

*On the last day in February, I called David before he left for work. Officially, he would start his residency in internal medicine on March the first. I felt guilty for not seeking him out more. Perhaps this would be our last chance to play for a while.*

We had seen each other at work regularly. I knew he had bought a white Hyundai for a couple of hundred dollars. When we chatted, it was about this car, a safe and familiar theme. But he never voiced to me the rumblings I heard from others: that he was pissed off at Emily, pissed off at the fact that he would be in internal medicine, pissed off that he couldn't do emergency medicine—somehow, we were to blame. It was the reason I had not pushed very hard to play tennis.

He picked up the phone on the first ring.

"David!"

"Yes?" His voice was wary, suspicious, as though he had expected someone else. Or, he thought I was calling for a reason other than the one I voiced. I told him to bring his racket, perhaps we could leave for the court after work.

"All right," he said, but again the voice was distant, suspicious.

When I arrived at work an hour later, I found out why.

David had submitted a handwritten letter of resignation.

I walked down the hall to find Lou Binder.

"You heard?" I said.

"I'm sure he's relapsed," Lou said.

"How do you know?"

"I don't, but I will in a few minutes," he said. "There were two urines tested last week—David, and one other person. I just called the lab; one of the urines is positive. I asked them to tell me if it's

opiates or cocaine—if it's cocaine, it's David. The other guy never used anything but opiates."

The phone rang.

"Yup, yup, okay, thanks," Lou said and hung up. "Cocaine. It's David. Do you know where he lives?"



We got off at the downtown exit, and made our way to Sunset Heights.

"What are we going to do if we find him? I mean, if he's resigned, that's it, right?"

"He's *relapsed*. That's the issue," Lou said. "His disease is very bad. His use escalates quickly. We get him into detox and then back to treatment."

I was in shock, unprepared for all this, while Lou was matter-of-fact, knew exactly what to do.

I was angry with myself. Angry that I hadn't sat him down and read him the riot act when I should have. Somehow I had let it happen again: I had forgotten about the cocaine, focused instead on his self-pity, on his pessimism. It was all so predictable in hindsight. I felt as if I had been sucker-punched.

"I *am* very upset with him," Lou said, though he didn't look upset. "It's a pity. David has a very bad disease. Perhaps the worst of all the people I've dealt with."

I had knots in my stomach and, as the house came into view, I felt my chest tighten. My anger had given way to fear.

The street was deserted except for David's Hyundai. We parked behind it. I put my hand on the hood. It was warm.

The house loomed over us, sinister, offering no clues. I pointed out David's bedroom window.

I followed Lou up the stairs from the curb and onto the porch, our steps resounding on the wooden boards. He rang the bell repeatedly but there was no answer.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and with every passing second, I was getting more anxious, hearing my heart pound in my ears, physically fearful, but not sure why. I had the eerie sense we were being stalked.

The house was enveloped in a cloak of silence, the freeway sounds

held at bay. Every nerve in my body was alert, as if waiting for the signal to flee. The sound of the doorbell echoed deep in the bowels of the house. David's roommates were surely all at work.

"Maybe he's not there, Lou," I said. "Maybe it's just his car . . . and he's gone."

Lou, a stout man with a loud voice, now shouted through the closed door, "DAVID. OPEN THE DOOR. WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE."

"I think we should go, Lou." I was halfway down the stairs.

Lou followed, but as it turned out, only so he could look up at the window to David's room and shout, "DAVID!"

There was still no answer. Now he used his cell phone to dial David's number. No one picked up, though I could faintly hear the phone ring in the house.

"Lou, let's go."

But Lou wanted us to go around the house and try the back door. I followed him down the steps, up the rough driveway to the side of the house, the windows of the dining room and living room too high for us to peek through.

We rounded the corner, and I ran into Lou because he had stopped suddenly.

There, coming toward us, its eyes lowered, not having seen us yet, was a creature I knew but did not recognize. It muttered under its breath, and the sight chilled me, froze me to one spot. It resembled David in its general appearance, but the face was hollowed out, and the facial planes peaked at the nose. I recognized the warm-up suit as a present from Emily. A large tennis duffel bag was clutched in one hand, the ends bulging.

When he saw us, he snarled, and swerved and walked away from us, to the side fence.

"David!" Lou said.

"David?" I said.

"Get away from me!" The words came out in a low growl, an octave below David's voice. The appearance of this beast was terrifying, the face fixed in a scowl, the pupils so wide that they appeared unfocused, the ears splayed back, the head retracted into the muscles of the shoulder and neck, which were tensed like a rottweiler about to pounce. He paused, as if he were cornered. But like a sewer

rat, he knew every exit, every back door, every hole, every tunnel, every canal, every escape but the front door.

"David," Lou said, taking a few steps forward, but even he seemed to hesitate for the first time that day. "Where are you going?"

I put my hand on Lou to pull him back, to stop him from going forward.

From the first moment we spotted him, he had not stopped moving, pacing with small steps, as if in a frenzy, first this way, then that.

"Leave me alone," he said, a louder snarl. Then he found the opening he had been looking for behind the garbage cans, and swiftly, muscling aside a plank, he clambered through and made his way into the alley, ran between two houses, and was gone.

*When I spoke to Emily that night, told her what had happened, she was distraught.*

Even though there was no reason for it, we felt responsible.

"I was spooked, Emily. It wasn't David I saw. It was someone else."

"What do we do, Abe?"

"Nothing," I said, remembering the advice of David's sponsor the last time this had happened. "David is responsible for David. There's nothing to do."

"No, we have to find him, get him into detox. He could have a seizure, he could . . ."

"You can't take him against his will, Emily. Only the cops can do that."

"We must try and find him, get him help."

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I could not concentrate on work the next day. Twice I checked in with Binder and once with Emily, but there was no word.

That evening I drove slowly down Alameda Street, a likely place for David to get his cocaine.

I hoped perhaps to spot his car, if he hadn't sold it already. Used-car lots were cheek by jowl on both sides of Alameda for several miles. A pickup truck or a four-wheeler—the he-man car—was given center stage, its back end raised rakishly on a ramp. But on either side, a monotony of hoods made it impossible to focus. Banners screamed: *SE VENDE BARRATO!*; *SI SE PUEDE!*; *AUTOLIABILITY BY THE MONTH!*; *NO DOWN PAYMENT!* I gave up looking at cars and instead looked at faces.



On my second pass, just a mile from the hospital, I saw an older man sitting on a stoop, smoking a cigarette, his attitude jaunty, as if he owned that space.

It was Gato. I had not seen him since he'd left the hospital weeks before. I circled back and stopped in front of him. He looked at me with suspicion, then his brow relaxed. He glanced up and down the street, and sauntered over.

He was freshly shaven. When he leaned into the car, I could see the pack of Marlboros in the pocket of his safari shirt, and I caught the scent of tobacco mingled with aftershave.

Doing well, he said. Still at the halfway house. No, he didn't have a job yet, but he was looking. Not too many people wanted to fool with an ex-con.

"Say, Doc," he said, "let me take you to a place where you get the best *caldo* in town. Good for your strength," he said, holding up a stiff forearm like a *lingam* and grinning lewdly.

"I'm fine," I said. "But you probably need it . . . I'll come."



"*Es mi doctor*," Gato said proudly to the shapely but very pregnant proprietress of the tiny cafe. The kitchen was separated by a counter from the rest of the room. We sat down at one of the three tables.

I told him about David.

"That cocaine shit is bad," he said. "Once they start hearing the train, those fuckers are crazy. The train? It's like a *wheeeou-wheeeou*."

"And you? Have you shot up since you left the hospital?" I asked once the proprietress had taken our order.

"Hell, I won't lie to you, Doc," he said, showing me his square teeth. "I came down here two days after I left the hospital. I split a dime bag with somebody. It didn't do shit for me. The stuff around these days, it's pathetic. Used to be, if you got arrested or went into the hospital, you'd be all shaky and sniffing. Now they bust guys in jail and they don't even sweat. They don't puke. It's no good, the stuff they're selling."

I didn't ask if he had shared needles. In the hospital, he was HIV negative, and surprisingly showed no exposure to hepatitis B or C.

The food arrived, spilling over the bowls.

"You like spicy food, eh?"

"Love it."

"They have some chilies here. Stronger than jalapeño. *Pequin*. Pure dynamite. Watch yourself with it, okay?"

He gave instructions and the pregnant lady returned with a fiery red liquid in a tiny bowl. I cautiously put some in my *caldo*.

"I grew up right here. Ran a bar just around the corner."

"Is that when you started?"

"Hell no! I looked down on the hypes . . . fucking junkies nodding off. No. I was crazy about women and dancing. I would never be a hype."

He ate his *caldo* with relish, spooning out a few pieces of meat and putting it into a tortilla, holding this self-rolled burrito in his left hand as he spooned the soup up with his right.

"I got into a fight out there. Self-defense. Killed a guy. I was sixteen. Reform school for two years. I came back, and still you couldn't get me to use dope. When I ran the bar, I'd make good money selling to the junkies. My dealer kept after me, 'You need to try it, you must try it.' I tried it and puked like crazy. He kept after me and I tried it two more times, and by the third time I was into it. I was a big-time dealer. Ask anybody, Doc. I was the man here. Had my *gente firme* around me wherever I went. Broads. Cars. Even God had nothing on me."

It was stuffy in the cafe, and the clients coming in were mostly older men, looking not too different from Gato.

"I always carried my shit in my hand, slept with it in my cheek so I could just swallow it if the narcs busted in. One time I swallowed a packet this big," he said, making a fist. "Choked on that son of a bitch. I made bail and brought it out as soon as I got home."

I paid, and he stood up.

"Come on, Doc. You want I give you the quick tour? We'll look for your buddy?" He smiled mischievously.

Men like Gato made you feel that your manhood was being tested. There was nothing about his life—the hard time he did, the drug use, the manslaughter—that you envied, and yet when he flashed that arrogant grin, it was as if he dismissed everything you had done in your life as being sissy, *joto*. It tempted you to take some foolish risk just to prove him wrong, to show him you were one of the boys.

"Let's go," I said. "You think he's been around here? He mentioned under the bridge . . . the canal."

He had me turn off Alameda. One block away, we came to a little bridge that spanned an irrigation canal, a canal that ran from the Upper Valley all the way to Socorro.

"Park here. The car is fine."

Gato calmly walked down an alley between two houses to a back fence. He squeezed through an opening that I had not seen.

"Come on, Doc! Don't worry."

"Gato, what about the people whose yard we just walked through?"

"Aw shit! Everyone knows me here." His swagger was more exaggerated. If the stoop where I had found him was his pied-à-terre, this was his manor.

The moon was out. Lights shone down from the windows and backyards of houses that adjoined the canal. The muddy water in the canal shimmered and ran swiftly with a pleasant whirring sound. On both banks, weeds and trees had overgrown, creating little grottos. "See down there?" he said, pointing in the direction of the water flow, "Under the bridge we just drove over? That's where we used to shoot up a lot. Especially when it was hot. You can always find some hypes there, using. Water's up now because of the rains."

So much for the tour. I was ready to turn back. But Gato was marching ahead, along a little path that ran parallel to the canal, behind houses and backyards, ducking branches as he went and pushing back weeds.

We rounded one clump of bushes and heard voices. I saw three pairs of legs. I felt a surge of adrenaline. I was ready to run.



"Hey!" I heard Gato say and walk into the clearing. When I followed, I saw three chocolate-skinned men in scruffy laborers' clothes, sitting on the ground and looking at us, swimmy-eyed. If I was scared of them, they seemed more scared of us. They sat there as if they had come to admire the view. "*¿Qué pasó?*" Gato said. "*Nada,*" one of the men replied, and said in Spanish that they were just resting. Gato took slow steps past them, fearless, studying them as if deciding whether to allow them to stay. Then they were behind us as we continued along the narrow path.

"Who were they, Gato?"

"Ah, fucking wetbacks. Said they were just resting. Maybe so, maybe they just came over the border." He was scanning the ground ahead of him, a bloodhound following a scent.

No more than twenty yards along the path, behind a clump of bushes, another three men. They must have heard us coming but they didn't stop what they were doing. A man in a purple shirt and orange aviator shades was kneeling on one leg, shooting into his forearm with an orange syringe. Another man, also kneeling, his back to us, was similarly engaged. The third simply stood there, as if shielding them.

"Hey," Gato called out, "how you guys doing?" When he got closer, he realized he knew all three. He shook hands with the man who was standing, peered over at the two shooters. "*Oye! Chingado!* Come here, see this? Don't worry, Doc, I know these guys," he said, beckoning me forward to watch the shooting, while he himself looked at the scene lovingly, the way women will bend to coo over a baby.

It was an eerie spectacle, almost a ballet set piece: two men kneeling, one standing, forearms bared, fists clenched, veins bulging, moonlight and a naked backyard bulb washing over them, glinting off the needles. They were younger than Gato, in their twenties. The man in the purple shirt tossed his head, throwing his carefully styled hair out of his eyes. He looked familiar, as if during the day I had seen him behind the counter of a fancy store or sitting in an expensive restaurant. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He stood up, animated, sniffing, looking me up and down, and then engaging in a rapid-fire exchange in Spanish with Gato. He had almost certainly injected cocaine, not heroin.

Unlike his clipped, staccato English, when Gato spoke Spanish, it

was smooth and musical, but still full of *chingolés*—fuck words. He looked ready to spend the evening.

Gato looked my way and I pointed in the direction we had come from. I wanted a tour, but if the cops or the people against whose back fences we were congregating took a notion to chase us, how would I explain my presence? If we didn't leave soon, Gato would probably shoot up. This world, so normal to him, was terrifying to me. I wondered for a second if they were planning to rob me, or worse.

To his credit, Gato recognized my discomfort, and didn't mock it or turn on me.

"Hey, we'll catch you guys later," he said, and we headed back. As we passed the first group of men, who were still sitting there, the man in the purple shirt, who was following us, called out to Gato. I didn't hear quite what he said, but Gato said over his shoulder, "No, I got to go. Can't."

Just as we were about to slip back through the fence, Gato said, "Let's check out this one spot."

We were off in the other direction now. "See here," he said, pointing to a clearing in the weeds the size of a tiny pantry where a soggy mattress lay, bottle caps, needles, and empty water bottles all around. "Someone slept here." He grinned. "I probably slept here, except I don't remember."

We walked on another ten yards and saw a pair of legs sticking out from the underbrush. Gato strode confidently forward. "What have we here? Let's see, let's see . . ."

A chubby man in his twenties was seated against a wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. His sweatshirt said HARVARD in white letters on a background that might once have been crimson. He wore a filthy ball cap. Only when we got closer could I tell that he was a white man. His face was puffy and lethargic and he barely looked up.

"Hey!" Gato said, moving in briskly. "Hands up, man!" The kid made as if to rise and obey. "Just kidding, kidding, man. Do I look like fucking police, *pendejo*?" Now he was striding over the boy's outstretched legs. "See here, Doc," he said, picking up a bottle cap and handing it to me. "Peel out the rubber and make you a great cooker."

I put it in my pocket.

He bent down, sniffing out new evidence, as if the boy were not

there. Three unsmoked cigarettes lay in the dirt next to the boy's legs, and Gato fingered one of these. "These yours?" The boy mumbled unintelligibly. Gato dropped the cigarette and picked up a syringe, caked in mud. And then he wrinkled his nose.

"Smells of shit," he said. He spat and looked at the boy. "How can you sit here in this shit? *Chingado!*" He spat again, took a step back. "Stupid fucker. Sitting in his own shit."

I thought the boy was a schizophrenic because he was so disconnected and mute. He sat rooted in the dirt. "There's a little something here, if you want . . ."

Gato peered, his sight not very good. All I could see was mud in the boy's hand.

"No," Gato called. "You go ahead. You have it." He laughed to himself. "Stupid fucker."

We slipped back out through the fence. Gato was pleased. He had promised to show me his world and he had found it intact, just the way he had left it.