

The Ghost of Pepe Durango

by Dale Lerner

I knew Rafael killed his wife and dumped her body in the rubbish pit, but I didn't like her much, so I didn't say anything. But when Fernando, and then Carlos and Eddie went missing, I thought I'd better do something about Rafael.

The moon was out the night I watched Rafael dump his wife in the pit. I was going down to the docks to fish when I saw him come running through the jungle behind his wheelbarrow. I followed him out into the wild-banana field and watched as he bounced the barrow along the uneven path. It took a sudden jolt and tipped to the side, and his wife's body spilled out onto the dirt. Rafael didn't bother to apologize. Instead, he grabbed hold of his wife's wrists and dragged her body up the path to the pit and tossed her arms over the edge. Her head and body followed, and her legs gave a last kick, and one of her sandals flipped loose and landed in some large banana leaves just over my head.

It wasn't a pleasant sight, but like I said, I didn't like her much. Everyone in the village, except for Rafael, knew his wife cheated, but now it looked as if he'd found out. So I turned and took the path down to the docks and caught two corvinas that night.

The next day, Fernando went missing, and the day after that, Carlos and Eddie didn't show up for work in the sugarcane fields. They had each been with Rafael's wife, so I felt sure he had killed them too. Something had to be done. I couldn't let him go on killing all the men in the village—they were my customers.

The people that lived in the village and work in the sugarcane fields relied on my tobacco shop for their cigarettes. Now and then, American tourists from Golfito buzzed through on red scooters and bought cigars, but it was the locals that kept me in business.

I decided to confront Rafael and tell him what I saw. I was sure he would then want to turn himself in. There would be a small reward, perhaps three thousand colones, and that would be the end of the killing.

So on Saturday night, just as the clouds burned red from the sun going down in the sea, I turned my shop over to my nephew, Hector. I figured I could walk up to Rafael's hut on the cliffs, convince him to confess, walk him back down to the village police, and be back in my shop before business picked up. The sugarcane workers got paid on Saturdays, and when they got drunk, they smoked more and felt more lucky, and they came to me for their packs of Rojos and their lottery tickets.

I started up the path through the jungle just as the bar lights began to flicker on. The path took me around near to the edge of the cliffs, and I could hear the sea rush against the rocks below. I wondered why Rafael hadn't simply dropped his wife over the edge, where the sea turtles could pick apart her body. I thought maybe after Rafael confessed I would ask him about that.

The sun sank down under the sea and took all its light with it just as I made it to the top of the cliffs. Rafael's hut was as dark as the jungle, but then I noticed the orange glow of a cigarette on the front porch. I hadn't thought of it before, but Rafael smoked, so I would lose another customer after they hanged him. But then I thought it was better to lose one than another four or five, and besides, smokers from other villages would come to see the hanging, and they would need lots of tobacco and lottery tickets.

I stumbled on a root in the path and the orange glow lifted up, but then it was quickly flicked into the yard, and I stopped and leaned against a palm tree to rest.

"Hello, Rafael, it's me, Pepe," I said between breaths.

I was sure he had heard, but his hut stayed quiet, and I got a chill. It suddenly came to me that Rafael might try and kill me too. Then he would run *my* body through the jungle in his wheelbarrow and toss me over into the pit with his wife. But me and Rafael always got along, so I didn't worry, and I continued on.

I stopped at the front steps when I saw his shadowy figure standing on the porch. I knew it was Rafael by the chipped brim of his straw hat. He struck a match and passed the flame into an oil lamp and held it up, and his eyes glowed like a panther's in the yellow light.

"Pepe, that you?" he said.

"Didn't I say so?"

Rafael stepped back and put the lamp on a table.

"I thought you might be a ghost," he said. "All I could see was your white hair floating in the black jungle."

He sat and motioned at a chair for me, and I sat and dug two Castillos from a pack in my shirt pocket and offered him one.

He grimaced and said, "Save your Castillos for your wealthy tourists," and he pulled out a pack of Rojos. Lighting his cigarette with the lamp, he then leaned forward with the lamp to light mine. His face was unshaven and moist with sweat, and there was a small cut at the corner of his mouth just under his thick mustache, and he wiped at it with his thumb. His eyes stayed on me as he put down the lamp and leaned back in his chair. I then noticed a shovel and a hoe resting against the hut next to him.

"It's Saturday night, Pepe," he said, and blew a cloud of smoke. "Why aren't you down in that shop of yours taking money from those filthy drunks?" His voice was cold and empty. He wasn't like the Rafael I knew.

“Hector is there. He can handle it,” I said.

“Hector? That good for nothing cheat!” He laughed, but his eyes didn’t. “I wouldn’t trust him to watch my boots dry in the hot sun. You’d better hurry back, Pepe, before he gives away all your tobacco.”

Rafael’s eyes suddenly narrowed, and I realized he was thinking I had also been with his wife. I knew then it wouldn’t go over well to ask him to confess.

“That Hector does give me worry sometimes,” I said, as I stood to leave. “I’d better get back before he gets too busy.”

Rafael also stood, and he threw his cigarette over the railing. When I turned and took a step off the porch, the sound of metal dragging over wood seemed to follow behind me, and then the jungle suddenly flashed a brilliant white.

It felt like the shovel.

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There was darkness, but then something was hitting my body, and I opened my eyes. Objects were falling through a circle of blue light and landing around me. I rolled out of the way and faced a woman’s sandal. There was a foot in it. The toes were stiff and purple. I got to my feet and stumbled in the rubbish.

Rafael’s wife was face up. Next to her and face down, I recognized Fernando’s green jacket. Not too far away, Carlos was mixed in with some tomato cans, and Eddie’s tattooed forearm rested on a soapbox.

The pit smelled of sour goat’s milk, but then a hint of fresh sea air drifted up. It came from the back of the pit, and I slid down into the cold seawater and swam through the crashing

waves. The current then carried me around to the docks, and I dragged myself onto the sand and slept until the evening tide woke me.

My head was pounding, but I knew I had to go back to Rafael's. He had to be stopped. I staggered up the hillside through the darkening jungle and leaned against the same palm tree as before to rest, and looking over at Rafael's hut, I again saw the orange glow of a cigarette on the porch. But this time Rafael immediately lit the lamp and carried it down the porch steps.

"Ghost!" he shouted, and he stumbled sideways across the yard like a crab trying to get back to the water. He held the lamp up high as he headed towards the cliff's edge.

"You have to make this right," I said, and I started after him.

He cried out, "Stay away from me, Pepe!" and threw down the lamp and ran into the darkness screaming, and then his screaming was falling, and then the jungle went deadly quiet.

There would be no reward, and no hanging, and no customers from other villages to buy my tobacco and lottery tickets.
