

The Killing of a State Cop

Felipe was telling me how it happened. I was then twelve years old. He knew they would get him, he said. And he was scared. He looked around nervously all the time we sat on the trough that ran around the water tank.

Felipe wasn't a bad guy. Not at all. A little wild maybe. He had been in the Marines, and he could have gotten kicked out if he had wanted to, he said. But he hadn't because he could play it pretty straight like a good guy too.

He used to tell me a lot of things, about what he'd seen, about what he had done, about what he planned to do, and about what other people could do to you. That was one trouble with him. He was always thinking about what other people could do to you. Not the people around our place, the Indians, but other people.

How that state policeman died was like this. Felipe wanted me to always remember what he said. He talked very seriously, and sometimes sadly, and again he said they would get him anyway.

"What the hell, he deserved to die, the bastard."

It was the wine, Felipe said. And that thing he had about people, I guess. He didn't say, but I knew.

"It makes you warm in the head and other things like that," he said.

He had gone to town from the reservation with Antonio, his brother. They drove their pickup truck to town, where they bought the wine from a bootlegger. "From some stupid Mexican bartender. Geesus, I hate Mexicans."

Felipe spat on the ground. Indians were not supposed to drink or buy liquor at that time. It was against the law. Felipe hated the law and broke it whenever he felt he could get away with it.

“One time in Winslow,” Felipe said, “I got off the train when it stopped at the depot and walked into a bar next to the depot to buy a beer. I was still in the Marines then and in uniform. This barman, he looked at me very mean and asked if I was Indian. ‘Shore,’ I said. And he told me to get the hell out before he called the cops. Goddamn, I hated that, and I went around the back and peed on the back door. I don’t know why, just because I hated him I guess.”

Felipe and his brother were walking in town, not saying anything much, maybe looking at things they wanted to buy when they had the money. They stopped in front of the Golden Theater and looked at the pictures of what was at the movies that day and the next day.

“Hey, Indio. What the hell you doing?” It was Luis Baca, a member of the state police who patrolled the state highway near the reservation.

The brothers hated the man. Felipe regarded him with a fierce hatred because he had been thrown in jail by him once. He had been beaten, and he feared the cop because of that. The brothers did not answer.

“Hey, goddammy Indio, get the hell away from there. Get out of town.”

For no reason at all.

“For no reason at all. Goddamn, I got mad, and I called him a dirty, fat, lazy, good-for-nothing, ugly Mexican.”

Felipe looked around and told me I better learn to be something more than him, a guy who would probably die in the electric chair up at Santa Fe.

Felipe told Antonio he was going to kill the Mexican, but Antonio said that it was no good talk and persuaded him to leave town.

The brothers left, followed by the curses and jeers of Luis Baca. When they got back to the pickup truck, they opened another bottle of wine and drank.

“It makes a noise in your head, and you want to do something,” Felipe told me.

The brothers decided to go home. Almost out of town, they heard a siren scream behind them and saw a black police car with Baca driving it. Felipe told Antonio not to stop. They did not go faster, though. Luis Baca drove alongside them and laughed at the brothers, who were frightened and suspicious.

Antonio stepped on the brake then, and he let the policeman pass them. They were past the town limits.

“Antonio, my brother, he is kind of a funny guy,” Felipe said. “He doesn’t get mad like me. I mean yell or cuss. He just kind of looks mean or sad. He told me to give him the wine and he drank some and put it on the seat between his legs.”

The police car leading and the pickup truck following were heading toward the reservation.

Suddenly, a few miles out of town, Antonio pressed his foot down on the gas pedal and the truck picked up speed. It seemed that the policeman did not see the truck bearing down on him until it was almost too late.

“Antonio wasn’t trying to run into the cop. I thought he was going to, but he was only trying to scare the bastard.”

Luis Baca swerved off the road anyway, and there was a cloud of dust as his car skidded into a shallow ditch.

Felipe and Antonio didn’t stop. Looking through the rear window, they saw the cop get out of the car. Antonio stopped the

pickup truck. He started up again and made a U-turn. Passing by the police car, they saw that the policeman was trying to get his car out of the ditch. The tires kept spinning and throwing gravel.

A few miles down the road, the brothers turned around and headed back toward the police car again.

“Wine makes you do stupid things. Son-of-a-bitch. Sometimes you think about putting your hand between a girl’s legs or taking money from somebody or even killing somebody.”

They slowed down as they approached the police car. It was slowly coming out of the ditch.

“I drank the wine left in the bottle, and as we passed I threw the bottle against the window of the police car and I made a dirty sign with my hand at the Mexican,” Felipe said.

Antonio speeded up the truck. They kept looking back, and soon they saw the police car following them and heard the siren. They turned onto the road that led into the reservation. It was a dirt road, and the truck bounced and jolted as they sped along. The police car turned off the highway and followed them.

Felipe reached behind the seat of the truck and brought out a .30–30 Winchester rifle, which was wrapped in a homemade case of denim from old Levis.

He took the rifle out of the denim case and pulled down the lever so that the chamber was open. There was nothing in there, and he closed the lever and lowered the hammer very carefully as usual. He opened the truck compartment and took out an almost full box of cartridges.

“You remember that .30–30 I used when I went deer hunting last year? The one I let you shoot even though you weren’t supposed to before you shot at a deer with it? That one. My father bought it when he was working for the railroad. That one.”

They followed the road that led to the village but turned off

to another road before they got to the village. The road climbed a hill and led toward Black Mesa, several miles to the south. At the top of the hill, the brothers stopped and looked to see if the police car was still following them. It was at the bottom of the hill and coming up.

The dirt road led through a forest of juniper and piñon. This was near the heart of the reservation. They sped by a scattered herd of sheep tended by a boy who looked at them as they passed by. The sheepdogs barked at them and ran alongside the pickup truck for a while.

“The road is very rough and sometimes sandy, and we couldn’t go too fast. No one uses the road except shepherders and people going for wood with their wagons. We stopped on a small hill to see if Luis Baca was still coming after us. We couldn’t see him because of the forest, so I told my brother to shut off the truck engine so I could listen. It was real quiet in the forest like it always is and you can hear things from a long ways away. I could hear the cop car still coming about a half-mile back. I told Antonio to go on.”

They passed the windmill that is a mile from Black Mesa. The one road branched there in several directions. The one that led east of Black Mesa into some rough country and canyons was the one they chose.

Antonio slowed the truck and drove slowly until they saw that the policeman could see which road they had taken, and then he speeded up again.

“Aiee, I can see stupidity in a man, sometimes even my own. I can see a man’s drunkenness making him do crazy things. But Luis Baca, a very stupid son-of-a-bitch, was more than I could see. He wanted to die. And I, because I was drunken and *muy loco* like a Mexican friend I had from Nogales used to say about me when we

would play with the whores in Korea and Tokyo, wanted to make him die. I did not care for anything else except that Luis Baca, who I hated, was going to die.”

Directly to the east of Black Mesa is a plain that runs for about two miles in all directions. There is grass on the plain, and there are many prairie dogs. At the edge of the grassy plain is a thin forest of juniper and piñon. A few yards beyond the edge of the forest, there is a deep ravine that is the tail end of a deep and wide canyon that runs from the east toward Black Mesa. The ravine comes to a point almost against one edge of Black Mesa.

There is only a narrow passage, which crumbles away each year with erosion, between the ravine and the abruptly rising slope of the mesa. The road passes this point and goes around the mesa and to a spring called Spider Spring.

The brothers passed through the narrow passage and stopped fifty yards away. Felipe got out with the rifle and bullets, and Antonio parked the pickup truck behind a growth of stunted juniper growing thickly together.

“I took some bullets out of the box and put them into the rifle. Six of them, I think, the kind with soft points. I laid down the rifle for a while and waited for Antonio. He didn’t come right away from the truck, and I called to him. We laid down behind a small mound of sand and rocks. The ground was hot from the sun. We could hear the police car coming.

“Are we just going to scare him so he won’t bother us no more?’ Antonio asked me.

“I looked at Antonio, and he looked like he used to when we were kids and he used to pretend not to be scared of rattlesnakes.

“I don’t know,’ I said. I was going to shoot the cop. I don’t know why, but I was going to. Maybe I was kind of scared then.

“When the car came out of the trees, it was not coming very fast. It approached the narrow place and slowed down. I thought Luis Baca would see me, so I slid down until I could barely see over the top of the mound that we were lying behind.

“He had slowed down because of the narrow place, and I thought he would stop and turn back. But he didn’t. He shifted into first and came on very slowly. That’s when I put my rifle on a flat rock and aimed it. Right at the windshield where the steering wheel is. The sun was shining on the windshield very brightly, and I could not see very well.”

Felipe relaxed a bit, took a breath, and opened and closed the lever on the rifle, cocking it.

When he fired, the bullet made a hole right above where the metal and glass were joined by a strip of rubber in front of the steering wheel. It made an irregular pattern in the windshield glass. The shot echoed back and forth in the ravine and was followed by another shot. The bullet made a hole a few inches above and to the right of the first. Another shot followed, and it was wild. It ricocheted off the top of the police car and into some rocks on the mesa slope.

“Three times I shot, and I could see the bullet holes almost in the spots where I wanted them to be. One wasn’t, though. But the car didn’t stop or go crooked. It kept coming and crossed the narrow place. It stopped then, and Luis Baca got out very slowly. He called something like he was crying. ‘*Compadre,*’ he said. He held up his right hand and reached to us. There was blood on his neck and shoulder.”

Felipe settled himself into place and aimed very carefully. Luis Baca tried to unbuckle his pistol belt, but a bullet tore into his belly in that instant. He was knocked back a step and thrown

against the car. A last shot whipped his head around violently, and he dropped to the ground. Felipe started to put more bullets into the rifle but decided not to.

The two brothers walked to the car and stood over the still-moving body of Luis Baca. Antonio reached down and slid the police revolver out of the holster, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

Luis Baca, the poor fool, made a feeble gurgle like a sick cat and went to hell.

“They will catch me, I know. There were people who saw us being chased by the cop. Antonio went to Albuquerque and he took the pistol. He will get caught too.”

That was what Felipe told me that night when we were sitting at the water tank. He used to tell me all kinds of things because I would listen. I liked those stories he told about the Korean War. That was where he learned to drive a truck, and he had saved up his money so that he could buy a truck after he got out of the Marines. Felipe and I used to go hunting and fishing too.

I sort of believed him about the killing of Luis Baca, the state cop, but not really until a few days later when I heard my mother talking about it with my father. I asked something about it, and they told me to forget it. They said that Felipe would probably die in the electric chair. Every night for quite a while I prayed a rosary or something for Felipe.