GHOST GIG

by John Harding ©

Prologue

The Fat Stealer by Eddie Galeano
Winner of the Desperate Literature Prize for Short Fiction Competition, 2022.

ON 10 FEBRUARY 2018, A BOMB exploded at 8:45pm approximately 300 meters from the Radisson Hotel, La Paz where Bolivian President was attending a reception. At approximately 9pm, police defused a second explosive device found inside the hotel. A previously unknown group called the Commando Carlos Bairon claimed responsibility. No injuries were reported.

Soon after this failed attempt to bring justice to the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, the Commando Carlos Bairon dispersed and fled the country according to a prearranged plan. Two of the conspirators headed for Mexico with a view to entering the United States. Another crossed the border into Peru to hide amid sympathetic followers of the cause but one, Eddie Galeano, boarded a flight for London, England under an assumed name.

When he arrived, he claimed political asylum and after a few weeks of legal wrangling and lobbying by certain sympathetic individuals, Eddie was granted a temporary stay and slipped away into the obscurity of the mighty city to begin a new life. It had been his love of Dylan Thomas that had led Eddie to flee to England, hoping it would inspire him to write. Thomas's picture had been on his bedroom wall at home; his incantation, 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light!' was often on Eddie's mind. He would say, 'Unlike the Spaniards, who view death as the end of life, we natives view it as the continuation of life. Instead of fearing death, we embrace it.'

Eddie was short, no more than five foot five, and wiry. With his long, aquiline nose and dark, narrow eyes, he could have been taken for an Incan Indian, though his recently deceased father, a small but significant industrialist in La Paz, always denied the family had any 'peasant' blood. It was one of many bones of contention between father and son

Eddie obtained a job in a fast-food restaurant on the Old Kent Road and, in a small, rented room, started to write, enthused with excitement and energy. In a careful, laborious hand, he began a novel that, he hoped, would expose the world of exploitation and brutality that was the lot of his native peoples. Occasionally, he took a bus to Fitzrovia, to Thomas's Fitzroy Tavern, trying to sense whatever spirit Thomas had left behind him. Ultimately, however, a deep restlessness invaded his soul, and he began to feel isolated and cut adrift.

His small frame began to feel heavy, and his joints ached in the mornings after long shifts serving up greasy hamburgers and kebabs. When he missed a couple of days work, he was instantly dismissed. His express train to freedom had hit the barriers. He felt as though he was ceasing to exist, fearing he had crossed what someone once called the "river of oblivion": that metaphorical body of water where one, "arrives on the other side not knowing who he is or where he comes from". It was the fate of the exile.

Eddie dragged himself to see a gently spoken Asian doctor who concluded that Eddie was run-down and might have an ulcer.

Eddie asked, 'Can you see any wounds on my back? Any scars?' The puzzled doctor said he could see

nothing. ‘I was afraid of the fat-stealer,’ Eddie confessed, the terrible Andean ‘lik’ichiri’, which attacked people as they slept, cutting long, thin slits in the sides of its victims and removing their fat. ‘The wound then heals, and the victim is none the wiser. According to Inca legend, unless treatment is given promptly, the victim soon dies.’

Doctor Pillai laughed, ‘You should try and catch one of these Fat Stealers. The slimming industry would be put out of business in weeks! Go home, eat well, go to bed and rest,’ he said.

But Eddie couldn’t rest. He was being robbed of his very existence. Expropriation was the prevailing ideology. He was under siege. With a heroic effort, he re-dedicated himself to his literary work but, one day on the bus coming home, Eddie fell asleep and the bag containing all his notes was stolen. He took to his bed again and when he at last emerged, he hardly recognised himself.

Deep one night in late October, Eddie heard the door-chime. Some insomniac ‘trick or treater’, it being Halloween? The sky outside his window was a rich, pre-dawn blue. The sharp, high-pitched yelp of a fox pierced the silence.

The next morning, he found an envelope on the mat with ‘Eddy’ scrawled on it. Opening it, he found five brand new five-pound notes and nothing more. Who, he wondered, owed him money? When had he ever had money to lend? As he pondered, an image of his dead father appeared before him, he who had wasted money and time in betting shops, gambling on horses and football, on beetles climbing the wall. When Eddie was a teenager, his father would unfurl rolls of crisp ‘bolivianos’ and thrust them at him, saying, ‘Go on, Eduardo, try your luck, you little shit!’

It was the Day of the Dead. On Eddie’s annual alter of gifts, his Ofrenda, there would have to be items devoted to departed loved ones. Eddie thought that a used, unsuccessful betting slip would spite his father’s ghost.

At midday, he walked into the local betting shop and scanned the runners and riders, searching the daily newspaper for signs and clues. A roving vixen, a cunning fox, a spider’s web, and a dead poet! As he approached the counter to lay his bet, Steve, the Pakistani newsagent said, ‘You a betting man! You are a dark horse!’

Eddie shook his head. ‘I found some money, that’s all.’

Steve laughed. ‘Do an accumulator! It’ll increase the winnings! Really!’ And he showed Eddie how.

Two hours later, Eddie sat in his kitchen, stunned at the money spread out before him. £3,575, every horse having won, and each win rolling onto the next. He had never seen as much money in one place at one time before. It was his father’s revenge.

In Bolivia it was now springtime, the time of returning rains and the re-flowering of the earth. His odyssey, he suddenly realised, was over. With this money, he must return. His illness was a sickness of the spirit. He would buy a plane ticket the following day. His exile was over.

Over the next few days, via local market stalls and sympathetic food shops he built his Ofrenda, his ‘alter to the departed’. Bread figurines called t’antawawas, sugared skulls and skeletons, and intricate tissue paper cut-outs called papel picado. Chocolate coffins inscribed with the names of the deceased, sugary sweet rolls called pan de muerto and unadorned dark bread humanoid figures called animas (souls). Finally, there were candles and votive lights and fresh seasonal flowers, marigolds and cockscomb. Photographs of his mother and father were surrounded by bottles of beer, tequila, coffee, and fresh water, candied pumpkin and sweet potatoes. And the betting slip.

He shaved, put on a shirt, and caught a bus to Fitzrovia, to the Wheatsheaf, for a final drink with the shade of Dylan Thomas.

Later that evening, Eddie looked up to see a smartly dressed woman smiling at him She was wearing a long camel-haired coat with a wrap-around belt tied tight to accentuate her waist and breasts. Her jet-black hair was pulled back and tied in a ponytail. When she smiled, she revealed small, white, perfect teeth.

She said, ‘You look ill. Are you okay?’

Eddie replied but his words seemed to come from someone else standing just in front of him. She

laughed happily, an invitation to Eddie to consider her plump and warm body. Her sharp, light perfume drifted across the small space between them and made him feel light-headed, as if he were breathing in pure oxygen. Her black eyes sparkled as she laughed.

'Can I buy you a drink,' he said.

It was almost one' clock when Eddie pushed open his apartment door and ushered Nadira – for that was the woman's name – inside, saying, 'And, at this time of year, our doors are open to all guests, who can share in the dishes, especially the favorites of the deceased ... '

'I'm not that hungry, Ed,' Nadira said, wrapping her arms around her and shivering.

Seeing the altar, she touched something, and her tiny squeal caused Eddie to turn round.

'Jesus Christ, what the hell is that?' she said

'Dried llama foetus, burned with incense and bits of wool and grease and coca leaves – to rid houses of evil spirits.'

Nadira shivered again. 'I feel like some evil spirit, myself,' she said. 'I feel like a *drink*, sweetheart,' she added.

'I only have some singani, made from muscatel grapes, Bolivian, you might like it.'

She said, 'Never mind, I've got a bottle here, can you open this?'

He pulled the cork, and she took the bottle into the kitchen. When she returned, she was holding two big glasses of deep, red wine, glinting in the light of the candles on the altar. 'Come,' she said, drink this down.'

'You're not English, 'he said. 'You Spanish?'

'From Guyana,' Nadira said.

'I knew it! You're South American! Like me.'

'Not quite like you, Eddie,' she said.

'You're right. I've had some luck. A big bet.'

Nadira said, 'I hope there's a little bit of that left for me, Eddie. Where's the bathroom?'

Eddie stood and staggered slightly, putting his hand to his head.

'You okay?' Nadira said,

'Here,' he said, pushing open a door then putting his hand to his head again, as if checking that it was still on his shoulders.

'Get into bed and warm it up for me,' Nadira said. 'Don't forget your drink,' and he grasped the glittering glass she held out and smiled vacantly at her.

'Who are you?' he said.

'I'm Mummy,' Nadira said, 'Come to tuck you in.'

Nadira sat on the sofa dressed in her silk slip and underwear, but with her camel-haired coat draped around her shoulders and she waited. She looked at the altar then reached out to take a small sugar skull that she bit into with her small, white teeth. The sticky mixture was sweet and sickly, and she spat it out into her hand then looked for a waste- bin. Just then came the sound of a heavy thump from the bedroom.

She didn't move, simply turned her head to listen intently. He must have fallen and hit the floor. Missed the bed, maybe, or rolled off it. It was powerful stuff. One minute they talk, the next they go out like a light. She'd once had to catch a man when he'd fallen towards her like a tree.

After another minute, she went into the bedroom to find Eddie face down beside the bed, his underpants halfway down his legs, his face contorted in a strange grimace She crouched over him and pressed her head against his back. Was he still breathing? She gave him a kick with her toe and he seemed to stir.

Relieved, she searched for his trousers and found a wad of notes stuffed into his pocket. She took a watch, a silver ring, and, from the alter, a small antique gilt picture frame containing the faded image of an Indian woman. Nadira stuffed the frame into her carrier bag along with the other items then took the wine glasses, poured their remaining contents down the toilet, washed them carefully and returned them to the kitchen.

She paused at the door. It was past 3 o'clock. Eddie would sleep well into the next day, she knew. There

was no hurry, and she was tired. So, she dragged a blanket from the bed and curled up on the couch in front of the gas fire. Outside, the sky was just beginning to lighten and, as she slipped into dreams, from far, far away came the scream of a vixen.

So deep was she in slumber, Nadira didn't hear the doorbell chime. Neither did Eddie, for he had died some hours earlier, his troubled soul even then manifesting itself on the family alter in faraway La Paz.

The Fat Stealer was thus left with the delicately perfumed body of Nadira upon which to perform his hideous surgery, from the effects of which she died in some considerable agony, right there on Eddie's couch, where she was found a week later, her sharp perfume being no match for the sweeter, sicklier odours drifting from Eddie's flat out into a largely indifferent world.