

Pepper Corner  
by  
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**PEPPER CORNER - STRYDER SIMMS 2012 OPENCHANNELCONTENT LLC**

Rural Northern New Mexico, a skyline of mesas and arroyos. Dwellings of pre-Columbian America crumble in the cliffs.

High desert hillsides are dotted with adobe's and modest fields of corn, squash and chili.

Prickly pear, pinion, and cottontail ramble from over hill and dale to the creek's edge.

PEPPER CORNER a far-flung outpost of the American westward expansion sits on the sweet spot of a fertile valley between two such sheltering mesas.

Pepper Corner's claims to the modern world are a telephone line, a train station and a saloon.

**EXT. PEPPER CORNER TRAIN STATION, SUMMER OF 1937 -SUNSET**

A train whistle can be heard broadcasting its departing cadence across echoing mesas. A million fiddling crickets divide up what's left of the sound track among themselves.

An EMPLOYEE OF THE RAILROAD turns the key on a lock and walks away from the station. He is **GERALDO** a confident, good-natured Norteno in his late thirties with a poker face and swaggering manor.

He walks past a drunken young man, **JESUS**, 24 the local dreamer with few prospects and pants that he must keep pulling up. He is also well built and not bad looking.

GERALDO

Get your ass home by dark, pendejo,  
before your wife comes out looking  
for you and finds someone better.

JESUS

(quite drunk)  
Hell with her. Paloma is dancing  
tonight.

GERARDO

(pulling down an imaginary  
train whistle)  
Whoee! I'm going to go fuck your  
old lady, while you're drooling  
over Paloma.

JESUS

Go!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GERALDO

Anyway you think you can make  
Paloma Sanchez your chonch? You're  
crazy.

Jesus pulls A KNIFE out of his boot and runs at Geraldo  
presenting his steel out front like a bayonet.

Geraldo gets a serious look on his face, but it grows less  
serious the closer Jesus and his knife become.

Geraldo simply side-steps his attacker. Jesus loses his  
balance. Geraldo slaps Jesus's face on the way down.

GERALDO (CONT'D)

(laughing)

It's not me you want to stick,  
pendejo.

(he kicks dirt on Jesus)

You have to face off with Jack  
Tanner for Paloma's chi-chis.

Jesus gathers himself off the ground, put's his knife back in  
his boot and dusts off while Geraldo stares him down acting  
superior in every way.

JESUS

Watch me do it.

GERALDO

Who? You, with Jack Tanner?

JESUS

(gathering courage)

Hang around, tonight, Cabron.

Geraldo looks him up and down, skeptically at first, but then  
nodding. Reading Jesus's aim Geraldo sees that it's true.

GERALDO

You better sober up then.

The train whistles once more further off.

GERALDO (CONT'D)

Better get your ass down to the  
creek, señor.

Geraldo grabs Jesus roughly by arm to escort his compañero  
over the tracks toward some nearby bluffs overhanging the  
creek.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Suddenly both men look back over their shoulders. A clattering, 1930's Ford touring car full of noisy, drunken characters careens into town and screeches to a stop in front of the train station. All four doors fly open.

Jesus and Geraldo look at the strangers, then at each other.

It is dusk. Against the fading western sky, the rooster tail of dust the car has dragged down the road behind it catches up to the dark silhouettes of tipsy men as they pile out of the car.

The Ford empties out. Six figures stumble onto the road, five men clutching bottles OF TEQUILA, and a boy **THEO**, hugging a GUITAR. He is all of fifteen, shy, fresh-eyed, like a shot of blue in a cloudy sky.

A compact bear of a man leads the pack. **DIEGO**, in his early thirties, sharply dressed in black from head-to-toe, twirls an onyx ring on his index finger.

As he contemplates their next move, Diego's muchachos mill about swilling from jugs.

Diego looks around, eyes the saloon, lights a cigarillo. Crickets are mincing up the silence like a thousand-stringed orchestra. Diego smiles to himself elects to sit down on some benches under an archway next to the train station.

His amigos fall in all around. The boy Theo sits at the far end of the bench from Diego and starts to strum his guitar. One of the men begins to hum a soulful ranchero. Others drink from their bottles and sway to the music.

**EXT. FIELD - NIGHT**

Slowly sinking down on their haunches to remain unnoticed Jesus and Geraldo look at each other, then the strangers.

We watch with those two as Diego stands up under the archway, snatches a bottle from one of his companeros and offers Theo a drink. Theo refuses and keeps strumming the guitar.

Diego grows more insistent. The boy grows more insistent with his refusal, still strumming his guitar.

Diego finally takes the boy by the hair and forces the bottle to his mouth. The music stops and the boy takes a long drink. Diego let's him catch his breath and then makes Theo take one more. Diego's men watch and laugh.

DIEGO

You sound better after a drink.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

From out in the field Jesus and Diego watch and whisper.

JESUS  
(tearing up)  
I was about that same age.

GERALDO  
Que no? My old man did that same  
thing.

Both men slap the other's cheek.

**EXT. TRAIN PLATFORM -CONTINUOUS**

Diego slaps the boy's cheek, offers the bottle to him.

DIEGO  
Listen up. Su Padre habelaren! Here  
is the one thing that can help take  
the sting away when life gets hard  
and life is always hard.

Theo takes the bottle from him and takes a drink then sets it  
down and returns to his music making.

**EXT. FIELD - NIGHT**

Geraldo shrugs and sniffs, looks at Jesus who has a tear in  
his eye. The stars are starting to twinkle around their  
heads. Geraldo nudges Jesus.

GERALDO  
You going to stick Jack Tanner  
tonight or not?

A distant dog barks. Jesus wipes his eyes. The two of them  
point their asses at us and sneak off on hands and knees  
toward the creek.

DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. PEPPER CORNER TRAIN STATION -A SHORT TIME LATER**

It's deserted. Darkness has closed in. Someone has switched  
on the street lamps. The old Ford remains parked in front of  
the train station.

**EXT. SALOON - CONTINUOUS**

The saloon windows bleed tawny light out into the star-  
crowned night.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

By the sound of it, the strangers have moved their party inside.

Jesus and Geraldo return from the creek with their faces washed and hair combed back.

They proceed to cross the road, but, just then, up walks a couple in fine evening dress. Jesus freezes.

The man and woman pass by as though they don't even see them.

It's **JACK TANNER** and **PALOMA**. Jack appears well turned out, aged early 40's, blond, slim, blue-eyed, with a close-trimmed mustache and 5X beaver hat tilted at a distinctive angle.

Jack palms a gold-tipped cane, wielding it as a scepter not a crutch. His suit is light and pin-striped. His watch chain, heavy and gold. His cigar, fresh and blazing.

Paloma's costume bustles with lace and crinoline and whispers as she strolls past Jesus. Her perfume catches in his nose. Jesus does not even look at Jack.

Geraldo looks at Jack and his expression clouds over. The two vatos stand back and evesdrop on the couple as they approach the saloon.

Jack reaches his arm around the waste of Paloma. She shuffles it off, and adjusts her gate a half step out of Jack's reach. Jack snags her arm with the hook of his cane and hauls Paloma back along beside him. He squeezes one of her buttocks. Paloma shrugs and looks away.

Geraldo nudges Jesus to act. Jesus steps into the light, puts his hands on his hips, juts his jaw Jack Tanner, about to shout something. Geraldo chuckles. Jesus suddenly drops his macho attitude and goes hysterical with nervous laughter.

Paloma searches over her shoulder for the source of it.

Jesus winces with desire. Geraldo laughs, throwing his arm over Jesus' shoulder.

GERALDO

My old man used to say, Better not  
to start what you can't finish.

The vatos watch Jack and Paloma make their entrance into the saloon. As Paloma passes through the door a cheer can be heard.

JESUS

I want to watch Paloma dance first.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

GERALDO

Sure, my friend, if you insist.

Jesus suddenly throws his body affectionately on Geraldo.

JESUS

Vato, if I am killed, please accept my knife as a memorial.

Geraldo slaps Jesus' face.

GERALDO

It's bad luck talking like that. My old man used to say, while the loser blinks, the winner thinks.

Jesus raps his own head with his knuckles.

JESUS

You're right. Right? Clear your head or you're dead, que no?

Geraldo marches toward the saloon, stiffening his spine like a soldier, Jesus falls in behind.

In through the saloon door push Geraldo and Jesus.

**INT. LEGAL TENDER SALOON -NIGHT**

Inside is a nineteen-thirties territorial dance hall with a full house of raucous ranchers with a handful of bawdily clad dancing girls.

Diego and his men are holding down a large corner table.

Theo, at his own table, is going at his instrument now with passionate, abandon. On the table in front of him is a bottle of tequila. Next to it an overturned one and countless used shot glasses.

Paloma makes her entrance. She grabs a glass of tequila off the nearest table, downs it and tosses it. She throws her arms up and launches into a floor stomping frenzy, spinning around once to flair her skirt and get the men worked up.

Just then Jack throws his gold-tipped cane in front of Paloma so that she has to stop dancing. Men's voices grumble. Everything grinds to a halt.

Paloma looks embarrassed, then reluctantly picks up Jack's cane and takes it to him like a dog might fetch a stick. Everyone watches with big grins on their ignorant faces.

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CONTINUED:

Jack frowns at the bartender. In a subservient and kowtowing manner, the bartender hands Jack Tanner two glasses and a fresh bottle of tequila.

Jack grabs Paloma by the arm and doesn't let go until he's set her down in a chair at a vacant table. Jack then kicks two of the three remaining chairs over, sets the shot glasses on the tabletop, gently, then shoves the bottle at Paloma.

Jack does this smirking and watching everybody's expression to relish his control over Paloma and her admirers.

Paloma takes the bottle by the neck, grudgingly, slips the cork out of the tip with her teeth and pours one for herself first and then fills the boss's glass.

Jack then lowers himself into the chair as Paloma bolts her drink, neat and greedy, then flicks her wild hair back and scans the room looking captive, hungry and bored.

Jesus and Geraldo have witnessed all this. Geraldo studies Jesus's opponent while he leads the way toward the bar.

Jack sneers at Geraldo and flicks his half smoked cigar to the floor. As some poor sob bends to pick it up, Jack's boot crushes it. Geraldo shrugs and looks away timidly.

Jesus's attention clings to Paloma's charms like the very stitches that fix the spangles to her gown and stockings.

A look around the room reveals that every other young man Jesus's age in the room is conspicuously wearing the same trimmed mustache as Jack and has their hat tilted at more or less the same angle as Jack's.

JESUS

I'm going to become Jefe around here.

GERALDO

(slapping the bar to call the bartender)

Muchacho! Dos pronto!

The bartender appears, sets and pours. Ritualistically, the two men knock back their liquor, rap down their empty shot glasses and, in unison, slap their palms on the bar for refills before the bartender can get away.

With recharged glass, Jesus turns and faces the room, takes a shot of booze over to Jack's table and sets it in front of Jack, stepping back politely.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

He glances briefly and smiles at his friend Geraldo whose heart is beating in his throat back at the bar. All other bar patrons stop and take notice as well.

JESUS

May the lady dance again, like last week?

Jack takes the glass Jesus has set before him and drains it. Then he takes his glass of tequila, stands up and pretends to be giving it to Jesus in an exchange of goodwill.

Jesus takes the glass and no sooner does it come away from his mouth than Jack fits his fist right down the same hole. Jesus goes down.

The room erupts in laughter. Geraldo winces on the sideline. Jesus gets up with his back to us, walks over to Geraldo. Geraldo's reaction tells how bad it is.

Disregarding its owner, Jesus swipes a full shot glass off the bar and walks over to Jack again, sets it in front of Jack. This time Jesus is looking at Paloma.

Paloma does not miss the gesture and seems disturbed by it.

This time Jesus doesn't ask Jack anything. He just stands there waiting to be punched. Jack bolts the booze, stands up and repays him with another smack. The crowd erupts in laughter, Geraldo winces again. Jack laughs with the crowd.

Jesus gathers himself up once more and takes another glass of tequila off the bar to set in front of Jack. This time, there are rows of tequila shots backed-up and waiting for Jesus.

There is some kind of betting going on. Perhaps how many punches he can take. Guys standing watch are palming cash.

Jesus sets down the booze in front of Jack once more and stands back with his eyes on Paloma. The crowd hems Jesus in to make sure there is no retreat.

Jack stares him down as he slowly reaches for the drink, but Paloma grabs the shot of tequila first and gulps it. Then she stands up, tosses the empty glass over her head and starts dancing.

Hoot, hoot, everybody encourages her. Jack does nothing to stop it. Jesus claps with the music while Paloma dances.

Paloma dances with hands raised and clapping. She exudes sexuality and passion. All eyes are on the hem of her skirt.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Her gaze briefly falls on Jesus, skeptically probing his deeper intent. She lingers on him long enough for Jesus's eyes to brim over with love-sickness.

Jesus gets slammed in the face again, by surprise this time, while he is distracted by Paloma.

The entire room goes up in laughter and cheers.

Paloma's thunder intensifies.

Jesus gets up on rubber legs and goes back to the bar, grinning a foolish, bloody grin. People are slapping him on the back, laughing at his expense.

His compadre Geraldo appears at his side with a shot glass. They down them in unison. Geraldo wipes his mouth.

GERALDO

Now that you've got us both looking like cowards, let's get the hell out of here before everybody wants to put their chingas on us?

JESUS

But Paloma's still dancing.

GERALDO

(grabbing Jesus by the shirt)  
You're going home.

JESUS

(pulling himself away and nodding toward Jack)  
Are you loco? He just blinked. I'm going for it, cabron.

Geraldo assesses Jesus's resolve, like he did outside when Jesus first swore he'd kill Jack. Again, Geraldo's face tells us what is on Jesus's. Geraldo nods and backs away grinning, nodding, looking notably impressed.

Jesus grabs a shot off the bar.

Geraldo steps in and blocks Jesus's drinking arm.

GERALDO

(nodding toward Jack)  
Clear your head Jefe.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

Paloma's has gone into full ignition, like a whirlwind. Her skirts are flying way up. Everyone is cheering and clapping. Theo works the neck of his guitar as if demon possessed.

Someone steps between Jesus and Geraldo and downs Geraldo's tequila. It's Diego. Jesus has Geraldo on one side of him and the mean hombre Diego on the other.

DIEGO

(sucks in through his  
teeth)

She gets under my skin.

JESUS

(sets down his tequila)  
Watch now while I kill her  
boyfriend.

Diego's arm comes across Jesus's body and we see the huge difference between these men in stature. Diego steps forward.

The guitar music crescendos. Paloma begins to practically levitate, chewing up all the space, sucking up all the air, jamming the airwaves. Her heels could crack ball-bearings.

Observing how Paloma always has her eyes on Jack, Diego positions himself between the two.

Diego's eyes burn into Paloma. She looks away.

Jack stands up and with his cane taps Diego on the back. Diego ignores it. All the attention in the room suddenly leans in toward Jack and Diego.

Paloma is furious at being upstaged. She dances between the two men, takes hold of the shaft of Jack's cane and strokes it suggestively while Jack holds on to it by the handle at about waste level.

Jack likes how this makes him look. Diego looks at Paloma with insatiable desire. This does not fail to arouse her.

She yanks at Jack's cane and suddenly it splits apart revealing a highly polished, and pointy-tipped rapier in Jack's expectant grip.

Geraldo nudges Jesus.

Paloma is standing right near him. He eavesdrops on her, within touching distance. With her unaware, Jesus gorges himself on the sight of her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

Geraldo casts uneasy glances while Diego forces a show down with Jack Tanner.

Jack frowns at Paloma who juts her chin at him and shrugs like, what are you waiting for my hero?

Diego laughs and starts striding back and forth in front of Jack barehanded and making false lunges at him from time to time, toying with Jack, laughing, humiliating him.

While Geraldo and everyone else is watching Jack and Diego, Jesus remains transfixed by Paloma.

Jack gets a worried look on his face. Diego kicks the table out from between the two of them laughing a diabolical laugh. Jack's reflexes are quick. He charges with his blade in front of him.

Everyone backs up. FLASH There's something FLASHING in the lower hand of Diego. Jack lunges at the Diego.

A BEAR KNIFE with the onyx-ringed fist tucked behind its hilt cuts Jack to the quick. Paloma screams. Diego lets Jack fall.

Jack's body rolls on the floor to Paloma's feet. Blood pools. The room falls silent and no one moves.

Paloma grasps a jug of tequila in her hand. She stares at the dead man for a long time and then heaves a huge sigh, raising the bottle to her lips. She drinks from it like she was passionately kissing a lover. This is meant to be a very sad image of malnourished dreams.

Then Paloma passes the bottle over her shoulder without looking at who she's handing it to. Jesus gets it, puts his mouth to the bottle as though it was Paloma's.

Then, one by one, the bottle is passed around in silence.

The stoned occupants of the saloon are arranged in a ring around the one dead body of Jack and the two very alive one's of Paloma and Diego.

Everyone sips from the bottle and passes it. It takes on the solemnity of a Holy Communion ritual.

When the bottle comes back around it is handed to Diego and he drains it.

Paloma pulls her shawl around her and sits down at in one of two empty chairs. Diego lowers himself in Jack's chair.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

Geraldo gruffly helps the dancing girls stand-up the chairs and tables that were knocked down. Jesus tries not to cry.

Diego's men drag Jack's body out of the saloon.

**EXT. SALOON- CONTINUOUS**

Diego's boys are plundering Jack's pockets, pulling off his boots, lighting Jack's cigars with Jack's matches, dividing watch, wallet, ring and belt buckle between themselves like vultures.

**INT. SALOON- CONTINUOUS**

Theo clutches his guitar like a woman, rocking her sadly.

DIEGO

Tocale!

Startled from his reverie, Theo begins to strum a waltz.

Diego whispers to Paloma. They stand up to dance.

Grouchy and upset, Geraldo boxes Jesus's ears and drags him out of the saloon. Jesus is a bit dazed from all the punches he's already endured, plus the booze. Some bar babe slides a rose behind Jesus's ear on the way out.

**EXT. SALOON- CONTINUOUS**

The vultures are gone. There's a track in the dirt leading to where Jack Tanner's body was dragged out of sight.

In a fury, Geraldo pulls the flower from behind Jesus's ear and dashes it down in a puddle of blood.

JESUS

This humiliates me more than you.

GERALDO

You vowed to murder that chota. you hesitated and that new Jefe has beaten you to Paloma.

JESUS

(biting his fist)

Aye.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GERALDO

So, pendejo! Go home and fuck the old lady for one last time before she hears the story of what you did, and what you didn't do, and laughs you out of town tomorrow.

With an air of superiority, Geraldo adjusts his brim, slicks back his sideburns and walks away shaking his head.

Crickets split the heavens with their choirs. The saloon sounds spill out the door and windows along with an arresting light of a most antique hue. The guitar music plays sweet and soft.

Jesus stands by the saloon door in the dark, looking at the rose in the puddle. Out the door of the saloon bounds Diego with his hands all over Paloma and a bottle of tequila in each of hers.

Diego doesn't even notice Jesus, but Paloma does. Her eyes meet his as they pass. There is enough there to make him love sick all over again.

He watches Paloma disappear with Diego into the same field where he and Geraldo crouched earlier.

Dogs bark off in the distance. Jesus looks at the rose again, in the puddle, but this time he sees his reflection.

**INT. SALOON- LATER ON**

The patrons are drowsy. Theo rocks softly, asleep in his chair, rocking his guitar again like a woman.

Jesus enters the room. He looks sober, pensive. Another of Diego's men is singing a lonesome ranchero, unaccompanied.

People slap Jesus on the back and laugh at his black eyes and blood stains. Jesus accepts a shot of tequila from some fellow drunk but, staring at the glass he throws it aside instead, without drinking. Then Jesus is bumped from behind by someone coming in the saloon door.

Paloma enters holding up Diego. Diego takes two steps inside the door and falls over with a fatal knife gash to the throat.

Jesus looks at Paloma. Paloma glances away. Diego's friends step forward and surround him. They discover that one of his fingers has been chopped off, the one with the onyx ring.

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CONTINUED:

PALOMA

I did not see who killed him. He came to the meadow where we were lying and called out.

Diego's men look at Paloma skeptically, surrounding her. Jesus steps in front of them.

PALOMA (CONT'D)

(sounding nervous)

They fought fair. I could not tell who it was.

JESUS

Are you looking for this?

Jesus flips Diego's men the bird. Around Jesus's middle finger sits Diego's missing ring.

Diego's men draw their knives. Jesus pulls Diego's knife. It's six against one.

Suddenly Theo wakes up, lays down his guitar. Draws a knife and hustles to the defense of Jesus. Now it's the remaining four of Diego's men to the two of them.

But wait, Paloma draws a knife from her garter and throws in with Jesus and Theo.

Before anything else can transpire, the remaining occupants of the saloon flash their blades and rush Diego's gang out the door.

**EXT. SALOON- CONTINUOUS**

There is a stand-off. Many blades pointed. The locals clearly outnumber the strangers, and they're not about to have their beloved Paloma cut up by those yahoos. Diego's men back away, pile in the Ford and drive away.

**EXT. TRAIN STATION PLATFORM -DAY**

Paloma and Theo wait on the platform as the arriving train whistles not far off.

**INT. TRAIN STATION -CONTINUOUS**

Geraldo in his capacity as railroad clerk is giving Jesus tickets through the ticket window. The train is arriving outside.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GERALDO

You finally become Jefe and you're leaving town?

JESUS

Headed for the city, where Paloma can dance for a respectable crowd.

Geraldo comes out from behind the ticket cage to do the local hand shake with Jesus one last time. The local handshake involves a bottle of tequila. Jesus shakes Geraldo's hand but refuses his drink.

GERALDO

(unoffended)

OK, mi amigo. Clear your head.

JESUS

Or I'm dead.

GERALDO

(tucking the bottle away  
and then motioning to him  
once more)

Tell me, vato. Aren't you going to tell me? Come on. How is she?

JESUS

Better than your dreams.

**EXT. TRAIN PLATFORM -CONTINUOUS**

Geraldo is waving from the door of the station to Jesus as Jesus arrives by Paloma's side. He hands her and Theo their tickets. They each pick up a small suitcase and board the train.

Jesus follows them then leans out his window and waves to Geraldo. Paloma sits by his side. Theo strums a travelling tune. The train whistle blows

FADE TO BLACK.