

THE TRIP

Speeding toward the cliff at the end of the world

A Novel

Armando García-Dávila



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Dedication

I dedicate *The Trip* to any son who has
longed for his father's approval.

PROLOGUE

December 13, 1862 – Fredericksburg, Virginia

JOHN SHIVERED AS MUCH FROM THE COLD as from the ominous, dark feeling about the battle that lay ahead. His regiment, 1,200 rifles strong, was in one of five brigades that had marched to the battlefield. The percussion from cannon and musket fire, neighing horses, bugles, and officers screaming orders, previously muffled by distance, was now sharp and clear at the staging area where his brigade waited. “God be with us,” he whispered. A biting cold breeze carried the sinister odors of war: exploded gunpowder, blood, burnt flesh.

“Fix bayonets!” yelled Devil McGhee, the first sergeant. Thousands of steel knives snapped into place.

A corn snake crawled from a weed patch toward a nearby stream. McGhee slid his sword from the scabbard to lead the advance and caught sight of the snake wriggling by at his feet. McGhee brought down his blade beheading the snake. Its body writhed violently, its head lying to one side still as a stone, eyes staring blankly toward heaven.

“Wasn’t necessary to harm it,” John whispered. Locks of his dark brown hair hung out from under his cap and fluttered in

the icy December breeze. John nervously licked the ends of his moustache that hooked over the sides of his mouth.

McGhee raised his sword. “Shoulder arms!” Rifles thumped against shoulders. “Forward, march!” The sergeant led them up and over a knoll that had hidden them from the battlefield.

John’s heart grew cold. Before him lay a field covered with the bodies of fallen soldiers, casualties from previous charges. A half-mile off across an open plain, thousands of enemy fighters were dug in behind a wall of fieldstones cutting down advancing troops. “Steady,” he whispered tightening his grip on the rifle.

The brigades’ mission was to do what previous brigades had failed to do: overrun the wall and take the enemy.

McGhee pointed his sword to the field. “Forward, double quick!” The brigade charged, its battle screams filling the air. John’s only hope was a fool’s luck to avoid the barrages of cannon fire and shrapnel. He jogged steadily forward, bayonet pointed at the enemy.

Smoke blasted from a string of cannon on the hillside behind the wall. Bodies flew in pieces. Hot shrapnel hit John’s ear, a numbing blow. His blood flowed warm against the winter air.

The brigades pressed on, within range of the enemy’s long rifles. A snake-like cloud of smoke rose along the wall. Men around John fell as musket balls cut through limbs, torsos, and skulls. A campmate running next to him caught a ball in the chest. He screamed. A second ball passed through his open mouth, exiting his neck and taking fragments of shattered teeth and splintered vertebrae.

“Charge, you bastards, charge!” McGhee screamed, his eyes aflame. The brigades weren’t close enough for their return fire to reach the enemy. John leapt over the bodies of the dead and dying. Some had scarcely a wound and appeared to be lying asleep; others mutilated beyond recognition. A headless body

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lay with its arms at its sides as if at attention, blood pouring from the neck and forming a dark pool on the ground. Nearby, a leg from the knee down stood in its boot.

The air thick with smoke from continuous barrages along the wall clouded the enemy's view, and John's brigade began taking fewer losses. The enemy fired blindly in the direction of the advancing brigades. Seizing the moment McGhee raised his sword. "Make stand!" Soldiers lined up. "Shoulder arms, fire!" Sparks and plumes of smoke blasted from their muskets. Thirty of the enemy fell along the wall. Smoke thinned allowing them to see. They answered with a volley of hundreds of rounds. Dozens along McGhee's line fell, some piling on top of others.

John dropped a charge and ball into his rifle packing it with the ramrod.

McGhee screamed, "Ready, aim, fi..." The rage in his homicidal eyes turned stunned. A ball passed between his eyes. His bear-like body fell back and landed with a thud. McGhee stared blankly toward the heavens. A fountain of blood pulsed from the hole in his head.

Men surrounding John fell in rapid succession. The line broke. Someone screamed "Retreat!"

John ran praying that he wouldn't die running from a battle. A tremendous punch hit him from behind above the hip and knocked him to the ground. He pushed up dazed and looked behind him. Who had hit him? Not a man standing. John put a hand to his hip and brought it forward. Blood dripped from his hand. He put his hand to the front, next to his abdomen: more blood. A ball had torn through him.

The battlefield grew eerily quiet before cheers broke out along the wall. The enemy had held and won the day. Cries of the wounded, drowned out by the din and chaos of war, rose from the field.

John tore his handkerchief in half and stuffed a piece into each side of the wound. His head spun as if he had just shared a whiskey with a campmate.

John lay still. A grizzly lesson learned from war was to remain still until nightfall. Standing made one an easy target for snipers. He held, nauseous with pain, through the afternoon and into the cold dusk. The wounded cried, wailed and moaned. Their voices wove into a dirge of agony that rose from the field of misery to God's deaf ear. John shivered with cold but the frigid air slowed the flow of blood from his injury. Cries turned into pitiful pleas for water and calls for loved ones.

A man next to John spoke in his delirium, "Abram, do as your Ma says. Put on your coat lest you freeze, sonny boy."

John had hoped to make it back to camp under the cover of night, but he had lost the strength to lift himself. Was this the end for him? What would it be like to die, for his soul to extricate itself from his body? He took solace in knowing that he had sewn his name and town to the inside of his jacket. At least his family would learn what became of him. He wondered if the modest amount taken from his pay each month and sent to his mother and father would continue, or if it would die with him. He drifted in and out of restive sleep.

John dreamed he was inside his home, lying near the front door with a foot trapped between floorboards. The door stood ajar, the outdoors white with snow. Frozen air whistled through, chilling him to his marrow. He tried time and again to reach the door, but he couldn't free himself.

THE SUN ROSE OVER THE PLAIN. John awoke with fever despite the winter cold—tongue dry as leather. A lake of water could not satisfy his thirst. *I would give my arm for a taste of water.*

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The day warmed and pleas from the field rose anew “Water! Water!”

Footsteps approached. The shadowy image of a man appeared, knelt at John’s side, and lifted his head.

The voice of a young man. “Here you are, mister.” He poured drops of water over John’s lips. John opened his mouth and water trickled in.

John gulped. “Thank ye,” he said in a parched whisper.

“I can’t hear what you’re saying, mister, but I’ll figure it’s to the good. Have a bit more.”

John held the water in his mouth for a moment before he drank feeling the blessed moisture. “Who, are, you?” he said.

“Say again?” The man leaned into John’s lips.

“Who, might, you be?”

“Regret to report that I’m with those you’re fighting against.”

Drained of strength, John could only mouth the words, “Lord, bless ye.” His world evaporated into blackness.

The water bearer put an ear to John’s chest, listened and said. “You’re better off leaving this wicked war.”

Motorcycle Route Across



United States in 1968



Part 1

Taking Flight

1.

Freedom

San Diego, California – Saturday, August 3, 1968

“¡ÁNNNDALE! (CHARGE!),” SCREAMED Tino Caballero, speeding out of the driveway on his powerful new motorcycle. He bolted up Euclid Avenue and glanced into the rearview mirror. Standing at the curb seeing him off were his identical twin brother Val, his pregnant sister Carolyn, and his mother Concepción. She raised a hand and made the sign of the cross giving Tino her blessing.

Tino shook his head thinking it pathetic how much faith she put in that invisible world of hers. Did her countless blessings and invocations to God, the saints, and her ancestors ever do any good?

He reached the Highway 94 on-ramp, narrowed his deep brown eyes, and raced down the incline toward the highway.

Trees and shrubbery on either side of the on-ramp formed a darkened tunnel around him. He emerged into the light feeling as if he had just opened his eyes for the first time and could truly see—as if an entirely new world had just opened before him. Exhilarated, he gunned the engine. The bike jumped with a burst of speed.

He wove in and out of highway lanes, effortlessly passing car after car.

A teenage boy sitting in the rear seat of a white American Motors Rambler stared at Tino on his bike loaded down with gear. *That's right kid, I'm on the trip of a lifetime!*

The sun lay low behind him casting his shadow long to his front. For the first time, he was leading, no one to tell him where to go; no one to tell him what to do. Warm summer air streamed gloriously through his thick dark wavy brown hair and whipped the sleeves of his nylon jacket. If he spread his arms, he'd surely fly.

Tino blasted through Lemon Grove, merged onto Highway 80 in La Mesa, and rocketed past hot and dry El Cajon.

He had never gone on a trip without his family. Not even his twin, Val was along. Tino had shared everything with Val: bedrooms, circle of friends, ball teams, even their underwear. For eight years they'd made a daily mile-long trek to Saint Rita's Catholic Grammar School. Their teachers, the nuns, referred to them as "the bookends."

"Where's Val?" people asked Tino when he was alone.

Val, whom Pa called *el abusado* (the sharp one), had made the responsible choice to register for junior college instead of taking this month-long cross-country motorcycle odyssey from San Diego to New York and back.

His father had said, "No trip for you. You're registering for school with Val." But Tino made his escape from his life with too many rules and responsibilities: chores, school, studies and church services, when Pa went to bed that afternoon to sleep before his graveyard shift at work.

Undoubtedly, Tino would pay a heavy price for his transgression when he returned, maybe a beating. But he had planned this trip for a year with his older brother and friends, Gary and Patrick, and he was not going to miss out.

Fuck the consequences, I'll pay 'em.

Tino and his bike ascended into the Laguna Mountains in East County and entered the Cleveland National Forest. The

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multilane highway had narrowed to a two-lane road. Traffic, except for an occasional car or long haul truck, was nonexistent. The air, cool with altitude and impregnated by the scent of pine forests, soothed him from the summer heat. Smooth round boulders nestled into the landscape looked like eggs from a prehistoric age.

By the time he reached the foot of the eastern slope, night had folded over the land. He tripped the headlight switch and began the trek across the furnace-like Anza-Borrego Desert. He checked the odometer. Tino had only traveled seventy miles. This was just too cool. He had barely started—the month of freedom still lay ahead.

2.

Rocinante

AN HOUR INTO THE RIDE, Tino rolled out of the dark into a Chevron gas station in El Centro. His body tingled from the vibration of the engine and felt rousingly good between his legs. Without the air fanning his sweat, the full intensity of the desert heat engulfed him. He took off his jacket and stashed it in his gear.

An attendant close to Tino's age stepped up to the gas pump. His white uniform shirt and navy blue pants were smudged with engine grime, shirt stretched taut over his paunch.

"It's a hit!" A play-by-play announcer's voice emanated from a transistor radio tucked into the attendant's shirt pocket. He turned down the volume on the electric buzz of cheering fans. "Must be nice riding that Honda."

Tino set the gas nozzle into the tank. "It's bitchin'. I bought it today from an old guy who hardly ever rode it. Sat in his garage most of the time."

"No shit," the attendant said. "Looks like it's fresh off the showroom floor. You sure it wasn't an old lady who just rode it to church on Sundays?"

Tino laughed, proud.

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The attendant stepped back to get a good look at the bike. “450 cc’s, that’s plenty of power.”

“It carried me and my gear over the mountains without so much as a hiccup. If it were a horse, it wouldn’t have even broken a sweat.”

He lifted the nozzle and held it over the tank, allowing the last of the gasoline to drip in, and hung the hose. He reached for his wallet, opening it wide enough to show off the stack of bills amounting to over \$150—more money than he had ever carried. He peeled out a dollar and handed it over.

The attendant inserted a key, hanging from a chain hooked to a belt loop, into a cash drawer. “You been riding long?”

“Not really. I’ve ridden my big brother’s bike a few times, and I just bought this bike today. I’m taking a trip around the whole country.”

“Jesus, that’s an awful long way for just starting to ride.”

“I can handle it,” Tino said.

The attendant fingered coins from slots in the drawer. “I tried a cross-country trip last year,”

“Right on, man! How’d it go?”

“Fell,” the attendant said. He extended his arm showing a long scar. “Compound fracture and I wound up with this zipper.” He pointed to suture points on either side of the scar that ran from palm to elbow.

Tino winced.

“Ended my trip right there.”

A green dust-coated Chrysler station wagon, its windshield splattered with insects, pulled into the adjacent pump island. The car was packed with an adult couple and kids of all ages, roof rack loaded with baggage.

The attendant grabbed paper towels and a squeegee and made for the car. “Lotsa luck, just be careful.” he said with a backward glance.

“Yeah, sure,” Tino said, disappointed he couldn’t say more about the adventure he’d just embarked on. And who was this clown to say “be careful.” Tino swung a leg mounting the bike and gave the kick-starter a hearty jump. The engine roared deep and loud. He gave it gas and let go of the clutch lever. The bike reared back, its front tire lifted a foot off of the ground. The rear tire screeched, leaving a black line of pulverized rubber on the concrete.

“Whoa! Easy, boy!” Tino said. He and his powerful bike sprinted into the night. Miles and time passed. It wasn’t fair that Tino’s Pa didn’t want him to take this trip. Pa had always let his brothers have anything they wanted. Sure, Tino had gotten into a little more trouble at school for fooling around, and his grades weren’t the best, but did it give Pa the right to treat him like crap? Pa called Tino *Chato*, a Spanish term referencing one’s nose. Tino had broken it as a child and although minor, the disfigurement was magnified a hundredfold in his mind. He looked at himself in a mirror and wondered, *Who could ever love this face?* He felt a blow to his confidence each time that Pa called him Chato.

Hot gusts of wind rolled large, round tumbleweeds across the road. Tino leaned side to side adroitly dodging them like a skillful rider on an obstacle course.

His bike needed a proper name, but what? Aha, Rocinante! what the knight, Don Quixote named his horse. Sal, Tino’s older brother by ten years, had read epic stories like Don Quixote in school and related many of the adventurous and funny passages to his twin brothers.

Tino leaned left dodging one tumbleweed and then right dodging a second.

He laughed with delight, skillfully zigzagging on the road. Tino felt the same way about his mount as the Spanish knight had felt about his: “A finer and more valiant steed has never been known.”

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Blink! The world turned black. The headlight without warning turned off. Panicked, Tino hit the brakes. Rocinante skidded off of the road into the desert and ran head on into a spindly creosote bush, stopping him dead.

Tino kept going. “¡Ay!” he yelled, flying over the handlebars and through the bush, its stiff branches raked hard against Tino’s face. He slammed against the ground, tumbled over the grit of the desert floor and came to a dusty stop.

No hard pain anywhere but a wet sensation on his cheek. He put a hand to it. Blood. He walked unsteadily to his bike pressing a handkerchief against his cheek.

Rocinante stood in the bush, held up by its branches, engine softly puttering. Tino tugged on the bumper. Stuck. He pulled harder; scarcely an inch of movement.

A coyote’s howl echoed in the night. Tino had heard of Javelinas that can slice a man open with their razor tusks, and God only knows what man-eaters could be on the prowl for an easy meal. He pulled with adrenaline-fueled strength, ripping Rocinante from the entanglement. He pushed on the handlebars and jogged the bike to the road.

He hit the light switch—nothing. Lights from a distant town formed a faint domed halo on the horizon. His eyes had adjusted to the dark allowing him to differentiate between the black asphalt and the desert floor along the side of the road. He rode off slowly, pitched forward eyeing the road for objects that might cause him another fall. He looked up at the dome of light, down to the road, checked his mirror for vehicles coming from behind. He looked up, down, checked the mirror.

Feeling confident, he gave it a little more gas. The air pressed harder against him as he accelerated.

Bam! A hard jolt. He lost and regained control in a beat.

What the hell was that? Rock? Dead animal? He slowed to a nervous crawl.

Armando García-Dávila

Lights from approaching vehicles shimmered through waves of heat rising off the baked earth. A set of headlights riding high off the road closed in from behind. Tino pulled to the side. A Greyhound bus sped past. He hit the gas, caught up, and followed in a wake of hot diesel exhaust, resting his hand and foot on the brakes should the bus suddenly stop.

The bus slowed when they reached a town. A sign read WELCOME TO HOLTVILLE – CARROT CAPITAL OF THE WORLD.

3.

The Wrath of Carrots

TINO PULLED INTO A TEXACO GAS STATION that serviced long-haul trucks. Small clouds of insects hovered around the overhead fluorescent lights. He dismounted and dropped to a knee to inspect the wiring but found nothing obvious. Better to wait until tomorrow when he would meet up with Sal.

Tino closed and opened his hands, flexing his fingers, stiff from gripping the handlebars. His neck muscles ached from keeping his head up against the constant push of air. He stretched, yawned, and made for the bathroom where he washed the threads of dark dry blood from across his cheek. The cold water felt good against the heat. He then asked a clerk in the station office for directions to the town jail.

The route ran through a district of produce packinghouses. A strange shimmering appeared under a streetlamp at the end of the block. It looked to be some kind of liquid glistening in the night. Tino came upon it to find hundreds of crickets crawling up and over and around each other, each shiny little back a facet reflecting the streetlight. Collectively they looked like some type of horror movie alien life form on the prowl for

flesh. Tino stared transfixed at the eerie spectacle. He rode off in a daze.

Tino parked at the Holtville Police Station and Detention Center, an aging, single-story concrete block building, slightly bigger than a two-car garage. Rocinante's engine fins and exhaust pipes pinged and popped as they cooled. He ran a steel cable through the front and rear wheel spokes securing the ends with a padlock, and patted Rocinante. "*Hasta mañana compa.*"

He opened the station door. The policeman's swivel chair squeaked when he swung around.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm on a trip and wonder if I could sleep in a cell."

Sgt. Wood, read the officer's nameplate. His dark hair was neatly combed, mustache trimmed, uniform, starched flat. An ancient black fan on his desk begrudgingly oscillated side to side.

"Think we're running a motel here?"

"No, sir. But my older brother told me that sometimes police will let a guy who's traveling sleep in a cell if it's not being used."

"Where's your brother?"

"He and two of my friends left yesterday on this motorcycle trip. I'm catching up with them tomorrow in Flagstaff."

Wood narrowed his eyes. "Well why didn't everyone leave together?"

"I was short on the money I needed to make the trip, but I got a loan today."

"And you're going where?"

"Around the country, sir."

"Around the whole U.S. of A.? Ballsy. Where'd you start?"

"Today in San Diego."

"Jay-sus kee-ryst! You barely started."

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Wood looked to a cop standing on the opposite side of the room and pouring cream into a coffee mug. “What do you think, Flattop? Let him stay?”

“I don’t know, Bobby. Doesn’t he fit the description on the guy that there’s an APB on?”

“Pardon me, sir, but I’ve never been in that kind of trouble in my life.”

Flattop sank a spoon into the cup. “That’s what they all say. It’s your call, Bobby. You’re in charge. Just don’t blame me if you wind up with a slit throat in the morning.”

“Tell you what,” Wood said. “I’m going to lock you up. You know, just in case.”

“Thank you, sir. You won’t have any trouble with me.”

“That’s what they all say,” Flattop said.

Wood took a clasp envelope from a desk drawer. “Empty your pockets.” A large patch riding high on the arm of his uniform had a graphic of the earth skewered by a carrot.

Tino handed over the bike key and his coins, but hesitated to let go of his wallet, fat with bills. Wood tugged it away.

“Relax, it’ll be safe with me.” He placed Tino’s items in the envelope and into a file cabinet. “If you find an IOU in the morning, don’t worry. I’ll be good for it, right, Flattop?”

“You betcha. Bobby always makes good.”

Tino smiled weakly hoping that they were kidding, but neither smiled.

A tall, broad-chested policeman with beefy arms entered the station and pointed his chin toward Tino. “Whadda we got here?”

Wood took a heavy black skeleton key off a hook on the wall behind his desk. “He’s on the road, wants to stay the night.”

Wood led Tino to a cell with bunk beds and banged the door shut behind him.

“Hey, Bobby,” Flattop said. “Now that the kid’s in the slammer, what do you say we borrow a little of his dough and get some lunch.”

“Turkey, on a soft roll,” said the new policeman.

“Pastrami on rye, hold the mayo,” Flattop said.

Tino sat on the lower bunk fretting. He leaned over to unlace his boots and jumped with a start when a black cockroach the size of his thumb scurried out between his feet.

“Don’t step on Fido!” Wood said.

Laughter.

Tino looked out the wire-mesh window and took comfort in seeing Rocinante parked alongside a police cruiser. A mutt meandering by stopped, sniffed Rocinante’s rear tire, and lifted a leg. Tino sighed and climbed to the upper bunk, leaving the lower one for someone who might be arrested later and brought in a drunk or, God forbid, something worse.

The two-inch thick, cotton-stuffed mat of the cot smelled of mold and had nasty dark stains in the middle. The wall radiated the day’s heat like an oven. Tino’s T-shirt was damp with sweat and peppered with tiny winged insects.

The cops played cards at the sergeant’s desk under a blue haze of cigarette smoke. On a radio, Johnny Cash sang about falling into a ring of fire.

He faced the wall and laid an arm over his eyes to shield them from the light thinking the cops terribly rude.

What sleep he managed to get came in sporadic naps through a string of disturbances: ringing phones, doors slamming shut, the acrid odor of tobacco smoke.

Tino awoke deep into the night confused over his surroundings before remembering where he was. Except for the hum of the fan, the office was quiet.

A different cop, alone, was lying back in Wood’s chair—feet on desk, hands on chest, hat over face. Tino rolled to his side and fell asleep; he dreamed that he and Rocinante were

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speeding down a foreign road. It ended at a cliff; no ordinary cliff, but the one that existed in a tale that his old Mexican uncle Nene had told Tino as a boy, a mythological cliff found at the end of the world. Children who disobeyed their parents were thrown over it into the abyss. Tino hit the brakes in his dream, the cliff drew nearer and nearer, but Rocinante raced on. He woke up with a pounding heart.

Sharp spikes of sunlight pierced the gray dawn over the hills and onto the cell wall. Relief, the long, hot night had come to an end, and the air was pleasantly cool.

He'd be back on the road soon. Tino hopped off the bunk, catching the eye of the cop at the desk.

"Good morning," he said.

The cop stared stone-faced.

Tino pulled on his boots and laced them. "I'm ready to leave sir. The sergeant put my stuff in an envelope last night and—"

"You think I don't know the drill?"

"Yes, sir. I mean no, sir. I'm sure you do."

The cop took the envelope out of the file cabinet and walked in a deliberate gait toward Tino, waving the envelope in a tease. "Is this what you want, August?"

"Y-yes, sir," he said, afraid and confused over the cop's attitude. "But maybe that's somebody else's. My name is Augustino."

The cop slapped the envelope against the bars. "Not here, it ain't, boy. You're in America, Seenor Augustino Cabalero. I'll let you out, but only because I have to. But first you become an American. We're going to start by getting your name right. Say, 'My name is August, August Wetback.' He laughed ugly. "Got a nice ring to it, don't it?"

Beads of sweat formed on Tino's brow.

"You chicken? No. Not chicken, a yellowbellied taco bender. Ha! Ha!" The cop took the wallet from the envelope and peeled

out a twenty. “City ordinance to cover costs.” He dropped the wallet into the envelope, reached for the key hanging on the wall, went to the cell, and unlocked the door. He tossed the envelope bouncing off of Tino’s chest. Tino snagged it.

“Time to pick carrots.”

Tino walked a wide arc around the cop to the door.

“If you people just came and worked and went back, but no. You got to bring your fucking music, and put your kids in our schools, spreading their head lice. Now that greaser, Chávez, is organizing. Organizing my ass, he’s nothing but a goddamn Commie agitator. Go on, get outta here before I cite you for vagrancy.”

Tino quick stepped it to Rocinante, unlocked the padlock, stashed it in his gear, kick-started the engine, and took off, checking his mirror as he rode. Would the cop come after him? He raced onto the highway afraid, angry, and confused.

He passed acreage, once hard desert, now transformed into soft green blankets of farmland. Mexican men and women, wearing wide-brimmed straw hats and long-sleeve shirts were hard at it, stooped over, pulling bright orange sticks from the rich earth. A red flag with the geometric black eagle, the emblem of the United Farm Workers Union, hung from a pole.