

The Enemy Wears a Bandit's Mask  
by  
Chris Nelson

I was making chili when I heard the crash outside. Naturally, I was nervous. I make a blue ribbon chili, the envy of the neighborhood. My front yard is routinely toilet papered by men living on pensions following county events where chili is eaten for reward. I have been offered the sexual services of wives and daughters on non-consecutive occasions in exchange for the secret to my chili. Needless to say, I live in almost constant fear of chili-related espionage.

And so, with the crash, I immediately threw the kitchen into lockdown. Howling siren and flashing red lights brought my twelve year-old son, Cote, running.

"Is it the Cubans?" Cote asked, frantic. The poor boy had recently watched the cold war masterpiece, *Red Dawn*, and for nights had been scanning the heavens for communist paratroopers drifting down to occupy America's heartland.

"No!" I said, hiding ingredients in the locking pantry. "Get our guns!"

"The chili!" Cote yelled.

"GUNS!" I screamed, giving Cote a quick kick in the back of the pants. That shook him back to life, and he ran out to the hall closet to retrieve our ordnance. Striking the boy gives me no pleasure, but when a soldier freezes up on the battlefield you have to do something to bring him back to reality or else people will die.

I turned down the stove to let the embryonic base simmer. "CAROL!" I called out. "CAROL, I NEED YOU ON THE BRIDGE IMMEDIATELY!"

"Our kitchen is not a bridge," my wife said, coming through the doorway with her hands pressed tightly against her ears. "Turn off the G.D. alarm, Stanley. The neighbors will call the police."

"Neighbors? HA! *Neighbors!* Barbarians at the gate, Carol!" She shrugged, mouthed "what?," so I cut the siren but left the warning lights swirling and repeated myself: "Neighbors? HA! *Neighbors!*—"

"—I heard you, I just wanted you to shut that thing off."

"Barbarians," I said. My wooden spoon shook within the rage of my grasp. "Gate."

Cote arrived, lugging my pump-action 12-gauge in one hand and his own bolt-action .22 in the other. "Loaded?" I asked him. He nodded, tossing me my shotgun over the counter.

"Not the guns, Stanley," Carol pleaded.

I handed her the spoon. "Carol, this is bigger than us. This is about a man's right not to live in fear. To enjoy a brisk autumn evening with a steaming pot of chili and his family. To live, Carol, to *live*. This is my castle. And I will pepper with buckshot the bejesus out of anyone who tries to violate it. Now, stir that chili! The boy and I are gonna deal out a sweet dose of rectitude."

With that, Cote and I ran for the back door, Cote yelling "WOLVERINES!" the whole way.

"Make Cote wear a jacket," my wife called out.

A jacket? Did the 300 Spartans wear a jacket? My wife is a hell of a gal, but sometimes she honestly has no clue.

Outside, the trash cans had been knocked over behind the carport, spilling refuse across the patio. I sent Cote out on point. He hit the twilight like a turbo-charged cougar: sprinting, rolling, pointing his rifle this way and that. I took up a covering position on the bottom step of the back porch, firing off a warning shot into the air before chambering a fresh shell and scanning the distance with my sighting eye.

“Christ, Smith! It’s the dinner hour,” one of the neighbors yelled from a window.

“Charlie, you shut up! If I find out you’re in on this, you’ll be the secret ingredient in my next batch!”

“Secret ingredient my taint, you lunatic!” he cried, slamming his window shut.

“Clear on the left,” Cote yelled, rolling around on the damp grass several times before bringing his rifle up to the east sector of the back yard. The sector with my garden. Tomatoes, peppers, precious herbs. The worth of that garden in chili terms equaled the GNP of the eastern United States. My mind reeled from the possibility of espionage to an even more dire threat: sabotage.

“Wooden shoes!” I called out to Cote.

He sprinted for the garden and I followed, keeping low against the brick wall of the carport.

“Sweet jimminy!” Cote cried out. He fired immediately, rolling on his heels into a crashing halt. I heard the bolt click-clack up a fresh round and a second shot ring out as he scurried back toward my position.

“RRRAAAAAAAAAACCCCCOOOOOOOONNNNNNNSSSSSS!” he screamed as he fled, falling back against the carport wall with a thud. He chambered a fresh round and swivelled, pointing back toward the garden.

I squeezed off a blast of shot just over the dark tangle of fresh produce. I needed them to scatter. I couldn’t risk hitting the vegetables, let alone the fruits.

“What’s going on?” Carol asked, propping open the screen door.

“Stirring, Carol! You should be stirring!”

“It’s raccoons, Mom!” Cote said, firing another shot.

My wife’s face blanched and she dropped immediately back inside, slamming the door behind her.

“She better be stirring,” I said.

“WOLVERINES!” Cote screamed, firing again.

I heard rustling in the leaves of the garden. There were three of them at least. Three if we were lucky. But what a thing to think. How could three raccoons be considered lucky?

Sweet Christ, why did it have to be raccoons?

It was right about then that they finally started returning fire. Bullets snapped against the brick and sliced through the air above us. Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop, they kept pouring it on. I shook loose mortar out of my hair and fired a wild and desperate shot back.

“I love you, Dad,” Cote said.

I shook my head. “Dammit, son, don’t talk like that. Not yet. We’re not finished yet.”

“Raccoons,” he said, his hands trembling on his weapon.

I gave him a light slap. My boy could be a real Foxhole Norman sometimes.  
“Keep it together, boy,” I said, sharply.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.

Charlie called out from his window again, “Smith, you asshole! I’ve called the police! They’ll fix your wagon once and for all!”

“It’s not a wagon, Mr. Douglas!” Cote said. “It’s raccoons!”

“Balls!” Charlie spat, slamming his window closed again.

“Do the raccoons have wagons?” Cote asked. Kids.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.

The raccoons sure as hell weren’t backing down. They had automatics, at least, and the shots were spreading out. They were taking up positions around the yard, forming fields of fire.

“Look sharp,” I said, unloading off to our side at a raccoon looking to flank us.

It screamed a chirping screech, rolling back and clutching at its midsection as it dropped its weapon and fell to the ground. Its little beret rolled to a stop a few feet away.

“Medic!” it spat, choking on blood.

“Martinez!” came a high-pitched squeal from the garden. Martinez coughed and shook, then ceased to move. The raccoon’s fire slacked for a moment, then intensified.

There were definitely more than three.

“Pour it on, boys,” their leader squealed again.

Cote and I returned fire as best we could, but we were pinned down something fierce and our ammunition was running low.

Thankfully, the cavalry arrived just in time. Sirens cut through the air out in front of the house as two cars screeched to a halt.

“Weapons down and hands up!”

The bullets stopped firing for a moment, but I smelled a rat. A rat-coon.

“I smell a rat-coon,” I told Cote, which made him smile. It was good to keep the mood light. I’m a hell of a good father.

Two police officers approached from the left and two from the right.

“Wait! Raccoons!” I said.

The cops scattered just as the raccoons resumed fire. Only three officers made it behind the carport with us. The fourth was dropped out in the yard not far from Martinez with an apple-sized exit hole where his left eye had been.

“Washer bear motherfuckers,” growled one of the cops, a Sargent Calhoun, as he rubbed a flesh wound on his shoulder. He threw a bunch of numbers and curses into the radio and got up into a squat, lighting himself a cigarette. “Back up’s on the way, but we’re yanking ourselves if we think they’ll get here in time.” He blew smoke over the carport and the debris in the air stood out in it like dust mites in a sun beam.

“Right,” he coughed. “Franklin, you’re with me. Grant, stay here with these two and cover our asses.”

“Are we deputies?” Cote asked. God bless him.

“Shit, kid,” Calhoun smiled, giving Cote a drag off his cigarette. “We get out of this thing and you can be the fucking sheriff. Franklin, we’re moving.”

The two of them crept toward the edge of the carport on their toes, their own shotguns at the ready.

“Sheriff. Can you believe it, Dad?” Cote asked.

“Put out the smoke, son,” I said. His mother would have been angry with him smoking, but not as angry as I was gonna be if she wasn’t in there working that spoon.

“Good luck,” Grant called after Sgt. Calhoun.

“Fuck you,” Calhoun said. Then he and Franklin charged around the side of the carport, guns blazing. We popped up behind the wall and threw everything we had at them, too.

I won’t lie, it was a hell of a mess. Bullets cutting through the air like a bee swarm. Blood spraying this way and that. My garden will take two seasons to fully recover. Still, somehow we came out on top. I credit Calhoun with that one. Even taking seven bullets, two of them not in the vest, he still killed four of the bastards. The last one had his teeth dug into Calhoun’s forearm as he strangled the life out of it.

When the dust had finally settled, Franklin was dead, and the rookie cop I hadn’t had the chance to meet, Stevenson. Eight raccoons met their maker that day. Their bodies were laid out in the yard, bloody holes scattered throughout their little green uniforms. Three were taken into custody. The leader, one of them, hurling profanity at us the whole way. The cops all had a laugh when they rammed his head into the roof of the squad car putting him in the back. Hell, I laughed too. It was over, and the chili and Cote and I were alive.

For all we knew, of course, a few of them escaped. Raccoons are shifty bastards like that. They’ll bug out on a gut shot buddy and not lose a wink of sleep over it later. If there were more of them out there, maybe even seeking revenge, why, we’d shoot that bridge when we came to it.

To Carol’s credit, she’d been in there stirring the whole time. She’d actually stirred a little too much, but I could hardly fault her for that. And Cote, my boy, he didn’t kill any raccoons, but he wounded the leader, which was what triggered the surrender of their survivors. My family. What a family for a man to have. After my ability to make a pot of chili, they’re the other two of the three great blessings in my life.

Calhoun’s captain showed up when the back up came, and my backyard was full of patrolmen securing the perimeter, crime scene techs and coroners. Carol and I had patched Calhoun up as best as we could, Cote going on the whole time about being a sheriff.

“Damn right, a sheriff,” Calhoun told him. He slipped Cote Stevenson’s badge and told him to wear it with pride.

“I’m writing you up for a commendation, you salty dog, you,” the Captain told Calhoun.

“Shit, Cap,” he said. “With all the goddamn raccoons out there these days, I was just doing my part.”

“Commendation, hell. I’m gonna make you the best batch of chili you ever tasted,” I said.

“Chili?” Calhoun asked. “Is that what smells so good?”

“Holy shit.” The Captain’s eyes got wide. “You’re him,” he asked, “aren’t you? You’re the chili guy.”

I sort of smiled and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Don’t be modest, dear,” Carol said, putting an arm around me. “He’s the chili guy all right. My husband is most definitely the chili guy.”

“Wow.” Calhoun nodded. “The chili guy. That’s amazing.”

The Captain beamed. “Why, I’ve followed your career since the ‘84 tri-county fair. Jesus couldn’t make a better chili.”

“Well, people seem to like it,” I said, blushing.

“The chili guy and me, in the trenches together.” Calhoun smiled. “Why, I tell you, I’d kill an army of raccoons to get a look at your recipe,” he said.

And everybody laughed. Calhoun, his captain, all the other roustabout cops taking reports. Even Carol. Hell, Cote even gave a little chuckle. But not me.

I just picked up my shotgun and pumped a new shell into the chamber.

“You,” I said. To just about everybody who could hear me. “You get the hell out of my house right now.”