

PLOTS WITH GUNS

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MUSCULATURE

BY CHARLES DODD WHITE

IN THAT MOMENT WHEN THE CROWD NOISE PULSED THROUGH THE CONCRETE FLOOR, LEAKED THROUGH HIS SNEAKERS AND ROSE TO HIS FORTRESSED TESTICLES, EDDIE LONGMAN KNEW IT WAS TIME TO DON THE MASK OF EL PEQUENO DIABLO.



In that moment when the crowd noise pulsed through the concrete floor, leaked through his sneakers and rose to his fortified testicles, Eddie Longman knew it was time to don the mask of El Pequeno Diablo. He rolled down the spandex casing from the crown of his head and adjusted the spangled eyelets to ensure clear vision. In the dressing mirror he felt fatal and unblemished, prepared for great inflictions of cruelty. All of his physical complaints—wrecked joints, rent muscles, poorly mended bones going arthritic—suddenly sloughed free. Hatred throbbed.

The desire for mangling throbbed too. Throbbed and caught in the lungs so that he felt he was choking on his own accumulated lack. To name that lack was to know Pompeii Quartz. To know Pompeii Quartz was to see complete and terrible beauty reckoned then summarily despised.

The spotlight was a white hole in the platform surrounded by a square of triplet ropes. Plucking on the top rope, the beauty himself, Pompeii Quartz, lifted his greased arms to the cheering audience, his lank hair falling over the shoulder straps of his wrestling singlet. He had pinned yet another opponent into shame, and in that triumph was deaf to the pleas and warnings of the audience. With Vaseline smile, P.Q. slowly basked under their cheers, heedless of the treachery at his heels.

Longman torpedoed beneath the bottom rope and spun his small body with alacrity, crashing his full weight into the champion's vulnerable calves. With contact, the great man gave like wicker, and Diablo had once more felled his rival and boss.

Inside the ring, time slowed for Longman. The choreography of his assault was a sequence programmed into his body. No mind entered into it. His arms worked like matched serpents, encircling the large man's throat and twisting against the corded muscle that guarded his windpipe. P.Q.'s great blond head trembled in fury. As P.Q. wrangled and shifted his superior body for position, Longman slid like oil from one painful embrace to another, wreaking torment. The crowd deluged them with noise. It became the sound of one great beast stricken.

"Kill the little freak," a female voice screamed.

As if that had been the signal, which indeed it had been, since the woman who gave voice to the crowd's outrage was Retreat Diamond, P.Q.'s buxom wife standing now in the champion's corner, full glorious in her raven halter and bikini drawers, P.Q. snatched Longman from his back and hurled him to the canvas with a wet thump.

The champion was a study in technique and verve, lashing Diablo to the canvas time after time. Longman shook his head when P.Q. reached for the mask. When the hand came too close, Longman bit into the lovely fist. Blood sprayed. The crowd booed.

P.Q. cried out and cradled the wounded hand to his breast, a moment's inattention freeing Longman from the arm hold. The little man hurled himself into the ropes, rebounded high and launched himself boots first into the champion's tail bone. P.Q. cried again, this time with murderous rage as both his hands braced against his lower spine, throwing his whole posture back in a pantomime of high tragedy.

Longman circled, his arms raised in triumph. As the crowd hurled loose articles and defamed him, he grew agitated, shaking his head violently and promising vengeance to those who mocked. The distraction became ever greater, as if he were locked in combat with the spectators rather than with the champion. So much so, that he did not turn from their scorn in time to see P.Q. charge forward and wrench him high overhead.

Feeling the surreptitious pinch on the back of his neck that was the second signal, Longman tightened his abdomen and curled inward as much as he could. A second later the champion slammed his small body down, stamping his own foot at the moment of impact to amplify the sound of the crash. Longman rolled about in a daze before P.Q. threw himself contemptuously on top of Diablo and waited for the three count.

The crowd exulted in the midget's routine humiliation.

In the hot tub that was his daily due, Longman worked out the new injuries. They gathered in him like pathogens, swollen knots and distortions of tissue that could only be solved with the right treatment of steam baths, gurgling tubs and deep massage. He lived an uneasy truce with his physical turmoil. In time, the injuries would capitulate, as long as he remained patient, serene and dissatisfied.

A knock at the dressing room door.

"Come in, P.Q."

Pompeii Quartz entered, changed now into his evening wear, a stylish navy blazer and duck white trousers, white Gucci loafers clamped to his size 14 feet. His signature hair was bound in a tight sailor's queue.

"Good work tonight, Eddie," he said, dropping a rubberbanded bundle of twenty dollar bills on top of Longman's duffel bag.

"Thanks, boss. We gave them a hell of a show."

"We did do that. You coming out with me and the missus tonight? Paint this hick town red?"

"Sure, give me fifteen, okay?"

"You got it, Eddie."

The door clicked behind him.

Longman dried off and climbed up onto the chair to view himself naked in the mirror. Turning slowly, he inspected every plane of his body, making a tally of the new bruises and abrasions that he would need to conceal before his next bout. Once he was satisfied, he unfolded a pair of jeans and a black sweatshirt from his duffel and dressed. He tucked the Makarov 9mm in at the back of his waist, the barrel oily against his clean skin.

People liked to laugh at Longman. He realized this young, but as he grew into a man, the momentary trauma lost its sting. He learned to despise this squeamishness in others that masked itself as revulsion and shock. In time, he learned to love the hatred he evoked in them because there was nothing like the satisfaction of inflicting his deformity on those who believed themselves untouchable.

In truth, he had not seen his stature as a disadvantage since he left home at the age of sixteen, bumming his way across several medium sized cities throughout the Southeast. He attached himself to any number of the young and, for the most part, optionally poor who lurked outside of hippie headshops, banging on a tambourine for pocket money, filthy and reeking in thrift store duds, a rescue shelter mutt always at hand. Even if the tourists didn't care for his clanging and yowling, they dropped a few dollars in his hat because they pitied the dog.

One such evening, Longman was discovered. Standing outside a vintage record store, he approached a striking couple, a giant Scandinavian and his bombshell companion. He had procured an array of colorful glass pipes from a Chapel Hill dropout who had sought the romantic experience of hoboeing his way across the state and had mistakenly fallen into Longman's company. The young collegiate had boasted of his prodigious drinking ability while sharing a long house constructed of stolen shipping pallets beneath a riverside bridge overpass. To test this claim, Longman produced a bottle of clear liquid purported to be grain alcohol of some extraction, and the youth fell to with purpose, meeting with drastic but not unexpected results. To make up for the cost of the consumed alcohol, Longman availed himself of the pipes, though he had no reasonable idea of their worth. This did not keep him, however, from trying to unload them on any common dupe on the street.

The huge man was amused by Longman's sales pitch. Not only did he buy each of the pipes, he invited Longman to join his wife and him for dinner at a nearby French restaurant that featured bottomless baskets of spicy mussels. Longman suspected he was being lured into some illicit sexual proposition, but the woman was beautiful enough that he decided he would suffer a quick cock in the mouth if it meant he could take a turn with such a lovely piece as she.

As the evening transpired, he was both relieved and disappointed that his erotic dilemma didn't bear out.

After aperitifs, Pompeii Quartz described his unusual line of work as a professional wrestling entertainer, and the reason he'd wanted a chance to talk with Longman.

"It's a way to shove it back in their face, you know?" he said, tonguing a mussel from its shell.

"Whose face?"

"The ones out there," he waved his hands up at the stag horn chandeliers. When Longman didn't understand, he clarified, "The public. The assholes who like to scratch their asses and hand over good money to see us beat hell out of each other."

It was only then that Longman realized Pompeii Quartz was the first man in the world he had met who was a greater misanthrope than he. It excited him. He had not until that moment realized the beautiful and strong had as much reason to revile the world as did the disfavored and ill-born. From that moment forward, he listened to P.Q. attentively. He earnestly worshipped in the church of the beautiful man's hate.

As Longman, Pompeii Quartz and Retreat Diamond walked along the broad sidewalks of the strip, the autumn seas bucked under a desolate sky. This was off-season, the slow down. It was a moveable emptiness for Longman, the travelling to these placeless towns. That was what the wrestling troupe was reduced to these days—simple diminishment, a nostalgic sideshow in seedy tourist traps that needed something unusual to draw crowds when the weather or the fashion turned. There was too much ready entertainment on the tube. Too much mental squalor, P.Q. complained as he looked out at the ocean and shook his head. All the humanity was being ripped out of pain, all the ethics being kicked into a garbage dump. People were inoculating themselves against shock by the crap they watched at home. They imported cynicism in the comfort of their Pier One sofas. As far as P.Q. was concerned, the middle class didn't like the idea of seeing someone really sweat and bleed and suffer. And they could go fuck themselves. Royally.

The waves broke blindly against the strand, bringing a long gray moan. Everything was empty, untrafficked. A seafood shack at the end of the pier was the sole beacon, waving a blinking crab pincer, beckoning with neon promise. As P.Q. and his wife walked on, their heels clacking on the pier boards, Longman let himself fall a few paces behind, watching them hand in hand, the ocean ruffled before the beauty they brought. P.Q. turned his head over his shoulder to see what kept him. Longman drew a cigarette from his hip pocket and told them to go on and get a table, he would be along once he was done killing himself.

Longman waited until they stepped inside before he tossed the unlit cigarette in the sand and circled back to

the pier head so he could walk down on the beach. He looked up and down to make sure no one saw him as he jogged under the pier and hid himself among the shadows. He was careful to avoid the little sacramental mounds that stunk faintly of shit where some conscientious bum had covered his leavings like a cat. Squatting on his heels, he felt the loom of the incoming tide. He closed his eyes and listened to it, hearing the breaking waves pound the flats, a sound that always reminded him of his own impact on the canvas.

When Longman had first begun wrestling, he did so unmasked. Truth be told, he was not an unattractive man, and the fact of his relative normalcy was confusion to the crowd. The symmetry of his eyes, ears and well-formed mouth made the men uncomfortable, made the women deny unacceptable desire. P.Q. was the first to realize this effect on the public, and he pulled Longman aside after one of their bouts at the civic center in Jellico, Tennessee. The turnout had been unusually low that night, after all.

“Eddie, we need to rethink things a bit,” P.Q. said, laying a gentle hand on Longman’s shoulder. “We need to change the character of the performance, you know. Give them something they can better identify with. Something they’ll pay good money to hate.”

The idea of the Diablo came from Retreat. She crafted the *lucha libre* mask herself, cutting the saucer shaped eyelets and stitching in the brightwork. She fitted it to Longman and let her hands rest a moment on the nape of his neck.

“You look horrible,” she said.

Longman saw in the mirror she was smiling.

She and Longman began sleeping together after a few months on the road. The long hours on the bus made P.Q. anxious and irritable, and he often went up front and sat talking with the driver, Davy, partly to keep the boy awake behind the wheel. But really, P.Q. just loved to watch the endless unspooling of macadam. He liked to count mile markers. He said it would eventually add up to something of worth in his own head, the distance and the constancy, the idiotic count of lapsing time.

Retreat spent many of those empty travelling nights in one of the back nooks, playing backgammon or gin rummy with Longman over a couple of cans of Coors Light. Intimacies developed. Shared jokes and incidental physical contact. New towns, old towns, all faceless in the running gag of the performance and the repetitive drone of the highway miles. Some late nights were too good to let die, and capsules were broken and their contents vacuumed into each nostril. The nights got longer and better.

At first, they fucked in the bus lavatory. Despite its indignity, the area offered certain spatial accommodations that couldn't otherwise be achieved. Also, as Longman was fond of telling Retreat, her cunt was as tight as a fiddle string, so the exchange did not take long before he emptied himself into her.

They grew more daring when they were in one of the towns for a few days or more for a show. Sometimes they strayed off into empty fairground lots, rutting like beasts of the field, grunting and scratching at the earth, their eyes rolling whitely in their heads. Afterwards, there was never a moment's peace between them. Retreat would shove him away and dust herself off before returning to wherever it was she returned to.

These late nights with Retreat left Longman brooding in his own private aftermath. This continued for several months until P.Q. adopted the female wolf dog. It was caged and sitting on the back of a sun-struck Dodge pickup just next to a highway outside of Clemson, South Carolina. They had stopped for peaches, but the dog soon commanded P.Q.'s attention.

A sound of murder boiled deep in the bitch's throat. P.Q. had some vague idea about working her into the act, something to do with working the crowd's sensitivity towards animal cruelty. When Longman volunteered to feed and water her, the acquisition was sealed. Retreat, under her breath, said something about the wrestling performance becoming more and more like a circus every day. Both P.Q. and Longman ignored her.

The dog would take only scraps, whatever castoffs could be turned up from the after supper table, and what little exercise she was allowed was controlled by a loop fashioned to a broom stick, so that Longman could keep her at bay if she were to lunge. She was segregated from everything else, kept in her kennel in dark rooms or under a blanket to calm her as a hood might a falcon.

In time, a ritual developed. After Retreat would invite Longman to couple with her and she would leave him spent, he would go to the wolf dog and talk brusquely to it until a steady growl sounded from her. Then he would ease the door open and catch her as she sprang at him, locking his powerful hands around her deadly throat. Her eyes would stare with positive fury until the blood surge ebbed and the pulse drew thin. Embraced like this, they would sleep together for the rest of the night, the stranglehold relaxed but never completely released. At daybreak, Longman would shove her into the cage and bring her necessary bowls. Once he left her alone she drank and ate and thrived in her shame.

The act continued. Longman repeatedly betrayed Pompeii Quartz, and the great man punished his disloyalty in front of the approving fans.

In Colorado Springs things caught up with them. The power had been knocked out by an ice storm after the

crowd had already been seated for the early evening show, and because the arena was windowless, nearly a thousand people sat complaining and quaffing beers from paper cups for half an hour in utter darkness. Later, the idle bitching turned into something uglier. Insults were exchanged. Fists too. Finally, when the generator growled to life ninety minutes later, the citizens were pitching towards mutiny. P.Q. appeared on stage in his lovely magenta robe to quell them, promising a full refund at the door, plus the most vicious gladiatorial combat still legal in North America. Many left, but some must have decided nothing in the surrounding icescape could offer any better distraction than what P.Q. offered, so they grudgingly settled back into their seats and waited to be enthralled.

But the rhythm of performance had broken its harness. Timing suffered. The spell of the moment was lost in an awkward, fumbling attempt to enact displays of violence. The truth of phoniness leaked through. The whole evening of matches seemed like nothing so much as an ill-partnered tango, stiffly technical, lacking the grace of felt passion. Worse than booing, the wrestlers were met with tepid applause and a drunken apathy as immobile as hammered iron.

After it was all over, P.Q. sent for Longman to come see him in his dressing room. For a long while, they sat unspeaking. Longman became anxious as to the cause of his summoning.

“I wish it weren’t all so simple,” P.Q. finally said, feathering the ends of his hair between his fingers. “So rote. I’m afraid I’m losing something, some...audacity.” He heaved a sigh and shook his head. “It’s just too goddamn easy to be strong, Eddie. Goddamn me if it isn’t. I’m hungry for difference.”

Longman did not know how he should answer, so he sat still as an idol, listening for the rest of the night as the great man emptied his dread into him.

In Phoenix, the idea to salve all of P.Q.’s woes came to Longman. The first afternoon in town he went down to the closest pawn shop and passed four one hundred dollar bills across the glass display case in exchange for the Makarov pistol. It was a slim, functional weapon, embodying a realized simplicity that weighed well in the hand. He liked something so dumbly mechanical, an object that pulled the impulse to destroy from his heart down to his fingertips, the easy mesh of his digit to the spinal curve of the trigger.

That night, after the show’s lights had been dimmed and the routine fucking of Retreat carried out, Longman took his pistol and the handler’s lasso and brought the wolf dog far out into the desert. Occasional meteorites chipped by overhead, wasting themselves in antic brightness before air consumed them. The lonesome wail of coyotes raised the dog’s hair between her shoulders, but no sound came from her throat. When they had gone far enough to mask the sound, Longman lifted the pistol and put a single round in her back. She howled once in

pain, then rounded on him, trying to fight back against the lasso holding her in place. Seeing that she could still move, he adjusted his aim a quarter inch and fired again, severing the backbone. This time she did not yelp, but only dragged herself away with her front paws, seeking survival.

The surf pounded the strand and the chill was at work inside Longman, shaking his blood. He remained hidden beneath the pier, waiting for the report of footsteps on the planking above him, waiting to see necessity done. Time coarsened and played out in his mind, images of days without number, unassignable and irrelevant. The ghosts of conscience melted into some vaguer stuff. Longman crouched. He waited.

The sound of them overhead, passing him by, P.Q.'s swinging gait, his false laughter and Retreat the body, the thing, attached to him. The woman a mirror for the man. Both needing something of Longman, needing something broken to be made real. To be more than mere puppets recumbently unstrung.

The Diablo...the giver of what could make them human.

Longman stepped from his place and raised the pistol at their backs, firing two precise shots into their spines, collapsing them, breaking them down flank to flank, where they lay crying out and weeping mad tears of love as they tried to pass through the open door of one another.