

Desconocido  
by Mike Waugh

"Hello again", said the wizened old raisin of a gentleman in a heavy Venezuelan accent, as he wobbled on his stick. Again? It was odd because Cliff had never set foot in Caracas before, let alone this place. But, he studied the old guy and concluded he was probably blind, maybe demented too so it didn't matter a great deal. Cliff nodded politely and looked around in dismay.

As shops go, it was one of the worst. Rusted kettles. Long trestle tables full of unwanted cutlery. And a wide selection of ornamental egg cups. However, Cliff was a beggar without a choice - his flight left in less than two hours and he couldn't fob off his son with a giant Toblerone from the airport. Not again anyway.

Cliff edged his way past the bric-a-brac and rummaged around on an old dresser. A pair of fabric scissors. A servant's bell. And a harmonica which caught his eye. It was actually in pretty good nick, engraved with a Spanish Vaquero riding a horse. Cliff blew it, and it emitted the strangest noise. So strange, he did it again; it sounded like a cross between a wheezing cat and a whispering child. Moments later, he was daydreaming of wandering across La Guajira desert, returning from war to be greeted by lusty cowgirls before his pocket started vibrating, jolting him back to reality. Cliff turned the phone alarm off - time to go. The price of twenty euros for the harmonica seemed ludicrously high, so he tried to haggle but the old Venezuelan didn't respond and just gently rocked backwards and forwards, staring at him intently. Deaf too, but certainly not dumb, thought Cliff. Time was running out so he paid up and stuffed it in his hand luggage.

That evening back in the UK, Cliff sat his son Daniel down and spun an elaborate yarn. How the owner of the harmonica was a mysterious fighter on horseback, known as El Desconocido - the Unknown. He'd fought against the Spanish rule in the early 19th century, and how during a bloody and violent battle for Venezuela's freedom, he had grasped this Spanish harmonica, prised from the pockets of a dying general.

Daniel was mesmerised, and held the harmonica aloft and gave his dad a huge hug. He'd never owned anything antique before, let alone something belonging to a proper badass. That night, he spent hours poring over it in his bedroom, his fingers tracing the engravings, imagining the escapades of the Unknown. He wondered if the bravery and skills of the fighter would rub off over time. Daniel blew into the harmonica, and it let out the same feeble rasping sound that his Dad had experienced earlier that day. He shrugged. No matter. He put it in his pocket - the cold hard steel a reassuring reminder of the strength of its former owner.

Over the weeks that followed, Daniel kept asking his dad more and more questions about the Unknown. Cliff would pretend to go off and make phone calls to the Venezuelan antique shop and came back with breathless stories of heroism and valiance. He spoke of how the fighter fought his way out of a forest ambush with just a handful of men armed with swords, against a whole battalion of Spaniards armed with muskets. He recounted how the scent of pine mixed with the gunpowder smoke hung in the air. How the distant

rhythmic clanking of spurs would stir up a deep dread in the bottom of their stomachs. He whispered about the first moment in battle, the racing heartbeats as the men saw the first glimpse of the enemy.

These stories became magical slices of time, sandwiched in between Daniel's schooldays and nights. Slowly, imperceptibly at first, Cliff began to notice that the tiny details; from the Unknown's pock-marked battle-scarred leg to the white boot-shaped marking on his horse's nose, came to him faster and faster. They tumbled into his imagination in real time. He felt his pulse quicken and adrenaline swishing around his body when he regaled the tales of fighting, and then palpably experienced the relief as he recounted the Unknown's evening spent warming his hands around the campfire after battle.

The battle-worn harmonica had stories of its own. Back in the day, it would sound across the camp signalling the end of bloodshed and the beginning of stories, laughter and bonding. The Unknown was said to be a master, and would lead the others into singing songs while others backed his lead on guitar. And the sound itself was so clear, so melodious, it was like a thousand tiny horns blowing at once. One night, Cliff sang one of the Unknown's songs, a brisk rendition of a folk number called El Tigrito. The words came to him, and tumbled out his mouth, even though he spoke no Spanish and he could have sworn he'd never heard it before. The power of the subconscious, marvelled Cliff.

Then the call came in that would shatter the storytimes - another business trip. The nightly tales would have to come to an end, so Cliff thought of a neat way to bring them to a close. On Cliff's last night, he told Daniel of the Unknown's solemn promise to his soldiers around the campfire. Daniel sat with rapt attention.

"Tell me Dad! Tell me, what did he say?"

Cliff looked around and leaned in with a whisper. "Do you promise to keep it a secret?"

Daniel nodded, and whispered back. "I won't tell anyone, Dad. Not even Mum".

"The Unknown felt that he would die in battle the next day, so he told his travelling fighters something precious that they should pass on to anyone they deemed worthy enough to hear it. And those words have passed from person to person, across campfires, festivals, dinner tables, cities, oceans, scrolls and books, and now from the old man in the shop to me. And now... from me to you"

Daniel could barely contain himself, his eyes spinning with excitement.

"The Unknown said that once he was dead, he would look to visit someone. Man or woman, boy or girl. It didn't matter. When he visited he wouldn't be a ghost or any of that nonsense. He would visit by bringing his skills to whoever he chose. They'd be filled with his courage. His laser-sharp focus. His fighting skills. They would inherit the heart of a hero and would lead their people into freedom and sanctuary."

Daniel looked around the room and breathed deeply, taking in the enormity of it all. "How do I make him visit? Tell him to visit me!"

Cliff shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. He chooses to visit. He said the story could be relayed by anyone, through any means. And the way they'd know he was about to visit was they would hear a little phrase. Just a small something, maybe only a couple of words that would remind the listener or reader of this story. Anyone could say them, at any time. And that meant he was coming to stand with you for as long as you needed him."

Daniel's eyes darted around the room, searching for clues. "Do you think he'll come to visit me?"

"Well, you have his harmonica. I'm pretty sure that's a sign he's coming. Time for sleep now". Cliff kissed Daniel's forehead and tucked him into bed. Daniel wore a huge grin, thrilled with the very notion.

Cliff winked and left. Going to be hard to top that one, he mused.

Two nights later, Cliff called home from a sanitised Hilton hotel in Belgium. Daniel was breathless with excitement.

"Dad! I've done it!"

"What, you've heard the words?"

"No, I've not heard anything but with the harmonica, I saw it had screws and I took them off. It was not blowing because there was some paper in it! Mum helped me."

Cliff laughed. "You little genius, so it was just clogging it up? You got it working?"

"Yep. Someone wrote on the paper too. So, anyway, mum helped me screw it back together and listen, listen to this..."

Daniel blew on the harmonica and five hundred miles away, Cliff heard the unmistakable sound of a thousand tiny horns.

"That's incredible! Wow", said Cliff. "And the paper... what did it say?"

"Not much", said Daniel in between blowing the harmonica.

"Just three words. It said, 'Hello again Desconocido'.