

The Passion: a Western
Bruce McAllister

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“This story, whatever its virtues and vices, has been thirty years in the making—beginning with a tropical-storm, lightning-strike bus accident in Mexico in 1974. In the 80’s the story went through a number of incarnations—all of them bloody—but not until Mel Gibson’s movie appeared did the blood finally make sense. I’m grateful to Mel, and hope that Clint—whom I do admire—will forgive me.”

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CLINT STARES OUT THE WINDOW at a town of red dust and adobe. He’s seventy-five years old, for God’s sake, and hasn’t made a western in years, but it’s a western. He’s younger—he can feel it in his bones—and though he can’t see Leone’s bright blue chair or hear Morricone’s score, it’s a western. It’s got to be.

This is Mantos, a voice says suddenly. It’s the script, of course. They never used voice-over in films like this.

It’s a quaint but somehow disturbing town, the voice adds. How pretentious. It’s got to be Sergio’s. Who else would write like this?

He’s waiting for someone. He can feel it. They’re in this town on a mission. The script doesn’t have to tell him. But what mission?

He’ll have to wait for clarification—and his partner. Is it Paul? Bob? Hank? Lee? John? Someone new? He squints—it’s one of his trademarks—but he can’t remember.

He keeps staring through the broken glass, not knowing what else to do.

We alternate between his eyes and what he sees. The alternation has meaning.

What meaning? What the hell is the script talking about?

Figures in loose white garments cross and re-cross the street, like dogs in a John Ford flick, and he knows this pattern should probably mean something, too, but what?

What would Sergio want it to mean?

The figures disappear, and now, behind his eyes, in their place, float immense white flowers like the dogwood blossoms of his own country's capital, so far away now.

Flowers? Why?

Something stirs behind the flowers.

It's Easter, the script says, and it's true. The evidence is everywhere: The little parade of people coming toward him up the dusty street, the stiff white Christs on crosses held upright and swaying in dark hands, and, leading the parade, the homemade figures of Our Lady strapped tightly to mules and burros.

He's got to go to church. Whether it's the script or just his conscience doesn't matter. He's got to do it. If he doesn't, he'll never know what's happening here.

He can remember going to church with his family when he was a kid, the Sundays, the blue-eyed Jesuses in their white robes on all those posters in the Sunday School room. He hasn't been to church in fifty years, and he feels it now: the guilt.

When the mission starts, there will be no time, the voice says. It's true. It has to be. The script is always right.

Either he goes now or he doesn't go at all.

He'll leave a note on his hotel room door saying only, "I'll be back soon."

It won't have his partner's name on it because he doesn't know what the hell it is.

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He chooses a church on the narrow, anxious highway between Mantos and the industrial sprawl of San Tomas. He recognizes the road, but nothing else.

He's barely aware of the long mountainous ride in the bus, but that's okay. He's here now—at the church he's chosen—and that's what matters.

The bus has stopped beside two others at a grassless plaza where a single bench sits in the shade of an ancient pepper tree. The bench is empty. The little plaza is flanked on two sides by walls of a converted mission. The walls are topped with broken glass and the windows in those walls have bars. On one wall the words "COMMUNITY PRISON"—written in the language of this country, which he

somehow knows—are flaking away.

No heads peer from the windows. No one is locked up here.

It's Easter, after all.

He crosses the street, wondering how the land can be so dry and hostile this near the ocean, this close to the unpruned lushness of San Tomas.

To reach the church, he's got to cross the corner of an open-air market filled with ramshackle stalls. As he nears the low wall that surrounds the church and starts through it with four other tourists, it happens.

A man wearing a dirty poncho—one with a garish Our Lady of Guadalupe painted on it—jumps from the shadows of a stall and begins shouting.

The man is shouting at him.

“Como se llama, hombre sin nombre? Como se llama?”

The man's pronunciation is strange. The *r*'s are German. The man can barely get the words out. There's German blood everywhere south of the border, Irish too, but you don't hear it in the language like this, he remembers.

What country is this?

The Man With No Name wonders where he is, the voice says.

He shouldn't stop, but the shouting holds onto him. The figure painted on the poncho isn't Guadalupe at all, he sees, but a whore in a satin robe with cleavage and a halo. He's got the feeling, the presentiment, that this dark man knows something—that he may even know, when the actor doesn't, what the mission is going to be.

The actor waits. The script is silent.

The other tourists have moved away in embarrassment.

When the actor doesn't move, the man reaches out like lightning to pluck at his sleeve. The actor doesn't pull away. *He lets the poor man do it, the voice says. He's got to. It's his nature. His destiny.* It's familiar, this plucking. His mother plucked at him like this when he was a kid; and her mother, too, his grandmother, who shared their green-stucco home for years. It made him feel ashamed. *You're a bad boy, the plucking said.*

He feels the shame even now, so many years later.

“You think you can, motherfucker,” the man is saying suddenly in English, the r’s just as guttural. This man, an *indigena* but clearly a bilingual one, is drunk and angry. Saliva gathers at the corners of his mouth like milk—*like the palest blood*.

“You always do,” the man babbles on. “Why? Why do you?” The man waits for an answer, and the actor doesn’t have one. He has no idea what the man is talking about.

“We are not so stupid!” He grabs the actor’s sleeve again, hangs on and pulls him up to his sweaty face, to the bristles and alien breath.

This man, the actor sees now, doesn’t know anything about the mission. He’s just drunk, angry with his wife for some reason he won’t even remember when the liquor fades.

The actor breaks the man’s grip, steps quickly through the low wall and hurries toward the church, the one he’s chosen on his own, without his partner’s help, maybe even without the script’s.

He looks back once. The *indigena* is there in his dirty poncho, open-mouthed, waiting.

For a moment—an absurd moment—the actor wonders if the man is his partner.

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The little church is disappointing. It can’t be what Sergio wants. It doesn’t remind him of the churches he attended as a kid, the Sunday School room, the adults in their Sunday best and he in his tight little suit.

He thinks the floor is solid dirt, but when it sounds hollowly under his boots, he sees it’s wood covered by lifetimes of dust. This isn’t the really disappointing thing, though. What’s pathetic is the decor. The religious paintings of this saint and that, Our Lady of the Crosses, Our Lady of the Bougainvillea, other Ladies, other saints—all of them crude and far too “busy.” If this is what the director chose, it’s another director. It must be Michael or Bob. Sergio hated “busy.” He’d shout, “*Ingombro!* Too busy!” He liked it clean as a samurai sword, he’d say, and everyone would nod.

The place is a wreck. The pews are black enamel and flaking. The arches are so uneven he feels vertigo. The walls are a nightmare of unpatched cracks—like chasms—and the material of the walls is doughy, like a thigh dimpled with fat.

Thin women, the voice says. That’s what The Man With No Name dreams

of.

It's frontier craftsmanship, he knows—a poor imitation of continental, Iberian work. He's read enough to know this. It can't be part of their mission. It's like an aside, a joke. One of Cobb's maybe.

The church is empty except for two old women in black peasant dresses seated at the front, bereaved. Both are hunchbacks. Why?

Their presence has meaning, the voice says. What meaning? And where are the other tourists? They were heading into the church, weren't they?

He pans the room anxiously.

We pan it with him. It too has meaning.

When he catches sight at last of a head, pale and still as if dead, it's in an alcove and he hurries toward it. It's in the script, so he's got to do it.

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As he steps into the alcove, he sees the blood. It covers everything. The alcove is small and windowless, and the blood fills it.

He pans the alcove.

We pan it with him.

In each of the four corners a life-size plaster figure stands on a little black stand. Each is covered with blood.

It's overwhelming. He's never seen anything like it.

We're overwhelmed.

He goes to the nearest figure. It has an ax imbedded in its shoulder, cleaving it down through the plaster ribs. Blood covers it like a robe. The head tips against the uncleaved shoulder and the eyes, cast imploringly up, bulge, as if the suffering of an entire people were behind them. The whites of the eyes are without blemish. The pupils are darkest night and the irises rings of perfect Della Robbia blue, the color of the plump porcelain sparrows his first wife kept for years on a mahogany tea service they never used.

The figure's slick flesh fills him with nausea as he tries to get it. The face is childlike. *The figure looks like a child bleeding to death.* Is that what the director wants?

Even if it is, so what?

The saint's hands are contorted in prayer, and in front of the figure—in front of each of the four saints in their corners—sits a dark box on a metal stand. Each box has a coin slot. On the cracked wall behind each saint hangs a little bulletin board—a *milagro* board of red satin pinned with little hearts, medallions, other charms of tin and flaking paint. The satin is faded, yet here and there it isn't. Hearts and charms have been removed, and where they once were the satin is as red as it must've been at the beginning. *Why are they missing?* This doesn't make any sense either.

Nothing here makes sense, he tells himself, but that's just not true. If he could just read the script, he'd know.

As he moves to the next figure, he recognizes it—the saint standing in front of him—even with all the blood covering it. The two dozen arrows in its chest, stomach and groin are sunk to within an inch of their feathers. He knows the saint's name, in fact; and he can feel, because any good actor would, what it would be like to have the arrows in him.

He sees the meaning and it's simple:

Any man hated for his goodness by those less good is a saint. Would Sergio put it this way? He's not sure.

This head is tipped up, too, eyes wide and surreal with the same perfection.

When he turns and looks at all four saints, it hits him:

All four faces are identical.

He gets it now. He gets, as if in a burst of delirious light, what the sameness means—

The face of anyone. The face of any poor fool who has ever died for another, the cast-up eyes of any Christ, any ascetic misfit on this earth, any transcendental mestizo from the hills of a country like this—

—even the face of the artisan himself, so long ago, downtrodden, martyred by his own fertility, children whose needs he could never meet.

It's a miracle, he knows—that he has seen this, this meaning that may or may not be in the script.

We see the miracle too.

—the way the blood pours from imbedded shafts that shouldn't allow blood to flow, the cleaving ax, the body that has no wounds at all, and yet bleeds. It should not be possible, this much blood—

The light hits him again—hits us too—and he sees (as we see)—the truth:

More blood than any single body could hold....

The blood of a hundred hearts pounding to fill what cannot be filled....

Like a dozen crucifixions—

Like a hundred wide-eyed children drained like sides of beef—

Like a thousand women in their monthly cycles—

The litany goes on and on, moving and miraculous, but a little tedious; and when he tries, he can't get it to stop.

When it does, he's exhausted and alone. Even the hunchbacks are gone from the pews.

He feels the misgivings once more, but goes ahead and steps up to the third saint.

The eyes have been gouged out. Black blood drains from the sockets to the figure's naked feet.

Black blood? *The metaphoric darkness of our blindness? The true color of our suffering and lack of grace?*

He's not sure about it, but they're all good possibilities, aren't they? Auteur directors aren't the only ones who can *see*.

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The fourth saint has no visible wounds, but the blood is just as copious. It flows from the open mouth, from under the fingernails and from the nose in streams thick as ropes. It won't, of course, stop.

The actor understands now—in the kind of epiphany he never ever felt in the old movies—the very purpose of this room:

To show us more blood than the West has ever seen and by this to show us how generous and inhuman anything holy is, bleeding forever, world without end.

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As he turns to leave, what needs to happen whether it's in the script or not does indeed happen:

He sees the mission at last, and now that he does, who his partner is doesn't matter.

It's *his* mission, he sees now—and his alone. It was his job all along, no one else's.

He rushes from the church and makes his way to the open-air market where he buys a thick, short-handled shovel whose blade has been welded from old coffee cans.

Back in the alcove, he grasps the shovel tightly in his right hand—knuckles turning white as plaster—and draws the fleshy base of his thumb across a jagged corner of the metal.

It takes two attempts to produce blood, and he adds a third for the sake of symbolism, the kind Sergio or Bob would love—trivial though it may be in the face of everything else that is about to happen.

But the cut is messy. The blood is slow in coming. It's not at all as generous and holy as he hoped it would be.

The Man With No Name stands there patiently, hand over the coin slot of the nearest box. The blood isn't going to drop. Even when he shakes his hand, it won't fall.

He's breathing heavily now.

We know exactly what he feels.

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He shakes his hand so hard the fingers snap, but instead of falling, the blood flies to the *milagro* board, anointing the charms and bright silhouettes.

His hand hurts like hell now, but what can he do? He hears a sound and looks around. He has two companions in the alcove—not the hunchbacks, but two young women in trendy clothes, sitting in chairs he didn't notice before, watching him as so many women have before, thinking him handsome, boyish but rugged. He doesn't look seventy-five, that's for sure.

In tears he steps to the saint behind the box—whatever its name—smears its

face with the blood on his hand, and sees the final symbolism:

His blood isn't the same color.

He's different.

We feel what he feels. We're different too.

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Outside in the sunlight, he knows he should be happy with how he's handled this part of the mission, but he's not. He wonders what his partner is doing. It shouldn't matter—it's *his* mission, no one else's—but he's feeling the old doubt again.

It's tempting, this doubt, the voice says suddenly, and he smiles. The script is back. Things will be clear in a moment.

He looks down at his bloody hand.

We alternate between his face and his hand. Both must have meaning.

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When he is back in Mantos—unable to remember the return bus ride—he wants very much to leave the bus, but he can't. The script says he can't, so he sits there.

He sits in the bus staring at his hands, both of them pale and free of wounds and any trace of blood now.

He remembers cutting one hand.

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Where's the blood, the wound, the sacrifice?

What is happening to me?

It makes no sense.

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That's wrong. He isn't sitting on a bus looking at his hands at all. What was he thinking? He's just left the church and is moving like a bat out of hell to an open-air market near the dead-grass plaza, the *zocalo*, where he buys two dented cans and fills them with gasoline from a rusty pump near the buses. No one tries to stop him.

In the center of the plaza he sets fire to himself, starting with the blue windbreaker his first wife gave him. He wonders how long it will take his boots, the ones she also gave him, to burn.

The *indigenas*, *mestizos* and *turistas* look on dully, but he hears the whistling now, Morricone's score, so it's got to be right.

The fire goes out almost immediately and he gets up.

This is a miracle, he knows.

It is a miracle, yes.

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He leaves the church, yes, but when he reaches the front steps, he stops instead and begins to urinate on them.

The drunk who shouted at him earlier stands by the low wall, smiling in approval. He walks toward the actor and in a moment has joined him. They're able to wet down three steps before the *policia* stop them.

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The drunk dies of chest wounds. The actor takes a round below the ribs, but lives.

This is a miracle, too, we know.

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He leaves the alcove of the church. The *indigena* who shouted at him earlier stands at the opening in the low wall. When the actor looks at him, the man makes a series of frantic, obscene gestures with his hands, all of which the actor understands and does forgive.

"You are wrong about her," the actor says, loudly enough that the man can hear him out in the murderous sunlight and wind. "You know not what you've done. She loved you more than you will ever know, yet you turned away from her. *Culpa tua*, my son."

The drunk flips him off, screams something about his *puta* wife, and the actor turns away.

He walks on toward the *zocalo*, which is now on a high gray hill, the thunderheads of a storm hanging over it like a dirty sock.

Behind him the drunk is screaming in fury, the German r's sputtering like a machine pistol and the words sounding strangely Latin. *Lupa vilis est!* the drunk seems to be shouting. *A vile whore she is!*

None of them understands me, the actor tells himself, forgiving himself this moment of self-pity and in any case having no trouble feeling the necessary mercy and love for others.

He's got to try again. This mission—whether he's got a partner or not—demands it. It's in the script. Whether he can hear the voice or not, it's all as clear to him now as a cloudless Sunday in childhood.

Walking back to the drunk, he says gently, "You're the man your father should have been, and the man your sister should have married. This will be clear to you in time, but for now take this gun—the one in the dust at our feet—and use it for justice, for your people."

The drunk, spittle hanging from the corners of his mouth like a blessing, a charm, picks up the gun and fires.

The shot rings out like a hammer on a Roman helmet, like a lone son's cry in the wilderness, and the actor lies dying on the earth of this distant country so much like any other.

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As the actor gets up, returns to the church and steps from the doorway again—because he must, because the script demands it—it's the last take, he realizes, and understands in the kind of epiphany few actors ever have that Paul or Hank or John or whoever his partner happens to be will not be at the rendezvous point. That he, the Man With No Name, will indeed have to carry out the mission by himself. That on his own he will have to do what the director in his insanity wants: Start the epidemic of *Pasteurella pestis*, the Black Death, which this country needs if it is going to be free.

It's simple enough. He's the vector. He'll crack the hollow tooth in his jaw of perfect teeth, and the bacilli will spread. The plague will destabilize the corrupt, racist, fascist oligarchy of this country and the regime that has cursed this country for so many generations will fall in a symphony of justice—

We have seen this before—

—for the greater good of the world.

We've seen this and more than once.

He's immune, of course. He's an asymptomatic carrier. The script says so. He won't die of lymphatic buboes or toxin damage to kidneys, brain and lungs, like so many will, guilty and innocent alike. Yet he will indeed die before the mission is through, and it will be an old, rusty revolver that takes him.

He's the one who can do it, we're sure.

Everything is sepia-toned, like an old photograph—and behind his eyes he sees a stagecoach slowing, two young men jumping from a cliff, another young man chewing on a cigar, many many things—but none of them matters. He can move now, with or without the voice telling him what to do, and he'll keep moving until it's over. He'll take the same damn bus. He'll take it toward the capital of dark-skinned people where he will, before it is over, find a woman dark, passionate and different enough from the pale women he has known that he can die for her, at her hand, the gun going off as they roll on the bed, and by doing so die for us all.

We know the blood it will take.

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For Barry Malzberg, *magister lucis*.