

Who Killed Palomino Molero?

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To José Miguel Oviedo

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“Sons of bitches.” Lituma felt the vomit rising in his throat. “Kid, they really did a job on you.”

The boy had been both hung and impaled on the old carob tree. His position was so absurd that he looked more like a scarecrow or a broken marionette than a corpse. Before or after they killed him, they slashed him to ribbons: his nose and mouth were split open; his face was a crazy map of dried blood, bruises, cuts, and cigarette burns. Lituma saw they’d even tried to castrate him; his testicles hung down to his thighs. He was barefoot, naked from the waist down, with a ripped T-shirt covering his upper body. He was young, thin, dark, and bony. Under the labyrinth of flies buzzing around his face, his hair glistened, black and curly.

The goats belonging to the boy who’d found the body were nosing around, scratching around the field looking for something to eat. Lituma thought they might begin to gnaw on the dead man’s feet at any moment.

“Who the fuck did this?” he stammered, holding back his gorge.

“I don’t know,” said the boy. “Don’t get mad at me, it’s not my fault. You should be glad I told you about it.”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad that anybody could be bastard enough to do something like this.”

The boy must have had the shock of his life this morning when he drove his goats over the rocky field and stumbled onto this horror. But he did his duty: he left his herd browsing among the rocks around the corpse and ran to the police station in Talara. Which was quite a feat because Talara was a good hour's walk from the pasture. Lituma remembered his sweaty face and his scared voice when he walked through the station-house door:

"They killed a guy over on the road to Lobitos. I can take you there if you want, but we have to go now because I left my goats all alone and somebody could steal them."

Luckily, no goats were stolen. As he was getting over the jolt of seeing the body, Lituma had noticed the boy counting his goats on his fingers. He heard him breathe a sigh of relief: "All here."

"Holy Mother of God!" exclaimed the taxi driver. "What the hell is this?"

On the way, the boy had described, more or less, what they were going to see, but it was one thing to imagine it and quite another to see it and smell it..The corpse stank to high heaven. The sun was boring holes through the rocks and through their very skulls. He must have been rotting at a record pace.

"Will you help me get him down, buddy?"

"Why not?" grunted the taxi driver, crossing himself. He spit at the carob tree. "If someone had told me what the Ford was going to be carrying, I'd never of bought it. You and the lieutenant take advantage of me because I'm such a nice guy."

Jerónimo had the only taxi in Talara. His old van, as big and black as a hearse, passed freely through the gate that separated the town from the zone where the foreigners who were employed by the International Petroleum Company lived and worked. Lieutenant Silva and Lituma used the taxi whenever they had to go anywhere too far to use horses or bicycles—the only transport available at the Guardia Civil post. The driver moaned and complained every time they called him, saying they made him lose money, despite the fact that the lieutenant always paid for the gasoline himself.

"Wait, Jerónimo, I just remembered we can't touch him until the judge comes and holds his inquest."

“Which means I’ll be making this little trip again,” croaked the old man. “Either the judge pays me or you find another sucker.”

Just then, he tapped himself on the forehead, opened his eyes wide, and looked the corpse in the face. “Wait a minute! I know this guy!”

“Who is he?”

“One of the boys they brought to the air base among the last bunch of recruits.” The old man’s face lit up. “That’s right. The guy from Piura who sang boleros.”

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“He sang boleros? Then he’s got to be the guy I told you about,” Mono said again.

“He is. We checked; he’s the same guy. Palomino Molero, from Castilla. But that doesn’t tell us who killed him.”

They were near the stadium in La Chunga’s little bar. There must have been a prizefight in progress because they could hear the shouts of the fans. Lituma had come to Piura on his day off; a truck driver from the I.P.C. brought him that morning and was going back to Talara at midnight. Whenever he came to Piura, Lituma went on the town with his cousins, José and Mono León, and with Josefino, a friend from the Gallinacera neighborhood. Lituma and the León brothers were from La Mangachería, but the long-standing rivalry between the two neighborhoods meant nothing to the four friends. They were so close they’d written their own theme song and called themselves the Unstoppables.

“Figure this one out and they’ll make you a general, Lituma,” wisecracked Mono.

“It’s going to be tough. Nobody knows anything, nobody saw anything, and the worst part is that the authorities won’t lift a finger to help.”

“Wait a minute, aren’t you the authorities over in Talara?” asked Josefino, genuinely surprised.

“Lieutenant Silva and I are the police authority. The authority I’m talking about is the Air Force. That skinny kid was in the Air Force, so if they don’t help us, who the fuck will?”

Lituma blew the foam off his beer and took a swallow, opening his mouth like a crocodile. “Motherfuckers. If you guys had seen what they did to the kid, you wouldn’t be grinning your way down to the whorehouse like this. You’d understand why I can’t think about anything else.”

“We do understand,” said Josefino. “But talking about a corpse all the time is boring. Why don’t you forget about the guy, Lituma? He’s dead.”

“That’s what you get for becoming a cop,” said José. “Work is a disease. Besides, you’re no good at that stuff. A cop should have a heart made of stone, because he has to be a motherfucker sometimes. And you’re so damn sentimental.”

“It’s true, I am. I just can’t stop thinking about that skinny kid. I have nightmares, I think someone’s pulling off my balls the way they did to him. His balls were hanging down to his knees, smashed as flat as a pair of fried eggs.”

“Did you touch them?” Mono asked, laughing.

“Talk about eggs and balls, did Lieutenant Silva screw that fat woman yet?” José asked.

“We’ve been on pins and needles ever since you told us about it,” added Josefino. “Did he screw her or not?”

“At the rate he’s going, he’ll never screw her.”

José got up from the table. “Okay, let’s go to the movies. Before midnight the whorehouse is like a funeral parlor. They’re showing a cowboy film at the Variety with Rosita Quintana. The cop’s treating, of course.”

“Me? I don’t even have the dough for this beer. You’ll let me pay later, won’t you, Chunguita?”

“Maybe your mama will let you pay later,” answered La Chunga, looking bored.

“I figured you’d say something like that. I just wanted to screw around.”

“Go screw around with your mama.”

“Two points for La Chunga; zero for Lituma,” Mono announced. “La Chunga wins.”

“Don’t get steamed, Chunguita. Here’s what I owe you. And lay off my mom: she’s dead and buried over in Simbilá.”

La Chunga, a tall, sour woman of uncertain age, snatched up the money, counted it, and gave back the change as the Unstoppables were leaving.

“One question, Chunguita. Didn’t anyone ever crack a bottle over your head for being such a wise guy?”

“Since when have you been so curious,” she replied, not deigning to look at him.

“Someday someone’s going to give you a lesson in good manners.”

“I’ll bet it won’t be you,” said La Chunga, yawning.

The four Unstoppables walked along the sandy path that led to the main road, passed the Piura blueblood club, and headed toward Grau’s monument. It was a warm night, quiet and starry. The mixed smells of carob trees, goats, birdshit, and deep frying filled the air. Lituma, unable to erase from his mind the picture of the impaled and bloody Palomino Molero, wondered if he’d be sorry he’d become a cop instead of living the free and easy life of the Unstoppables. No, he wouldn’t be sorry. Even though work was a bitch, he ate every day, and his life was free of uncertainties. José, Mono, and Josefino were whistling a waltz in counterpoint, and Lituma was trying to imagine the lulling tones and the “captivating melodies” of the kid’s boleros. At the entrance to the Variety, he said goodbye to his cousins and Josefino. He lied to them, saying the truck driver from the International was going back to Talara earlier than usual and that he didn’t want to miss his ride. They tried to shake him down for some cash, but he didn’t give them a cent.

He headed for the Plaza de Armas. On the way he spotted the poet Joaquín Ramos on the corner, wearing a monocle and pulling along the goat he called his gazelle. The plaza was crowded, as if people were there for some church function. Lituma paid no attention to them and, making as if he were going to meet a woman, crossed the Old Bridge over to Castilla. The idea had taken shape while he was drinking his beer in La Chunga’s. Suppose she wasn’t there? What if she’d moved to some other city to put her grief behind her?

But there she was, sitting on a bench in the doorway of her house, enjoying the cool of the evening as she shucked some

corn. Through the open door of the adobe hut, Lituma could see the woman's few pieces of furniture: cane chairs (some without seats), a table, some clay pitchers, a box she used as a dresser, and a tinted photograph. "The kid," he thought.

"Evening." He stood in front of the woman. She was barefoot, wearing the same black dress she had on that morning in the Talara Police Station.

"Evening," she murmured, looking at him without recognizing him. Some squalid dogs sniffed at him and growled. In the distance, someone strummed a guitar.

"May I talk with you for a minute, Doña Asunta? About your son Palomino."

In the half light, Lituma could just make out her furrowed, wrinkled face, her tiny eyes covered by puffy lids scrutinizing him uneasily. Were her eyes always like that, or were they swollen from crying?

"Don't you recognize me? I'm Officer Lituma, from Talara. I was there when Lieutenant Silva took your statement."

She crossed herself, muttered something incomprehensible, and Lituma watched her laboriously stand up. She went into the house, carrying her corn and her bench. He followed her and took off his cap as soon as he was inside. He was moved by the fact that this had been Palomino Molero's house. He was not following orders but his own initiative; he hoped it wouldn't mean trouble.

"Did you find it?" she mumbled in the same tremulous voice she used in Talara to make her declaration. She sagged into a chair, and since Lituma stared at her questioningly, she raised her voice. "My son's guitar. Did you find it?"

"Not yet." He remembered Doña Asunta sobbing as she answered Lieutenant Silva's questions, and constantly asking about getting back Palomino's guitar. But after she'd gone, neither he nor the lieutenant remembered. "Don't worry. Sooner or later it'll turn up, and I'll bring it to you myself."

She crossed herself again, and it seemed to Lituma she was exorcising him. "I bring it all back to her."

"He wanted to leave it here, but I told him, Bring it with you, bring it with you. No, Ma, at the base I won't have any time to play. Besides, I might not even have a locker to store it in. Let it stay here. I'll play when I come to Piura. No,