

HUNTING THE WHITE RHINOCEROS

to Clint Eastwood

With difficulty but skill, the Land Rover avoided the dangerous hills, which although small could be fatal because of the vehicle's high speed; it zigzagged, from time to time tearing off slender branches from the acacias—or pulling out whole bunches of them—that lashed our cheeks and our naked, sweating torsos. Traveling along a blind route, we followed the tracks of the much sought-after specimen, the assignment given to Harry by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Abdullah knew how to drive at just the right speed, avoiding roots or dirt-clods that might be hidden rocks which could be catastrophic for us. He transformed the Land Rover into a different kind of beast, one that mimicked its prey until it became one of the same species, predicting all of its feints and charges. I was in the back of the jeep, bumping up and down, my tailbone pounding on the hard seat, barely holding onto the loose pieces of metal in the vehicle; next to me, Jemmy, a tall, freckled young man, was helping Harry load and reload, like an arms handler of Death.

And Harry, that is, Alvaro Leiva, nicknamed Dirty Harry for his extraordinary resemblance to Clint Eastwood, was seated next to Abdullah, immobile and erect, his hair whipped around by the speed and the jolts of the Land Rover, his Mauser, an unlikely golden color, in his left hand, and the black strap that suspended the weapon from his bony shoulder shining in the sun. His gaze, like a young eagle's, was fixed on the wrinkled animal, whose body, coated with plaster, dried mud and the remains of branches and grass, looked like a Paleolithic armature wrapped in a dust-cloud protecting it like a magic aura. It was a monster that predated thought, incomprehensible and insolent on its unbridled course, instinctive and frenetic, with no logical connection to the weight and expanse of its structure.

Harry tried to get a glimpse of the monster's musculature through the thick dust-cloud, traveling on its unbridled race as if toward death, persecuted by the other monster, the metallic one, which tried to calculate from the whirling dust the steady agility of its torso, the measured bobbing of its head, the exhaustion

the skillful Abdullah was producing on its live mass as he drew unlikely patterns on the savannah with the Land Rover, patterns like those at Nazca whose design depended on the unchanging dance of life and death, a dance inscribed to rob the beast's last gust of breath, weight, destructive power. They were two unbridled structures describing spirals over the savannah: one, that organic force endowed with a rugged but magical armor of wrinkled hide; the other, metallic, hard as an unbroken colt, as gray as the beast, whose roaring, smoking engine spurted through its radiator leaden, boiling water that was difficult to distinguish from the foam pouring out of the beast's panting snout.

After a day of siege, sunset had arrived. There was a look of preoccupation barely visible on Harry's wrinkled brow, which revealed through its expression, like that of the real Harry, the one in the movies, that something wasn't going completely as he'd planned it, a week or who knows how many days earlier.

Little by little Abdullah reduced his speed, in order to steer the jeep with more precision and less risk, so that the power of the roaring and near-empty engine also diminished. He also ran the risk that the beast might suddenly stop its wild course, overwhelmed, and charge at us head-on with the fury and potency of its last strength. From the halted vehicle, with its motor running, Harry looked at the other mass sinking into shadow from a safe distance, observing its eyes, which looked tired from the mud that coated its timeless lids, and the measured snorting from its diaphragm that raised dust from the savannah.

Finally Abdullah turned off the Land Rover's slightly-flooded engine, which was leaking water and burnt oil on the savannah's scorched grass, and we remained immobilized about a hundred meters from the specimen, which was almost four meters long. It was a magnificent adult male, the requisite African rhinoceros, panting, expelling bubbles of thick foam from its nostrils, which were crowned by two magnificent typical horns. There it was, immobile, snorting with difficulty, the setting sun outlining its silhouette against the infinity of the horizon, its head hanging. Abdullah got out of the vehicle, stinking and sweaty, and emptied a water jug over his body. Then he stretched like a dog and shook his frizzy head. Jemmy stretched his legs and sighed. Harry remained motionless with his golden Mauser in his right hand and his brow creased, his gaze fixed on the motionless animal that was like a latent rock. I took the opportunity to

shoot the third roll of film in my Pentax, taking inoffensive flash pictures from different angles of the men, the resting beast, and the landscape, all stained by the bloody African dusk.

This whole absurd persecution began for me when, feeling disgusted, apathetic, and uprooted, I was working as a photojournalist in Somalia, whose conflict had started to unravel during the time this story takes place. My mission, although institutional, for an agency of little importance, was to capture with my lens the greatest number of Blue Berets* on their peace-keeping mission in the zone devastated by that curse which condemns certain villages to sicken and die, just like certain human organisms, by a neo-Darwinian law. All I had to do was spend each day in that lunar landscape and assemble Blue Berets so that they stood out against the dying skeletons covered with grayish, opaque skin at the moment that they received humanitarian aid. There may have been only twelve Blue Berets scattered over mounds of subhuman creatures, but it was easy, I just had to find the right angle with my Pentax, and the light and some smiling, rosy face did the rest of the work.

To entertain myself, surreptitiously, between shots, I would capture on film some half-dead rebel being dragged by a Blue Beret toward a truck full of prisoners, after being caught with an arsenal of three hand-made rifles under a table made of planks. And I would forget, at night, how this dusky land was fed only on dried blood. The rest of it was taking a photograph whenever some soldier, as fed up as I was, shot at a shadow-rebel, an extension of some twenty other rebel leaders before him. It was simply watching a living skeleton shatter into a thousand splinters without being able to explain the source of a blood-stain engraved on a mud wall like a squashed mosquito. The nights were a repetition of the tedium, apathy, and discontent, all for a few dollars in anticipation of who knows what.

So I was only waiting for my month-long contract to be up so I could leave all that shit and have some money to drink and shoot pictures at my leisure far away from there, I don't know where, but far from Africa. That was the situation when I received Harry's letter. To learn that mail has arrived and, what's more, to get access to it, is as difficult as getting a plate of humanitarian aid. When I finally got the letter, I realized what my mission was: to graphically cover the

hunting of a rhinoceros, detail by detail, a mission charged to Harry by the Museum of Modern Art of New York—the popular MoMA—something that seemed strange to me at first—a natural history museum or something like it would be more logical than an art museum—but because of the payment offered and my curiosity of seeing Harry one last time in my life—knowing him, one more time could very well be “one more last time”—I accepted, leaving Somalia for Kenya.

Before leaving, sitting in a miserable cantina drinking cheap whiskey smuggled in with the humanitarian aid—in reality it was the most humanitarian of all aid—I began to remember the last time I saw Harry: his hardened features, his facial expressions almost mimicking those of the actor, his ineffability, everything that earned him his nickname didn’t seem fake. He was just like a double who’s unaware that he has another double, even if the other is a famous actor, nothing more. He was the son of a prospector from northern Chile and a *gringa* who was passing through and wanted to know what prospectors were like in bed. Everything about him fit the stereotype: Chilean, adventurer, he’d practiced every kind of trade and knew everyone; a friend to his friends and an enemy to his enemies. He’d once killed someone and had fifteen scars on his body. The only thing that didn’t fit the archetype was that he wasn’t missing any teeth, and that he looked like a movie star.

But maybe—this was my theory—Alvaro Leiva didn’t inherit the facial expressions or even the laconic clichés of “yanqui” movies. Nor was Harry a fan of movies, but of Life. Maybe those deadpan philosophical pronouncements partly reflected his background as a prospector’s son; or maybe he was simply Eastwood’s “double,” not on the screen, but in Life.

It was my last night in Somalia, and I was half-drunk, feeling the nostalgia created by any departure, however desired it might be, or that comes from the shadowy tedium produced by the habit of death. I was sprawled on the cot in my room—if a cubicle of mud and straw can be called that—passing the time emptying a bottle of whiskey that tasted like rum—or a bottle of rum—getting drunk to the depths of my soul as I remembered everything I was leaving. Meanwhile, I was listening to a cassette of Sade that had accompanied me that whole wretched month and which I’d decided to leave in this very room, the same way you leave a woman you’ve used up and all that remains of her body, her kisses,

her hair-style, and her lips is a light melody and traces of lyrics you've hummed many times but that eventually fade away. "A Somali woman fished for pearls in the desert sand / impossible pearls that she delivered with her wounded hands / to the children in her native land," something like that....

The next day, a ray of sunlight through the skylight blasted my throbbing head, while on the floor, the whiskey bottle looked like a cadaver surrounded by cigarette butts and the Sade cassette had spooled around itself after rotating too many times in the walkman.

Harry descended from the jeep, without letting go of his golden Mauser, his gaze fixed on the animal we'd chased all day without a break. He put a cigarette between his lips and lit it.

"It's magnificent," he said.

Abdullah, Jemmy and I set up camp and lit a fire; afterwards we heated up the canned beans and coffee. The rest of the work was split between Abdullah, who never showed any signs of exhaustion, and me, since Jemmy was carefully checking the arsenal of Harry, who was staring at the rocky, immobile mass of the rhinoceros standing out against the savannah's steely horizon. From a distance, it looked like a dolmen, or some funerary idol from an age before time began, a compact, mineral mass fused with the crust of the savannah, which fed more life than we ourselves did, an imposing and terrifying dormancy that waited with its two lethargic horns, signs of its ancestral power.

Harry approached us; I took a sip of whiskey from the same bottle he handed to me: finally, good whiskey, I thought, as I drank some more, which returned some strength to my stiff body. We sat in a primitive circle next to the fire. The glow highlighted Harry's leathery complexion; his eyes always seemed to stop time, except when he was speaking, proffering his zen-Hollywoodesque sentences. When he finished his beans, Abdullah collapsed like a falling tree and got under the covers at the same time he began snoring. Little snores of ancestral weariness, from centuries of slavery. Jemmy, mimicking his boss's laconic attitude, had been asleep for awhile in his sleeping bag, the golden Mausers right next to his hand. I observed them, beautiful and shining beneath the dying light of the fire.

"Why do you still have the Mausers?" I asked Harry.

"They've never failed me," he answered, without taking his eyes off the immobile animal a hundred meters away from us.

I kept watching him in silence, as he handed me the bottle of whiskey. I felt the effect of the alcohol and imagined those two outdated weapons, like those objects without a useful purpose, those remodeled vehicles from the '50s that appear in commercials for blue-jeans, next to a man who also had no useful purpose except in that time and place, two obsolete remnants, absolutely kitsch, without a past or possible destiny. Similar to the rhinoceros, a structure out of time, on a continent that was also absurd, only debris, sticky substances in the world.

That was when Harry took a spyglass out of his jacket and handed it to me.

"Look at the animal," he said. From inside the sharp focus of the eyepiece, I could graze the animal's lunar-like surface; without a doubt it belonged to another time. The plastered mud and dried grass had begun to melt away from the night dew, and the perfection of that thousand-year-old antiquity appeared before me like a painting by Dürer. I had the impression that its color was beginning to metamorphose from the effects of moonbeams striking it from different angles, as if the beast, as time passed, were glowing more and more, becoming whiter, turning into marble.

"You aren't hallucinating," said Harry, emphasizing each word.

I looked at him hard, asking for a better explanation. "It's a white rhinoceros," he said, tossing his cigarette butt into the fire and taking another swig of whiskey. "That's why we've delayed doing him in."

In effect, the search for the specimen had lasted a week.

I drank from the whiskey bottle he raised toward me.

"Are you going to sacrifice it?" I asked.

"It may be the only specimen in the world," Harry said. And after awhile: "There may not be another one like it for decades. There may *never* be another one like it."

"And you're going to sacrifice it?"

"It's a lot of money," he answered, almost with pity. "I'm tired already, I'm covered with wrinkles and too many scars."

"How did you find it?"

"Instinct," he answered. "Just by sense of smell."

"But wouldn't it be more valuable alive?"

"I was commissioned by an art gallery," he answered, "not a zoo."

"But its value is priceless," I insisted.

"Not for an art gallery. Zoos wouldn't pay that amount. "We should go to sleep," he said, "the nights are short."

Before getting into his sleeping bag, Harry said as a way of wishing me good night: "It will be better off in that damned art gallery than in a zoo. Sleep well."

Just as Harry had said, daylight soon arrived. From a point on the horizon disconcerting for someone who'd never been on the savannah, a furious red ball turned yellow before I'd barely opened my eyes. Harry was already five meters from the camp, aiming straight at the rhinoceros, with Jemmy at his side, carrying the other Mauser, which flashed in the sun. Abdullah was sitting in the jeep, smoking, and true to my profession, I grabbed my Pentax and positioned myself, half-standing, almost two meters from Harry. From that moment on, time stopped. Harry was aiming between the beast's eyes and through the lens I could make out the glint of metal between its horns. Me kneeling, aiming with my camera. All of us immobile, breathing.

A slight movement from the Mauser flashed in the eye of the rhinoceros, which was like a mountain of ice or salt that had been planted on the plain for centuries. It was my first shot and the first blind charge of the rhinoceros, which gathered more and more speed and fury, cloaking itself meter by meter in its protective cape of sand. At thirty meters Harry fired; the animal's head reeled but it continued on its course. I was shooting with my Pentax like a lunatic; at twenty meters, Jemmy handed him the other loaded rifle, as the first bullet flew; and at exactly ten meters, the second shot was heard; now the giant lurched and shot by shot I could see a flood of thick, blackened blood flowing and coloring the head that now had no strength, swinging from side to side, sprinkling blood. It all ended when its bulk fell to its knees and remained immobile after a final snort, ten meters away from our group. I continued my work, Jemmy and Abdullah posed next to the quarry, and finally Harry, who seemed instead to be measuring it and checking the color of its hide, looked at the camera with his impenetrable gaze.

"It's all over," he told me, taking the camera out of my hands, as he sipped some whiskey. "I'm going to immortalize you."

And here is that photo, partly blurry—Harry couldn't shoot good pictures—where I appear standing next to the animal during my last stay in Africa—that's what I'd already decided—I'm looking at it and recreating all this, as I think of Dirty Harry's last two shots.

2.

I never heard more about Jemmy or Abdullah. They must still be in their country, seeking out and protecting themselves against death, the only way they know how to survive. Harry and I would remain for a few days in New York to receive our pay and complete our contract, which consisted of some photographs titled "Procession from Dragon to Dürer," in a very tedious photo session, more so for Harry than me, and which involved the following: They'd successfully deposited the rhinoceros—preserved in ice in a container during its trip from Africa—through an intricate procedure involving pulleys, chains, and indescribable structures, on a huge metal sheet. Then came the brief obligatory greeting from the artist—a corpulent man with a long black beard and something effeminate about his complexion—who greeted us by vigorously shaking Harry's hand—they were almost the same size—and mine. He looked at my photos and approved them with a nod of his head as he directed me, also with gestures, to take two rolls of what was going to follow. We put on masks as if for welding and the corpulent Michelangelo, like a skilled surgeon with a circular saw, proceeded to cut open the belly of the animal, out of which came some kind of white slivers, greasy and foul-smelling, that splattered our clothes. Then he put on some rubber gloves—I recorded all this from different angles—and extracted the flowing viscera of the animal, depositing them in a large receptacle that I assume was there for that purpose. I took a magnificent close-up of the artist as he removed the rhinoceros's heart with an irate look and threw it in the receptacle. Finally, with leather gloves he stuffed the animal with straw, he poured liquids from different flasks over it and waited a few minutes. Harry looked at him in complete silence. His face didn't move a muscle. Some of the maestro's assistants unhooked, with pulleys, a strange artifact that ended in four revolving wheels, and inserted it in the animal's belly; afterwards they carefully sewed it up with metal thread.

The artist smiled as he wiped from his forehead the sweat, blood, and guts of the rhinoceros, and it was set on its four feet. Finally, a faint buzzing was heard and, to our surprise, the white rhinoceros began walking; thanks to a remote control, it could be made to move with greater or lesser speed. When it collided against some object, wall, sculpture, or human being, it turned around calmly, buzzing softly, without much excitement. Finally, it went through the door and went off to make its way through the gallery. Everyone present rushed to embrace the corpulent, sweaty and bloody artist, and made champagne toasts, and asked him all kinds of questions, events that also had to be recorded. When everything was finished, I looked for Harry, but he'd disappeared from the gathering. I thought I'd find him in the hotel and we'd finish this whole absurd matter by going on a bender in Soho.

3.

I can only speak about Alvaro Leiva's death through the vague images that I myself was able to glimpse. It's true that there are the statements of the night-watchman and the long police report, and what's recounted there from the closed-circuit TV cameras that guard the interior of the museum. There are also the newspaper reports and their sensational headlines: "Strange Death of Hunter"; "Bizarre! Sculpture Kills Hunter"; "Rhinoceros Sculpture Returns from the Beyond for Revenge," etc.

How was Harry able to enter the museum, outsmarting the sophisticated alarm system? How could the guard not have heard the shots? Because it was confirmed that there were two shots. Who turned on the fateful control switch of the animal, sculpture, or whatever it was?

Thanks to the guard's confusion the night of the incident, he believed me when I told him that I was the victim's best friend, and he sympathized with my request; during a quiet moment he allowed me to enter the room with the closed-circuit TV monitors. He was a corpulent black man; he commented in passing on my unfortunate friend's resemblance to Clint Eastwood. He ran the cameras: the images looked a little blurry from the greenish color of the lights that lit the space at night. I saw various sequences: one in which Harry was creeping silently

along a wall, to outsmart the alarm; another where the rhinoceros's mechanism was already turned on, since it was rolling at high speed, crashing against the walls, knocking down sculptures and paintings; in another—no doubt it was a shot fired by Harry—there was a glimpse of a flash an instant before the monitor turned off. There are other sequences: Harry, for the first time with a look of desperation, struggling with the safety catch of his Mauser; then a rear-view of the rhinoceros attacking Harry from behind; finally, the blurry figure of the beast crashing torpidly against the walls, with Harry hanging from its larger horn, which had pierced his heart.

"It's all very confusing," the guard told me. "Everything was covered with blood, the walls, the paintings, the carpets..."

I gave him a few bills to thank him and left to lose myself in the crowd. I didn't know where to go, or return to, if I indeed had a place I could return to. So many places, so many empty cities with hollow beings along their dead streets. So many steps resounding on this avenue where the only reality is the fog. I was carrying only my back-pack and the walkman I'd brought from Somalia. I entered a record shop and bought some cassettes of Sade, and later looked for a bar and sat down to listen to them as I got drunk.

Translated by Daniel Shapiro 

**Note: "Blue Berets" refer to United Nations peacekeepers*