Like being a teenager again, sandwiched into the back seat of your father's station wagon on a family vacation, driving to an isolated cottage on some small lake for a week of mosquito bites and fish nibbles, spending the ten, twelve, fifteen travel hours listening to the music of his, not your, life. Unless Dad is a fan of thrash metal or Emo or new wave or whateverthefuckteenagerslistentothesedays, you spend your time sitting in the back seat willing yourself to go deaf. Wishing, praying, "Make me deaf, God, please." I had enough of that shit growing up. So, two months into our partnership, I told my partner, whose musical tastes I have been deferring to because of his one year and six-months of seniority on the job, I told him I am not your teenage son and I get to control the radio some of the time. He could tell I felt strongly about it, 'cause we're partners.

"Damn man, you shoulda said something." He pointed to the radio dial, as if to say, have at it.

This was not our first serious partner to partner discussion. There are other things I feel passionate about. For example, two weeks into our partnership, our first serious discussion went like this:

"Just so you know," I told him, "I do not kill children."

"Moral thing?" he asked.

"It's difficult to quantify," I said.

"No problem," he said. "I'm the same way about redheads."

"Male and female?"

"Just female. Something to do with my first girl friend I guess."

I know. In comparison, my love of music seems trivial. But I really love music - all types, all kinds, as long as it is good. Since we're good partners, we've compromised. If called for, he'll be the one to do the kill I won't, I'll do the one he can't and we both get to control the radio/ tape/ CD/ MP3/ iPod player on an alternating 24 hour basis.

When it's my partner's turn to program, we listen to classic rock. Lots of Tull and EL&P and Floyd and Zeppelin (he says he got the taste for that retro stuff from his parent's vinyl collection) and sometimes that political talk radio crap. Or sports, even hockey games. I have a hard enough time following the puck when I'm at a game. On the radio... man, it's impossible. When I'm in charge, it is eclectic city, you might find some sides by the Blasters mixed with Los Lobos or LCD Soundsystem or Sonny Rollins or Delbert McClinton. Toss in some Lyle Lovett, toss in some Steve Earle, some John

Scofield and lots of Charlie Hunter. Aretha, Mavis Staples, Gatemouth Brown, Lowell Fulson, whatever I do, it's got to be funky. But right now, as I tell my partner, "At this very moment, betcha we're the only two Federal Agents in the US of A listening to Bob." Hell, I don't know for sure but the odds seem real good. And how you gonna check to prove me wrong? Besides, it gives us something to talk about while we wait for you know who.

"Prove it," he says.

Of course. "How?"

"We could call someone. Say, the dispatch for the FBI in Houston."

"What are they gonna do, an all points call - 'All agents, all agents, please report, anyone listening to Bob Marley?'"

Just so you know we could do that - call the Bureau. Hell, with our phony creds and our electronics, we get all the radio traffic. We could call BATF (if you did call BATF you want to refer to them as ATF, only outsiders add the B even though it is officially part of their name). We could call ICE. We could call those drug guys from Don't Expect Anything (DEA). We can call Federal, state and local on both sides of the border. You'll see. Later, we will be calling Border Patrol, maybe a few others. That's one of the reasons we're here.

"Statistical sampling," my partner says. "Send out a survey."

"Wouldn't the simple receipt of the survey cause someone to say they are listening to Bob Marley?"

"Like the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, the very act of observing changes."

"Yep, Heisenberg," which always makes me think of a hops-laden German beer.

That's how, in the parlance of today's youth, we roll. We're all Heisenberg all the time: observation = action = change. In our present circumstances, imagine this: a Government operation is off the books and, for what ever reason, it has to be brought back onto the books. Entered into the ledger, so to speak. So, they send for our unit. They really don't have a glamorous name for us, nothing cool like CTU or UNCLE, just Unit 25. Yeah, sounds like a room on the second floor of the Bid-A-Wee Motel or a rental storage unit located off State Route 91. Informally, we came up with something else. We call ourselves the Footnote Guys, as in, 'See? It wasn't off the books, it was in there all the time. Guess you just didn't bother to read the footnotes.' Sounds sexist, 'Guys', but we have some women working here. Hell, our boss is a woman. And they don't seem to mind being called a generic non-sex specific Guys, so you be cool with it.

What brings us to the border of Mexico and these here United States - on this bluff above the slow moving Rio Grande, where the smell of toxic and human waste merge and linger in the air? Is it just because of the good food and a chance for me to summon up a border music package - The Texas Tornadoes, Café Tacuba and the Nortec Collective - from my collection of jams? To view all the natural varieties of creosote bushes? What operation needs to be remanded? Simple. The Mexican Government has seen fit to provide Beto Taberas to the US Attorney's Office in Houston. And who is Beto Taberas? Beto is the devil. Really, the Devil. That's what ICE had him on the books as: Chamuco - 'the Devil'. You don't ordinarily refer to 'controlled' informants under their real name. Hence, the appropriate name for this particular piece of shoe sole dog turd - Chamuco. He could be a villain in the soap opera world of Mexican professional wrestling, wearing one of those decorated S&M masks, red cloth horns

poking up, contending against the wily El Santo. Unfortunately, there's no fantasy morality play involved. He's our villain, originally caught by US Law Enforcement, de-hooked and released in native waters to attract a bigger fish, as if there are any bigger. Not snatched from some blue bucolic lake. Nope. Chamuco was netted on the US side, in Laredo, in the company of his money-laundering, cocaine-consuming whore of a wife, his two over-weight children, Juan (10) and Ofelia (8), and about \$1.5 Million in ill-gotten gains. I say about, because we both rounded down. Keep in mind this figure does not include what he still has in bank accounts both in the US and Panama, nor those bearer silver certificates squirreled away in a safe deposit box in Tucson.

Arresting a guy like Chamuco would headline any US Attorney's news conference. Maybe even get the Attorney General to fly in and read something prepared especially for him, complete with phonetic spellings of all the big names and words, so he could read it right off the page. Chamuco was near the top of the Televisa Cartel. That alone makes him a genuine wall mounted trophy fish. Combine that with the fact that he also, over a fifteen year period, had worked his way from a grunt at the Federal Highway Police to an office near the top FHP command.

How'd he rise so far? Simple. Using his position with the FHP to protect his own Cartel's drug deals and to set up rivals (sometimes for busts, sometimes for death) had the dual purpose of helping him rise simultaneously in both the ranks of the Cartel and the Police. Further, using his position in the FHP and the "Grupo Operativo" (Operations Group) of detectives and officers under his command, he hamstrung any investigations of the Televisa Cartel (though he allowed some minor seizures and arrests as cover). He and those under his command went balls to the walls on investigations involving the other cartels. One of those investigations resulted in the arrest and elimination of a rival, the regional National Police Chief, Sandalio Gonzalez. Gonzalez had used his own position to protect the Ferre Cartel. Journalists touted Chamuco as an honest, humble policeman who could get things done. National politics beckoned. See? A real smart guy.

So why did the dumbass move across the border? Why leave his villas, his mistresses and his cohorts to come to the US? It was over a simple 'business disagreement' with Cesar Santillan, the person directly above him in the Cartel. The disagreement was over a matter of honor and, just coincidentally, a healthy sum of money. Acting under Chamuco's direction, the police seized a load of cocaine from a rival transporter, found in a hidden compartment welded beneath the trunk of the car along with a few hundred thousand in US dollars. Santillan believed, as a matter of honor, both the money and the dope were rightfully his.

Chamuco said, "Here's this fat fuck who does nothing but sit back and count the money I make for him telling me he wants both the product and the funds. Both."

Their discussion escalated.

"I have expenses, I told him. My guys need a taste. You are taking food from the mouth of my children."

Santillan was unwilling to listen to reason. The argument escalated.

"Perhaps this will convince you, I said, drawing my pistol. He tells me - "Chingate tu madre, carbon", that is what he says to me. Do you know this term?"

The agent did not.

"It is an insult. It means, 'Fuck your mother, you impotent incompetent shit. In all seriousness I tell you, I am able to perform sexually with many different women on the same day and I was very good at what I did. My mother, God Bless her soul, was a saint and is now with the Lord. I earned a lot of money for this guy and this is how they treat me? It was unfair and demeaning so I shot him."

Camucho had left out some details. The body of Cesar Santillan was found, sans genitals, with burn marks up and down his arms and legs, and an opening the size of a boot-toe where his left eye should be. The examiner noted that he was probably still alive when some of the early things took place, before slipping into an unconscious state. The eyeball was not found. Understand the Devil part now?

After his capture some dickhead from ICE had a plan. "We sent Camucho back," this pencil necked supervisor from ICE explained. "This way we could get the inside information, routes in and out, shipments, money, people."

I repeat; As if there was a bigger fish to be had.

Since 9/11, as our President likes to say, the world has changed. Here's one of the changes in law enforcement. Drug dealers are bad, but *9/10 bad*. The possibility of terrorists sneaking into the United States across the US - Mexico border is *9/12 bad*. And *9/12 bad* trumps all else. Largely to make them relevant in the War on Terror, DEA, FBI and other agencies have trumpeted the rise of narco-terrorists, moving through Latin America and across the border into the United States. These narco-terrorists are the same drug dealers that existed before Bin Laden et al, but now, all that cocaine funds mansions with swimming pools *and* terrorism. Back in place, one of Camucho's roles was to be an early warning system for any terrorists with designs on entry. So the United States Government decided that a drug dealing, murderous piece of scum was a valuable asset in the on-going war on terrorism.

A reasonable man, Camucho agreed to return to Mexico, to re-man both his former legal and his illegal post. In exchange, his daughter was not sold into training for the border Donkey Show, his son was not sent to a pedophile ranch located within a two hour drive of Mexico City and his wife was not accidentally marked down as a transsexual, then sent to the men's prison.

Camucho dedicated himself to finding whoever did this horrible thing to Santillan, heading up both the Cartel's internal and the police's external investigation, controlling both sides. He was also ever-vigilant, watching for that wave of terrorists who wanted to sneak over the border.

Remember the term they used - controlled informant? Camucho, absent the restraints of any fear of retribution was anything but controlled. He began operating as his own little kingdom, capturing and torturing rivals and those they employed. Some of the two years worth of torture may have been for information gathering, some likely for giggles. It resulted in numerous dead folks buried on the ranch grounds of what the papers have seen fit to call 'Rancho De La Muerte'. According to the Mexican papers, body parts, some with obvious teeth marks, were found in shallow graves scattered about the surrounding grounds. The ranch was immediately tied to Camucho and Camucho immediately told the investigating authorities that yes, he did these things but that he was acting under the authority of the US Government. This was, you can imagine, a surprise to the Mexican authorities, who had not been informed about Camucho's new role. It was also a surprise to the FBI and DEA, to some in the US Attorney's office, to just about

everybody - except one Assistant United States Attorney, two ICE agents and their supervisor. Hell, two of the bodies found on the Ranch of the Dead were highly placed informants of the DEA. A total body count of thirty was reconstructed, including nine women and six children. No known or suspected terrorists were among their numbers.

From our position, over the river, we could see activity across in Mexico. "Better get ready," my partner said. He left the passenger seat, opened the back door, reached in and removed the Beretta M501 Sniper Rifle from its cover.

As I mentioned before, the US Government is concerned about the possibility of terrorists sneaking across the border. Drugs, guns, people come across with impunity. It is a sieve. One of the ways to defeat a sieve is to plug a few holes.

You heard about the tunnels they've found under the border? They were in competition with the ones the US Government controls. Here's the new post 9/11 deal - we allow drugs and weapons and money to be sent through our tunnels so we can keep an eye on things. Usually, drugs to the US - weapons to Mexico. And money? Well, that runs both ways. You know the routes used by overland unlicensed workers? We've sought to eliminate all the routes not under our control. How? Sending out folks posing as banditos, stealing and beating and even raping, if that's what it takes to close down the route. For each we shut, another pops up. You know, the border is a big place, hard to guard. Our latest idea is getting some outside help.

"Make the call," my partner said. Using the radio, I called the Border Patrol and reported a breach of the border, right where the Mexican National Police were to deliver us Camucho.

Over on the Mexican side, three Mexican military style Humvees entered the water, each had what appeared to be mounted machine guns. A fourth vehicle, an extended cab pickup with an open bed. Five uniformed soldiers, each carrying an AK-47 rode in the bed. The devil was not alone.

I looked them over through my binoculars. "Second one", I said to my partner. He sighted in and shot.

The rear tire of the second Humvee was no longer full of air.

People began jumping out of the Humvees. The water exploded with the activity of soldiers.

Two vehicles from the Border Patrol arrived on our side of the river, began to make their way down.

My partner fired a second shot, hitting one of the soldiers.

The Mexicans began firing at the Border Patrol vehicles. The agents stopped, sought cover behind their vehicle, begin to return fire.

Another group of trucks arrived on our side of the river. The US Patriot Police were a volunteer army patrolling the US Mexico border. Started by a bunch of right wing gun enthusiasts, they like to capture undocumented workers, turn them over to the authorities so they can catch the same folks a few nights latter. Hey, we all have hobbies. The Patriot Patrol just happened to receive some large anonymous donations in support of their worthy cause - plugging some holes in the sieve. They got enough money to buy vehicles, weapons and to run some of their own patrols, and they always monitor the frequencies used by the Border Patrol. They too began to return fire on the Mexican soldiers.

My partner spots Camucho. He is looking up towards us, his hand shielding his eyes. His hand stays up; long moments after the top of his head rode a bullet train elsewhere.

My partner climbs back into the vehicle as The Blind Boys of Alabama are singing about the need for keeping the Devil way down in the hole. We begin driving away. Flurries of shots continue behind us.

"Sounds like someone finally made it to the machine guns."

"We need something here," I say to him, "something deep and profound." I try to come up with a phrase that meets those standards, only think of 'Nice shooting, Tex' and 'Heisenberg light - less killing, same bold flavor,' neither which I voice.

"Quien anda mal, termina mal."

"Come again?" I say.

"Bad things happen to people who deserve it."

We head toward a town, any town that has a bar. I imagine us sitting there, sipping our cold Negro Modelo beers, eating something spicy, discussing the next set of footnotes yet to be written.

John Stickney lives and works on the mean streets of Cleveland, Ohio. Previous fiction has appeared in Hardluck Stories. He can be contacted at stickney_jj@yahoo.com.