

## The Tregua

By Daniel Acosta

### I

Fish was at the Tenampa when he got the letter. Sitting with his *compadre*, Felipito Cuevas, he watched his nineteen-year-old protégé Agapito Mendoza's singles match against another young handballer. After months of pleading, and wanting to learn the game of *rebote* only from the master, Agapito had persuaded Fish to be his mentor.

Fish was a living legend. He had played and won on every court in the Southwest—from Brownsville, Texas, to Salinas, California. By his reckoning, he had won over two hundred thousand dollars during his career, defeating the very best *rebote* players ever to take the handball court. Now in his fifties, and a man of simple needs, he had loaned, gambled, and given away most of the money through the years. The only material reward he had to show for all his winnings was a modest white clapboard house in San Gabriel, a few blocks from the Tenampa.

Nicolas, the bartender at the Tenampa, brought the letter to Fish sitting at a table on the shady patio behind the *cantina*.

"It's from a couple of players in El Paso. They want to a match."

Fish kept his eyes on Agapito.

"I don't think so. What would be the point?"

"They said they'll put down five thousand. They'll play by your rules wherever and whenever you want."

Fish watched Agapito hit a kill shot low into the corner. He whistled approval, and Agapito smiled self-consciously.

"How about it, Fish?" the bartender continued, "Word gets you're coming out of retirement for one match, and you'll pack this place. I need the business."

"Who are they, anyway? Torres and Guzmán? I've beaten Torres too many times. Has he teamed up with that cheat Guzmán?"

"It's not them. I don't know these players. The one who wrote calls himself Lucero. Just Lucero. His partner's name is *El Diablillo*."

*El Diablillo*. Fish chuckled and shook his head. He looked up at the bartender.

"Nico, I've never heard of them. I don't need to play nobodies."

Across the table, Felipito leaned forward in his chair. "Nobodies don't put up that kind of money, Fish."

Fish nodded and looked out at Agapito, who was poised to serve.

In the end, it would not be the money or the crowds that would persuade him. It was the not knowing.

"All right, Nico, write back to —what's his name?"

"Lucero."

"Write this Lucero that I accept. But it must be on a Sunday. I'll need Saturday to rest."

Nicolas grinned and went back into the *cantina*. On the court, the game ended, and Agapito came over to Fish's table.

“You did well. That was good the way you put the ball low like that. But your left is still weak. Rest awhile, then play a game using only your left hand.”

Agapito beamed at Fish’s compliment, then nodded seriously at the advice.

“I’m going to get a beer. I’ll be right back.” Agapito turned and entered the bar. The sweat glistened on his back and shoulders.

Felipito watched him run inside.

“He’s coming along fine. You’re teaching a good one, Fish.” Felipito grinned. “He reminds me a lot of a young you.”

Fish smiled back. “The first time I watched him play, I thought he could become very good. I want him to be confident, but I won’t let him get cocky.”

Agapito returned carrying three bottles of beer. He handed one to Felipito and set one in front of Fish. He pulled a chair around backwards and sat straddling it.

Fish took a drink. “I’ve been challenged to a doubles match. Did Nicolas tell you?”

Agapito towed his face and uncovered a broad smile. A personal letter addressed to anyone care of the Tenampa became public domain.

“I’m looking forward to watching that one.”

“Oh, you won’t have time to watch. You’ll be busy.”

Agapito furrowed his eyebrows, and Fish looked him straight in the eye.

“You’re going to be playing.”

Agapito’s face turned dark with embarrassment. He looked first at Felipito then back at Fish.

“Fish, I can’t! I mean—I’m not good enough. There’ll be a lot of money riding on the match!”

Fish shook his head.

“You’ll know my game as well as anyone else. You’re young. I need a young partner to make up for my age and slowness. You’ll do fine. We’ll work together to get ready. Go home and clean up, all right? Forget about the left-hand game. And don’t worry. You’ll do fine.”

Agapito shook his head slowly and got up from his chair. He bade the men goodbye and left the patio. Fish waited until he was gone.

“He needs to play a pressure match with me. Win or lose, it will be good for him.”

Felipito looked at his pocket watch and stood up.

“Then the money doesn’t matter to you?”

Fish looked up at him.

“Sure the money matters. Can you round up some backers? I’m only about four thousand-eight hundred short of my end of the bet.”

Felipito slapped Fish on the back and laughed heartily as he walked towards the *cantina*. By that evening, Felipito would have the backers for the return of the Fish.

In the weeks before the match, Fish played himself back into shape and assessed his condition. The calluses on his hands were still hard, and there was still power in those tanned, muscular arms. But his legs were almost gone, and to make up for his limited range, he’d devised a set of signals to teach Agapito. With the signals he would move his young partner into position about the court.

## II

Saturday morning, the day before the match, brought unseasonable heat. Like most Decembers in Southern California, this one had been mild. But a Santa Ana condition blew in from the northeast, and hot desert winds drove the temperature to ninety-eight degrees by eight-thirty.

Agapito stopped at Fish's house on the way to the Tenampa. He opened the wire gate and entered the yard. Fish was moving about under the *ramada* of bougainvillea, tending to his plants and flowers.

Agapito pulled a garden chair into the shade near Fish, turned it backwards, and sat down. He took a deep breath and heaved a sigh.

"Are you coming over today?"

Fish finished his watering and turned off the spigot.

"Would you hand me that towel?"

Agapito jumped nervously and fetched the towel. Fish wiped his face and hands.

"I'm going to stay home. It's too hot to be out." He was perspiring even in the shade of the *ramada*. Fish gathered the hose slowly and looped it over the spigot. "Are you going there already?"

Agapito slouched a little in his chair.

"I though I'd just stop by. I can't sit still at home."

Fish stomped the mud from his boots on the concrete patio. Without looking at Agapito, he said, "Well, I don't see any harm in going if you don't let yourself get pulled into a game. It's too hot to play today." He opened the screen door and started into his back porch. He turned to Agapito.

"Just two things: if you drink, stick to beer; and don't talk to the players from El Paso. Not even if they try to talk to you. Ignore them completely and don't say a word."

Fish started into the house then stopped again.

"Three things: go home early." Fish went inside, and Agapito smiled, relieved.

Agapito stepped out of the shade into the furnace of the morning, bound for the Tenampa, thinking over what Fish had told him.

## III

The Tenampa was already buzzing by nine. Agapito entered and stood by the door a few moments, letting his eyes adjust to the *cantina*'s darkness. When he stepped up to the bar, Nicolas came over to him.

With a perfunctory swipe, he cleared the counter in front of the young man. "What can I get you, Agapito?"

Agapito looked around, studying the faces of the men in the *cantina*. There were many unfamiliar faces, and he couldn't tell which were the men from El Paso.

"I'll have a beer." Agapito turned to Nicolas. "There sure are a lot of strangers."

Nicolas looked around at the crowd. "Strange to you, maybe. But a lot of them are old friends of the Fish who have come from far to watch him play again. Fish and them go way back."

Agapito looked over his shoulder. "Where are they?"

Nicolas pulled a beer from the ice box. "I think they went out to look at the court, but it's pretty hot out there. They'll probably be back inside soon. When they come in, I'll point them out to you."

Nicolas set the bottle in front of Agapito and moved to another part of the bar. They must have come in while he was away.

"Agapito Mendoza? We were told you were he."

The hairs stood up on the back of Agapito's neck, and the muscles of his shoulders knotted. The baritone question was posed quietly, but its deep roundness boomed inside Agapito's head. He flushed but kept his eyes straight ahead.

There was a long silence.

"I am Lucero."

Agapito continued to ignore the stranger, hoping he would give up and go away.

Lucero stood behind him a moment longer. Agapito was sure he could feel his hot breath on his neck. Then the stranger stepped away and disappeared into the crowd, taking his heat with him. Agapito did not dare turn around.

Nicolas returned to Agapito.

"Where were you? Didn't you see him?" Agapito asked. "You said you'd point them out. He came and talked to me. God, I wish I hadn't come in here." He took a swallow of beer and wiped his mouth nervously. "Have Rudy and Pato come in yet?"

Nicolas pointed his chin past Agapito. "They're back at the corner table."

Agapito braced himself. Lucero might be standing near waiting for him to turn around. He didn't even know what Lucero looked like. He spun around and looked from face to face, trying to match one with the singular voice that had scorched his mind and chilled his blood. He saw Rudy waving to him from the back table.

As soon as Agapito had joined his friends and gotten comfortable, another stranger approached him. Agapito dropped his eyes to the table and fixed his gaze on the wet label of the beer bottle in front of him.

"May I buy you a drink, Agapito?"

Agapito didn't answer. Rudy looked at the stranger, then at Agapito. "The man's talking to you."

Agapito kept his eyes on the bottle, but kicked Rudy hard under the table.

The stranger asked, "May I sit down?"

Agapito shifted his eyes slightly and looked at the stranger's feet. They seemed too small to be a man's.

"I guess the answer is no," Pato told the stranger. Agapito watched the little feet stand there a long moment then turn and walk away.

Rudy waited until the stranger was out of earshot. "I don't know what that was all about, but if that was me, I would've pulled you to your feet and slugged you."

Agapito stood up. "Fish told me not to say a word to them. I'll see you tomorrow." Agapito abruptly stood up, left the dark *cantina*, and made his way home in the blinding brightness of the midsummer December morning.

Throughout the day people arrived, filling the Tenampa, some from as far north as Salinas. It was a homecoming. Old friends and *compadres* long separated gave *abrazos* and chided each other about how they had aged. New acquaintances were made. Rounds of drinks were bought, and friendship and sport were toasted again and again. From diverse places, all these men had come home to San Gabriel with three things in

common: love of *rebote*, money to bet on their favorites, and the fact that none of them had ever heard of the men from El Paso.

By eight o'clock Saturday night, not another patron could be shoe-horned into the Tenampa. If all these men had brought gambling money, they had brought even more drinking money. The din within the *cantina* was deafening. Men strained to hear conversations and vulgar jokes over the laughter and shouting. Drinkers hunched shoulder to shoulder at the bar, and the barmaids couldn't serve the tables fast enough. Cecilia and Chavela were having all they could handle this night, Cecilia trading insults with customers, Chavela, the younger of the two, darting from table to table stuffing bills into her damp, formidable cleavage. As she went, she wiped the stream of perspiration from her chest, and with the same towel cleaned off the beer-washed tables.

The fiesta carried long into the night. At the height of the revelry, Rosalio Sanchez and Lalo Delgado left briefly and returned with their guitars. They were the pride of San Gabriel for their harmonies and their way with the instruments. They had waited for the mood of the crowd to be just so, and they were greeted with boisterous applause when they took a small table near the bar and began tuning their guitars. As they tuned, the crowd quieted down.

When the *cantina* was quiet enough, Rosalio had only to play three notes of a familiar love song before the walls of the Tenampa shook from the whistles and *gritos* of the appreciative audience. Lalo poured out the song in careful measures, his lilting tenor voice hypnotizing the already mellow patrons. A gossamer cloud of steel blue cigarette smoke floated over the men as they savored every word.

The song ended, and the audience hooted and stomped their approval. The beer flowed a little more slowly now, as the barmaids paused among the tables to rest an arm on a muscular shoulder and listen thoughtfully to the singers.

After a second love song, Rosalio struck up the tune of a bawdy bar ditty that brought thunderous applause and laughter. The men joined in and sang the lyrics lustily, aiming the obscene verses at Cecilia and Chavela. The women went along with the gag, feigning modesty all but trampled on. And the men sang their heartiest when the girls swatted at them with their towels or covered their faces in mock embarrassment.

Someone requested that Chavela sing her number, a story of loved betrayed for another. It was the absolute favorite of the locals, and nothing pleased the girl more than the chance to sing her song.

While Chavela sang, a young man tenderly wrapped his arm around Cecilia's waist. She rocked slowly to the rhythm of the guitars, her hip now and again softly brushing the young man's chest.

Chavela ended her song defiant, head held high. She juted her chin and thrust her hands on her hips in the classic pose of the Mexican *chanteuse*.

The entertainment ended, and some of the patrons left the cantina for home and a short night's sleep. Others settled into their chairs for more serious drinking, reminiscing, and speculating about tomorrow's match. There would be hell to pay for tonight's fiesta, but hell would come reckoning on its own soon enough for all who drank the night away in the Tenampa bar.

## IV

Sunday morning brought no break from the heat. Inside the Tenampa, the Saturday night revelers nursed the *cruda*. In the steamy darkness of the *cantina*, Cecilia and Chavela whispered catlike from table to table. They pushed carts laden with kettles of piping hot *menudo*. Almost asleep on their cat-feet, the barmaids crashed into tables, adding to the agony of the hung-over patrons. Like a Sunday morning service in a dark adobe mission, penitents held their heads bent, hands pressed to temples, repenting of having drunk so very much, praying for anything short of death to free them from the *cruda*.

At ten o'clock, Agapito entered the Tenampa and went straight to the bar. In the dimness he couldn't see the tears pouring from Nicolas's burning eyes. Never had the bartender chopped so much cilantro or sliced so many onions.

Nicolas wiped his running nose with a towel then wiped off the bar in front of Agapito. He bent down, fished out a cold beer, popped the cap, and set it on the counter. Agapito impatiently grabbed the bottle and pressed it to his sweating forehead, gritting at the first painful sensation of its icy coldness. He took a swallow and headed for the handball court.

The blinding whiteness of the court staggered Agapito. He shaded his eyes and took a seat in the small bleachers under the patio shade. The plastered brick court was like a furnace. The whitewashed walls reflected the heat at the cracked, sizzling concrete floor. On the court, Lucero and El Diablillo were limbering up with a game against Santiago Contreras and Pedro Aparicio, two respected players out of Santa Barbara's *SalSiPuedes* bar. Agapito settled back to watch.

Lucero and El Diablillo looked well matched. Lucero appeared to be in his prime, about thirty years old, handsome and muscular. He sported a black moustache which he wiped after every point. Lucero played an even game. He showed no emotion, not even the few times his team lost a point. Lucero calmly played every point with the control of a veteran.

Agapito took a drink and turned his attention to Lucero's younger partner. *El Diablillo* was a marked contrast to Lucero's manly, darkly handsome appearance. He looked to be in his twenties. He had the face of a weasel, with slightly pointed ears, and sharp, weasely eyes that darted—never swept or glanced but darted—here and there as if they hurt to look on anything for too long. And he had the quickness of a weasel. Lucero was muscular, but his muscles relaxed between points. *El Diablillo* was like a tightly-wound watch spring. He stood tensed, slightly bent at the waist, arms out, ready to spring from here to there on tiny feet—the same little feet Agapito remembered from yesterday—all his limbs set to move at the same time, like the talons of a raptor.

Agapito looked up at the cloudless sky. The heat that had blown in from the desert had sanded the clarity from the blueness of the sky. Agapito wondered what the heat was going to do to Fish.

The game was over quickly. Lucero and El Diablillo had beaten Contreras and Aparicio handily, 11-3. The losers walked off the court to the shade of the patio shaking their heads. Aparicio saw Agapito and came over to him. Agapito offered his beer. He knew what the man was going to say. Aparicio took a long pull of the cold beer, wiped his face with a towel, and looked over at the strangers as he spoke.

“I don’t know who they are. And I don’t know whether you should look forward to a long afternoon or a very short one.” Aparicio turned toward Agapito. “I didn’t see any weaknesses, did you?”

Agapito shook his head and said nothing. Aparicio took another swig of beer. “They seemed to know where we were going to hit our shots almost before we did. They were never out of position.”

Agapito felt a surge of panic rise in him, and he sat up. He reflected on the stakes of the match, and the panic almost overwhelmed him.

Aparicio continued. “But you’re playing with the best who ever lived on his home court. I don’t think Lucero or the other one is as good as Fish.” Aparicio paused. “But Fish isn’t playing alone. Nothing personal, Agapito, but Fish should’ve picked a more experienced partner.” He turned and walked into the dark bar, leaving Agapito to mull over his words in the late-morning heat.

At twelve-thirty, Fish entered the Tenampa. By this time, most of the big bets had been placed. Close to twenty thousand dollars had been put down in side bets. Surprisingly, for coming in with no reputation, the team of Lucero and El Diablillo was a three-to-two favorite. Most of the out-of-towners put their money on them, based largely on the tune-up game against Contreras and Aparicio. The locals and other friends of Fish, however, stuck with the master and his inexperienced *protégé*, although their better judgment told them the smart money was on the strangers from El Paso.

Fish’s entrance was met with applause and cheers. Fish humbly acknowledged the acclaim with a wave of his hand and took a seat at a nearby table. As he bent over to unlace his shoes, Cecilia brought a towel and a glass of ice tea. She couldn’t help noticing that Fish was sweltering from just the walk to the *cantina* in the scorching heat.

Agapito went to Fish directly.

“Fish, they’re good. I watched them beat Contreras and Aparicio. I don’t think I should be your partner. I mean it. Can we get out of this bet?”

Fish didn’t respond to the young man until he had finished lacing up a pair of old, black sneakers. He sat up and looked at Agapito, the disappointment a shadow on his face.

“I thought you had enough sense not to go out there and watch them play. You still have a lot to learn, young man.”

“But, Fish, I thought I’d scout them out; you know, look for weaknesses or something we could use to win. But there’s nothing. Not a weak point in their game. I tell you, they’re a perfect team.” Agapito was trying to whisper, but his voice cracked with urgency.

Fish held up his callused hands in front of Agapito’s face. They were laborer’s hands, the skin of the palms thick and tough like well-used slabs of leather.

“We have these,” Fish told him, “and everything I have up here.” He tapped his temple with an index finger. “Relax. Don’t worry about their game. Just concentrate on our game.” He took a drink from the frosted glass. “Do you think you will remember all our signals and moves?”

Agapito nodded nervously, trying to instill in Fish confidence he had so little of in himself. He gave up and let out a sigh.

“I have friends who have laid out a lot of money on us. I can’t lose it for them.”

Fish wiped his perspiring face with the towel.

“That’s why all this talk should stop. Look, Agapito, play exactly like I taught you. Just do that. I’ll back you up, but I have to know you’ll do what I expect you to. Will you?”

Agapito shrugged his shoulders and stood up.

“I’ll try my best. I just hope I don’t embarrass you in front of all your friends.”

Fish gave him a quick, reassuring smile.

“Our best is all we need. Let’s go.”

Fish put a hand on Agapito’s shoulder, and the two walked out of the darkness onto the patio of the handball court.

Agapito stepped onto the court amid a burst of applause that sent the blood rushing to his face. He wandered around the court momentarily, trying to dissipate his self-consciousness.

Fish went to a table on the patio. He took off his shirt, exposing muscular arms tanned to the biceps. His thin cotton sleeveless undershirt would allow him freedom of movement and at the same time would absorb his sweat and protect his back from the sun. He took the court to even greater applause than Agapito. Fish tightened the belt of his loose khaki trousers. He did some knee bends and squats to limber up. As he did, he took in every detail of the familiar surroundings.

The patio off-court was filled with *aficionados*. Above the sidewall, neighborhood boys perched atop the screen and waved down at their less fortunate friends far below. On the roof of the Tenampa, men drank and laughed. They had clambered up a rain gutter and would view the action from a hot but unobstructed vantage point.

Fish looked at the wooden fence at the back of the court. It was sturdy enough, but there were large gaps between the boards. The gaps were filled with a hundred eyes. Against the fence, an enterprising fan had leaned a stepladder, and, like a gorgon, appeared to have several heads of varying size and feature. Fish could hear the large crowd pressed close on the other side of the fence.

There were still others Fish could not see. They were the men inside the dark *cantina* and outside the entrance, *aficionados* of *rebote* who would depend on a word-of-mouth chain of reports from courtside to follow the action.

Fish looked at the whitewashed walls of the court. Hundreds of black dots peppered the front wall, an impressionistic history of games gone before. The ballmarks on the sidewall were sharp, black brushstrokes, a mural of speed.

The front wall was brick, covered with a smooth layer of plaster. There were three or four dead spots on the wall. Shots that hit them died quickly. There were also live spots. Balls that hit solid brick and plaster exploded off the wall and were all but impossible to return.

This was Fish’s court. He knew it and played it like no one else. All these thoughts Fish considered as he swung his arms in large circles. In front of him, Lucero stood, arms crossed, watching him while *El Diablillo* killed time throwing the ball against the wall and catching it.

Don Esteban Aguilar called the players to the shade. For the first time, Fish and Agapito acknowledged the strangers from El Paso.

Don Esteban introduced himself to the strangers and went over the rules of the match.



“I understand the match will be a *tregua*.” Fish and Lucero nodded. Fish had stipulated the three-game match thinking it wise not to place such high stakes on a single game. Even if they lost a game, he and Agapito could still rally and win the match.

Don Esteban continued. “Each game of this best-of-three will be to eleven points. I will be the official scorekeeper and judge. My decisions will be final and will not be protested. Do you have your wager, Lucero?”

Lucero handed him a roll of green bills. The judge counted it and asked Fish for his stake. Felipito Cuevas gave Don Esteban a stack of bills, five thousand dollars.

“If there is nothing else, I’ll toss the coin.” As soon as the coin left Don Esteban’s hand, Lucero called tails. The coin bounced, then wiggled to rest heads-up.

The roar exploded as the four players took the court. Fish blessed himself. Agapito, too, blessed himself and took the ball in his left hand. The crowd on the patio, inside the bar, and on the street hushed for the first serve.

With a voice hoarse with nervousness, Agapito called, “*Va*,” indicating he was ready to serve.

Lucero answered in his baritone, “*Viene*.” His team was ready. When both teams so signaled and the server dropped the ball, the point had to be played. The server had to hit a fair serve and the receiving team had to hit a fair return.

Fish gave a short, high-pitched whistle, and Agapito moved three feet to his right. He bounced the ball and hit a perfect serve low into the corner. The shot just cleared the serving line then skipped out of bounds. One point. A thunder of applause rumbled from the fans. Agapito prepared to serve again.

“*Va*.”

“*Viene*.”

Fish gave a different signal, and Agapito served the ball toward the front wall as he ran toward the sideline. The unorthodox move froze the strangers, and *El Diablillo* was out of position. The second serve was not returned, and Agapito had won two quick points. Money began changing hands as bets were won and lost on each point.

Fish was already perspiring, and he hadn’t so much as touched the ball yet. He wiped his face with the front of his undershirt and looked at Agapito. The boy’s nervousness had yielded to cockiness. Fish called him over.

“You’ve made two good serves, but they’re only two points and this is just the first game. We’re going to lose some points before this is over, so don’t get overconfident.”

Agapito settled down, but it was as Fish had predicted. Agapito’s next serve skipped out of bounds. Having lost the serve, they would have to receive from *El Diablillo*. As quickly as they had fallen behind, the strangers came back and tied the score. From the bleachers on the patio, murmurs of dissatisfaction drifted out to Agapito, and his self-doubt returned.

At seven-five in favor of Lucero and *El Diablillo*, the first game was already an hour old. At two o’clock the sun continued to beat down mercilessly on the four players.

Fish was feeling the effects of the heat. His throat was parched. The soles of his feet burned on the sizzling concrete. The Santa Ana wind had died, and no breeze cut through the dead stillness of the heat wave. There was no relief. Fish had to let Agapito cover more of the court.

At eight-six, *El Diablillo* sent a low shot along the sidewall. Agapito lunged for the ball and slammed into the sidewall. He collapsed grasping his right shoulder. Fish ran to him and started rubbing and rotating Agapito's arm. The boy screamed out in pain.

"Keep moving it. Don't let it stiffen up."

Agapito pulled his arm tight to his side.

"Can you play, or shall we stop?"

Agapito shook his head. "No, don't call it off. I'll play."

"You're hurt. You won't be able to cover the left."

"We can't just hand them the money. Let's play. I'll be all right."

Agapito winced as Fish helped him to his feet.

Somehow, despite Agapito's injury, he and Fish rallied and won the first game eleven-nine. As soon as the game was over, Pato ran onto the court and began rubbing down Agapito's shoulder with *tequila*, trying to save his investment—a week's pay—on Agapito and Fish.

During the short intermission between games, Fish went to the patio and took some tea. At best, he thought, Agapito might be able to cover the front left quarter of the court. That meant that he, Fish, would have to protect the other three-fourths, too much for his limited range. He looked at Agapito. Pato was working furiously on his shoulder.

Fish took another drink and turned his attention to Lucero for the first time. He was startled to see the man staring him straight in the eye. Fish looked away, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Lucero still staring. Fish took a last mouthful of tea and spat it on the hot concrete. Before he took the court, he rubbed the soles of his sneakers in the quickly evaporating splash.

Pato's work was all wasted effort. Agapito's serve in the second game fell far short of the front wall. Head down, he turned and looked at Fish. With his eyes, Fish told him to forget the lost point. When Agapito turned back, Fish shook his head.

*El Diablillo* set himself to serve.

"*Va.*"

Fish looked at Lucero. The man continued his piercing stare. His eyes seemed to penetrate Fish's, to burn their insides.

"*Viene.*"

Fish whistled twice. Agapito moved to his right so he could cover more of the court with his left hand. His weak left hand was now his stronger side, and Fish rued not having had him develop his left.

*Diablillo's* serve hit the front and side and bounced to Agapito's right. He turned and awkwardly backhanded the ball high on the front wall. Lucero hit a low kill shot, but again Agapito returned. *Diablillo* hit a strong ball to the back wall that Fish played perfectly. He sent the return to a dead spot in the corner, and the ball trickled back unreturned. It was to be their only point in the second game. The strangers from El Paso won ten straight points and routed Fish and Agapito to even the match.

The crowd was buzzing. The heat, the drink, and the score combined to shorten tempers. On the roof a fan broke a bottle over another's head after he complained about Fish's play. Bets were renegotiated or welshed. And the sun blazed down relentlessly.

Before the start of the third game, Agapito came over to Fish.

"It's no use. My arm is dead stiff. You should've got another partner. I'm not helping you at all."

“Look, Agapito, we’re going to play this out. You could’ve quit earlier, but you didn’t. Besides, what’s the worse that can happen? We can lose. Well, I’ve lost a lot of games. Before you’re through you’ll lose your share. The important thing is that you’re learning from every point. Do your best. I still have some tricks. Just do your best.”

Agapito towed off and went to the bleachers. Fish sat down in the shade and took off his sneakers. His socks were soaked and he pulled them off. Huge blisters covered the soles of both feet. Fish pressed the blisters until they broke, washing the bottoms of his feet with clear liquid. He mopped his feet and put on a fresh pair of socks he’d pulled from his back pocket. They felt cool and soft on his raw, burning feet. He laced up his shoes and walked gingerly back onto the court. As he did, he looked again at Lucero. He was still staring with those strange piercing eyes.

## V

“*Va.*” Fish snapped his attention back to the match.

“*Viene.*”

*Diablillo* hit his serve just above the foul line, and the ball skimmed toward Agapito. He returned high against the sidewall. The shot caromed inches inside the sideline. *Diablillo*’s return was slightly off, hitting low on the sidewall and bouncing before it reached the front. Agapito’s point.

Fish took over serve from Agapito. He stood farther back than usual.

“*Va.*”

Lucero hesitated, his first moment of uncertainty in the match. He moved back almost alongside Fish.

“*Viene.*”

Fish put strong bottom-spin on his serve. The ball hit the wall and shot straight down. *El Diablillo* was farther back and couldn’t get to the ball. Fish led two-nothing.

Behind the back wall, someone started a rhythmic handclapping. Others joined in. Fish served into the corner. *Diablillo* should have been out of position, but because he was playing back, he returned a shot low along the sidewall. The ball whistled past Agapito. The handclapping died away as the brief spark of hope was extinguished.

Fish was exhausted. Sweat poured from his face and burned his eyes. His arms felt like lead. He reckoned he had been playing for two hours. The heat and exertion were taking a heavy toll.

Fish asked for a timeout. He went to the table and gulped down the fresh tea Cecilia had brought him. He dumped the chunks of ice into his hands and pressed them to his eyes and his temples. Felipito came over. He groped for words of encouragement.

“There are a lot of people behind you. Be strong.”

Fish bent down and pressed the ice to his neck. Felipito left him, and Fish returned to the court. It was hotter than ever in the depressing sunshine. He stood still a moment trying to detect even the faintest movement of air. Nothing.

Fish looked at Lucero. He didn’t want to look. He knew what he would see. But his eyes seemed to be pulled to the magnetic gaze of the stranger. There was something black, evil about those eyes, and Fish strained to comprehend their power. Who was he? What was he after?

“*Va.*”

“*Viene.*” It was Agapito who answered.

*Diablillo* served to Agapito’s left. His weak return caught the edge of the front wall and dribbled along the sideline. *Diablillo* cursed, picked up the ball, and slammed it against the front wall.

Fish whistled and pointed at *El Diablillo*. Don Esteban warned the young opponent and ordered the game to continue. Fish traded positions with Agapito. He sent what looked like a bad serve dead-center on the front wall. *Diablillo*, still hot from Agapito’s lucky shot, played right into Fish’s hand. *Diablillo* returned, and Fish stepped in front of him to get to the ball. At the last moment, Fish swung under the ball and missed. The ball struck *El Diablillo* in the chest. Fish whistled and pointed at *El Diablillo* again. He asked Don Esteban for a ruling.

“Obstruction.” the judge announced. “The ball may not be touched by a player after he hits his shot. Obstruction and interference.”

*El Diablillo* screamed at the judge, and Lucero had to pull him away. Don Esteban recoiled from the force of the anger, but he stood by his decision.

“The call will not be protested.”

The fans booed *El Diablillo*, and Fish smiled mischievously at Agapito. They had the lead, four-to-one.

Agapito took over the serve. He won one point but lost the serve on the next. After each shot he winced and pulled his arm tight to his side.

“*Va.*” *Diablillo* was still seething.

Fish asked for another timeout. As he wiped the sweat from his face, he looked over the crowd. No one had left, and the men on the patio rustled in the uncomfortable closeness and unbearable heat. Everywhere, faces glistened with perspiration. The doorway of the *cantina* was crowded with faces. Behind Fish, the gaps in the back fence glittered with the blinking of a hundred eyes. Atop the screen, children’s bodies hung motionless in space. The whole world had ground to a stop in the furnace stoked by the Santa Anas.

Fish pulled his sticky undershirt away from his chest and took his position. Lucero was staring. He could feel the eyes boring into him. Who was he?

“*Va.*”

“*Viene.*”

They traded points. Lucero kept his gaze on Fish.

“*Va.*”

Fish called timeout. He was buying time.

In the bleachers, men moved restlessly. Others went in and out of the bar, trying to dissipate their own tension.

“*Va.*” Lucero stared.

“*Viene.*” They were too good to be unknown.

*Diablillo*’s serve hit high and carried back to Fish. His return moved Lucero back, leaving the forecourt wide open. Agapito hit a little shot that kissed the front wall and died. The score tightened to nine-eight in the final game of the *tregua*.

## VI

All the spectators were on their feet. The bar had filled to overflowing, and patrons were pushed out onto the patio by the surge from within. The roof of the *cantina* groaned with the weight of men. Everywhere, people stood in tense silence. All these people, and none could help Fish. Only a nineteen-year-old with a bad shoulder playing in his first pressure match.

“*Va.*”

“*Viene.*”

Lucero returned Agapito’s serve with a bullet. Fish sidestepped the ball, let it hit the concrete, and played it off the back fence. His shot hit the side and front walls and clipped the sideline before shooting into the crowd. He had tied the score at nine.

It was almost three-thirty. The sun burned Fish’s bare shoulders. He looked at Agapito. The boy was pale. He bent at the waist and dipped his body to favor his right side.

Fish looked over at *El Diablillo*. He had his back to him, hands on his hips, still looking fresh.

Fish didn’t want to look at Lucero, but Lucero’s sinister eyes wrenched his to them. They seemed to be trying to draw the last of Fish’s hope and replace it with despair. They sought to blacken his soul with their deep blackness. What did he want?

“*Va.*”

“*Viene.*”

Agapito hit a poor serve dead-center. Lucero’s return was perfect, and Fish sprinted to the sideline to get it. He got his left hand on the ball and lofted a shot before crashing into the crush of court-side spectators. His feet were being cut to ribbons inside the sneakers. He was pushed back onto the court, but he could not reach the kill shot Lucero sent to the back wall. Like a drowning man, Fish gulped for air. His lungs burned and his knees nearly buckled. He could do no more than bend at the waist, wheezing hot air into his parched, tortured lungs.

“*Va.*” Ten-nine, match point. Lucero stared.

Fish called timeout. *El Diablillo* protested the obvious stall, but Don Esteban merely shrugged his shoulders indicating the timeout was within the rules.

Someone threw Fish a towel, and he wiped his face and hands. Lucero was staring, and the questions desperately begged for answers. He had tried to avoid those eyes, but maybe the answers could only be found in the deepest blackness of those eyes.

*El Diablillo* knelt on one knee, lacing a shoe. Fish studied him—the hooked nose, the sharp eyes, the pointed ears. Fish turned to Lucero. He was grinning.

It was the most evil expression Fish had ever seen, the grin of a damned soul. The realization of who he must be wrapped itself around Fish, suffocating him in its coils. His eyes were welded to Lucero’s, and the sneering grin gave Fish the horrible answers. Now he understood why Lucero had no reputation, why he played so well. The *tregua* was not for money. Lucero was not playing for money. Fish realized what the stakes of the *tregua* had always been.

Lucero released him from his eyes. Fish trembled as a new question troubled him: why did he have a partner? He fought the answer as if he could will it to be otherwise. Agapito had just begun to live. So much that was good lay in his future.

Fish looked back at *El Diablillo*. He, too, was grinning that damn grin, that damned, evil, victorious grin.

But they weren't victorious. Not yet. Lucero and *El Diablillo* had to win one more point.

And through the dry, stifling heat, Fish felt the whisper of a fresh breeze caress him, lave him, flow through him, invigorate him. It was silken in its coolness, and it came from the west—a sea breeze that touched him and no one else, not even injured, exhausted Agapito.

Fish looked at Lucero. He was no longer grinning. He wore the true face of his evilness—angry, proud, and utterly without salvation. But Fish's fear and uncertainty were gone, evaporated by the soft sea breeze. No, he would have made it difficult for Lucero to have him. But to have Agapito, too, Fish would make it impossible. Lucero had made two mistakes: he had challenged Fish to his game, and they were playing on Fish's home court. And not a soul—damned or otherwise—beat Fish on his court.

Fish summoned the last of his strength and wits and hobbled out on bloody feet. Agapito took his position in front of him. The boy bent, supporting his body, bracing his right arm on his knee.

Fish would tell him nothing.

The crowd began to clap again, the same rhythmic handclapping. All around the court, men with grim, exhausted expressions clapped. Behind him, Fish heard the men pounding on the back fence. A thousand handclaps multiplied themselves in reverberation against the white walls. It was to Fish as if upon the next point hinged the salvation of all these souls.

“*Va.*” Lucero could barely be heard above the echoing thunder.

“*Viene.*” Fish shouted with determined finality.

Lucero let the black ball roll out of his left hand toward the hot concrete floor. In those few moments that it dropped through the still air, rotating slowly, Fish made his final move.

“*¡Ay, mi corazón!*” He grabbed his chest and dropped to the floor of the court. The clapping stopped and men shouted in alarm. Lucero turned back to look at Fish lying still on the ground, and the ball bounced, and bounced again, and rolled to a stop against the sidewall. There was silence. Everywhere, spectators were gripped in stunned silence.

Fish laughed.

In the hot silence, the laughter poured out of him in waves as he lay on the hot, gray concrete and surged up into the hot, blue sky. The laughter echoed off the walls and washed over the numb spectators. Fish sat up and laughed into the face of Lucero. He had tricked him into losing the match point. Fish had forced the mistake with desperate guile. The score was tied, and no matter how long the match might continue, Fish and Lucero both knew Fish could keep pulling one more trick out of his bag to keep from being beaten. Fish might not win, but he would not lose.

When *El Diablillo* understood, he grabbed the ball in his left hand. His weasel eyes flashed at Fish. He turned and hurled the ball over the front wall. The heads of the spectators snapped up to follow its flight. Like a rifle shot, the black ball disappeared into the dull afternoon sky.

When the spectators looked back, the strangers were gone, vanished into hot, dry air. Only Fish and Agapito remain on the court. Fish sat, arms on knees, weeping. Agapito rested on his haunches, cradling his right arm.

The crowd surged onto the court. A wave of fans broke from the *cantina*, the flow separating as some ran to Agapito and others to Fish. The players were borne to the patio by the flood of men.

Pato held out a beer, and the exhausted Agapito took the bottle and pressed it to his forehead.

“I can’t believe it! I thought they were going to win that last point!”

Fish sat on a table. His shoes and socks were already off, and Nicolas was nursing his bleeding feet.

Don Esteban brought out a leather pouch and poured the wagers onto the table beside Fish. Felipito pushed through the crowd and set down a white hat turned upside down and filled to the brim with bills of large denomination.

“Your share of the side bets, Fish.” Felipito beamed.

Fish looked at the money for a moment.

“Not exactly easy money, was it.” The crowd laughed politely. Fish pushed the bills and the hat toward Agapito.

“You take it, son.”

Agapito looked wide-eyed at Fish, then braced stubbornly.

“I can’t do it. I didn’t help.”

Fish shook his head tiredly and spoke quietly.

“I’ve shown you almost everything I know about this game. Today you played as well as a man can play. You’re going to do fine for yourself.

“Take the money. Save it. Spend it. Do whatever you want with it. But listen to me now: don’t forget this day, this *tregua*. Remember the shots, the moves.” Fish smiled. “The tricks, too.”

Agapito looked at Fish soberly and was silent. Fish continued, “This was my last time on the court, and I have learned the most important lesson of all. But you have many more games ahead, many things you’ll learn, and—God willing—many wins.”

The men on the roof felt it first. The sea breeze blew in and they opened their shirts to its cool relief. Below, the brown palm fronds of the *ramada* rustled delectably and showered gold coins of sunshine upon the men on the patio.

Agapito stood and, moving closer, whispered to Fish.

“Who were they?”

Fish looked tenderly at Agapito.

“Not now. We’ll talk about them tomorrow. We must. But today enjoy all this, young man.”

Fish put on his socks and street shoes. “Time to get this old man home.”

Fish slid off the table and Felipito helped him walk to the back door of the Tenampa. He stopped there and looked beyond the back fence of the handball court. Far to the west clouds were forming over the ocean. They promised a return to the cool days of winter.