

The Damned Thing Out

by Francisco Nieto Salazar

Second Lieutenant Cornelio Malatesta had his first encounter with the power of a spirit doctor one night while performing an unusual surgery on Padre Xavier Altamirano.

Nearly moribund after weeks of gastric pains and vomiting that would not cease, the Reverend Father in charge at Mission Santa Cruz finally sent for Cornelio Malatesta, the second lieutenant stationed at the Presidio of Monterey. Malatesta was renown as the best surgeon in all of California, and was a damn good barber as well. His skills were sought out by the gente de razón for leagues around. Born in Veracruz, Cornelio learned his trade mainly from his father, who dragged him around the Indies as part of the Real Ejército, from outpost to outpost, in the outermost reaches of the King's domains.

As a boy Cornelio observed his father's countless surgeries before he was old enough to try his hand on his own. The first arrow Cornelio ever removed was his own-- a prize he still kept as a reminder of the bloody Pima wars. It was shortly after this that he realized he was destined, or condemned, depending on the day, to follow his father's footsteps. Before the old man died, he handed him his tools and told him to go north, to California, with the Anza expedition, and try his luck up there.

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In his letter to the surgeon, Father Xavier Altamirano wrote of strange and painful movements under his skin and around his gut. He could not sleep or eat anything besides the posol gruel they gave the Indians, and was unable to attend to even the most basic tasks of his ministry. He also mentioned something about a curse. But not the sort of curses he was so famous for, (for God knew how that padre loved to curse) but of a wicked hechizo he claimed he could not shake off. Malatesta hesitantly made the trek up from Monterey to Santa Cruz during a frigid rainstorm the following day to see to the missionary's bizarre ailments. He was sure they were delusions,

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the kind that had afflicted more than a few of his predecessors at the struggling Mission at the north end of Monterey Bay. Shielding his face from the rain with his hat, he almost wished the padre was suffering, at least enough to justify his trip. Fr. Altamirano was not known as the most amiable padre, and Cornelio resented him, more than anything, because he knew Reverend Father to be a stingy hoarder and speculator of foreign goods.

He arrived at night, not much after the lone bell cried ten. The Padre was agonizing on his corn-husk mattress surrounded with candles as he had done for days. All around him hung a noxious green cloud, which became excited when Cornelio opened the door, and rushed out, eager to escape the confines of its own putrefaction. Cornelio stepped aside to let the cloud pass, and then made his way reluctantly inside. Fr. Xavier Altamirano turned to him and, dispensing with a welcome said, "Malatesta. Get it out. Please."

"But Your Reverence..."

"Rid my body of this terrible malady, I beg you. There is nobody as skilled as you in the surgical arts in all of these bedeviled lands." His eyes waxed and waned with a deep desperation as he spoke. Cornelio had never before seen a padre so helpless and so dirty and so apparently close to death as this one.

"I know Your Reverence is suffering greatly, but all we can do is wait for it to pass, as such movements usually do. Honestly, there is little I can do except speed up the process with some of these remedies."

"Fuck your remedies, for goddsakes, I've had weeks of them." Altamirano's misery had disappeared from his pallid face and he barked: "It's not a vómito, carajo. And I've shat all I'm going to shit. For the love of God, just take it out." He clenched his whole body tight in a painful spasm.

"I don't quite know what you suffer from, I must confess. One cannot simply cut open somebody unless he knows what he's looking for."

"All I know is that it came from one of the brujos. And whatever it is, it's alive. Aiiiii!" he cried out like he was pushing out a baby.

Then, when it seemed to subside he said between pants: "Get a rope. Tie me down. Cut me open. Get the damned thing out! " Then his eyes sharpened like knives and he said, " If you refuse, I shall excommunicate you and I shall damn your soul to hell!"

This was the padre Altamirano that Cornelio was used to, choleric and prone to making threats he meant to carry out.

"I am afraid I can't perform such procedures. I can remove a bullet, but not something like a curse, as you say," which the surgeon said in his authoritative tone. Not inclined to believe in demons nor witchcraft, Cornelio nevertheless feared the padre was afflicted by some disease he could do little about given his rudimentary tools. He told Altamirano that there was nothing inside of him. "But your holiness wouldn't imply, that the magic of those Indios is the cause of your affliction? Surely you don't give credence to their superstitions." The whites and their converts knew there were sorcerers, old Indians out in the woods renowned for their power to shoot poison air from a distance, or send lizards and snakes that would enter into their enemy's body and eat away from within. One in particular, simply called One-Without-a-Name, was a perennial scourge and was blamed by neophytes and gentiles alike for bringing doom and cheating death. He was a bird shaman, but had many other allies, they said, up in the mountains towards the north. And he hated the Missions and all they had brought. Xavier, despite his years of seminary had become convinced that this was the only explanation for his pain. He understood Malatesta's refusal to operate, but the pain was so severe, that he threatened, "Indian magic is the work of the Devil. If you don't have the balls for this then you'll be working for him, The Prince of Lies. And I shall be forced to do it myself, provided you lend me your knives. I swear on the Holy Mother's Virginity I will! I can't stand this any torment any longer!"

Malatesta realized that Altamirano was deadly serious, and his attacks were so intense that they already caused him to bite off a piece of his tongue. Besides, his two *compadres* were called into question, and this reminded him his undescended testicle (the

source of all of his misfortunes). The way he figured, he might at least be able to prevent his death, if Altamirano were reckless enough to attempt the surgery on his own. Besides, there might be a reward in it after all, if the padre was grateful enough to spare some of his bounty he kept buried somewhere in the Mission graveyard. And he had come all this way.

"Alright, for the Love of God and to ease the suffering of a Reverend Father, I shall do it," he said. Then he told Fr. Altamirano to lay flat on his back and that he should not worry. "I'll get that thing out, whatever it is." He began to examine him, feeling with the balls of his fingers and pressing down hard every so often. This caused Altamirano much pain, and he determined that if there was anything inside, it had to be quite deep. He explained the procedure; "I will cut a finger and a half in length form here to here on your holiness' abdomen. I have to get through various layers of skin and tissue, so you'll have to strengthen up and bare the pain." He did not tell him about the risk of infection, but added this: "Your holiness should be prepared for the worst, and should probably call the other Revered Father assigned to this Mission too see about your soul."

"I understand all this. Either way my death will be in your hands, Malatesta," he groaned. "Now go call that bastard Igoa to come hear my confession, should the Lord find it necessary to call me to his Kingdom this very night while under your knife!"

Malatesta wasted no time, and in less than twenty minutes he had summoned Fray Igoa, ready to apply the extreme unction, as well as a couple of soldier escorts whose job it was to help hold down Fray Altamirano for the operation. Fray Igoa buzzed around the adobe chamber looking concerned, and tried to talk the ailing friar through it. For all his fame Malatesta used the crude tools of a soldier, which were more accustomed to removing projectiles from peoples' asses. In those cases he knew where to cut and what he was looking for.

Quickly without fanfare he cut. He cut smoothly and quickly. Altamirano, gagged and bound, tried to arch his back, which made Malatesta make a bigger incision than expected. Blood began to

pour and soak into the rags provided to absorb it. He inserted his fingers into the newly made gap, and felt around, to the great displeasure of Altamirano whose veins swelled and throbbed. His eyes looked like they were ready to abandon his body.

Whatever Igoa was saying to him, Altamirano could no longer tell. Something about praying, or the torments of the early Christians, but the sharpness of the pain was unbearable. Then Malatesta felt something peculiar underneath the tissue, and it was obvious by the change in his expression that he had no clue what it was. As everybody except Padre Altamirano looked on, Malatesta decided to make an additional incision, past the muscle and fat to explore the jumbled innards of the Franciscan by hand. "Hold fast, Juarez, I'm going to cut him again," he said to the soldier on the left. And Juarez obeyed, putting his knee on Xavier's chest along with all his weight." Now the surgeon was motivated by a morbid curiosity, common amongst doctors of his day, instead of a desire to satisfy a suffering padre.

The next cut was made with the precision of an engraver exciting the blood flow further. Altamirano tried to kick, but the feet restraints held up, and there was nothing he could do. Something was there. It was undeniable, and he turned to face the padre, whose eyes were now clenched shut. Without asking for further permission, he moved his hand in-between the intestines, which felt like curtains of tightly—wound chorizos. Suddenly Malatesta removed his hand and squealed something in Italian. "It's, it's, coming out!" he yelled.

Everybody jumped backwards, including the surgeon, at the sight of the head of brown lizard peering with its bulbous eyes at the fright-filled faces around her. She froze in a momentary stupor, and then she emerged slowly from the slit in Fr. Altamirano's side. Her body was outfitted with strange geometric patterns and steaming with hot coat of blood. She wiggled and clawed, and finally freed herself from the trap of the padre's interior. She was happy to be released, and a chorus of gasps accompanied her exit.

To the men present it was a demonic manifestation. A never-before-seen freak encounter and they scrambled to explain it, first to themselves, then to each other. Fr. Altamirano, on the other hand, felt a sudden great relief, after days of severe pain, after the reptile made its slippery exit. "Santo Dios!" "Es un hechizo!" said Igoa. "Ave Maria!" yelled a soldier. But as it scurried around the floor, looking for a portal to the outside, Malatesta yelled, "Brutos, agárrenla! Before she escapes!" But the men hesitated.

Altamirano, still gagged and restrained, did not move. He wasn't aware of any reptiles yet. Nor was he aware that he was slowly bleeding away his life through his open wound. The stinging pain of the incision was a relief from the horrible lizard that walked around his insides. As the soldiers and Igoa screamed at each other, however, he began to sense that something had gone terribly wrong. The soldiers acted first, and chased it out from under the cornhusk mattress. It jumped off the table and ran across the room with ease, while Father Igoa called out a series of loud and frenzied Pater Nosters that only added to the confusion. The little brown lizard used the darkness of the floor to hide behind everything it could.

Malatesta took a wooden bowl that held the water for the operation, emptied it on the ground, and chased the lizard into a pile of firewood. Then he waited, and kicked it over log by log until the lizard had nowhere to go. The bowl was slammed hard over it, catching three of her fingers. She thrashed about inside. "I've got you!" yelled Malatesta and put her into a clay jar. The celebrations quickly evaporated as the soldiers, surgeon and Padre Igoa began to argue vehemently again as to what to do with the monstrosity.

Altamirano still in shock had by now pieced together what had occurred to him. He saw the men put something into a jar, he knew it was alive and he knew it had come out of him. He looked at the men who had abandoned him on the operating table with eyes wide open, and his forehead wrinkled in terror. Then he noticed that his cut remained open, bleeding his life into the cornhusks. "Help!" he yelled, "You left me open! Put that thing down and sew me up!"

Malatesta, Juarez, and the other two soldiers complied, and ran to his side.

"Padre... disculpe... eh, ahora comprendo sus dolencias..." Malatesta did not know how to explain to the reverend what he had just witnessed. He certainly did not wish to alarm him any further, and told him to calm down as if everything were normal. Out came the suturing supplies: cat gut, pig bristles, a shoemaker's needle, and poultices to prevent infection and aid in healing. The surgeon quickly went to work, with the aid of the others who held the father tightly down with rawhide. Could there be any more? Could they be found in others? He suddenly found himself at the verge of what he thought might be a medical discovery, and his hand trembled as he tried to steady the naked body of the priest, whose instinct was to buck and thrash. Fr. Altamirano held up quite admirably to all this pain, enough at least to finally demand an explanation. "What was it? A curse, right!?" he yelled as he was sewn up with pig bristles. He received no answer, but somehow he felt vindicated that he was not mad.

Padre Igoa believed it (correctly) to be the work of an Indian sorcerer, surely allied with the devil (quite incorrectly). Whoever was responsible had to be found and eliminated, he demanded. "These brujos are not as useless as you think, Malatesta. They work on the Evil One's behalf."

The lizard sat quietly inside the darkness of the jar and listened as humans outside discussed her fate. The soldiers wanted to kill it immediately, as was their nature, and Fray Igoa tried to recall the correct procedures for the destruction of demonic creatures, urging restraint until he could figure it out. Malatesta, a man of science, wanted to look at it under his lenses. "How could it breathe inside your body? Impossible!" He kept repeating. "Perhaps it crawled up your Reverence's anus." But the voices of destruction were gaining the upper hand and it was suggested by Igoa that the lizard be sentenced to death by decapitation. If it was demonic, then it should also be burned, he added. Solider Juarez poked his sword in her back and held his breath as if to avoid inhaling its escaping demon.

The little thing squirmed and fought until Altamirano spoke abruptly between sobs, "Alto! Don't kill it!"

The soldier obeyed and looked, along with the others at the man who had borne that horrid creature. "It's just that," he paused and held his wound tightly, "Ugghh...it came from me. I must see it!"

Padre Igoa: "For the sake of God, Padre, I don't think that is such a wise idea. I think its safe to assume that we are dealing with a demonic curse, that has been cast upon you by some evil pagan, who most certainly desires your end."

Malatesta argued: " You may have your reasons for wanting to destroy it, your holiness, but I don't believe in witchcraft or things of the sort. What we have before us is a strange native creature, previously unbeknownst to us, whose eggs hatch in our bodies, and emerge when it is grown. I would not be surprised, Padre Altamirano, if at some point your holiness did not consume one of its eggs, without your knowledge. It is, after all just another one of God's magnificent creations."

Padre Igoa: "You are an atheist. A rotten atheist, Malatesta. No use in playing a believer. I am the ecclesiastical authority here. I have great experience in these matters, and as you well know the devil is loose in these lands. I have seen his work. I followed his traces from San Jose to Valladolid, always through the practices of these renegade Indians. That's why we can never trust them."

Altamirano: "Callad, par de cojones. Will you finally give me the opportunity to look upon this...thing, or lizard or whatever the devil it might be? I believe I have the right to know what was inside of me."

After some arguments, the soldiers were motioned to bring it over and show it to the sore Padre. As they removed the lid, and brought light inside the lizard's prison, Altamirano changed his look from apprehension and disgust, to curious amusement. He found it incredibly charming all of a sudden. It was the look of a father, but not a Father in the ordained sense, but as a real progenitor gazing upon its brood. He could not allow its destruction, evil or no evil. Now it would be his, and he would redeem it through Gods' love, as

Saint Francis did the Wolf, or St. Anthony the Devil Pig. Putting his hand in side the jar, he then took hold of it, still bloody, and let it squirm between his palms. None of the others could understand this reaction. They had seen a live lizard crawl inexplicably out of Altamirano torso and now he was endearing himself to it in the most bizarre of ways. The little thing swung its tail back and forth with charm.

The squabble quickly intensified at a higher pitch so that it became hard to make out who said what. But Padre Altamirano would not let go. He put the lizard back in the jar and hugged tightly. He looked at everyone as if he would bite any hand that came near him. But the soldiers would not seize it from him at this point realizing that if a man of God could handle the creature, they had little to fear from it themselves. They were tired of everything, and soon everyone would come looking for them to fix their leaking roofs.

"Keep it, but don't let it out of your sight," said Malatesta. Padre Igoa, however, tried in vain to convince him to kill it, to burn it, to drown it in holy water. He pleaded as if the very life of him depended on its destruction. And after a while he finally gave up his fight. "You'll be sorry," he said on his way out the door, poking his fat finger into the air. "We'll all be sorry." And he left to drink *aguardiente* and honey, hoping partly to be proven right.

Altamirano took this lizard as evidence that he was not insane. He had plans to set it up somewhere, to feed it and keep it for show. "Look! It was inside me!" He wanted to say. Whatever evil it may have possessed in the hands of the Nameless-one now seemed irrelevant. After a few blessings he put it back in the jar and requested a bottle of Castillian brandy to calm his nerves.

"Are you sure you don't want something else?" asked Malatesta. "You're víceras are tender and they have been clawed pretty badly. Alcohol is sure to irritate them."

"Yes, but nothing else will put me to sleep. In the meantime, make sure those three don't do anything to the little thing. I want to keep it as long as I can. In a way it knows me better than anyone."

Malatesta stared at him oddly and agreed, "Ok, but only if you give me access to it. I should love to study it."

"And what else."

"Oh, nothing. I wouldn't expect much in the way of recompense for this..."

"Are you asking me for money?" said Fr. Altamirano, perturbed.

"Oh no, on the contrary."

"Good. We understand each other. Still, you can have thirty off-the-books cows, young ones with your own brand. You'll need a larger corral."

Then Malatesta cried out his last order of the evening: "Tell the whole garrison that if anyone brings harm to this thing he will be chained to the pozolera for twenty days. And turning to the padre he added, "Your holiness has a right to keep it. Like you said, it came out of you. It belongs to you. After all, you are like its mother."

Fin

