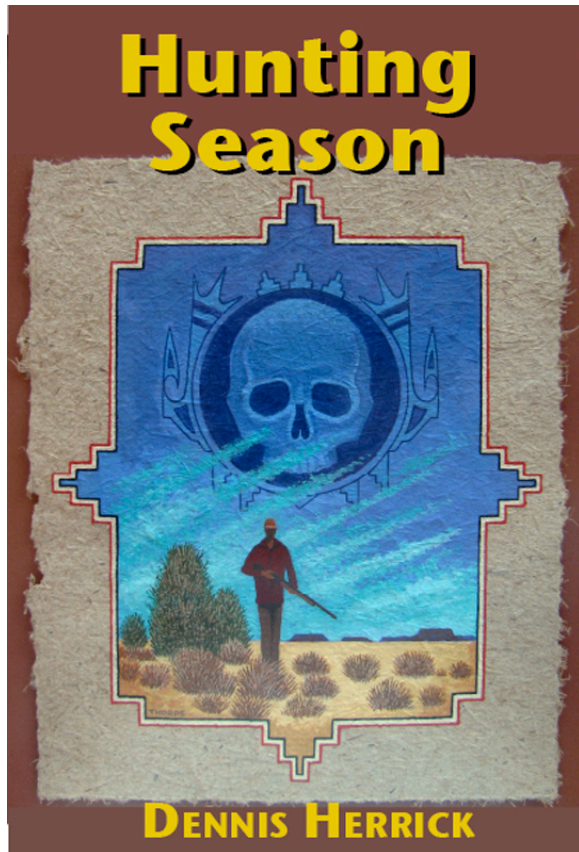


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## Hunting Season

by Dennis Herrick



METRO EDITOR John-somebody snapped his fingers and motioned me over to his desk.

“Sheriff’s deputies found a man’s body out on the high plateau just west of the National Guard Armory,” he said.

Having just arrived in Albuquerque, I hadn’t known there was an armory. I didn’t even know where the newspaper’s candy machine was yet. I had been on the job for, what, fifteen minutes?

An hour earlier I’d told the young woman at the reception desk that I wanted to apply for a reporter’s job. As a single guy, I was so busy

appreciating how attractive she was that I almost didn’t see the tall woman in her 40s walking toward me. The woman reached out for my hand and shook it firmly.

“I’m Mary Dolan. I’m the managing editor. So, you want a reporting job?”

I nodded, off balance at the suddenness of the job interview. Things didn’t usually go this easy for me.

“What’s your experience?” She was still hanging on to my hand, which felt like it was caught in a warm vise. I tugged ever so slightly, and she released me.

“I worked ten years as a reporter for *The Tucson Sun*. Covered the police beat, was city hall

reporter, and did a lot of feature writing.”

We were still in the lobby. The receptionist seemed amused.

“So what are you doing in New Mexico?”

“I want to work for a daily and still stay in the Southwest,” I replied. That seemed simple enough to me. I could tell I was at a bigger paper. Mary Dolan wore a stylish blouse and creased slacks. My last editor smelled vaguely of horse sweat.

That reasoning seemed simple enough for her too.

“Are you an Indian?” she asked, in blatant violation of three or four federal employment laws.

Gee, I wondered, what gave me away?

“I’m a Yaqui.” When she looked puzzled, I added, “Yes. I’m an Indian.”

“We’ve never had an Indian reporter before. Maybe it’s about time we did.”

“When was your paper founded?”

“1885.”

“Then I guess it is about time.”

I expected to get thrown out after that wisecrack. Instead she led me to her office. “Let’s see your clips,” she said over her shoulder. She splayed clippings of my Tucson stories across her desk, asked some questions, and seemed satisfied.

“Your lucky day. We just lost our police reporter. We can start you at thirty-five thousand. Today, if you want.”

“Better sooner than later.” I tried not to act astonished by a salary that was seven grand more than what I’d been making in Tucson. Someone had at last recognized my genius.

She pointed down a hallway. “Go to Human Resources and they’ll get you signed up. I’ll call and tell them you’re coming. Then report to our metro editor. John. I’ll let him know too.”

And that was it. John greeted me with the briefest hello—I could see he was a busy man—and he pointed toward a cleared-off desk.

That was why I still did not know his last name when I found myself a few minutes later standing in front of him.

“A man’s body has been found out by the National Guard Armory,” John-somebody repeated when I delayed a second too long to respond the first time. “You’re a reporter. Drive to the armory and find out what happened. We pay thirty cents per mile, so use your car today.”

He turned back to his desktop computer and started pounding again on its keyboard. “Let’s see what you got.”

“Sure.” I looked back at the terminal on my desk. It had a white dot blinking at the blue screen’s upper left hand corner. I guess that was where I was supposed to start typing when I came back from wherever it was that I had to find this story.

I did what any skilled investigative reporter would do. On my way out, I asked the receptionist for directions to the armory.

\* \* \*

The plateau’s high desert country around the armory was a landscape of chamisas, bunch grasses, and fifteen-foot-tall juniper bushes undulating to the horizon. The flashing police lights were easy to spot. I parked my car on the highway and walked in.

I could tell at a glance that Deputy Joseph Romero was an Indian. Of course, I didn’t say anything. I wouldn’t have said anything if I realized he was Italian, either. But after I introduced myself, Joseph gave me a look of surprise. “Well, I’ll be. Are you an Indian?”

I looked down at my dusty boots. “I’ve got to quit wearing moccasins.” Then I plucked at my hair. “And these feathers have got to go.”

Joseph laughed. He shouted to his partner, “Hey, Ray, the *Times* hired an Indian reporter finally.”

Raymond Sanchez was opening an entrance in the yellow police tape that was looped in a large circle around several junipers. The body of a hunter was sprawled on its back at one end, the legs and feet poking out from under the gray tarp covering the body. A shotgun lay nearby. The body had been found about two hours ago. I saw an ambulance bumping its way across the desert’s rocks and a shallow arroyo.

Raymond motioned the ambulance toward his opening in the tape and then walked over to me and shook my hand. “I’m from the Pueblo of Santa Ana. Joseph is from Jémez. What’s your tribe?” He studied my face. “Apache?”

“No. We used to fight Apaches where I come from.”

Joseph laughed again. “We did, too.”

“I’m Yaqui. From southern Arizona. Near Tucson.”

“Oh,” said Raymond. “We don’t see many Yaquis around here.”

“I’ve never seen one,” Joseph said, scrutinizing me with renewed interest.

And so we became friends. The enemy of my enemy—even an ancient one—makes for a quick ally. Joseph was built like a block, while Raymond was slim and muscular. Both had easy grins. I would have liked them even if their ancestors had not fought Apaches.

“Detective Wilson says it might be a hunting accident,” Raymond said, gesturing toward the body. “Rabbits are thick in this desert, so hunters come out here. This happens sometimes. Folks get careless.”

“Looks like a .22-caliber wound,” Joseph said. “A .22 is for rabbit hunting, all right, but we can’t find a shell. By the looks of that saltbush, maybe the shell ejected there and someone busted the bush apart looking for it.”

“Detective Wilson had the area swept with a metal detector.” Joseph shrugged. “No shell.”

“Who’s the victim?”

“He’s from Jémez, like me. His name is William Baca. Twenty-nine. His wife reported him missing yesterday. Poor guy. He was left out here overnight.”

Like many Pueblo Indians near the Rio Grande, and Arizona’s Yaquis as well, the victim and both deputies had Spanish surnames. Joseph said he knew Baca and his wife and young daughter. Baca was an unemployed handyman.

Raymond left to walk the ambulance attendants to the body. Joseph watched with his hands on his hips.

“Jémez is one of the few pueblos without a casino. And with twenty percent unemployment I’m luckier than many Jémez men because I have a decent job. Baca didn’t have a regular job, so he drove over here every week hunting rabbits to feed his family.”

Joseph scratched his head under his cap and began talking more to himself than to me. “If we had a shell we might find a fingerprint of the shooter on it. Or if we had a weapon we could match it to the fired bullet. Without either a shell or a weapon....” His voice trailed off.

“I better get back and start writing the story.”

“When’s your deadline?”

I was running to my car. “I don’t know,” I shouted back.

\* \* \*

The story ran on the next day’s Page One, thanks to beginner’s luck. And thanks also to an

editorial that was planned for that day anyway urging hunters to be careful as bear hunting season opened on the nearby Sandia Mountains. A hunting accident with rabbits seemed like a good warning for bear hunters. Hey, you go with what you've got.

I even received a byline. *By Edward Valencia*. It's nuts, but even after more than a decade in this business I still love to read my name at the top of a story.

The byline is why Baca's widow LaDonna and their four-year-old daughter Sage knew to look for me when they entered the newsroom. I was surprised to see them waiting by my desk when I returned from the candy machine still chewing my chocolate lunch.

LaDonna Baca was dressed in an indigo western blouse and skirt. She held her daughter's hand. The girl was like a tourist's postcard, with hair as black and shiny as obsidian framing a warm-toned face and dark eyes. She was dressed in a blouse and skirt like her mother. She also wore the soft leather leggings with moccasins that are favored by Pueblo Indians for formal occasions—such as funerals. She was so cute that even John looked up from his computer and smiled. I didn't think that guy could like anybody.

That night I didn't sleep well. LaDonna's visit had been my first opportunity to talk with her. She had no phone, so with Joseph's help I'd tracked down her brother just before deadline. He was the one who told me the family's information. Frankly, I'd been relieved when I couldn't reach the widow. I've always hated making those calls. But what she told me in the newsroom haunted me because she didn't think William Baca's death was a hunting accident.

The next morning I called on Detective Wilson. He was one of those growling cops who doesn't trust reporters. The only way you can get information from a cop like Wilson is to convince him that you're not going away. So, when he was too busy to see me, I returned two hours later, and then a couple hours again after that. On the fourth try he ushered me into his

office with a weary look.

“It’s just a hunting accident.” I could tell he was exasperated with me for becoming such a nuisance. “Someone shot him by accident, got scared, and took off. We’re checking out other guys who hunt around there.”

“The widow thinks her husband might have been killed by a drug dealer from Albuquerque who hangs out at Mountain Spirit Casino. They didn’t like each other. Some guy that everyone calls Burro. Ever heard of him?”

“Yeah. We suspect he handles some runners of Mexican cocaine to the Midwest. But they keep a low profile around here.”

“Baca worked occasional odd jobs at the casino. He and Burro got into a fight once, and Burro threatened him at least twice. Where was he on the day Baca was shot?”

“You know, Mr. Hotshot Reporter, we don’t just sit on our hands around here. When LaDonna Baca reported her husband missing, we talked to your Señor Burro. He’s got all kinds of friends vouching he was at the casino all that day.”

“All kinds of friends.” I snorted in derision.

“We’ve got nothing to tie him to anything. I wish we did. I don’t even have enough to ask for a search warrant on him.”

“No shell was found from the shooter’s gun. A .22-caliber, you say. Baca is shot through the heart, and then someone picks up the ejected shell. That doesn’t sound like a hunting accident to me.”

“The hunter picked it up when he got scared about what happened.”

“I think a person who shot someone by accident while hunting would call the police and stick around.”

“Then you’re an idiot.” Wilson took my arm and marched me to the door. It seemed our interview was over.

“I’m going to keep looking around.”

“Good. While you’re looking around, look for the ejected shell. Just like on flashlight batteries, there’s sometimes a fingerprint on a shell from the person who loaded the weapon. Especially if that person plans to pick it up afterward. Until then, we’ll try to carry on the best we can without your advice.”

He turned back into his office and slammed the door.

\* \* \*

Saturday was my day off and the soonest I could make it back out to the plateau. I located the large saltbush with snapped branches where Joseph had said the shooter must have been looking for the ejected shell.

Wilson assumed that the shooter had found the shell in the bush. But what if he hadn’t? After all, it was a big thick bush. I started rummaging in the branches but gave up.

That’s when I saw small rodent tracks in the soft sand around the saltbush. I dropped down on my hands and knees and peered so closely at the tracks that even the ants started looking impressive. I tried to follow the tracks, hobbling along on my knees. But it was impossible. I stood disgusted and brushed off my pants. The Great Indian Tracker can’t even track a mouse.

In front of me, however, about twenty yards away a shelf of sandstone rose five feet high. It was pitted with smooth holes from millennia of wind and water erosion.

If I were a rodent, I thought, that would be a luxury condominium.

For an hour I walked along the sandstone examining its holes, prodding into them with my pen, shining my car’s flashlight into the deepest ones. The October sun was so hot on my hatless



head that it felt like my brain was being fried into an omelet.

One hole was camouflaged behind stems of grass. As I pushed the grass down, I could see that the hole tunneled ten inches into the sandstone. With difficulty I stretched flat on the ground and shined my flashlight inside.

At the back was the black mass of a packrat's midden. And on top of the midden a .22-caliber shell gleamed in my flashlight's beam like a nugget of gold.

I called Wilson on my cell phone so he could retrieve the packrat's treasure.

It was satisfying to later learn that cyanoacrylate fuming—whatever that is—of the shell revealed a latent partial print of Burro's right thumb. I missed the serving of the warrant that found a .22-caliber rifle hidden in Burro's attic. But Wilson was nice enough to call and give me the scoop. He's turned into a good source.

John-somebody gave me another Page One byline. I'm going to make a point today of finding out his last name.

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#### **From the author:**

I hope you enjoyed this story. If you have any questions or comments about it, you are welcome to contact me by going to my author's website at [dennisherrick.com](http://dennisherrick.com), where you will find my current email address, bio, and other writing projects.

Discover some of my other short stories and books on that website as well, including:

SHORT STORIES (online, 99 cents)

- [The Woman with a Rain Pot](#) (5,300 words, this story is dedicated to the combat veterans of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.) An Iraq veteran who sacrificed a leg for his country returns, becomes a detective, and sets out to find the killer in a year-old cold case.
- [The Ancestor](#) (3,900 words) Inspired by an archaeological dig near Albuquerque that discovered the skeleton of a Pueblo Indian killed by a conquistador back in 1540.
- [The Bullet That Saved Me](#) (4,800 words) Short-story fiction inspired by the author's experiences as an infantryman in the Vietnam War.
- [The Indian Who Defied Coronado](#) (4,000 words) Nonfiction. A Pueblo Indian leader mostly forgotten in history led America's first Indian war—the Tiguex War—against Coronado's expedition to the Southwest in 1540.
- [Shadows of a Lost Time](#) (3,300 words) An archaeologist on a team excavating a 400-year-old pueblo in 1934 New Mexico has visitors from the past who make him rethink his career.

- [A Missing Tourist in Mexico](#) (4,450 words) Inspired by the author's vacation to San Carlos, Mexico, and a policeman he met there.
- [It Only Cost Two Teeth](#) (11,500 words, too long for most short story contests and magazines) A humorous mystery involving an eccentric newspaper columnist.
- [Missing](#) (2,450 words, winner of the 2010 Society of Southwestern Authors Writing Contest and published in *Story Teller* magazine.) A Pueblo elder with cancer chooses to live out his final days in the mountains instead of a hospital.
- [Spirit Journey](#) (5,900 words, published in the *Wapsipinicon Almanac* literary magazine) Based in Iowa, the story deals with today's illicit trade in Indian artifacts looted from Indian and public lands.
- [Woman Without a Name](#) (8,000 words) The refurbishment of the B61 nuclear bomb draws spies to Los Alamos, New Mexico. When a National Security Agent is killed, a woman NSA agent is sent to find out what happened and to stop nuclear secrets from being stolen.
- [To Steal What Is Sacred](#) (4,000 words) An ancient katsina mask sacred to the Puebloan religion is stolen from a museum. An Albuquerque police detective from the Acoma tribe is assigned in this short story mystery to find the person who killed a museum guard in the robbery and took the mask.
- [Alien Visitors](#) (1,800 words) Here's one scenario on how the first encounter between humans and aliens from another planet could turn out.
- [The Final Farewell](#) (1,850 words) A small short story about a woman raised by her grandparents who keeps a final vigil at her grandfather's hospital bed.

#### BOOKS (forthcoming)

- ***Esteban: The African Slave Who Explored America*** (in-progress nonfiction) The true adventures of an African slave who crossed the continent in a 1528-1536 odyssey, and who guided the first Spanish exploration north into Arizona and New Mexico in 1539.

#### BOOKS (published)

- [Winter of the Metal People: The untold story of America's first Indian war](#) (historical novel) This book presents the first account of Coronado's Tiguex War of 1540-41 written from the Puebloan point of view. It follows a young Pueblo warrior who reluctantly takes leadership of his people in a time of crisis, overcoming self-doubt to lead Puebloans in successful guerilla warfare against Spanish conquistadors and their Aztec allies. Available as an ebook or paperback.
- [War of the Planet Burners](#) (science-fiction novel) Aliens from an unknown planet have suppressed Earth's electrical ability and killed 99.96 percent of the population. Fires ravage Earth and plant growth accelerates. But humanity wouldn't give up. How can humans without electronics or nuclear capability fight back? Combat veteran Joel Birchard inspires a diminished military with his determination.
- [A Brother's Cold Case](#) (mystery novel) When the murder of Andy Cornell's brother is still unsolved after two and a half years, Andy enters the hidden worlds of cartel violence, street people, and Pueblo secrets to find justice. This is available as an e-book or as a paperback.
- [For Your Guest Bedroom: Collected Stories](#) (245 pages) Perfect for putting in your guest bedroom, this book is a collection of short stories that your friends can read a little at a time. In the book they'll meet detectives, American Indians, heroes, villains, and ordinary people striving to solve life's problems.
- [Pueblo Mysteries](#) (56 pages) A collection of four short stories available as an e-book or as a paperback: Hunting Season, Missing, The Ancestor, and The Woman With a Rain Pot. This is available as an e-book or as a paperback.
- [Farewell to the Master](#) — Reprint of the 1940 sci-fi first-contact novel by Harry Bates with my new introduction and a list of more than 200 first-contact novels, novellas, and short stories. This is available as a paperback or as an e-book.

- [\*Successful e-Publishing for Authors\*](#) (e-book only) Written by an author for other authors, this book provides numerous tips and links to help writers who are new to publishing e-books or self-publishing paperbacks.
- [\*Successful Self-Publishing for Authors\*](#) (e-book only) It's now possible for little or no cost to produce a paperback book of your novel, short stories, recipes, family album, vacation trip, or other subjects.
- [\*Media Management in the Age of Giants: Business Dynamics of Journalism\*](#) (textbook, second edition) Okay, you're probably not going to be interested in this unless you're a college journalism student. It's a book about the takeover of local media by corporate conglomerates with tips for beginning managers on how to deal with the new face of media. Available as e-book or paperback.

—Dennis Herrick