Mark Beauregard

The Four Driftwood Misses Sing Songs of Love

Bad Luck Bill is writing this account because my writing can't be seen any more. Bad Luck Bill can still hear me, but he knows better than anyone that telling this story may be my last act on earth, before I vanish completely. I admit that I wished I could vanish, but I didn't think it was really possible. I didn't know what it meant.

To understand what happened, you need just a little American history. I will be brief, allowing that you may already know that:

After the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the vast auburn-colored deserts and craggy mountain passes of the New Mexico Territory became a refuge for outlaws, escaped slaves, and *banditos*. The territorial governor called it "a catch basin for rogues." Law enforcement did not exist. Also, no one informed the Chihene Apache that "New Mexico" had changed hands with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo; they still called their broad plains and high mesas Tih-go-tel, and they still defended their wickiups and lean-tos with rifles. Then, in the years following the Civil War, defeated Confederate soldiers walked their windbroke donkeys two thousand miles from their beloved, annihilated Dixie to that arid, lawless New Mexico to look for silver. They found it and built the town of Driftwood on the Gila River.

That's what you need to know: *banditos*. Former Confederates. Lawlessness.

But don't expect any whooping or gunfights. You just need to know that violence is the backdrop of this story.

As Catalina puts it, "Americans are violent because violence is the most natural reaction to the terror of Time. Americans think of their country as the New Eden. They are always looking backward."

Catalina is from the state of Oaxaca. She thinks a lot about Time. She says things like, "You can judge a mouse by the beauty of the hawk that eats it."

"But what does that have to do with Time?" I ask.

"Beauty *is* Time."

Catalina is a ghost. She wants me to tell you: "You do not have to believe in ghosts in order to believe this story. It is a love story. You only have to believe in love."

Let me give you a picture of Catalina before she died, because it's good to get to know people while they're still alive.

In 1870, at the Buckshot Saloon and Inn in Driftwood, the silver-mining town tucked into the foothills of the Mogollon Mountains of what would eventually become New Mexico, the

Driftwood Misses—four young ladies in bustled dresses, petticoats, and lace—sing and dance for the miners and outlaws. Catalina is one of the Driftwood Misses. She is dark-skinned, five feet nine inches tall—unusually tall for a Mexican woman born in 1840. Her icy gray eyes darken and lighten with her moods. She is the only one wearing a high-necked red dress; the others swell out of green bustiers.

Imagine them up there on the plankboard stage, the rough-hewn proscenium arch over their heads adorned with stags' heads and miners' picks. An upright piano. A guitarrón and a vihuela. Swaying hips, a high kick. See the white frills and crimson ribbons in their dark hair. Hear their bending harmonies, tones and overtones melting into one unearthly sound, as if they'd all emerged from the same womb singing. They are shiny and perfumed.

Before them, in the saloon, the miners, stinking of sour sweat and pack animals, eat stew and beans and rice. They drink whiskey and beer. Sawdust, peanut shells, and tobacco juice cover the floor.

But let's keep our attention on Catalina Pérez—the reason for this story—the one playing the vihuela.

Catalina was raised by a wool carder—a not unhappy poverty. Her father, mother, and brother were killed in an unnecessary skirmish after the Battle of Molino del Rey in 1847. Her uncle Fernando took care of her, brought her north, raised her on his cattle ranch in the Gila. He taught her to play the vihuela and to sing.

So now, again, imagine Catalina up there on that little stage, in that frontier saloon built where the Gila River meets the railroad and the dusty stagecoach. The smoky rafters glow yellow—the flames of cheap tapers gutter in the chandeliers—and Catalina stares up at them, past them, to something beyond. Imagine the four Driftwood Misses singing songs of love, their melancholy harmonies seductive and sad. Catalina croons. Strums. Plucks. She is a siren summoning the living, her vihuela a clarion call to the dead. In Mexico, *curanderas* play vihuelas to summon spirits.

Oh, something you should know. A vihuela is a five-string instrument with a vaulted convex back. The number of strings and the resonant vibrations of the vihuela's re-entrant tuning call the dead. The ukulele uses re-entrant tuning, as well. Imagine a child strumming a ukulele in an echoing mausoleum. That's the sound of the vihuela.

On stage, Catalina speaks English very quickly, with an accent that I sometimes find difficult to understand. At other times, her words are perfectly understandable, but their meaning remains elusive.

She says, "Jesus got lost in his love for God. That's why he rode a donkey."

She says, "Dreams are a proof of God. They are the bridge between slumber and the sleeper."

She says, "The notes of a truly sacred song dissolve the doors of memory."

But when she sings, everything is clear.

And now I'm going to tell you the last little bit of history you need to know in order to understand what's happening to me now, the details that will bring us into the present:

In 1870, a forest fire swept through the Gila and burned Driftwood to the ground. The two dozen people staying at the Buckshot Saloon and Inn that day—including the four Driftwood Misses—burned to death or suffocated in the flames.

The mining boom moved north to the Black Range and the Mimbres Mountains. The town of Driftwood never recovered.

Local ranchers bought up the land. They built wooden shacks and adobe chicken coops. They dug wells. In 1912, New Mexico became a state. In 1922, a forward-thinking developer from New Jersey rebuilt the Buckshot as an Old West-themed tourist hotel. Forward-thinking because the Apaches were still raiding the Gila in 1922, because there were no tourists. The theme was still the reality.

The Jazz Age and the Great Depression never came to Driftwood. The saloon barely survived on local traffic. The Second World War passed like all the other wars, and the saloon barely survived it as well. Tourists began arriving in the 1950s, and the Buckshot barely survived on the tourists. It was barely surviving when I arrived in 2021, when I myself was barely holding on, after COVID, after my wife had decided I was no longer a fit father.

I had planned to stay for one night, on my way to the hot springs north of town.

On the night I checked in, there seemed to be as many staff as guests: there was a desk clerk and a porter, both in candy-striped shirts, and a dedicated attendant for my room, wearing a straw boater hat and red arm-garters. Their English corkscrewed: aints and caints and hoosegows and goners.

"Y'all are gonna have a right nice time at the Buckshot, I warrant."

I didn't point out that "y'all" was plural and I was singular.

In the dining room, a waiter for every table and another for every function: a drinks lady to serve you cocktails, a wine steward to discuss your palette, a suave Mexican pâtissier to describe the desserts. A proper chef ran the kitchen—he said he was a retiree from a Michelin-starred restaurant in San Francisco. He came to each table to discuss the sauces in loving detail, his own magnificent girth proof of his culinary genius.

I ordered the ahi tuna ceviche with mango, avocado, and sesame lavash, and then garlic pesto pappardelle with maitakes, Delta

asparagus, and pancetta. The steward suggested the wine, a Bianco di Caselle.

Questions: How could a resort so obviously hardscrabble afford to employ so many people? How could such a remote restaurant, surrounded by high desert wilderness, with only a single county road connecting it to the rest of civilization, manage an ahi ceviche as fresh as a Tokyo sushi bar's? Why was an Old West-themed inn serving pappardelle and Italian wine?

I declined dessert. My waiter asked, "Is this your first time here, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then you might enjoy the show in the Opera House, through that door."

He pointed to a heavy, maroon-varnished wooden door, with black iron hinges as big as my hand. I noticed light coming from beneath the door, where only a moment before it had been dark. I heard the raucous sound of a piano in mid-song.

My fellow diners: at a long table, four men in faded Wrangler jeans, denim work shirts, and giant belt buckles. They lifted their beers and nodded toward the Opera House door. One of them smirked knowingly. An older gentleman at the next table, dining with his wife, shook his head no. His wife looked away.

The entire staff appeared in the doorways, smiling, gesturing toward the Opera House. My room attendant doffed his boater.

I stood and walked toward the door. My waiter rushed ahead of me and bowed as he opened it.

The Opera House was a narrow rectangle stretching before me, crowded with rough-looking men sitting at barely finished wooden tables. I know now that they were ghosts: miners and rustlers, desperadoes and drovers, railroad men and ranchers killed in that fire in 1870. Hooting and hollering, drinking whiskey that seemed real. The drinks girl handed me a whiskey. I drank, and it burned my throat. The men stank real stink.

And now imagine, for the third time, Catalina Pérez up on that stage at the far end of the Opera House, singing a *décima* of her Oaxacan home, the other three Driftwood Misses behind her, swaying. Catalina can sustain high notes for so long, with such clarity, that the sound begins to seem like the air itself. She leaps octaves, lands with dramatic vibrato; her voice dances between the uncanny notes of her vihuela. The song is real. The eerie, lush, consoling overtones of the Misses' unerring harmonies are real. You feel them in your chest, in your heart: they cut through the clatter and din.

The lone empty table awaited me near the stage. Bad Luck Bill was standing next to it, seemingly holding it open for me. He winked.

Catalina's *décima* ended, and the applause was nearly deafening. The floorboards shook with the stomping of feet. Whooping. The Misses began their next song, and Bad Luck Bill introduced himself and sat down at the table with me.

"Why do they call you Bad Luck?" I said.

"One day I was in the City of Rocks. In the Gila. There's a natural arch out there, a massive boulder eroded from the center. I climbed up it. From the top, you can see the whole valley below and the mountains beyond. You hear the wind through the arch, like a deep-throated owl. I'd been there a thousand times—to think, to solve problems. I'm a man of science. But on this day, the wind made words as it hooted through the arch. It said, 'I am The Truth.' And then the layers of the sky peeled back and fluttered away into space. The thermosphere with its auroras. The mesosphere, where comets burn out. The stratosphere. And finally the troposphere and all its clouds. I became naked and trembled. My heart felt like ice. I stood staring at the sun, which I could now see was the eye of God. It was looking into me. The presence of God filled me, consumed what had been me. I don't know how long it lasted. I woke up on top of that arch in the middle of the night. The moon was full. I saw God everywhere. I *was* God everywhere. I haven't stopped being God everywhere, ever since." Bad Luck Bill drank his whiskey.

"But why is that bad luck?" I said.

"How can I live, when I am The Truth?"

Peanut shells hit me from behind. I turned in my chair. A gap-toothed young man in a tattered gray Confederate uniform stared me down. "Yankee," he said. He punched the side of my head. That's when Catalina intervened. She stopped playing and threw a bottle at the grayback, smacking him clean in the forehead. He cried out and stumbled back, holding his head in his hands. He retreated to his seat.

Catalina raised her hand, and the crowd became quiet. The four Driftwood Misses picked up their song, exactly where they'd left off; but now Catalina sang directly to me. She looked down her long, straight nose at me, her gray eyes cold as moonlight, and the four Driftwood Misses sang a strident, sprightly waltz whose doomstruck lyrics belied its happy tone:

Muere el sol en los montes
Con la luz que agoniza
Pues la vida en su prisa
Nos conduce a morir.

The sun dies in the mountains
With its light fading
Because life in its haste
Leads us to death.

Sé que una nueva luz
Habrá de alcanzar nuestra soledad

I know that a new light
Will reach our loneliness

Y que todo aquel que llega a morir	*And all those who happen to die*
Empieza a vivir una eternidad.	*Begin to live forever.*

After the last note, ear-splitting hooting and hollering. The four Driftwood Misses then announced a break. Jeers and boos. Catalina came to my table and sat down.

She said, "I called you here, but I wasn't sure you would come."

"Called me?"

"You wished you could vanish. Your wish reached me in a dream, and I invited you to be with me."

Yes, I had wished I could vanish, as a daydream, in a fit of despair. I did not imagine anyone was listening. I had contracted an illness that doctors would now call long COVID but at the time could not diagnose. I was so tired, so tired. I lost my job as an architect. Then I lost my job as an architectural drafter. Then I lost my job as a landscape laborer. My wife, who refused to believe how tired I was, took our two boys away.

I said, "I came here because I heard that soaking in the hot springs can restore your body to health."

"I believe it's true that you came here in order to soak in the hot springs," said Catalina. "But it's also true that I called you here."

"How did you call me?"

"I played my vihuela."

Bad Luck Bill chimed in, "That's how summoning works."

Catalina said, "The fire that killed me purified me." This was the first moment I knew that Catalina was a ghost—the way she said it left no room for doubt—but somehow she seemed more alive than the people conventionally living. "It burned off my coarseness and selfishness. It allowed me to understand people's wishes, to understand my own wishes, to ask for things I want."

"The fire burned off your body," I said.

"Since I died, I've been disconnected from the world. But I began to long for pleasure and pain again because I came to understand that pleasure and pain are also ways of knowing God. Our bodies need not make us selfish. I longed to open my heart, but I needed a living heart to do so, another person who would be open to me. So I longed to live again, to meet someone alive again. You longed to know the purity of leaving your body. I summoned you for those reasons, because we need each other to fulfill our longings."

Mind you, till now, I had never believed in ghosts. If I had been hearing this story instead of living it, I would not have believed a

single word of it. But I assure you that every word is true.

I said, "God contrived all the circumstances of *my* life to lead me to you?"

Bad Luck Bill winked. "Meetings and partings are sacred, whether you summon them or not," he said. "Your life just fits in, so it's better to summon them intentionally, consciously. Otherwise, who knows what you'll get."

Let me pause again to say something about these attributions of the divine. As I told Catalina at the time, and I'm telling you now, I'm not religious at all. I'm not suggesting you should believe in God's revelations. I'm just telling you that a ghost summoned me with her vihuela, and now I'm turning into a spirit myself.

Catalina said, "I wanted to feel connected to the earth again, and God sent you to me. What did *you* want, that God would bring you here?"

"I wanted to be cured."

Bad Luck Bill said, "You were going to the hot springs for minerals to cure your body. Maybe the cure you need is for your soul."

"You can leave here," said Catalina. "You can go on to the hot springs, and you will never see me again. People like you see me only once. Unless you choose to stay. But if you choose to stay, you must stay forever."

"At the Buckshot Saloon?"

"No, with me."

The other three Driftwood Misses passed my table on their way back to the stage. I felt a tug at my heart as Catalina stood to join them.

"This is our last set," she said. "Then your show's over. I hope you'll stay."

"What would I have to do, to stay with you?"

"Just believe in me."

It's not that I had nothing else in my life—though, from a certain perspective, it was beginning to look that way. I stayed because I believed in her. I didn't choose to do so. I just believed. So I stayed.

As I listened to Catalina's haunting voice and watched her mouth form words that I can only describe as words of love, no matter what song she sang, all the trials of my life melted away. I wasn't healed, exactly; I simply didn't need to be healed any more.

This all happened four years ago. Bad Luck Bill saw it all. You can ask him. He's still alive, for now, like you.

In the first months after I left my old life behind, my body felt the way it always had, except that my mysterious lethargy disappeared; in my heart, I discovered a compassion that washed away regret and cynicism. Nothing bothered me any more. I lived with Catalina in her

room, in a wing of the inn that doesn't exist in the architectural plans. I began working as a room attendant in exchange for meals, but as time passed, I needed to eat less and less. Now, my body barely seems part of me.

When I first came to stay at the Buckshot, Catalina ate and drank nothing, subsisting entirely on poetry and song. She told me I was the only one who had ever truly understood her songs, her soul—an idea I found difficult to credit. She said my understanding made her real, and as our lovemaking became more physical, her other appetites returned, as well. Now, she is the first to sit down at every meal, and she can drink all the ghostly vagabonds under the table.

She says, "Blending bodies in love allows spirits to become flesh."

She says, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

She says, "The way you make love is the way God will love you."

Bad Luck Bill, who comes to the Buckshot every night to see the four Driftwood Misses, says that our love is the meeting of heaven and earth. He says that every true love is a meeting of heaven and earth.

I am telling you what happened as a way to prepare myself to disappear entirely. It is possible that I'm not real any more already, not in the way people speak of reality. When I first wished to vanish, I merely wanted to escape, or so I thought. But I know now that I wanted to disappear into a belief so strong that doubt was no longer possible.

I believe in Catalina, and she believes in me. And I don't need to be more real than that.