

The Chixoy River

The descent through El Peyan Gorge had been harrowing. Andres shipped the oars and stowed them in the boat. The ache in his arms and shoulders eased as he rested, surveying the wide river ahead. Here, below the rapids, the Chixoy River spread out and the current lazied between shallow banks overhung by high canopied trees festooned with vines and bromeliads. As a boy, Andres had spent hours exploring this river, wandering through the national park on faint trails. That was before the drug cartels began using this wild corridor between Guatemala and Mexico for their clandestine smuggling routes. Andres' knowledge of the river had gotten him this far with his boat load of valuable cargo intact. But, he knew his biggest challenge lay ahead where the river flanked a small village taken over by Los Zetas, a Mexican cartel. Members of that notorious gang had intercepted shipments of Andres' cartel and the smugglers, some of Andres' friends, had vanished without a trace. Andres had volunteered to try the river as an alternate route to the jungle trails. Now he wondered if he had gotten himself into a bad deal. Chucho, his immediate boss, had told Andres he would be in big trouble if he lost this shipment of coca paste, destined for a cocaine refinery in Mexico. Before leaving home, Andres had told his wife, if she didn't hear from him in a week, to go into hiding with the children.

Andrew sat back and scanned the last several paragraphs he had just written, cracking his knuckles and stretching his neck. The description of the wild ride through El Peyan Gorge had been easy to write, using notes from some of his own whitewater kayaking trips. What lay ahead for Andres, his protagonist, would rely on Andrew's memories, stories he had heard from his grandfather. He got up and went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

Andrew's wife, Gayle, had cleaned up the breakfast dishes and now sat at the kitchen table with her laptop, paying bills and planning menus. "Coffee break?" she asked as Andrew searched for a Keurig cup for the coffee maker.

"Yeah," he replied. He put in the little cup, closed the latch and pressed the brew button. As he waited, he turned and looked at his wife. "I'm not sure I can finish it."

"Then don't," Gayle said.

"But, there's so much of it that reminds me of Grandpa --and Papa," Andrew said. "I owe it to them. I can't not write it."

"You knew what you were getting into when you agreed to the assignment. Tell your editor that you can't finish it, see what that does."

"I know, I know. It's just that the memories of them can become painful and I have to stop writing."

Gayle held up two envelopes. "You get the story published and we'll be able to pay our utilities and rent without drawing on my savings."

“Thanks for the encouragement,” Andrew gritted, grabbed his cup and headed back to the computer.

Andrew picked up the contract from the editor of Outdoor Magazine and glanced again at the date his manuscript would be due. The contract had come quickly with a note from the editor saying he liked the outline Andrew had submitted, an adventure story centered on drug smuggling in the jungles of Guatemala and southern Mexico. Andrew had plenty of material to work from. His Grandfather, Andres, for whom he'd been named, had told him stories of intrigue and wild adventures from Andres' earlier life as a drug smuggler. Andrew's parents had chided the old man for putting such outlandish ideas in a child's head. But Andrew had idolized his grandpa and had begged him for more stories. From those stories had come his love of outdoor adventures and an increased interest in his own heritage.

Andrew closed his eyes for a moment, letting some of the vivid images he used to get from his grandfather's accounts fill his mind. He began typing.

Andres anchored his patched and repainted wooden fishing boat against the bank where it was partially hidden by overhanging branches and vines. He inspected the boat for any damage that might have occurred coming through the rapids. Satisfied the boat was still seaworthy, he freed the Evenrude outboard motor from its lashings, lifted it from the floor to the transom of the boat and tightened the clamps. He checked the gas and the oil level, pulled the starter cord gently to prime the chambers and sat back to wait for dusk.

Andrew leaned back and drank the last of his now tepid coffee. He sat for a minute with his eyes closed, took a deep breath and began typing again.

Twilight is short in the tropics. Andres waited until the evening glow had faded enough so he could just barely make out the opposite bank of the river. He pushed the boat away from the muddy bank with an oar. The motor started with one pull of the cord. He pointed the prow towards the far side of the dark river and motored slowly downstream. He knew he had to time his passing the cartel settlement so he could still see well enough to steer clear of snags and rocks, yet remain undetected in the near darkness. The noise of the jungle, insect, bird and animal sounds that were constant during the day, often grew quiet at dusk. He hoped the absence of jungle sounds would be replaced by the usual evening hubbub that accompanied dinner time in the village. There was not enough current to drift by the village, so he had chosen to motor quietly by, rather than row. He figured if he was spotted, he could quickly gun the motor and flee.

Gayle looked into the study to find Andrew staring at the computer screen, repeatedly cracking his knuckles. She knew the signs of tension in her husband and walked into the room. “Stuck for a word?” she asked.

Andrew shook his head. "I've tried to get an image for this part of the story and it won't come. It's not like writer's block. It's like I have an aversion to what's coming, as if the story is resisting me."

"You're thinking about Grandpa Andres, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"It's been five years since he's been gone," she said. "Are you still reliving that?"

"I was thinking about when grandpa got the letter from the cartel."

"That was just bad luck," she said. "There was no way they could have found him after all his years living here. And yet they did. You've told me that yourself."

"He'd been able to evade the immigration service all that time," Andrew said. "How the hell did the cartel find him?"

"Well, you shouldn't dwell on it anymore. There's nothing you, or your parents, could have done that would have changed things."

"It would have been better if Grandpa had told Papa and Mama about the letter. Maybe they could have sent him to live with other relatives, away from Cleveland."

"Maybe. But Grandpa Andres made the decision to stay here, not your parents and not you. Besides, you were only seventeen, weren't you? It's easier to see things differently in hind sight."

"I still ask myself, why did Grandpa hide the letter from my parents? Was he afraid? I mean, afraid of what they'd think? What they'd do?"

"Did you think your grandpa betrayed you?"

"I don't know. He sure put all of us at risk, but I wonder if he knew that."

"Well, you idolized him. Maybe you put him on a pedestal. Maybe it hurt when you found out he had clay feet."

"But, Gayle, you really can't blame him. Imagine what it would have been like to live all those years in fear of being found, either by the immigration service, or the cartel?"

"I'm not saying he didn't have reason to be afraid. It seems to me he was hiding behind his family, putting all of you at risk."

"That's unfair, Gayle. He didn't know immigration law. He thought Papa was safe because he had married a US citizen and had a green card. I'm sure he didn't know what he did would affect Papa."

"I can see the story is messing with you."

"Sure it is. It's bringing back all those things I went through. Yeah, I idolized Grandpa. What kid wouldn't? He was fun, he could do things with his face that would crack me up. And he was so good at telling stories. He was a born storyteller." Andrew shook his head. "But he caved to some cartel minion who fed him fake threats. He had reason to run from the cartel when he left Guatemala. His life was at stake. But I thought he should have stood up to the punks who had sent him the blackmail letter. It didn't square with the man I learned about in his stories. He just went along with their blackmail and dragged the rest of us down with him."

"Why don't you take a break, come back to it later."

"No, I can't. I've got to finish the story and get it done."

"OK, if you're on a roll, go for it. I'll try to stay out of the room."

"You're not a distraction, Gayle. You're being here helps me get my head around this."

"Well, if talking helps, talk. Remind me of the rest."

Andrew took a deep breath. "When Papa found out that Grandpa had started running goods for the local drug ring, he was furious. I only know a little of what went on at home because I was usually at school. Mama filled me in on most of what I know. By the time Papa found out, Grandpa was in over his head. If he didn't toe the line with the drug ring, they told him, they would tip off the immigration police. Grandpa was deathly afraid of being sent back to Guatemala. The Mexican cartel, Los Zetas, had gained control of his home town and they were merciless with deserters. As a kid, I didn't know those things and so I thought Grandpa was spineless when he didn't stand up to the drug ring thugs like he did in his stories. I'm sure it was hard on Grandpa when I told him he was a coward. I would avoid him and then go to my room and cry with those mixed up feelings of love and betrayal."

Gayle rubbed Andrew's shoulders and neck, feeling the tight muscles and working out the knots.

"I was in my first year of college when they got caught," Andrew said.

"You're talking about when your Papa and Andres were stopped by the police?"

"Yeah. It was when the drug ring forced Grandpa to take a load of Fentanyl-laced cocaine to Toledo. He couldn't get a driver's license and..."

"Right, Andres talked your Papa into driving and they got pulled over."

"Yeah. For having one missing tail light. What bum luck."

"But your Papa had nothing to do with drugs. The whole thing was really unfair."

"They saw through the story Papa cooked up about Grandpa being a hitchhiker. There were drugs in the car. That's all they needed."

"We can't change the past," Gayle said. "It's getting close to lunch time. Why don't we eat and you can continue writing after lunch?"

"No," Andrew insisted. "I've got to finish this. I'm getting close to the end of the story."

"Well, I'm getting hungry. Knowing how long you can go without keeping track of time, I'm going to get a snack. Can I bring you something?"

"No thanks. I'm not hungry."

"Alright." Gayle hesitated. "I know we haven't talked about this for a long time, but I guess I still want to know why Papa Miguel wasn't tried in the US. He had a Green Card and was close to becoming a citizen. He was married to a citizen. That should have counted for something. What sense does it make to deport someone like that? Especially your Papa. I can't see it."

Andrew swiveled in his chair. "I know what you're thinking, Gayle. I've gone over this with immigration lawyers again and again. It's the times we live in. Papa was a Dreamer, supposedly protected by DACA. He had a Green Card, supposedly granting him permanent stay in America while getting citizenship. He married Mama for love, not to get deportation

immunity. It didn't matter. You get charged with a drug felony, all that goes out the window. But, at least Papa has a chance of getting his Green Card reinstated. It's Grandpa who's in real trouble, having been sent back to his old haunts."

"Did you get an email from Papa Miguel today?"

"No. Not since the one on Monday. Papa has to use the computer at the post office in Cobán to send emails and they charge plenty."

"Does he even know where Andres is?"

"Not for weeks now. The last hideaway Grandpa used didn't last long. After five years on the run, he doesn't have any options left. All Papa knows is Grandpa is trying to keep ahead of the cartel by moving every week or two. He has no way of contacting Papa anymore. I'm afraid for him."

"I'm so sorry." Gayle gripped Andrew's shoulder.

"Thanks," Andrew said putting his hand on hers. "Talking has helped. I need to finish this now."

Gayle squeezed his shoulder again and went to the kitchen.

Andrew turned to the computer.

With the motor idling and the boat creeping through the dark water, Andres steered as close to the far shore as he could. He rounded the corner and could see a few lights through the trees along the opposite bank. He heard a generator running and was thankful for that bit of noise to cover the sound of his motor. He leaned low against the gunwale to make himself less visible. Slowly he moved past the first few unlit houses, his eyes constantly scanning the shoreline. He was directly opposite a large lit house when he spotted a boat, stern to the bank with its prow pointed into the river. A figure stood up behind the boat and turned on a powerful flashlight, sweeping it across the water. The light caught Andres and his boat in its beam and a shout went up that was echoed by several other voices. Two figures jumped into the readied boat and pushed off from shore.

That was enough for Andres. He gunned the outboard motor and the 25 horsepower Evenrude roared into full throttle. The old boat lurched, the stern settled deep into the water with an ominous groan and creek from the transom and the boat shot forward. Andres crouched low and tried to control the wildly careening boat, aiming for the next bend in the river. The searching light caught up with the speeding boat and immediately several gunshots rang out. One bullet shattered the cover of the outboard, but the motor kept going. A second round of shots from automatic weapons tore into the side and transom of the old boat, exploding splinters into the interior, some impaling Andres' leg. With a resounding crack, the transom broke loose from the boat. Water rushed in, the stern sank and the motor sputtered and quit as it went under, dragging the boat with it. Andres scrambled to keep from sliding into the river, grasping ropes that anchored the cargo to the floor. The prow rose as the boat settled stern first into the blackness of the water.

Andrew hadn't realized how long he had been sitting with his hands in his lap, staring at the words on the monitor, until a drop splashed on his wrist. With the back of his hand he wiped the wetness off his face and sat forward. He had said his goodbyes to the man and his legacy. Now it was time to finish.

Andres struggled to climb higher in the sinking boat, but his foot had become wedged in the angle of the broken transom and the gearbox of the outboard. He looked up for another handhold and saw a crate of guns and ammunition shift and break loose from its moorings in the rising prow, toppling over the bales of crude cocaine. The last thing Andres saw was the heavy crate falling toward him before the blackness of the Chixoy River enveloped all.

Don Parker, 02-20-2020



The Chixoy River, Guatemala

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