

An Apparition

A Story by Dennis Giardina

I climbed into the back seat of our rented pick up truck. Sitting in between me and Dr. Frank, in the middle of a back seat that was only meant to comfortably seat two, was Marlon. The first thing I noticed was, well quite frankly, Marlon stunk. Not so bad I suppose; nothing unusually foul but enough so that even my onosmic sense of smell could detect his body odor. I opened the window. He came from pretty far away, actually very far away. He had no vehicle and I can understand how hitchhiking down from the mountains above Tegucigalpa under the afternoon sun could make him perspire. When I looked over, I saw that Marlon was smiling. Marlon is one of those people that you can't imagine not smiling. As if his face's natural state is posed smiling. I smiled back at him and shook his hand. "Marlon," he said.

Marlon travelled with a living and precious cargo and he is so far as I know, the king of the weevil larvae collectors. Earlier that afternoon, Marlon presented himself to the secretary at the office of Entomology with some three hundred large and likely parasitized weevil larvae. He said that it took him three days to gather up this prodigious quantity. He was promised a price of 3.5 lempira per grub and he had travelled far to collect it. On that very same morning our group spent hours in the bromeliad-laden pine forest mountains, six thousand feet above sea level where we too searched for weevil larvae and the maggots that infest them. We ripped open one after another of the fallen phytotelmatic tanks. Through their hearts, the hungry instars mine and burrow, creating their lethal tunnels and yes, we did find some, but needless to say, nothing like Marlon.

We were bringing Marlon home and on the way, Marlon was going to take us to one of his fertile collecting sites so we could all search together. For a long time, we drove up into the mountains where Marlon lived. We made numerous lefts and rights, so many so that I wondered how we would find our way back after nightfall. After what seemed like hours of chugging and bucking up eroded and bumpy roads, Marlon said "left." We turned left. The road quickly narrowed and shortly became too eroded and muddy to proceed any further. "Here is good," Marlon said. I asked him, "Are you sure the truck won't be in anyone's way?" Marlon waved his hand and shook his head dismissively and I thought, "Well, Marlon lives here, he should know." I remember noticing from the rear, as our force headed out on foot that Marlon was dressed differently from the rest of us. He wore black, patent leather shoes, the kind with hard, low heels and slippery soles, a pair of blackish slacks and a light grey sweater with a whitish dress shirt underneath. One side of his collar was tucked in, the other flopped out.

Not long after setting out, Dr. Cave realized that he had left the big cooler in the bed of the truck and was concerned that it wouldn't be there when we got back. I volunteered to go back and lock it inside the cab. I thought that might be a good

moment to take a couple of good snorts from my flask. I did. Then, I swung back onto my back my backpack and with a slightly happier disposition and a cheerful gait, I returned to my trek. The late afternoon mountain side echoed with the sounds of anthropogenic enterprise. I was tempted to cross over a barbed wire fence to search the ground beneath some massive, Tillandsia-covered pines but when I heard the sounds of smacking and chopping above the sound of the river down below the stand, I thought better of trespassing; I mean, after all, who did I think I was? Sure, my cause was a noble one, but an obscure one and one that's kind of hard to explain. In fact, I tried to explain to Marlon why we were doing what we were doing and why he was being paid to do what he was doing but I'm not sure he understood. Perhaps my Spanish was hard for him to understand? Perhaps the concept is too confusing for the uninitiated? I don't know, but even though he smiled and nodded along affirmatively as I spoke, I suspected that Marlon really didn't get it.



I wandered along far behind the group. Supposedly the collecting site was a twenty minute walk from where we left the truck parked in the middle of the road but I knew Marlon's was an overly optimistic calculation of distance and time and velocity. Half an hour after leaving the truck the second time, I wondered how far away Marlon's site actually was because I

didn't see anything very promising from the road shoulders. As I walked, I looked for the tracks of game in the muddy spots in between the road rocks and at some point I came across one that was as big as a Puma's but it was hard to tell if it actually was. I sleuthed along, "ciphering," when Dr. Frank appeared from around the bend, looked at me and twirled his finger in the air. I turned around and the two of us walked and chatted a bit until we reached the truck. The moment we arrived, a black pickup truck with even darker tinted windows passed by the entrance of the road above where we were parked, then it reversed and stopped, apparently looking down at me. I waved and tried to look like I belonged there and was neither in need of assistance nor fit to be trifled with. After a tense few seconds, the truck resumed its uphill course and as it drove out of site it, an electric base line started to pump out of it. "Pirates," I said aloud.

I opened the gate and tossed my backpack into the back of the truck. Dr. Frank climbed up into the bed, stretched up against the wheel well and lit up a Swisher Sweet. I wandered up towards the entrance of the road to see if I could determine the source of some high-pitched chirping that I was hearing. The sun had just set and dusk was dawning. I noticed a hummingbird flying not too far from me and I watched him sip nectar from a patch of little red trumpet flowers on the slope above. As I observed, I tried to remember the word for hummingbird in Spanish, "colibri." I always liked the Puerto Rican word "zumbador," because it seemed onomatopoeic to me. Of course it isn't because there is no "zoom" in the Spanish language to describe the act and sound of "zooming."

Before I got to know them, I thought hummingbirds were peaceful creatures, as I think most people do. However, they are one of the most aggressive and seemingly mean-spirited little devils I've seen in nature. For years I watched them carry on while I sat in observation platforms high up in the rainforest canopy in El Yunque. Sometimes during parrot or raptor censuses they would fly right up to my face to get a good look at me. They seemed curious and I always tried to stay as still as possible, not even blinking while they hung in the air hovering, turning this way and that. Sometimes, they would even alight near me upon a twig and preen themselves. Even when hummingbirds sit, they never seem to relax, stop twitching or looking all around, partly because they're prone to being dive bombed by other hummingbirds. I've seen it up close, vicious diving attacks, near impalings and acrobatic dog fights, one tearing after the other, shrieking madly.

As I stood watching the hummingbird flit from flower to flower, I heard the sound of fluttering by my left ear but the sound seemed to move around and come from more than one direction at the same time. I thought at first there was a hummingbird hovering next to my head or several whizzing by me but I didn't see any. Then the sound came from behind me and then I couldn't tell exactly where the sound was coming from. I cocked my head and smiled quizzically at this curious audio hallucination. "How strange," I thought. The only explanation I could come up with was that it must have been because it was misty, getting darker and my eyes just couldn't focus on where the sound was coming from in time to

see them. A second hummingbird suddenly appeared above the slope, which incensed the one I had been watching and the two of them began to zip around each other screeching. They flew across the road, down hill and out of sight. As I walked back to the truck, the hummingbirds reappeared for a second and flew past me once more, now with a third one joining them in a sort of aerial free for all.

When I reached the front of the truck, I heard what sounded like voices, coming from down hill just around the corner. I thought it was the rest of our group returning. A misty fog blew down the slope and from the shadows, four figures came into view. I then realized it was not our group. It was a man and a woman with two beasts of burden, each carrying a pack full of fire wood. One was a small horse that was being led by the woman, the other a small mule led by the man. I started to fumble in my pockets for the truck keys, thinking, "I knew this truck was going to be in the way." As they came closer I saluted them, "Good afternoon," and said that I was very sorry for the truck being in the middle of the road. The woman was wearing a sleeveless striped shirt and light purple jeans. Her caramel brown hair was tied back in a pony tail and she smiled at me kindly. The man was tall and thin. He wore a wide brimmed hat and an untucked, long sleeved shirt. I could see his chiseled facial features, high cheek bones and his thin beard of straight black hair. To me his face looked like a wood-carved relief of the face of Jesus Christ, but I couldn't really see his eyes for the hat brim shadow. They were both wet with sweat and dirty. The man smelled strongly of skunk fruit, smoke and pine sap. I said, "We're here with Marlon," but they did not reply. I'm sure they had no idea who Marlon was. The man spoke in a calm but firm voice to the woman who kicked off her flip flops and in her bare feet, led the horse onto the lump of grass between the truck and the wall of the slope on the side of the road. As she passed me, I noticed her strong back side and legs. The horse and the mule both wore saddle packs constructed to carry cut fire wood on both sides. They were wide and piled high. She pressed the horse forward into the narrow passage.

The horse hesitated and the man let go of the mule's lead rope. He positioned himself behind the small, heavily loaded horse and pushed while she pulled. It worked. I turned and looked down at the mule, which stood obediently. He looked back at me and blinked his eyes tiredly. I saw that the lead rope was lying on the ground between his legs. I thought for a second to grab it and hand it to the man when he came for it, but I did not. The man turned around and reached for the mule's lead and tugged its head to follow him through. I saw the rope dragging on the ground and hoped the mule wouldn't step on it.

"Sorry for the bother," I said to the man as he passed.

"Don't worry," he replied.

They walked past the truck up the rocky road. When they reached the spot where I experienced the strange hummingbird sounds just a few minutes earlier, a cascade of small puffy clouds of mist rolled over them from the hillside above and their movements appeared to become staccato, as if under a strobe light. I continued to watch them walk up the road but strangely, I could no longer hear their foot steps or the

clipping of the animal's hooves. They couldn't have been much more than a hundred feet or so away from me but suddenly the fog made them hard to see too. I squinted. I blinked, maybe. I looked away for a split second, maybe, but when I looked again, they were gone.

One second they were there – the next, gone.



Marlon, Christopher, and Dr. Cave

EPILOGUE:

We dropped Marlon off at his street corner about a half an hour later. We proposed to give him 200 vials and return at 9:30 AM, on Sunday morning to retrieve them full of weevil larvae for 3.5 lempira each one. Marlon's request for an advance on the anticipated collection was granted. Dr. Cave made sure that they were clear on the terms of their agreement and the agreement was made. Sunday morning, we returned through the mountains after a night of torrential downpours. The driving conditions were bad. At 10:00 AM, we arrived at Marlon's street corner, but Marlon wasn't there. Word spreads quickly through a rural village and in minutes it got to Marlon that the Gringos from Zamorano were there. Marlon appeared with a plastic bag, his three year old son and his rather plump wife, who had a soft, Indian face and a Moe Howard haircut. He apologized for only collecting one hundred and six larvae because of the rain. I grabbed the bag and lifted it as to

demonstrate its heftiness. "No brother, you did great" I told him, "Soon we'll be paying you by the pound." When the transaction was complete, Marlon said that he wanted to show us another one of his collection sites, which was back in the direction we were going. Dr. Cave agreed and Marlon and his family climbed in the truck. He said, "We'll take a left and just go up a side road not very far."

We turned off the main road and started up a wet, rocky hill. Not long after, the road became too slippery. The tires began to spin and the truck began to slide. We stopped and everyone got out. I took over the wheel and started to back down the hill to a spot where the truck could be turned around. As I craned my torso over the driver's seat to see out the rear window, I slowly descended. I thought I was doing okay but when I looked out the side window, I discovered that as I had been backing down, I had also been sliding towards the left side of the road. There was not much I could do. I couldn't go forward. I couldn't control the slide but I kept inching backwards, hoping I could get traction before the truck slid into the muddy road side ditch.

"Boom!" the left rear tire dropped into the ditch and the truck stalled. I still had the two front and the right rear tires on the road. I started the engine and because of the way the road bent at that spot I was able to roll across the ditch. The force of the front left tire falling into the ditch pushed the left rear tire out of it and then the front left popped out too. I was able to regain a slow controlled descent and I turned the truck around. "Lucked out again," I thought. Dr. Cave and Marlon walked down to me and I asked Marlon where his family was? He said that they were going up that way anyway and they continued on foot. It was then that I suspected that Marlon's ulterior motive was to get us to take him and his family up that hill, not just to look at his larvae collection area. "Rascal," I thought.

As we drove Marlon back to his street corner, he asked me again if many people do this in Florida and do they find as many larvae there as in Honduras. I said that I wasn't sure, that it depends. I told him that where I live in South Florida there is a great swamp with many trees, hanging from them are only a few species of bromeliad and they are important to us. The weevil is killing many of them and we're trying to protect them. The only hope is the fly and their maggots. When we arrived, I shook Marlon's hand and slipped him 150 more lempira, "I want to give you a small tip," I said, "You deserve it." I told him that I appreciated his hard work and thanks to him, our trip was a great success.

Marlon smiled.

NOTE: 1 US dollar = 18.8889 Honduran lempira

Dennis Giardina is the Everglades Region Biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and was formerly the Park Manager of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. He is involved with the search for parasites of the bromeliad weevil and the program to introduce them into the Fakahatchee.