

## The Coyote Murder

“Where’s the story, Grabowski?”

I dropped the papers on Leo’s desk. “It’s sorta outlined.”

“The deadline is in four hours and the story’s not done yet? What do I pay you for?”

A loud, demanding, little man, my editor gestured with his middle finger for me to sit while he reviewed my notes.

“‘Coyote Murdered in Desert’. Catchy title. At least you gave that some thought.”

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Twelve days ago six young Mexican women, Anna, Elena, Letitia, Maria, Rebecca and Rosa, some still in their teens, attempted to cross from Mexico into the United States in search of a better life. Two of the women and their guide, someone the Mexicans call a coyote, 25 year-old Rafael Solis, died making this treacherous crossing. The remaining women sit in a Tucson holding cell awaiting a decision from the Pima County Attorney’s Office on their fate.

Maria Louisa Palomares, a 19 year-old from Guaymas was the first to die. While descending into a deep wash, she slipped and hit her head on a jagged rock. Rafael, who was paid for each woman he brought across, ordered the other women to assist her. Eventually, when Maria couldn’t keep up, he ordered the other women to abandon her. They complained bitterly about leaving Maria alone in the desert to die. He agreed that dehydration was a horrible way to die, took out a gun and shot her.

Rebecca Flores, a short, heavy-set, 23 year-old, also from Guaymas, threw a rock at Rafael but missed. She realized the folly of what she had done and slowly retreated. All the women were devastated. They protested loudly but it didn’t last. His second gunshot impacted a few inches in front of tiny Letitia’s feet. He surveyed their stunned reaction while he slowly replaced the two spent shells in his revolver. The 13 year-old Letitia dropped to her knees over the lifeless body of her sister. Rafael picked up Maria’s plastic water bottle, took a long drink,

then ordered the women to walk in front of him.

Later Anna Ruiz, 19, of Empalme, became the target of the coyote's lusts. During a rest stop Rafael made advances toward the buxom Anna. Rosa Gutierrez, a tall, street-wise, athletic, 25 year-old from Ciudad Obregon tried to protect Anna but was stopped when the coyote pointed his gun at her. Remarkably, he completed his rape of Anna while still holding the other women at bay. Afterwards Anna rolled face down in the sand and sobbed. Rafael got up and surveyed the terrain.

They were now in the United States and he had to be sure of the direction they would take. The sun had set an hour earlier. Their movements would be hidden from normal viewing but the night-vision goggles and infrared cameras of the Border Patrol would easily spot them. He took a piece of paper from his pocket. On it was a crude map that he had probably sketched on a previous crossing. The Border Patrol later confirmed that his map showed the locations of observation posts in the previous month. Periodically the Border Patrol changes the location of their posts and that made Rafael's map obsolete.

Rafael waved his gun at the women and told them which direction to take. Apparently still fearing reprisal for his actions, he followed behind them, occasionally ordering them to change direction. Sometimes they walked along the bottom of washes in order to keep out of sight. Periodically they stopped and he would climb up the closest rise to get a better look at the area ahead. The quarter moon offered very little light in the barren desert. Rafael's large, battered binoculars helped in gathering more of the available light. At one point the sound of engines from the 4-wheel ATVs of the Border Patrol could be heard in the distance.

Rafael ordered them to take a rest. When the sounds faded he announced that the rest was over. He must have been feeling more confident of his control over these women since at this point he took the lead.

Elena Huerta, a heavy-set, 15 year-old from Hermosillo had been quietly fuming over

Rafael's actions. She tried to convince the other women to attack him. Although she had no specific plan in mind she kept trying to stir up a rebellion.

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"Where did you get all this information? Were you with the women on this trek?"

"No, but I was present when they were being questioned."

"Hmmpf."

His response reminded me of something my grandmother used to say, "What can you expect from a pig but a grunt."

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When Rafael stopped to check his bearings, Elena approached him and began calling him names. She said God would inflict the revenge that Rafael deserved. He apparently didn't think of her as much of a threat since he turned away. Then he told her to shut up or she would give away their location. A few seconds later she started her criticisms again at a lower volume. Again Rafael told her to shut up. This time his words only inflamed her. Her voice got louder. Rafael pulled out his revolver, cocked it and pointed it at her head. Everyone froze, fearing another outburst. Several seconds passed. Elena gained courage. She leaned toward him and announced to the group that he would never shoot her because it would give away their location. He nodded and swung the gun barrel at her head. Elena raised her hand in defense. When the gun hit Elena's hand it discharged into the air. The inertia carried Rafael's hand and gun until it struck Elena. She was knocked unconscious. Two days later the Border Patrol found her lifeless body where she had fallen.

Panic set in. Rafael ran back in the direction they had come from. The women followed. The last wash that they passed ran perpendicular to their route. Rafael leapt into it and continued running. Several minutes later the women caught up with him. He was peering over the top of an embankment at the lights and sounds in the distance. The Border Patrol was

searching in the wrong direction. Later, an agent informed this reporter that the footprints they followed had probably been left by previous “illegals”.

Rafael turned to the huddled women. With a sneer on his face he whispered, “You sluts are probably more trouble than you are worth.” In spite of his caustic comment he continued to lead them along the wash for about a kilometer and then resumed their previous direction. A half hour later the coyote was dead from a stab wound to the heart..

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“That’s it? That’s all you wrote? Who killed the guy?”

“That’s the sticky part.”

Leo was beginning to get ticked off. “What’s sticky? One of those women stabbed him didn’t they? Which one?”

“Well, the autopsy showed that Rafael had twelve stab wounds in his back but only one - the first one - was fatal. It entered his back below the left shoulder blade and penetrated his heart. It killed him instantly. It was done with such force that the long blade broke the rib immediately in front of his heart. The other stab wounds barely bled. That meant that his heart had already stopped. Each one of the women had Rafael’s blood on their hands. Each woman’s fingerprints were found on the murder weapon. Each woman looked guilty but only one wound was fatal.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well... Even though all the women apparently stabbed him, only one of them was guilty of his murder. The others stabbed a dead man’s body and that’s not murder. They probably banded together to protect the murderer. By all looking guilty they hoped that the authorities wouldn’t be able to single out who the killer was.”

“So we don’t know who killed him?”

“That’s where it gets really interesting. You see, the Border Patrol spotted the group by using night-vision goggles. Their standard procedure is to begin videotaping the aliens in order to document their capture. That video tape also contained the images of the last two minutes of Rafael’s life. The Border Patrol was so close at that point that the tape even showed someone stabbing him in the back.”

I paused and tried to look like I was deep in thought. Leo was now genuinely pissed.

“You’re deliberately trying to rile me, Grabowski.”

“Not really.” Okay, that was a lie. “Actually, after the County Attorney viewed the video he decided not to press charges. He said that it wouldn’t be possible to get a conviction from any jury.”

His patience was at an end. His face began turning red.

“What? There’s a video tape showing this bastard’s murder and the attorney won’t press charges? Why the hell not? Where’s the justice?”