

MULA RETINTA

by

Chris Lapp

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FADE IN:

INT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - NIGHT

Fire crackles in a crude stove casting light on a squalid room. A wooden board for a door. A slit window set high in the front wall, shuttered against a howling wind.

SUPER: SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, 1850

A double-barreled shotgun hangs from a peg.

Rusted mining tools crowd a corner - shovel, worn picks and battered panning dishes.

At a table sits ISAAC BRATT, mid 30s, gaunt, hunched beneath a blanket staring miserably into a bowl of gray broth.

He takes the bowl in shaking hands and gulps the contents down, liquid draining through his beard.

He pulls back, fighting the urge to gag. He turns his sunken eyes guiltily to a saddle strung from the roof.

A faint CLANG from outside draws his attention. Hearing no more he returns to the broth, steeling himself to finish.

EXT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - GROUNDS - DAY

Deep snow blankets a valley. Foothills rise through timber to distant mountains. Bratt's dugout has been cut into a rise. A front wall made of logs.

Bratt shovels drifted snow from a woodpile stacked along the wall. A blanket drapes his shoulders. His head swaddled in rags to block the cold.

He wrestles a chunk of firewood from the drift, tossing it onto a length of canvas.

Pausing, he sniffs the air, tracing a scent. He turns.

GASPAR, mid 60s, bearded, stands shivering behind him, fists balled at his sides. He's stark naked.

Bratt flails back against the woodpile. He loses his footing, scrambling away on all fours. He recovers, grabs a lump of firewood, raising it above his head.

BRATT

Stay back!

Gaspar's bloodshot eyes follow the sound, loose, unfocused.

Bratt stares at the naked stranger, trying to fathom. He waves a hand. Gaspar stares blindly back.

INT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - DAY

A pot of broth bubbles on the stove.

Gaspar lies on the bed covered by a blanket. His lips move, words lost before they can form.

Bratt watches him from the chair, keeping his distance.

The blanket slips to reveal black, frostbitten toes.

Bratt gingerly reaches over, tugs the cover back into place.

LATER

Bratt wafts a bowl of steaming broth beneath Gaspar's nose. No response.

He prods him. Nothing.

Bratt leans down, cocking his ear to the old man's mouth to listen for sign -

THUNK.

Bratt jumps back, broth sloshing down his front.

He looks down to see the old man's arm has slipped free. His fist rests on the dirt floor.

Bratt sniffs his soiled shirt, hurls the bowl at the wall.

Crouching, he moves to tuck the arm beneath the blanket.

Blood trickles from Gaspar's clenched fist.

Bratt glances to the old man. He tries to pry Gaspar's fingers apart - they're locked tight.

He finds a spoon and levers the fingers open. Something falls from Gaspar's hand, rolling under the bed.

Bratt gropes blindly beneath the frame. He feels something, freezes, breath catching in shock.

He scoots to the stove, holding his find to the light. It's covered in Gaspar's blood. He cleans it on his pants and checks again.

In his hand sits a gleaming gold nugget.

He does a slow take on the stricken man. Mouth agape.

LATER

Bratt sits at the table, the nugget set before him. He lifts his eyes to the ceiling, closes them, as if seeking guidance from on high.

A faint CLANG from outside. He doesn't seem to hear it.

A rasping breath from Gaspar snaps him back.

The sound comes again. The old man mumbles, incoherent, becoming agitated.

Bratt leans over him.

BRATT

Want your gold huh? Tell me where,
old man. I'll fetch it for you.

Gaspar tries to speak, his voice a hoarse whisper. He stretches his bloody hand towards the door.

Bratt turns to look -

Gaspar grabs him by the wrist.

GASPAR

Mula Retinta...

Bratt wrests free, rubbing his wrist, rattled.

The old man mutters in broken Spanish.

EXT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - GROUNDS - DAY

Bratt, bundled against the cold, shotgun slung, follows Gaspar's footprints towards the brushline.

EXT. BRUSHLINE - DAY

Bratt picks his way through a tangle of scrub wood.

A yellowed, moth-eaten undershirt twists in the breeze, snagged on a branch.

EXT. BLUFF - DAY

Bratt crests the rise. Gaspar's trail leads down the other side, out across a basin.

He spots a leather boot at the foot of the slope. A battered hat rests just beyond.

His eyes flick along the trail - he frowns.

EXT. BASIN - DAY

Bratt drops to his knees, winded. He drags a buffalo robe from the drifted snow, checks it over, finding nothing.

He looks around.

More items peek from the snow alongside the trail.

Bratt races from one to another -

He finds a moth-eaten frock coat. A tobacco tin in the pocket. Empty, he moves on.

A canteen - frozen solid. He hurls it away.

He tears open a leather pouch, gazes crestfallen as a bundle of frozen jerky falls out.

CLANG!

He spins -

A MULE stands two-hundred yards out. Mining tools and a pair of bulging saddle bags strung across its back.

Slowly, Bratt finds his feet, barely able to contain his excitement. He creeps forward, hands raised.

The Mule twitches, nervous.

BRATT

Woah, woah. Easy, girl. Easy. I ain't gonna hurt you.

He slips off his headgear, sheds the shotgun and blankets - doing all he can to appear less imposing.

BRATT
Bueno, amigo. Bueno.

The animal stomps its feet. A shovel on its pack knocks against the saddle bags with a dull CLANG. The noise sets the animal to a trot, shovel CLANGING rhythmically.

Panicked, Bratt starts after it. He stops - the Mule already too far ahead.

He looks back at Gaspar's scattered possessions.

INT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - DAY

Bratt shakes the old man awake.

BRATT
Wake up!

Gaspar opens his eyes, staring blindly into the light. His voice cracked with thirst.

GASPAR
Sara?

BRATT
I ain't no Sara.

GASPAR
...Pablo?

Bratt rubs his jaw, thinks.

BRATT
Si, amigo. ...Pablo.

Tears well in the old man's eyes, fearful.

GASPAR
Se han ido. Todo se fue - Mula Retinta. Ella trae la tormenta.

Bratt sags, not understanding.

He presses the nugget into Gaspar's hand. The old man gasps in recognition. Bratt quickly takes it back.

BRATT
Donde la gold, amigo?

The old man shakes his head, deathly afraid.

Bratt taps the nugget against Gaspar's head.

BRATT
You know goddamn well what I'm
saying. Ain't a man in the territory
don't know gold.

GASPAR
No, no-

BRATT
Si, si. Donde la golda?

GASPAR
La tormenta. No sigas-

BRATT
The mule - la mula? You understand?
Mula! Burro-

He snatches up the shovel, braying like a mule as he raps
the nugget against the blade in imitation.

The old man gasps.

GASPAR
Mula Retinta. Maldita!

He snatches blindly at Bratt's coat. Bratt pushes him off,
paces the room, patience worn.

BRATT
You be froze weren't for my good
nature. Stone cold dead. Ought to
show some damn gratitude.

CLANG.

Bratt rushes to the slit window.

GASPAR
No tengo mula! Ella trae la muerte-

BRATT
Shut up!

Sliding back the shutter, Bratt squints out.

From the window, the old man's coat and hat have been
mounted on a branch before the dugout like a scarecrow. The
mule stands at a distance, wary.

BRATT

Call it in.

The old man rambles, insensible.

BRATT

La mula, call to her!

Bratt grabs the shotgun from the wall, cocks the hammers.

BRATT

Killed me one stubborn cuss this week
already. Hell ain't about to get no
warmer.

Gaspar flicks out a hand catching the weapon's strap. They struggle. Bratt drags the old man from the bed. Gaspar spills onto the dirt floor -

GASPAR

La mula maldita!

He lets go of the strap sending Bratt crashing into the table. He lands hard, lets out a howl of anger. He pulls a revolver from his belt and wheels on Gaspar.

Gaspar stares through him, bleeding from a cut to his head.

Seething, Bratt limps to the door, wrenches it open - the mule nowhere to be seen.

EXT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - GROUNDS - DAY

Bratt, stripped to his shirt, stands waist deep in a snow hole, digging furiously. The shotgun leans against a tree.

Gaspar lies naked and shivering on the robe beside the hole.

Bratt pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow. He looks over to see the Mule standing at the dugout's perimeter.

Bratt slips out. He collects the shotgun and hurriedly lines up the shot. The shotgun BOOMS -

Bratt limps across the clearing as fast as he can.

The panicked Mule canters away, shovel ringing in its wake.

Bratt pulls up, sees blood mixed with the animal's tracks.

But there's something else.

He dips a finger in the bloody snow, holds it up to the light. It glitters with gold dust.

Bratt hares through the snow like a man possessed. The shovel's CLANG leading him on like a siren call.

EXT. RISE - DAY

Bratt follows the blood trail towards the bluff. The shovel's CLANG just over the horizon.

EXT. CREEK CROSSING - DAY

Bratt splashes across the wash.

The Mule a quarter mile ahead now. Wind builds. Mountains lost to a veil of cloud.

EXT. PRAIRIE - DAY

Bratt hugs the shotgun, head down. His undershirt frozen with sweat. Exposed skin chaffed raw by biting wind.

LATER

Bratt limps through a growing blizzard. Visibility reduced to fifty yards. He drops the heavy shotgun and labors on.

Ahead, the Mule a smudge against the horizon.

LATER STILL

Bratt pitches face down in the snow, overcome. He sputters, breath sawing through his lungs. He raises his head, flecks of gold sparkle in his ice-encrusted beard.

The Mule stands watching him through the storm.

Enraged, he struggles to his feet, draws the revolver and fires into the blizzard.

The Mule trots away, bullets missing their mark.

EXT. BRUSHLINE - DAY

A worn boot in the snow. A little way on a pair of trousers heaped beside a trail of footprints.

Ahead, Bratt shuffles up the rise, bare-assed, revolver in hand, undershirt trailing from his bony shoulders.

EXT. BRATT'S DUGOUT - GROUNDS - DAY

Bratt staggers from the brushline, shirtless, in the throes of hypothermia, driven by some primal impulse.

The Mule stands waiting in the clearing.

He raises the gun -

Bratt vanishes from view.

A thin layer of snow shifts to reveal a pair of bloodshot eyes. Gaspar blinks up at the heavens, roused by the shovel's CLANG, fading into the distance.

Beside him, Bratt lies shivering at the bottom of the snow hole. His hand frozen around the revolver's grip.

They lie there. Just two men. Naked. Waiting for death.

FADE OUT