Storm Over San Juan

by

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Storm Over San Juan

When I enlisted into the Rough Riders I never expected to die at San Juan Hill. I definitely never expected to be resurrected by a Hoodoo priest to fight an ancient evil storm goddess bent on destroying America. But here I am. Dead. But still fighting the good fight. Battling witches, storms, explosions and ancient gods. It’s a good thing I have a foul mouth and a sarcastic attitude to see me through. Hang on to your hat it's gonna be a wild ride.

This 4,000 word short story was written in response to J.A. Konrath's 8 hour challenge.

How the hell did I wind up here? That’s what I was wondering as I charged up San Juan Hill rifle in hand. I suppose that I didn’t have much choice. When your country and Teddy Roosevelt call for volunteers then you sign up. That’s how I wound up in this humid little island country fighting a host of little Spanish men who just wanted to go home as badly as I did. When that same Teddy Roosevelt charges up a hill you drag your sorry ass up the hill after him.

I ran up the hill, legs screaming, lungs burning and I realized that I had yelled my throat raw. I could hear bullets whizzing by my ears. Men were falling around me. Those damn Spaniards were too good a shot. That’s when it hit me. The hammer of Thor himself slammed into my chest throwing me to my back. I fell limply to the ground, head pointed downhill and my legs akimbo. My rifle tumbled from my grasp. I sucked in air but surprisingly I felt very little pain.

I could see the shapes of other men run past me as my sight dimmed, Rough Riders and Buffalo Soldiers alike. Slowly my field of vision faded to a pinprick of light. I felt my body loosen its hold on me and I drifted off towards that light. My role in this fight was over. I didn’t realize that I was preparing for another fight even grander.

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I woke up still on my back in the grass. I opened my eyes and lay still while I looked around for a moment. I quickly realized that I was no longer on San Juan Hill. For one there were no explosions around me. For the second I wasn’t lying downhill anymore. I figured that my brothers in arms had moved me after the battle but I wasn’t in the hospital tent.

Sitting up I took a look around and saw that I was lying next to a stream in a clearing. Surrounding me were stands of pine and oak trees.

“This looks just like back home” I said out loud.

“Of course it does” I heard from behind me.

I jerked my head around. Beside the creek, sitting on a rock, was a man in a black suit. He wore spectacles and vaguely reminded me of a Baptist preacher. I stood up slowly and walked over to him.

“Who are you” I asked. “How did we get here? Am I dead?” That last question slipped out almost subconsciously.

“Of course you are dead Michael. You got shot in the chest by a 7mm Mauser. That leaves a mark on a man.”

“Then where the hell am I” I demanded.

“Calm down. Hell is exactly where you aren’t. As to who I am, let’s just say I serve a higher power. Now, we need to talk. Briefly. Come sit down.”

Being dead I didn’t think it was prudent to argue with the servant of a higher power so I sat.

“Good. Now, there are a few things you need to know. Firstly, you still have a job to do. A very important job.”

“What job is that?”

“That isn’t for me to explain. The man who is currently trying to draw you back will tell you what you need to know.”

“Draw me back?”

“Yes. One of those pesky Hoodoo priests is trying to resurrect you. Just this once we are going to let him.”

He leaned in close to me.

“He has a job for you. Do what he tells you. It is very important. A very dark thing is about to be loosed on the world and you need to stop it. Now, he’s getting insistent. I think it’s time for you to go. Good luck.”

He stood up and made a shoving gesture in my direction. I fell over the back of the rock into the creek. Only, I never hit water. I kept falling. And falling. And then I landed in the bed.

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I sat up gasping for air. Well, trying to anyway. My lungs didn’t seem to work. I didn’t feel like I was choking I just couldn’t take in any air. There was chanting going on somewhere to my left. The room was dark, lit only by candles, and there was a strong smell of incense. This much I noticed even though I was preoccupied.

I started to panic. That’s when I realized something else. My heart wasn’t racing. My heart always races when I get scared or excited. Except that it wasn’t. Because it wasn’t beating at all.

“Oh hell.”

“Good. You are awake.”

“Of course I’m awake! Why can’t I breathe?”

“Because you are dead.”

I turned to glare at the little man to my left. He was an old man, small and hunched with age. He had dark brown skin and was leaning on a staff carved like a snake.

“I know I’m dead, but if you brought me back then how come I can’t breathe and why” I put a finger on my wrist to check for a pulse, “is my heart not beating?”

“The dead do not need air or blood. How did you know that I brought you back from the dead?”

“Because I was told by a man in a dark suit.”

The little man made a sign with his hand. I’m not sure what it meant exactly but I guessed it was to ward off evil.

“Why did you bring me back? How long was I gone? And who the hell are you?”

“My name is Raul and I am a Bokor. You have been dead for over a month. Just long enough for your countrymen to beat the Spaniards. I brought you back to help me fight a great evil.”

“Tell me everything.”

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“There is a witch who seeks revenge against your country for the death of her parents in the war.”

While he spoke he tinkered with a necklace. It was a small gold chain with a locket on it. His hands were surprisingly delicate to be so withered. I had followed into his workshop and while he worked I put my uniform back on. The trousers were still usable but the blue shirt had needed to be replaced. Perhaps the hole could have been sewn up but the blood would never have come out. It was sobering to see the hole that had taken my life. It was even more sobering when Raoul produced the bullet that had ended me.

I had tied it onto a length of leather and fashioned a crude necklace of my own. Checking myself in the mirror I adjusted the brim of my slouch hat. I noticed something in the mirror. Frowning I leaned in closer. I was gray. Not as gray as a stone but a light gray nonetheless. Raoul interrupted my self observation.

"Do you see this talisman" he asked me while holding up the necklace.

I nodded.

"This is the key to defeating the Bruja. The witch as you would say."

"Who is this Bruja?"

"I do not know. I only know what the spirits have told me. She has chained an ancient goddess, of storms and floods, to aid in her revenge. Her name is Guabancex. This talisman will trap her and her two assistants. They are named Guataubá and Coatrisquie. Guataubá controls storms . Coatrisquie causes floods."

"What do I have to do?"

"You must catch the lightning and tame the floods."

"What does that even mean little man?"

He smiled and replied "I have no idea. I only know that this talisman will be the end of me. The rest is up to you. Be forewarned, as soon as I finish this the Bruja will know that we are on to her. She will try to stop you."

He opened the locket up and laid it on his work bench. Taking out a small knife he pricked his finger and dropped a single drop into it. He immediately went into convulsions and fell to the floor. From out of the air I heard chanting. By the time reached him he was already dead. The chanting stopped. I felt for a pulse but there was none. I stood up and reached for the locket. A charge ripped up my arm and I cried out jerking my hand back. Hesitantly I reached out again but this time it was simply cool to the touch. Snapping it shut I looked into the mirror again.

"Catch the lightning. Tame the flood. Got it."

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The ship rocked madly on the stormy seas. It had been smooth sailing out of Havana until the wind changed without warning. We watched lightning dance on the horizon making its way closer. The sailors were nervous. That made me nervous. I might not need air but that didn't mean I wanted to try my hand at deep sea diving. The sailors had avoided me for days fearing that I carried some kind of sickness due to my gray skin tone. That was just as well by me. I had some serious brooding to do.

All of that ended when lightning struck the ship. I jumped back and watched men scramble to put out the fire it caused. And then lightning hit again.

"Well what are the odds of that?"

Not likely was the answer. The wind picked up again causing the ship to lurch dangerously.

"On fire and close to capsizing. Lovely."

That's when I heard a sailor beside me begin yelling in Spanish.

"El Diablo! El Diablo!"

He was pointing off in the distance. I followed his arm with my gaze.

"Well Hell!"

In the distance, but closing in rapidly, was a giant ball of light. Electric arcs were lancing out from it. I ran down below to my cabin and came back with all of mu worldly possessions. A canvas sack of clothes, my Winchester rifle and my army service revolver.

The glowing ball came to a stop hovering above the deck of the ship. The glow was so bright that it hurt to look at it. Inside could be made out the shape of man. He looked down at all of us frightened men and the bastard laughed. He threw up his arms and lightning came again and didn't stop until the boat was burning like a torch.

I was busy dodging bolts when I lost my footing and fell to my knees. When I did the talisman around my neck came loose. It slid away from me and I dove for it in a panic. I snagged it before it was lost and it almost burned my hand it was so hot. The spirit, god, demon or whatever it was whipped its head in my direction.

"Oh hell" I said aloud. "Guataubá I presume."

I pulled out my revolver and thumbed back the hammer. I squeezed the trigger and let out some thunder of my own. The thing never slowed down. So I shot the bastard again. And again. He stopped right in front of me and smiled in my face. So I slugged him with my free hand. His head lurched back and he screamed. I had forgotten the talisman in my fist. Connecting the locket to the man was a thin string of electricity. I realized that my jaw was hanging open. Guataubá seemed even more surprised than me.

"What the hell?"

I holstered my revolver and on an impulse grabbed the band like a rope. I tugged and Guataubá cried out as he came forward. I laughed out loud.

"I got you now! Catch the lightning!"

I realized that I sounded like a lunatic but I wasn't too concerned about it. I was a dead man who had just lassoed a demigod. What was a little insanity? I began pulling hand over hand until we were face to face again.

"Boo!"

I slammed the talisman against his forehead and he began convulsing the same as Raoul. There was a sound like fabric ripping and the locket began sucking Guataubá in. He was gone in a matter of seconds.

"Well that was easy enough."

That's when the fire hit the ships magazine and the gunpowder exploded.

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The lifeboat drifted on the water. The waves had calmed considerably after Guataubá made an exit. My little sailor buddy, whose named I learned was Luiz, and I had made it aboard before the ship went down. There were a few other passengers who had made it but they sat as far away from me as they could. I couldn't blame them. I would have avoided me too. The only person who would speak to, or even make eye contact, was Luiz. Unfortunately his English was as bad as my Spanish. I could just barely make out that we were close to New Orleans, our destination, when the attack happened.

"I certainly hope so little buddy" I said. He smiled uncomprehendingly and nodded. We drifted for hours in darkness before we saw a light coming closer. People began yelling and waving trying to get its attention.

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My boots made full thumping sounds on the plank off if the ship. The USS Venture had picked us up and deposited us promptly in New Orleans. Great. Now that I was here I had no idea where to go. I looked at Luiz.

"Well my friend, if you were looking for a Bruja around these parts where would you start?"

Luiz began frantically shaking his head at me.

"Bruja? No Bruja!"

"Ok then. No Bruja. Noted. I think you might want to sit the rest of this out then pal."

He looked at me confusedly and then wandered off. I mulled it over for a bit before it hit me. Hoodoo got this ball rolling. Hoodoo might be the answer I needed. I set off for the French Quarter to find myself another Bokor.

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I wandered the Quarter for an hour watching people run from my approach. I took that as a good sign. It meant they had at least some idea of what I was.

"Hey Deadman!"

I turned around in the street and saw a black man in a robe motioning me over. I trotted across the street to him.

"Are you a Bokor?"

He looked me up and down.

"What does a dead man want with a Bokor?"

"Even dead men need directions. Can you help me?"

He leaned in close to my face and gave me the fish eye.

"Come inside."

I followed him into the house behind him. He led me through the front room into a small parlor. He sat me down at a table and began shuffling a small deck of cards.

"Sit down dead man and I'll read your cards. I've never read the cards of a man whose fate has already caught up with him once."

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Armed with the details of my cards I made my closer to the levee. I'll be honest, not a damn bit of what he said made sense. Ah well. That's how it goes some time. The only advice the Bokor gave me that made sense was to start close to water. I trudged along for miles eyes staring into the distance when my feet splashed in a puddle. I looked down and realized that I was standing in a wide pool of water.

No big deal right? Except this puddle was growing rapidly. Others were starting to notice as well. I saw a gentleman walked out of a brothel and quickly backpedal up the stairs. He was frowning in confusion. By this point the water was at my ankles. I was going to have to dry my boots soon before they were ruined. I shifted my pack on my shoulders and straightened my rifle.

I had a sinking suspicion, no pun intended, what was going on. What I needed was a vantage point above the pool. I splashed forward through water up to my knees and rising. It had filled the street and was still expanding. It was thigh high when I reached the brothel. I mounted the steps and looked back the way that I came. Out of the water was rising a shimmering female form. Beautiful. Completely nude.

"And Coatrisquie makes her appearance."

I highly doubted that shooting her would do much good despite how satisfying it would be. I opened the door to find several surprised prostitutes.

"Ladies" I said tipping my hat. "Would you be so kind as to watch my belongings while I handle this little problem?"

They both nodded in sync, mouths open in disbelief and took my gear. I waded back out into the flood which was at my waist by this point. I didn’t have a clue how I was going to deal with this one.

“I know who you are” I called out. “I already dealt with your weakling brother Guataubá.”

I was trying to provoke a response. Unfortunately it worked. It worked very well. She screamed an ear shattering cry and thrust out her arms. The water rose up and crashed over me. I was knocked off of my feet and swept several feet away. If I was still alive I would likely have been drowned. Instead I found my feet and stood back up to face her.

“Too bad that won’t work sister. Dead men don’t can’t drown.”

I saw a look of worry cross her face as I slogged forward. My clothes were soaked and sticking to me. My hair was plastered to my head and water ran into my eyes. I pulled the talisman over my head and held it up high for her to see. Her watery eyes grew wide and she began moving away from me. Her gaze seemed to be locked on the locket so I hurried forward. I actually walked right up to her before she looked at me. She stopped moving away and met my eyes with her own.

“Is Guataubá really in there?”

I nodded in reply. Standing in the middle of a living lake talking to a nude demigoddess was not what I expected when I woke up this morning.

“I really don’t want to be doing this” she said.

“Then why are you?”

“She makes me. The Bruja controls my master and is making us do these things. Can you stop her?”

“I’m going to try. Can you tell me where she is?”

She ducked her head but gave me a small nod. “They’re at the cathedral.”

As she told me this she pointed in the distance. I looked up and saw the spire of the cathedral she was directing me to.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it from here. Are you ready?”

She nodded again and I saw tears running down her face. I didn’t dwell too long on a woman made of water crying. I touched the talisman to her forehead and it sucked her in as well. I would have sworn she was smiling as she went.

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I stood across the street from the cathedral. It was a heavy stone building complete with the flying buttresses. I was still soaking wet and my feet were chafed from walking. I started across the street when a shot rang out. I ducked and darted for cover. The closest was a small street vendor’s stand. I dove behind it as more bullets whistled by and occasionally through the stand. As far as cover went it was not much.

I popped my head up and spotted the shooter in the bell tower. I worked the lever of my Winchester as I stood. Taking aim on the fly I fired a shot and watched him fall backwards. I raced to the front entrance before someone else could take his place. Kicking the door in I was greeted by another shot that whizzed by my head. I threw myself to my left behind a set of heavy pews. I heard another bullet strike the wood above my head. I crawled forward to the end of the row. Rolling to my back I cocked my rifle again just as my opponent rounded the corner.

He was a Spanish man carrying a Mauser rifle. He might not be wearing a uniform but I recognized a Spanish soldier when I saw one. I shot him in the chest which seemed oddly appropriate. I leapt to my feet and shouldered my weapon taking stock of the room. From the stairwell to my right emerged another soldier cocking a pistol as he ran. My shot caught him in the shoulder spinning him around. As he fell his head struck the altar and he landed with it at an odd angle. I didn’t think he was getting back up again.

I ran across the room and stuck my head through the door of the stairwell. No shots greeted me but from the top I heard the boom of thunder.

“Well Hell.”

I started up the stairs. Halfway up I learned that while I might not get winded my legs still got tired. Another peal of thunder spurred me to move faster.

I reached the top of the tower to see two women facing each other holding hands. One was a pretty young Spanish woman. The Bruja I presumed. The other was a woman of Indian descent. Guabancex. The goddess of storms. Well hell. They turned in unison to face me.

“Ladies, whatever you are doing I’m going to have to ask you to stop.”

Guabancex jerked her head and I found myself flying through the air. I bounced off of the bell and fell to the floor. I stood up groaning and got hit by another blast. Somewhere in the air I lost hold of my weapon. I rose to my knees.

“Why are you doing this?”

The Bruja walked towards me, hips swaying, and knelt in front of me. She cupped my chin with her hand and lifted my face.

“For my parents who were murdered by you filthy American soldiers. Because your country killed them I intend to kill it.”

Great. Your average revenge story. As she spoke I spotted a necklace around her neck. It was shaped like a wave. On a hunch I snatched it from around her neck. Dear lord did she start screaming. I figured that meant my hunch was correct.

The wind really picked up then. She came at me clawing at my face trying to get it back. Suddenly I was airborne again but this time I grabbed hold of someone. The Bruja came with me as we rattled around the room. At some point my knife must have slipped out of its sheath. We came down hard and I heard her gasp as she landed on top of me.

I looked down between us and saw that it had slipped between her ribs. I rolled her off of me and cradled her head as the life slipped out of her eyes. Standing I turned to face Guabancex.

“It’s over ma’am. Your master is dead and it’s time for you to go back to sleep.”

Her response was in a language that I couldn’t understand. The snarl on her face was slightly more telling. She raised her hands high and more thunder broke. Rain began to pour outside the tower. I slipped the Bruja’s talisman around my neck. Everything stopped as suddenly as it started. She lowered her arms and her features went slack.

“That’s better” I said as I approached her. I have to confess that I debated what to do next. Keeping a storm goddess on a leash could come in handy but I finally decided to let that go. I lifted Raoul’s talisman to her head and she leaned into it.

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I walked back outside to see the sun peaking back out. I wasn’t sure where to go from here. I needed to find somewhere safe to stash the amulet. It wouldn’t do to have someone let loose an angry goddess and her two henchmen; after that though I didn’t have a clue. What does a dead man do in America these days?

About the Author

Stewart Felkel lives in Sterlington, La with his beautiful wife and their three fur babies. He has been a band director, music minister and optician. His hobbies include an eclectic mix of things including boxing, archery, bowery, medieval combat and writing. For freebies, news of upcoming works and the occasional book review check out his website [www.stewartfelkel.weebly.com](http://www.stewartfelkel.weebly.com).