

Close to Nowhere

by Tom Lichtenberg

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One

Eugenio Golpez stared at the wide open office around him and wondered what the fuck he was doing there. From where he stood he could see at least fifty other people who had showed up for work and were doing god knows what. They had computers on their tables and cellphones on their tables and some of them were staring at those and some of them were staring at the phones they held in their hands. Half were talking and the rest were maybe listening. Eugenio was one of the maybe-listeners.

"Alex", his boss repeated, zooming in even closer. She'd been standing behind him, murmuring barely above the chatter. How was Eugenio supposed to hear her? He heard her now, though, and turned towards her.

"Yes?"

He was nervous. He didn't like it when she snuck up on him like that and she was always sneaking up on him like that. And so damn small. She was something like four foot nothing even in heels and he was a regular sized guy, five ten, or eleven when trying to impress someone. It was like taking orders from a mosquito. He looked down at her and tried to smile but it just didn't happen.

"You didn't book that call," she reminded him. He knew he didn't book it. He barely even knew what "booking it" meant. He had never heard the expression before. Everywhere else he worked they called it "entering". What the fuck was booking?

"Please," Gabby said. "Please can you book that call now?"

"Yes," he said and turned back to his computer screen, where he'd just finished dealing with the damn call, what was it? Two minutes ago? What's the fucking rush?

Gabby, whose real name was Chien, crept back to her own seat down the row two chairs away from Eugenio.

He clicked the 'Submit' button and there. Happy now? The call is booked, so fuck it.

Eugenio did not like this job very much. He'd done phone work before, and hated it just as much then as now. His last job had been a lot better, but then the flood waters receded, the crisis ended and they didn't need him anymore. He found himself wishing the mucky mess had gone on, even if it meant a lot of suffering for a lot of other people. So what if their homes were literally under water? He was having a good time, dispatching rescue workers up and down the coast. He wasn't surprised when they let him go, even though they'd liked him at there, and his reviews were stellar, and the seas were still rising so there were bound to be more opportunities eventually, but with budget cuts and time constraints, luck just wasn't on his side.

Every cloud has a silver lining, they say. Even this stupid place. "Eco None", whatever that meant. Their slogan was something about "personal carbon footprint curation", but as far as he could tell they were basically nothing but parasites. Talk about your growth industry. Nobody did jack shit about the climate change until it affected their taxes. Now there was the penalty if you didn't do your offset, so along came sucker-suckers like Eco None to provide their so-called services which were basically doing the shit people didn't want to do themselves just so they wouldn't have to pay the stupid penalty. They'd come and do your recycling or soak up some cow farts, or plant a fucking tree in your name and you'd get the receipt and there, you did your part for saving the planet and making the world a better place. To Eugenio, it was just another fucking call center, and he was only a peon.

He didn't get what some of the other people in the office were doing. They were designing the website. They were "implementing" the "back end". They were programming the shit out of shit and he was just staring at them trying to figure out where the fuck did these assholes come from? Like the old guy with the long beard and the full body tattoo who's on the phone whining to his wife about how she forgot to get the right kind of peanuts at the grocery store. Like the young guy with the green hair who can't stop talking about how much he loves his wireless cellphone charger. Like that guy Bob, whose nameplate said Shrivinan, who wore blue reflective sunglasses inside the building. Like Tina, whose actual name he was pretty sure was something like Kamarama, who made her spiky hair stick out in every direction and talked about absolutely nothing else except that singing show where the same pretty boy wins every time. Why did they all have to have some kind of a shtick? I mean, every single one of them had one outstanding individualistic characteristic but aside from that, they were practically indistinguishable. Except for the sandals, or the ponytail, or the hentai t-shirt, or the stupid hat, or the airplane-size bottle of single malt whiskey dangling from the gold chain around her neck, nearly every one of them drove some kind of Lexus, lived in a townhouse, dined out every night, saw the same movie at the same time on the weekend, every one of them just basic, basic, basic.

You had to have that one thing. Eugenio had nothing. Maybe that's why he felt like such a loser. Hey, maybe that's why I AM such a loser, he thought. I don't have a thing. I should get a thing. Maybe I should wear a mini-kilt and pretend to be half-Scottish.

"Eco None," he said into the phone when it beeped.

"Is this Econ One?" the person on the other end asked.

"No," he sighed for the billionth time that day, "This is Eco None."

"Oh," they said. "I was looking for Econ One."

"That's a different company," Eugenio not-so-patiently explained.

"Well it's spelled the same way," the customer complained.

"That's because there are no spaces between words anymore," Eugenio said. "The internet makes them all run together."

"You should change your name," the customer said. "It's confusing."

"Their number is econone1 with the number 1 at the end after the words," he told her.

"I typed econone," she replied.

"Yes," he said, "and you just have to add the number 1 after the words. Goodbye."

He hung up and watched the screen fizzle out the call details in the fancy way the web designers made it do. If it was a "right call", the details zoomed in and got bigger and a big blue Submit button hovered over everything enticing you to click it. If it was a "wrong call", it fizzled and crackled and all the letters faded out. At least he wouldn't have to "book" this motherfucker. He got back to staring. Nothing but rows of tables in front and behind him, stretching from wall to wall with a dozen stations on either side of each row so that you had to look right at the person across from you, which in his case was a guy called Tim, whose real name was Jorge. Tim's thing was this enormous nose ring with some kind of pink jewel on the side of it. Tim drove an RX and was really really into Star Wars.

Eugenio had been on the job only two days, just long enough to know the script basics and how to handle the three different kinds of conversations. He hadn't really settled in but he didn't want to settle in. He wanted to get the fuck out of there and was waiting to hear back from Debbie, his recruiter-friend, but she was taking a break from trying to find him yet another job. She couldn't understand why the ones she kept finding for him never lasted very long, but it was never his fault. Weird things just kept happening. Like the restaurant job she got him as a short-order cook. Two days into the job, the

place burned down. Then she placed him on a factory loading dock, and the company went bankrupt a week later. It was always something. Maybe it was just because he simply hadn't found his correct alignment with reality, but it was getting a bit tiresome for everyone.

He took a step back and then a step forward for no good reason, just to relieve the monotony and keep his ass from falling asleep, but on the step forward he accidentally kicked something. He looked down and noticed a small filing cabinet stuffed under the table. He hadn't seen it before. What the hell, he thought, and opened the top drawer, expecting to find maybe a stapler or a packet of post-its. Instead he saw that it was crammed with stuff.

He bent down and started pulling the crap out of the drawer. There were scrunched up papers with tiny scrawling all over them, and several very small objects. He set them all gently in a row on the table top and examined them. There was a metal snail, a brown rubber spider, a nylon yellow rose, something that looked like a raisin on a toothpick, a teensy plastic fried chicken leg, a yellow origami paper hat, several tiny perfectly square ball bearings, a hand-lettered sign that said "Go Burs!", and three jade green stone carvings of totally flat-chested mermaids. The stupid phone beeped again.

"Hello," he said to it.

"Is this Eco None?" the man at the other end asked.

"Yes," Eugenio said, "This is Eco None."

"Don't you think you should say so when you answer the damn phone?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir, This is Eco None. May I help you?"

"I don't want to pay the damn tax," the man grumbled. "What's the cheapest thing you got?"

"We have our special artisanal disposal solution for only nine ninety nine," Eugenio offered.

"Nine ninety nine?" the man replied. "Is that nine dollars ninety nine cents or nine hundred and ninety nine dollars?"

"Yes, sir," Eugenio said. "Nine dollars and ninety nine cents."

"Don't you think you should say so instead of confusing me like that?"

"Yes, sir. Just Nine ninety nine per month with automatic renewal so you never even need to call again!"

"What do you mean per month? That's not nine ninety nine. That's nine ninety nine times how many months."

"You could see it that way," Eugenio agreed.

"No, you idiot. I'm asking you. How many months?"

"Why, until further notice, of course," Eugenio said. He was staring at the mermaids on the desk. They had masses of intricately carved curly hair, and delicately etched patterns on their tails, but their chests and backs were smooth and unblemished. He'd never seen anything like it. Were they supposed to be male mermaids? Maybe they were supposed to be from some seventies' hair band?

"Well, okay I guess," the man said. "You'd better sign me up."

"Gladly, sir," Eugenio said, and proceeded to go through the motions, asking all the questions, typing in all the answers, double-checking everything just the way he was supposed to, and finally clicking on the big blue button, booking the damn thing. The whole time he kept eying the pile of crumpled papers he'd pulled from the cabinet. He couldn't wait to see what was written on them, but he had another hour to go until break. Fuck.

Two

The phone's job was to beep. His job was to answer the damn thing, so when it beeped again, he answered.

"Eco None," he said, "How may I help you?"

"Richie?" asked a raspy voice at the other end.

"No, sorry. There's no Richie here. This is Eco None, personally curating your carbon footprint."

"Isn't this extension 419?"

Eugenio double-checked. Yes, it was.

"Yes, sir, this is Eco None," he replied, "offering a wide variety of responsible-Earth-caretaker services."

"Richie!" the voice repeated. "What happened to Richie? What's your name?"

"This is Alex," Eugenio said, "There's no Richie here. Sorry."

"No, wait!" the voice said, "where's Richie? It's really important."

"I'm sorry, sir," Eugenio said. "Good day."

He hung up the phone, and looked around at the various name-plates he could see on the tables around him. Not everybody had a name-plate. He didn't, for instance, but it was only his second day. Of course he didn't see a Richie anywhere. No one was permitted to use their real names here. He found it odd but accepted the explanation they gave at the orientation training session that somehow lawyers were involved.

To his immediate right sat a slight, older man of vaguely South Pacific lineage. His name-plate read 'Atta' but Eugenio had heard people call him Dave.

"Dave?" he asked. The older man looked over and raised an eyebrow.

"Is there a Richie here?"

Dave grunted and bobbed his head up and down for several seconds, and appeared to be literally chewing on the words forming in his mouth. Then Eugenio saw him swallow and realized he'd actually been eating something.

"Richie used to be where you are now," Dave pronounced slowly and methodically.

"Oh."

"He was a quiet guy," Dave said, emphasizing the words "quiet", and turned his attention back to his laptop. Eugenio got the message. Dave would rather he shut the fuck up and leave him alone, like Richie. He'd have to find somebody else to ask about Richie. In the meantime he was counting down to lunch, watching the clock and shaking his head.

There was a sort of cafeteria in the building, on the ground floor, really more like a crowded space with a big ass freezer, a long table and a bunch of microwaves. In the morning they offered unlimited donuts. At lunch you could help yourself to the scant variety of frozen burritos in the freezer, chicken or beef, and of course there was infinite coffee, as much as you could ever hope to guzzle. No wonder I have the shits so bad, Eugenio thought. All this crap! But here he was, twenty miles from the nearest little town where all there was there was a 7-11 which had the same exact fucking burritos and coffee, a nasty looking biker bar and a little diner called Marta's where if you waited in line long enough you might get a greasy platter with home fries. The office park was as close to nowhere as you could possibly get, and it made no sense to waste any time driving to the outskirts of nowhere get a just as lousy lunch. That was just gas money and time off the punch clock. Fuck it, Eugenio told himself. At

least it's free.

The phone beeped a few more times featuring a couple of paying customers and another wrong number. This time the wrong number wasn't pleading about Richie or mixed up about the company name. They just wanted to know about "the church in the fields" and whether or not it "burned down good". He didn't know what the fuck they were talking about and he didn't hold on to find out.

"Church in a field," he muttered, just loud enough to draw the attention of the woman to his left, who glanced uneasily at him and then rolled her chair away another foot. "Every problem I got", he grumbled inside of his head.

At the stroke of noon a bell rang like some kind of fire alarm and half the people in the building abandoned their posts at once and pushed and jostled their way down the crowded narrow staircase to the crummy food room below. Eugenio packed himself in along with the rest of them. Down there an impromptu assembly line formed like an old fashioned fire brigade except instead of passing buckets of water down a line it was warmed-up burritos. One huge guy manned the freezer and another just like him manned the bank of microwaves. It was really their job. The rest of the day they wandered around pushing trash cans on wheels emptying everyone else's trash cans when they weren't mopping the bathroom floors in the middle of the day and making sure there were never any paper towels anywhere. Eugenio wondered whatever happened to the idea of a night shift for janitors. These cleaning guys were always in and around and under foot all day, but at lunch they shined and had the system down. You were going to get your chicken or your beef burrito and a bag of chips and you were going to take whichever combination they gave you when it was your turn at the front of the line, and you were not going to say a word except "thanks".

Eugenio didn't give a fuck which crappy items came his way. He just wanted to grab it and hustle on out the back door where he could stand in the parking lot and munch on the stuff. He was wolfing it down when he noticed one of his table-neighbors come along. This was a guy with star-shaped glasses who drove an electric car and wore khakis. Everybody called him Glen but Eugenio had no idea what his real name was.

"Hey Glen," he called out between bites, and the man called Glen turned to face him.

"Hey," Eugenio said again, trying to work up some civility.

"What can I do you for?" Glen drawled, and Eugenio did not fail to notice the hostile look the guy was giving him. What, you don't like Mexicans? he wanted to say, but thought better of it. Maybe the guy didn't like anyone.

"I was hoping maybe you could tell me something about Richie."

"Richie?" Glen looked confused.

"The guy who had my desk before me," Eugenio clarified.

"You don't wanna be talking about Richie," Glen scowled, and walked away. Eugenio rolled his eyes. "What the fuck", he was thinking again.

"You're the guy at the haunted desk," a young woman chuckled as she walked by. He didn't get a good look at her before she disappeared into the parking lot burrito crowd. He thought he noticed blue jeans and a red top but that could have been someone else.

Haunted desk?

What the hell is a haunted desk?

And what the fuck is up with this Richie guy?

Eugenio slammed down the rest of his beef or chicken or whatever it was and decided it was time to check out those handwritten papers he'd pulled out of the drawer.

Three

When he got back upstairs he calculated he had about ten minutes remaining on his break, and he was anxious to get a look at those papers, but as soon as he got to his spot at the table, his boss came sneaking up on him again, quiet as can be and practically crawling up under his armpit. He had to squirm to wriggle free of her little head. He wanted to say her name but forgot what it was. Glenda? Gwen? No, Gabby.

"I hope you enjoyed your lunch," she was saying, and he had not idea how she could even conceive of that notion. Enjoy that? Enjoy? What were these words that had nothing to do with one another?

"I noticed your quota is, mmm, okay," she continued. He felt like he was flailing his arms about just to disentangle himself from her encroachment. Had she never heard of personal space? She was practically ensconced in his chest hair!

"But your customers are shall we say bottom feeders generally," she remarked.

"They just want to get out of the tax," he said.

"We have generous upsell opportunities," she reminded him. "You could work on the script a bit more, you know. Here," she slithered somehow around him and tapped on the monitor in front of him.

"It never hurts to mention the sea levels," she said. "As they rise, so do the premiums, you know."

He knew. It was how the law worked. Everyone's individual carbon footprint was tied to local environmental factors, and even though they were miles and miles from any coast, the sea level situation somehow affected the local penalties. That and the glacier melts and the massive tunneling required to keep nearly all the major cities in the world afloat, you wouldn't want to have to put the skyscrapers on stilts now, would you? Everybody plays a part.

"Everybody plays a part," Gabby said, "and their accelerated contributions could lead to future reductions, after all."

The operative word there was "could". In fact, no one knew if the oft-promised rebates would ever kick in, because the environmental adaptations grew more expensive by the month, and forecasts were continually undergoing revision. Eugenio was under the strong impression that the whole thing was a scam and a lie and chances were that outfits like Eco None were owned by the big oil companies anyway, and their stupid logo with the White Nun holding that glimmering watery cross was nothing but a cruel and deliberate hoax. Sure, the world was going to end any day now, but pay up, motherfuckers, pay up now and pay up big. Eco? None! That was more like it.

"Yes, ma'am," Eugenio sighed. "I'll be sure to work on the script a bit more."

And his break time was over. He hurried over to the clock and punched back in, then hustled back to his spot as the phone beeped and he sold somebody some bullshit they didn't need and probably couldn't afford, but it got them out of the penalty with the possibility of a future rebate, of course not guaranteed.

He worked his voice off all afternoon. It went smoothly enough, the phones off the hook pretty much because the Always News was barking at people from every direction that day. Apparently there'd been a catastrophic collapse of the Great Northern Rift or something like that, he didn't know for sure. Customers were talking about it but they all called it something different. Somewhere in the North Atlantic, or was it the South Pacific? It was Big News, that was all, and the penalty was going up by the end of the week, not to mention the deadline, so you'd better get on the horn and lock in your offset bargains now, and they did. That afternoon it was all business and Gabby was in her counting house, adding up the digits.

Eugenio didn't even get a sideways glance at the pile of scrap paper on his table until it was time to punch out. Then he gathered it all up, and the trinkets too, and stuffed the whole set into his sweatshirt pocket, punched out and made his way to his beat-up old Honda. He didn't talk to anyone on the way out, or even look at them. He'd had enough for one day. All he wanted was to get the fuck home and have a glass of ice cold milk. That was excitement enough for Eugenio. But the whole damn flock was leaving at the same time, and even though there seemed to be no one and nothing but empty fields around for miles, he knew that the two-lane road out of there was going to be jammed up for miles somehow, so he sat back in the driver's seat, pulled all the stuff out of his pocket and set it all down on the passenger seat beside him. The mermaids tumbled onto the snail and the spider and together they nearly crushed the little paper hat before he snagged and rescued it.

The papers were a mess. They were all shapes and sizes and colors, about twenty pieces of paper, some big, some small but all covered with the same miniature scrawl that was hurting his eyes just to focus. He picked one up at random, a creased and semi-crushed yellow legal pad sheet, and had to adjust the distance from his face a few times before he could make out a few words. He read,

"I'm just staring at them trying to figure out where the fuck did these assholes come from. It's like they're a fucking collectible set. Every single one of them has one and only one distinguishing feature. Otherwise they are the same fucking asshole. Like Bob over there, with the stupid blue shades. You're inside, Bob. Take off the fucking sunglasses!"

Eugenio was stunned, and dropped the paper onto his lap. Oh my god, he thought. Is this Richie or is it me? He was almost afraid to read any more, but sat trembling in his seat for a couple of minutes. Then he picked up another one, a small scrap of plain unlined brown paper which he recognized as coming from the same kind of notepad they'd given him at orientation the day before.

"It's that stupid Tina again talking about that show. If I had a chicken leg I'd stuff it right down her throat. Wait, I do have a chicken leg! Too bad it's so small. I hate her. I hate Randy and Billy and especially JoAnne. Hey, JoAnne, my name is not Richie, okay? My name is Alejandro Martinez! You want to talk to me you call me by my name!"

Again, Eugenio had to drop the note as if it was on fire. Alejandro? And here they gave him the name Alex! Who was this guy? Eugenio knew he had to find out. With a name like Alejandro Martinez he wouldn't be too hard for Eugenio to track down. He thought he even recognized the name. He knew some Martinezes for sure in any case. Maybe he'd even known this Richie guy. Alejandro, that is, but he couldn't remember right off. He was going to have to do some more reading, but not now, not yet. He was already feeling like a ghost of himself. Might as well hit the road and do the traffic thing, he decided. Deal with this shit later on.

Four

At least in the car he could decompress, listen to a little music, try to forget about the day. He was going home and that was everything. He knew what was waiting for him there and the closer he got the more he relaxed and lightened up. There were plenty of cars on the road but they were moving steadily at least, first through the empty fields on every side, then past the first few lines of tree breaks hiding flower farms and ranches. Soon he went by the hamlet of Trés Piños, with its 7-11, diner and the Two Hoots biker bar, and then the massive power plant, and more and more roads branching off into the suburban foothills as the road widened to four and then six lanes and the valley narrowed on either side and in forty-two minutes exactly he came to his own exit, and another three minutes later he was pulling into his spot in the driveway of the little place he and his wife rented in the Buena Vista Village, a low-income development consisting of identical yellow houses with blue doors and plastic flowers in all the window boxes.

Janelle was already home, her old red beater parked alongside his blue one. Eugenio had barely closed the car door when Matilda, his six-year old treasure, came rushing out of the house and into his arms with a whoop of joy.

“Daddy!” she screamed as she leaped.

“Precious!” he grabbed her and lifted her high above his head and twirled her around a few times before bringing her face to his and planting a big kiss on her cheek.

“How's my girl?”

“Fantastic!” she beamed, then squirmed for him to let her down. She ran inside ahead of him shouting “Mommy, mommy, daddy's home!”

Janelle looked up from the kitchen table and flashed a weary smile. As usual she was sitting in front of a huge pile of papers and an open laptop, grading homework assignments. She was a middle-school language teacher at the same K-8 where Matilda was now in the first grade.

“How'd it go?” she asked as he bent over to kiss her on the top of her head.

“Better,” he lied. “It's a lot of jabbering.”

“You can do that,” she assured him.

“Look, daddy,” Matilda was clinging to his leg, “I got the spices out,” and pointed to the counter where she'd lined up the little jars. He always loved how she pronounced the word “spices” as if it rhymed with Pisces. She'd done that on purpose ever since she'd first learned both the word and her birth sign.

“Ah, excelente,” he said in his occasional Spanish and rubbing his hands in a show for his little girl.

“And what else do we have? Do we have tomatoes?”

“Yes, daddy!”

“And do we have tortillas?”

“Right over here, daddy,” and she rushed over to the refrigerator and pulled out the package to show him.

“Okay, then all we need is ...”

Eugenio went through this routine every Tuesday taco night, a well-established ritual of preparing dinner with his daughter, how she'd bring out the saucer and turn on the stove, and he'd crumble the ground beef while she measured out paprika and chipotle and lemon pepper and salt and started mixing them in one by one, stirring the ground beef while standing on the wooden stool as he cut up tomatoes and tore up the lettuce and grated a little cheese and on lucky days chopped up a bit of avocado as well. Matilda was a thorough and patient chef and made sure her dad did everything just the way he'd taught her.

Meanwhile, Janelle continued to plow through her papers. She had a lot of students and they had a wide range of abilities. It was never easy. Some of them mainly spoke native tongues, some of which she'd never known even existed, while others were fluidly multi-lingual. It seemed impossible they were all in the same class at the same time. They should have been divided into several smaller groups, but instead it was she and teachers like her who were divided and sub-divided into multiple concurrent roles daily. She worked hard, and had been doing it full time for a long time.

Eugenio had stayed home to raise Matilda until she was old enough for school herself. He counted four years mostly out of the work force entirely, then another two of part-time occasional work while she was in pre-school and kindergarten. He had no real profession, had only completed his high school equivalency around the time Matilda embarked on her own formal studies. He missed those days, had never been happier, but Janelle could never have another child, and they could not really afford one

anyway, and a man had to work so there he was, back in the world again doing that.

"I want to show you something, muffin," he told Matilda later, after they'd made and had dinner and washed the dishes together and put them all away. She was sitting next to him on the couch in the living room with an old picture book on her lap. One by one he took out the little Richie toys from his sweatshirt pocket and lined them up on the low table in front of them. Matilda leaned forward and examined each one as it made its appearance. She said nothing about the spider, let out a little squeak about the snail, said "huh?" to the chicken leg, and "pretty" for the little paper hat. But when he brought out the little mermaids she gasped and reached out for them.

"Mermy girls!" she squealed as she grabbed them.

"You know what they are?" Eugenio asked her, leaning back.

"Doesn't everyone?" she shook her head in disbelief. He figured they must have been something she'd seen on TV.

"This is Trina, this is M'Bel, and this is Katie," she informed him, holding them up one at a time. He didn't know how she distinguished between them. As far as he could tell, they were all identical. She's probably just making it up, he thought.

"How do you know which one is which?" he asked her.

"That's easy. Look! Trina has a diamond pattern here on her tail. M'Bel has a teeny hair clip in the back, and Katie doesn't have either of those things."

"And what do they do?"

"They're mermy girls. They swim around and have adventures."

"What do you think of these other things?"

Matilda shrugged.

"They're okay, I guess. Are they for me? I like the rose. Not the spider."

"I found them at work," he told her. "Somebody who used to work there left them."

"Kids work there?"

"No, he was a man."

"Was he a weirdo?"

"I don't know."

"Nobody has a toy chicken leg," she said, then she hopped off the couch and started playing with the mermy girls, making them swim around the carpet beneath the low table, while making different voices pretending to be them telling each other what to look out for in that underwater landscape.

"There might be spiders," Trina warned Katie and M'Bel.

"I hope not," Katie said. "Spiders are yucky."

Five

Matilda had homework. Eugenio found it hard to understand how a six-year old could have so much homework, but she loved it, especially since it mainly involved drawing, coloring and copying letters. Matilda was a reader and a writer and had been from very early on. Already her handwriting was more legible than his, which admittedly wasn't saying much. As he noticed this, sitting by her side as he always did - a Matilda nightly requirement - he thought again of Richie's notes, scribbled in a scrawl as terrible as his own. He would have to read more, but later, after all the women in his life had gone to sleep. He was a little frightened of what he might see, but silently laughed it off. His new mantra was to

stop being such a pussy about things.

He wasn't actually a pussy about things. He was strong enough, and had worked enough tough jobs to prove it. He was dashing enough. Hadn't he secured the permanent lifetime partnership of the lovely Janelle? Everyone had wanted Janelle back in high school, but she would only have him, and it stuck. They'd been together more than thirteen years, had their baby girl, built a solid life. Sure, his own family was a pain in the ass to her, and her family was a pain in the ass to him, and they could have used more money for stuff, and she wouldn't be complaining if he could hold a steady job for once, but then he wouldn't mind not hearing about the same sorts of teenage assholes from year to year, with only their names changing but not their attitudes or their problems or the things you wouldn't believe they said to her.

Matilda was the best, with her curly black mop and her big bright eyes and her endless enthusiasm and joy. He was happy to sit by her while she focused on her school work, and he was happy to read to her every night like he'd done since she was an infant, and he was happy to sit in the dark and listen to her breathing while she drifted off to sleep. He didn't want to leave the room until he knew she was out for the night, and then he tiptoed out and closed the door as quietly as he could. Janelle was still in the kitchen, finishing up her paperwork. She had some administrative duties as well as grading and planning to do. She worked at least fourteen hours every day, sixteen often. He didn't know how she did it, but partly she could do it because he did almost all the cooking, and almost all the cleaning, and almost all the child care too. She had always wanted a child, and she loved Matilda dearly, but the dull chores of daily parenting were really not her thing.

Eugenio waited for her to finish and together they prepared for bed. His routine took a mere fraction of the time as hers, so he sat with the lights on and thought about the papers still stuffed in his sweatshirt. If I had a phone book, he thought, I'd try to look up that guy, but he didn't have a phone book. He wondered if they even made them anymore. Almost everyone had cell phones. He only had the one at work, and that one belonged to the company and had to be shut up in a locker every night. He wondered if there was anything on that phone, if Richie had left any other clues there. Tomorrow he'd check, he decided, if he could figure out how.

He waited, and waited for Janelle and when she was finally done with whatever it was she did, she climbed into bed, turned out the light, and fell right asleep. So that's that, Eugenio thought. He hadn't had any other expectations. Weeknights were often like this. He thought maybe a brief conversation, possibly a kiss goodnight, maybe a further inquiry into the details of his day, but nothing. She was beat and snoring like mad within moments. Eugenio climbed out of bed and stepped back out to the living room. He rummaged through the sweatshirt, pulled out all the papers, then carried them into the kitchen, closing the door behind him so the light wouldn't sneak under either of the bedroom doors. He sat down at the table, and spread them out at random.

He counted seventeen pieces of paper. Two he'd already glanced at, so he set those aside, and started to read the others from left to right. Fortunately, they were not all rantings about the other people in the office. Some of them were, though, and Eugenio tossed those into the crazy pile as soon as he classified them. Others were more curious. It seemed that Richie was a paranoid bastard. He was certain that Dave, for one, was spying on him. He was convinced that someone named Mitch ran the entire company and only pretended to be a call center floor boss. He hinted at a scandal that was bound to come out, trees that were never planted, or even worse. He suspected that some of the trees were being planted north of the Tropic of Cancer, which everyone by now knew for a fact was making the global climate situation worse, by blocking the snow cover which reflected the sun's heat back out into the atmosphere. A full three point two of the eight degree Celsius warming of the past twenty years was directly attributed to well-intentioned tree planting in North America, Europe and Asia. Eco None, Richie insinuated, was not only a part of the problem, but deliberately so. They wanted the ice caps to

melt, in his opinion. They wanted sea levels to rise. They wanted more droughts, more super storms, more blizzards. Why did they want these things?

Because Eco None was in fact owned by FedCorTron, the vast corporate octopus that owned nearly every major crisis service industry in the Western Hemisphere. Did he have proof? No, there were shadow companies and shell games in which they covered their tracks. Richie was certain, though. Eco None was not only fraudulent, it was criminal, and he was going to prove it.

Sheesh, Eugenio thought. The guy had it bad. No wonder they fired him. Or did they? He realized he had no idea what had happened to Alejandro Martinez. Well, it was none of his business, anyway. He just hoped he didn't end up going over the deep end like that. All he had to do was answer the phone, sell people some stuff to keep them from having to pay even more for the penalty, and just do whatever he had to do to keep Gabby happy and off his back. As for the rest of it. God, he hated that fucking place. The office smelled bad, like rotten garbage, and the carpets were probably filled with vermin, and those burritos were going to kill him if the coffee didn't do it first.

I've got to relax, he told himself. I've got to make it through the days. At least I get to come home to my girls, he thought, and for the thousandth time that day he wished he could turn back the clock and go back to the time when all he had to do was look after Matilda and the two or three other little kids he used to watch for their folks when he had his unofficial day care service going. He'd heard he could get a license for that kind of thing, but he didn't believe it would work out. People didn't want strong and healthy young men looking after their kids. It was one thing with the neighbors, who knew him and knew how good he was at that, but as a business proposition with strangers, he thought it would never fly. If only it could, though, he sighed as he folded up the papers, turned out the light, and carried them back to the bedroom, where he stashed them in the nightstand drawer before climbing back into bed and tried to remember how to breathe well enough to get at least a few hours of sleep.

Six

Matilda was just as much a morning person as a night one, and she was up by six just so she could say she beat her dad to the kitchen even if it was only by five seconds. When he got there she had already pulled the chair to the cupboards and was clambering up to grab a box of cereal off the shelf. Eugenio patted her on the head and slid past to start the electric water pot going for coffee. Janelle would have the bathroom occupied pretty much until the minute the coffee was ready. By then, Matilda had wolfed down her flakes, put the bowl in the sink, and run off to pick out her wardrobe for the day. She didn't own a wide selection but she made the most of every possible combination.

Eugenio in the meantime had his own toast and fruit and got around to preparing Matilda's lunch, a peanut butter sandwich and an apple, both properly separated in her backpack so they wouldn't touch, or in her words "smudge", each other. He was just about to wash the knife he'd used when he realized he ought to make the same thing for himself. He laughed out loud how stupid he'd been not to do that before, but he'd been seduced on day one by Eco None's promise of "free lunches every day". It had only taken him two days to give up on that little perk. There was a thermos somewhere too, he thought, so he rummaged through the drawers until he found it, stuck way in the back where it obviously hadn't been used in months if not years. Scrubbing it out and filling it with his own brew cheered him up. Maybe the job wouldn't be as bad that day.

He gave Matilda lots of hugs and kisses as he loaded her into Janelle's car for the ride to school. Janelle was in a rush, having forgotten to complete a couple of tasks the night before, so the two dashed off giving Eugenio five minutes to spare before he had to get in the car and head off. He didn't know what to do with that time. It wasn't enough to start on anything new, and he didn't have anything else worth spending five minutes on, so he just grabbed his jacket and got in the car anyway, telling himself that

maybe there'd be more traffic than usual so maybe it wasn't a bad idea.

There wasn't more traffic than usual. There was exactly the same traffic. From his home all the way out to the fields it was the same, brown and dry with civilization thinning out into nothingness once he got past the shopping mall and the power plant and the little town of Trés Piños. He felt like he was tracing the route of the future, getting a head start on destiny. Going home at night was more like the Old West, the pioneer days, when the pilgrims emerged from the desert and built up the cities and the towns, and now it was all heading in the other direction and fast. Migration south was the latest trend, with American ex-pat colonies beginning to dominate the tropics, and not only near the vanishing coastlines but more and more up in the mountains and the hills, where rain still fell and the oceans couldn't wash away your house from one day to the next.

The whole country was all going to empty out to dusty plains and dry fields. You couldn't plant any trees around here anymore, Eugenio thought, so no wonder they're planting them up North, if they are planting them at all. He recalled one of Richie's notes in which it was hinted that the whole tree-planting thing was a fraud, like those companies who promise to scatter your loved one's ashes from a plane over the mountains but really just toss them in a pit in their own back yard. Did it even matter if the trees were really planted? The customers were only paying less to avoid paying more. They didn't give a shit about the actual trees, did they?

His mood had already soured by the time he reached the office. Too much time all alone. Listening to the car radio didn't help because his thoughts only drowned out the sound, and the motion of the car, in rhythm with all the other cars, made him feel like a helpless ant being carried along by the mob. There was no room for willpower in this commute, no space for being yourself, or maybe just enough for that one eccentricity that set you apart, the custom license plate, the funny bumper sticker, the selection of music and its volume. There was only one lane each way on this highway and the drivers were all lined up properly and doing their diligence, each one just the same as the next.

From the parking lot to the punch clock to the locker to retrieve the phone to the workbench, there was nothing any different about this day for Eugenio except for the brown paper bag which contained his sandwich and an apple and the thermos. He stowed it in the file cabinet below. All around him the others poured into the office and took up their positions with varying levels of clamor. He put on his headset, switched on the phone, and assumed his position. He only hoped it would be smooth sailing today, no wrong numbers, no one looking for Richie, nothing but sales, sales, sales.

The phone beeped.

“Good morning. This is Eco None. How may I help you?”

“Richie? Is that you?”

“This is Eco None.”

“Listen, I know you can't talk. I understand your situation. The thing is, The Front can't wait any longer. They're going to make their move. You have to be ready.”

“I'm sorry,” Eugenio said, “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Richie, come on. Stop playing games.”

“Can you hold, please?”

Eugenio hung up and took a deep breath. I'll just pretend that didn't just happen, he thought. Move along, keep breathing, work on the script. But just in case, he made a mental note of the number that call had come from. When he saw that number again, he would simply disconnect it right away. That made sense, didn't it?

It made sense, but the caller or “The Front” or whoever was calling for Richie was living in another

reality, one that involved clandestine tricks gleaned from countless television shows, where they switched out their SIM cards as a matter of course, and used voice disguising filters, and probably kept themselves on the move so not even super spies with GPS could track them down. Eugenio fielded several normal calls and even performed a couple of tidy upsells before they got through again.

“Richie. It'll be the day after tomorrow. Copy? The day after tomorrow.”

“I'm sorry but I'm not Richie.”

“Okay, so they changed your code name again? What is it this time?”

“Not Richie,” he answered, thinking on his feet. No way am I telling them what they call me here.

“It's still Richie for us. We're counting on you. The plan is set. You'd better not let us down.”

This time it was they who hung up. Eugenio bit his lip. That last part had sounded like a threat. He couldn't help but wonder, did they actually know Alejandro Martinez? Did they know what he looked like, where he lived, who he was? Or did they only know him as the person who answered extension 419 at Eco None? Now he was the one with questions, but no one else called for Richie the rest of the day.

Seven

Eugenio found himself a bush he could sit behind at the back of the parking lot and have his lunch in private. The day was going okay. All he had to do was hang in there another four and a half hours and he could skate. He'd been breathing all right. He'd been keeping his eyes half-closed so he wouldn't have to be looking around the office at all the other people working, so he wouldn't have to be noticing, which would only lead to thinking, which couldn't possibly do him any good whatsoever. This job was not the place for thinking, just for talking, taking names and numbers and pushing them up and down the line.

He was keeping pace. Gabby had nothing to say but “all right” and “okay” and she even had a good word for him at the five-minute stand-up at three. “One day at a time”, he kept telling himself, and “don't get carried away”. The day could turn to shit at any moment, like so many days had done so many times before. He carried on until there was only half an hour left and then he had a solid idea. After that, he couldn't wait to get out of there and his breathing went a little shallow and he almost cut a customer short but recovered in time to not lose the pull. Trees were practically planting themselves that afternoon, hopefully down in the tropics where they belonged.

On the way home he stopped at the corner grocery to pick up the supplies for the project he had in mind. Matilda was going to love it, and maybe he'd get lucky with his plan. When he got home, out she came like she always did, scolding him a little for being ten minutes late but chirping with joy at the prospect of doing one of her favorite things. They were going to make their famous corn muffins after a little quesadilla and salad supper.

“I thought we'd go around and surprise some of our friends,” he told her, and he listed the pals he had in mind, Angelica, Barbara and Miguel, the other kids he used to watch as toddlers. Two of them lived on the same street a couple of blocks down, and the other only a few streets away.

“We'll have fifteen muffins” Matilda calculated as she brought out the mixing bowls and her favorite wooden spoon while her dad started melting the butter and measuring out the cornmeal, flower and sugar.

“That means they each get four,” she concluded after figuring it out on her fingers.

“And three for us!” she added moments later while mixing away with delight.

Janelle had taken her laptop to the bedroom to keep out of the way of the mess in the kitchen, and she

was glad Eugenio had the girl occupied while she got more work done. She had become addicted to the job. Seriously addicted, to the point where she took no days off, not even in the summer, and hardly ever on the weekends either. Eugenio was a bit worried about it. He wondered if she was depressed, if she was unhappy and using her job as a tool to stay away from him and Matilda, but it wasn't that. She was ambitious and had her mind set on becoming a school principal someday. Half the time when she said she was grading papers she was secretly studying administration. She thought that if she kept it to herself, then none of her colleagues or bosses would feel threatened, and no one would have to know if she failed, which was the fear that drove her so hard.

It was twilight by the time the muffins were baked and cooled enough to package up in make-believe gift bags, really just brown butcher paper folded and tied up with string and adorned with impromptu crayon decorations by hers truly.

"I got the flashlight," Matilda called, pulling on her jacket and heading for the door. Eugenio cradled the packages in the crook of his arms as he told Matilda to stay close since it was getting dark and he couldn't hold her hand until they'd made at least two deliveries.

Angelica's house was first, being closest, a small house very much like their own in the neighboring complex known as Sunny Farms. Her mother answered the door, a small old-fashioned woman who wore formal clothes and heavy make-up all the time, although she rarely left the house aside from shopping. Angelica stood behind her and beamed as Matilda snuck inside to give her a squeeze and a giggle. The girls ran off to Angelica's room while Eugenio politely presented the muffins. Angelica's mother accepted them with an actual curtsy.

"Freshly made," Eugenio smiled, peeking behind her to see if her husband might appear, but he was solidly situated in front of the TV in the back room and there was no way he was going to budge. The muffin would have to come to him.

"I don't suppose," Eugenio said, "well, I was going to ask Virgilio."

"He's busy," said Virgilio's wife.

"I was just wondering if he knew a man named Alejandro Martinez."

"I don't think so," she apologized, not offering to let Eugenio in to go and ask Virgilio for himself, and Eugenio was not going to insist. He still had two chances left.

"Matilda," he called out, and moments later she came running before he had to repeat himself.

"Bye Angie," she yelled back to her friend who shouted good-bye from her bedroom.

"She was showing me her new doll," Matilda said by way of explanation.

"Did you like it?" Eugenio asked her as they proceeded to their next stop.

"Not really," Matilda said thoughtfully. "It's too yellow. I don't know why they make them so yellow sometimes. I mean, I guess a girl can be yellow but I never seen one."

"There's lots of girls," Eugenio said for something to say.

"I know!" Matilda said, as if that fact surprised her.

"I don't think Barbara likes me anymore," she added as they approached that girl's house.

"Why do you say that?"

"She doesn't talk to me at school."

"She never was much of a talker," Eugenio said. "Does she have other friends there?"

"Maybe not," Matilda said, relieved at the thought that maybe it wasn't just her.

Barbara wasn't much of a talker, and neither was her mother, Alicia, but her father sure was. Calvin

Breakbandt was not one of Eugenio's favorites. He had balked at the idea of Eugenio looking after his little girl, and never admitted the good job he'd done of it, except the one time he told Eugenio that he "sure was reliable if nothing else," which Eugenio had taken for the insult it was. Recently he'd had the displeasure of working side by side with Calvin at the sea break tunneling project, a job that went under along with the waters. They could have commuted together, saved a little money, but neither one was going to be the one to ask the other first.

Eugenio was pretty sure that Calvin was a drug dealer. Not that he had any evidence of that, or even heard a hint of it from anyone at all, but it was the shaved white skull, the barbed wire tattoos, the goatee and the muscle shirts, all of it together spelled classic meth-head stereotype. And the guy was a talker like a speed freak would be. Eugenio was half-hoping Alicia would answer the door, even though it was Calvin he wanted to talk to, and he got his chance because it was Calvin who answered the door.

"Daycare!" he shouted when he saw who it was. Calvin had nicknames for everyone, few of them flattering.

"Yo, babies, look who's here," he yelled back into the house. Barbara and her two older sisters appeared from around the corner of the hallway, but remained standing well back of their father as if not daring or willing to approach any closer.

"We brought you some muffins," Matilda announced, holding out a parcel. Calvin was quick to snatch it from her hands, then wheeled around and chucked it at the girls, who let it fall at their feet. The oldest girl then knelt down to pick it up. She opened up the paper and silently distributed the muffins among the siblings.

"Why thank you kindly," Calvin said, stepping out of the door and practically onto Eugenio's shoes. "Is there something I can do you for?"

"Well, I did have a question," Eugenio started to say, and Calvin stepped back and let out a whoop.

"I knew you wouldn't be coming here for nothing, giving away shit and all like that, pardon the expression, hon," he added, momentarily acknowledging Matilda.

"About a guy named Alejandro Martinez," Eugenio said. "Wondered if you knew him."

"Know him? Mundo? Course I know him," Calvin said. He put an index finger to his lips and squinted at Eugenio.

"What you know about Mundo?" he quizzed Eugenio.

"Nothing," he said. "I got his job is all. People on the phone keep thinking I'm him. Don't know why." Eugenio found himself involuntarily mimicking Calvin's diction, and scolded himself for that. Don't forget to breathe, he thought, even in the presence of this asshole.

"I'll bet people are asking about Mundo," Calvin said. "Kind of people I wouldn't want asking about me, I can tell you that."

"I don't understand," Eugenio said.

"Look, buddy," Calvin put a hand on Eugenio's shoulder. "Hey, aren't you on the phone tree?"

"No phone," Eugenio said, shaking his head.

"Email tree?" Calvin grinned.

"No email either. The wife's got one but only for school."

"If I was you," Calvin said, "I'd keep it that way. Mundo, that was his problem. Or one of them anyway."

"Why's he called Mundo?"

“Mundo? Out to change the world is why. Getting mixed up in stuff he don't oughta. Nobody seen him since Wednesday last. Nobody that's saying, anyway. You ain't seen him, right? Course not. Here you're asking about him. Don't know him do you? Well, keep it that way. Don't even say his name, bro,” Calvin said, and with that he gave Eugenio a bit of a shove on the shoulder, turned and walked back into the house, closing the door without even a thank you or a good night. Eugenio stood still for a few moments.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, honey,” Eugenio said. He'd almost forgotten she was there, and why she was there, and why they were both there.

“Right,” he said. “Let's go visit Miguel.”

“Who's that man you were asking Barbara's daddy about?”

“I don't know, honey,” he said. “Just somebody who used to work at this job I've got now.”

“Is he important?”

“I don't think so,” Eugenio said, reaching down to take hold of her hand. “I really don't think so.”

Eight

The next day began no different than the few before it for Eugenio and his family. Matilda was all go-go-go and Janelle was there but not there and in a big hurry. Eugenio had taken Calvin's warnings seriously. He decided to tell Gabby about the “personal calls” coming in for Richie and maybe she could change his extension or move him to another desk and that would be that. He was not going to ask any more questions about “Mundo”, and the only reason he gave himself for not throwing out the papers and the toys was in case they were needed for evidence someday. He figured that if a shady guy like Calvin was freaked than the whole thing was nothing to go anywhere near.

He almost went through with this plan. The only problem was that Gabby wasn't around in the morning and his phone was beeping non-stop as if suddenly all anyone in the world wanted to do was offset their carbon footprint. He had forgotten about the deadline. It was the next to last day to avoid the first stage penalty surcharge. The whole process was incredibly complex, but the law was taking effect in phases, and if you didn't sign up by the first date, you'd have to pay a penalty plus a surcharge, and then there was another date a few months down the road where the surcharge itself had an additional fee piled on to it. Finally, by the end of it, the penalty plus the surcharge plus the additional fee plus the “aggregate bonus” ended up equaling double the original penalty itself. The offsets weren't all or nothing, either. You had to pay for so many “bonus points” in order to qualify for “levels of exemption”.

Eugenio didn't really understand it. He and Janelle qualified for the minimum level in any case. The whole thing only cost them twenty bucks, but for people who made more money, drove fancier cars, lived in bigger houses, had more children, owned more stuff and traveled by plane, it could end up in the tens of thousands. No wonder there was a rush to pay a few hundred to avoid that extra cost. The politics had gone crazy too. There was the “personal responsibility” party who believed that no one actually had any personal responsibility for anything, and then there was the “socially conscious” party who believed that social consciousness stopped at the pocketbook. Neither group was capable of any effective action, especially since they completely blocked each other's efforts all the time. The only reason the offset tax went through in the first place was the federal fiscal collapse brought on by the cascading costs of the constant climate crises.

It was the wealthier people who were calling now in the final days of phase one, and they were desperate to offset as much as they could. Eugenio had no problem selling them the glories of entire

evergreen forests, prairies full of wind farms and desert-spanning aqueduct discounts. The whole office was busily buzzing. Even the web designers and programmers were manning the phones now, and extra bodies had been trucked in from who knows where to line the hallways, cell phones in hand. It was kind of exciting. Eugenio was getting into the spirit of it and even thought of mingling with his fellow phone folks during the upcoming lunch break. He'd brought another sandwich and apple, but lingered in the parking lot rather than escaping to the bush.

The lot was crammed and the frozen burrito line was chaos in the kitchen, with people lining up nearly halfway around the building. Eugenio was jostled and jostling back but even though he was surrounded and jumbled up with other people he didn't manage to find a single one to talk to. Everyone was far too busy pushing one way or another or trying to squeeze through or stuffing their face. Rumors were spreading of an approaching food truck, and a roar rippled through the crowd when the horns of a bright green taco-mobile blasted out a trumpet salsa melody and people began shoving each other to make room for the thing.

The truck inched its way into the lot with the driver leaning out of his window, yelling and gesturing for everyone to clear a space where he could pull in sideways. There was a lot of beeping and back and forth until the truck managed to position itself exactly the way it wanted. Then the side shutters flung open and people began hurling themselves at it. In the midst of all that, the sound of a sudden gun shot split the air. The chaos up to that point was nothing compared to the madness that followed. The news later reported that twenty-six people ended up in the hospital from the trampling alone. Nobody seemed to have been hit by a bullet.

Eugenio had already been on his way back into the building so he was able to reclaim his station upstairs without much trouble. He'd kept in mind his plan to not get involved, to pay no attention to anything but the work itself, but as he still hadn't seen Gabby he hadn't gotten around to snitching on Richie yet. He just went right back to the phone, switched it on and continued as if nothing else was happening. Most others around him did the same thing. From the busy and noisy big room upstairs you wouldn't know about the ambulances rushing to the scene below, or the cop cars sirening, or the taco truck dishing it out and raking it in.

He didn't look to his right or to his left or straight ahead or anywhere else, so he didn't know how long the little man in the light blue suit had been standing right next to him. The man wasn't talking, either, but he was staring at Eugenio through light brown eyes. He was short, but strong and solid, sporting long, slick-backed black hair and a small tuft on the bottom of his chin. He waited patiently while Eugenio sold a pile of Earth-friendly goods to some rich guy from Newport. When the sale was done, Eugenio put the phone on pause so he could take a little breather. That's when the little man spoke.

"So they're calling you Alex now, eh, Richie?"

Nine

"I'm not Richie!" he insisted.

"Obviously. You just said your name was Alex."

"No, you don't understand," Eugenio whispered, glancing around to see if he could spot Gabby, but she was still missing in action.

"The man you call Richie doesn't work here anymore," he said. "He disappeared last week. I just started this job on Monday."

"There's no time for games," said the man in the blue suit. "Show me the chicken leg."

"What?"

“Move!” the man commanded, and stepped in front of Eugenio, jostling him back a step. The man leaned down and yanked open the top drawer of the file cabinet beneath the table.

“Fuck!” he whispered at seeing it empty, and slammed it shut again. When he straightened up and stared at Eugenio, his face was flushed and his eyes were full of rage.

“I don't know what you think you're doing, Richie or Non-Richie, but this is not the time. Commitments have been made and they will be kept. Tomorrow. Five thirty. Seven eleven. And you'd better have that chicken leg or you'll pay. I swear it. You'll pay hard.”

Before Eugenio could respond, the man rushed off and vanished quickly down the staircase. A rush of thoughts seized his mind. He should have snapped a photo of the guy. He should have tried to get his name. He should have yelled for help as loudly as he possibly could. He should have grabbed the guy and not let him get away. He should have tackled him and pinned him down. He should have slugged the little rat bastard in the face. But he hadn't done any of those things. Was it too late? Should he run after him now? Eugenio couldn't decide. He was paralyzed, and did nothing at all. Soon the only thought in his mind was “chicken leg?”

He turned the phone back on. With his luck that interlude was going to cost him commission and he didn't want that. It was back to the hard sell, and the best way to get the little blue man out of his head was to work the phone like crazy. And he did. Gabby would have been proud, if she hadn't been at that very moment tied up, gagged and locked in the small, hot closet in the storage room in the back of the Two Hoots biker bar.

She was having a pretty bad day, probably the worst since her ex-husband's last “visit”. Her tidy life was not so tidy now. Even though she had thoroughly vacuumed the apartment, scrubbed the kitchen floor, washed and dried all the dishes, folded and put away the laundry, and taken three showers, she still couldn't shake the sensation that somewhere, somehow, evidence remained detectable. Even now, uncomfortable as she was, the thing that bothered her most was the possibility of a DNA match.

She didn't even like Richie. Still, orders were orders, and commands from the Indivisible Front were paramount. At first she'd thought she couldn't do it. She saw herself as plain-looking and boring, the farthest thing from a secret-agent-seductress like she'd seen in the movies. She didn't look the part and she didn't feel the part, and Richie - Alejandro - was a decently handsome young man, tall and energetic who probably had no lack of girlfriends and had never looked twice at her before. How was she supposed to lure him back to her apartment and get him into a vulnerable position. How was she even going to break the ice? She had never even asked a guy out for a cup of coffee.

She had half-heartedly tried to worm her way out of the assignment, but her I.F. contact, a slim youngish red-head named Trudy, merely laughed at her and said,

“Just do what I tell you. It will be so easy, believe me.”

And it was. Trudy told her exactly what to wear, what to say, every detail, down to how and when to blink, clear her throat, and look away. Alejandro was ready and willing, vulnerable to the point of idiocy. It never even occurred to him that his own top-secret mission might be imperiled by this unexpected, illicit encounter with his previously nothing-but-obnoxiously-officious supervisor. He sat on her couch smiling vapidly, sipping in the tranquilizer from his wine glass, and blacking out even before the door opened and the rather husky “agents” let themselves in.

They had made Gabby leave the place while they did what they had to do, and when they let her back in after about twenty minutes, she couldn't shake the feeling that very bad things had happened in her home. There were no visible traces. As far as she knew, they had merely hoisted Richie over their shoulders and given him a ride home, but she figured that was probably not the likeliest scenario. She didn't know, and she didn't want to know, but she cleaned the apartment anyway, and cleaned it again, and every day since she'd been nervous and jumpy and looking over her shoulder and it didn't help that

“Trudy” no longer answered her phone calls and no one else from the Front had contacted her either. The Front was so incredibly secretive that hardly anybody in it even knew what anybody else in it looked like. Trudy was the only one she'd ever met in person, and so she was alone and adrift in uncertainty, trying to keep the bad thoughts from her head by focusing on her job, just as Eugenio was doing at the very time she was reflecting on her fate from the floor of that overheated closet.

Ten

The office was buzzing all the rest of the day, with the excitement of the rush compounded by the incidents of the gunshot and the taco truck. The effects of the taco truck lingered throughout the day most visibly from the lines for the bathrooms and the pained expressions on the faces of nearly everyone who had partaken. Eugenio was glad to have avoided that pitfall, but during every free moment, which weren't many, a cloud of worry hovered over his head. The cloud gathered into a tornado of concern on the drive home. There were too many things to process. He wondered how they knew where to find Richie's desk, because it certainly seemed like the blue man didn't know who Richie actually was or what he looked like, unless it was a case of all Mexicans being the same to him. He couldn't rule that out, and maybe his appearance was in fact similar to Alejandro Martinez's. He didn't want to jump to conclusions.

It also puzzled him that he'd known where to look for the chicken leg, and that he was even looking for the chicken leg at all. What could it possibly mean? Why a chicken leg, and why that particular one, or would any old drumstick do in this case? And what was the case? And who was the man in the blue suit? And why the threats? Why the deadlines? Why the secret meetings and the dire warnings? And again, the chicken leg! Above all, what was he going to do? Was he really considering showing up at the 7-11 at the appointed time? Would he bring the chicken leg? Why on Earth would he even think of going there?

Because of the risk. Because if they could find him so easily at work, they could just as easily find his home, and that was the last thing he wanted to happen. Home had to be kept out of the picture at all costs. If there were any danger, any at all, it had to be his and his alone. He wished Gabby had been there in the office, so he could tattle on Richie, but in her absence he had no idea who else to turn to. He supposed now he could have asked around, found out who was in charge aside from her, but he didn't and now it was too late. He wasn't going to turn around on the highway and head back, and anyway everyone would have left there by now. Office hours were over.

He drove past the Two Hoots and Marta's Diner and the suspect 7-11 and that was when he made up his mind. He would do what he had to do, what a man had to do. He would not be a pussy about this thing. Fate had presented itself and he would face the challenge, whatever it took. The trick was to keep the family out of it. They couldn't know anything. He would have to be resourceful.

The first thing he had to do was recover the chicken leg. He'd given all the items to Matilda and she had dutifully stowed them in various hiding places throughout the house. He made a game of it, a game of hide-and-seek after dinner, to her enormous delight. Hide-and-seek was practically her reason for living. The rule was that she had to reveal where the sought items were whenever he failed to find them in time, and to conceal his tracks he made a great show of his trials and errors, and worked the chicken leg into the routine as if it were nothing special. When it did take its turn in the game, he tried to slip it into his pocket without her noticing, but nothing escaped her eagle eyes.

“Daddy, is it your turn to hide things? Are you hiding the chicken leg now? Because I saw where you put it.”

“No, honey,” Eugenio tried to keep a normal face on, “I just thought I might keep it for a day or two. Maybe it will bring me some luck.”

“Why do you need some luck?”

“To make more money,” he said.

“How's a chicken leg help you make more money?”

“I don't know,” he shrugged. “It's just a guess. Let's find out if it works or not, okay?”

“Okay, daddy,” Matilda was thoughtful. “But if you really want more luck I think you should take the snail too. I hid it behind my book of magic tricks, so maybe some magic rubbed off on it.”

“That's a great idea,” he smiled. “I'm sure you're right.”

They played the game for a whole hour longer in the hopes that she would forget all about the chicken leg, but she didn't. She wanted to talk about it at chat time, their nightly ritual after reading time when he put her to bed.

“Why would somebody even make a toy chicken leg?” she asked.

“It beats me,” he admitted.

“Do they make chicken wings too? And how about chicken butts? Do they make little rubber chicken butts?” she laughed.

“I would not be surprised,” Eugenio said. “They make all sorts of crazy stuff.”

“I hope it helps you,” she said, “but I doubt it. I think the snail is going to work better.”

“I'll tell you what,” he said, “if either one of them works, I will buy you a lollipop. How about that?”

“Will it be lemon?”

“If you want.”

“I don't like lemon lollipops.”

“What kind would you like?”

“Peanut butter coconut apple pie!” she declared.

“Okay,” he replied. “If I can find one, I'll get you one.”

“If you can find one,” she said, “you'd be the luckiest man in the world.”

“I already am,” he said, and gave her a big smooch on her forehead.

Later, he worked his deception on Janelle, telling her that he had to work a little late the following evening, only an hour or so. He told her about the stages and the phases and the extra commission he could make.

“Okay,” she said. “I'll get a pizza. She'll like that.”

It was easy. He had the chicken leg, and the snail, and a built-in alibi to buy him the time he needed to show up at the 7-11. Now he only had to hope his stupid plan wouldn't get him killed or worse.

Eleven

It was a stupid plan, but nevertheless Eugenio felt unaccountably confident the next morning as he arrived at the office. He'd been rehearsing the script in his mind all the drive in, and realized he had the whole thing down. It had taken less than a week, but he felt capable of answering any question, handling any situation, managing any customer's needs, and the timing could not have been better. It was Friday, the last day of stage one, and promised to be a hectic and crazy day. One by one he ticked off every carbon offset offering the company presented, from the usual basic tree planting to the various emission storage techniques, to the alternative energy enhancements and appliance-conversion and trade-in upsells. He knew all the rates and all the penalty tables. He was ready, and it couldn't hurt,

he thought, that he was carrying the magic snail in his pocket along with that stupid rubber chicken leg. The preparation served him well. The phone beeped continually when he wasn't already on it, and the hold lines must have been backed up for virtual miles because there was no end. It seemed that everyone in the state had been waiting until the last day to rush to get their personal footprints accounted for. There were some who only wanted to get their application timestamped without actually making any purchases, and some who needed their hands held and their fortunes told, who knew nothing about anything, not even their own income or net worth or annual tax liability. Eugenio could have benefited from a degree in finance or accounting, but somehow he managed to work through every issue, one way or another.

He helped the proverbial "little old lady" and the clueless man in his twenties, assisted the go-getter who turned out to be the CEO of an interesting startup, and everyone else in between. He was working it, and the morning flew by in what seemed like mere minutes. At one point he stopped to catch his breath and found an old man by his side.

"Nice work there, son," the man said. His name tag said 'Daniel'.

"Thank you, sir," Eugenio replied, his finger on the pause button as he readied to release it and plunge back into the stream.

"I understand you're new, but from my count you're doing quite well."

"Thank you, sir," he said again.

"Your regular supervisor is out sick today," Daniel explained. "I'm filling in here if you need anything."

"Thank you, sir," he said for the third time, then let go of the button, and at the first beep he glanced at Daniel, then answered the phone. Daniel wandered off to praise some other worker bee.

Eugenio didn't pause again until lunch, when he grabbed his peanut butter sandwich and apple and headed out to the bush behind the parking lot. His plan was to eat quickly and get right back to work. He was feeling those commissions piling up and daydreaming about the extra money, not so much the things he could buy with it as the look on Janelle's face when she saw the paycheck. He often fantasized about bringing home more than she did, but it had rarely ever occurred. Now he was even thinking about how they did promotions at this place, and whether maybe someday he might become a supervisor, or rise even higher than that.

"Hi," his daydream was interrupted by a young woman who was striding next to him. She was very pretty, and smiling at him.

"Hello," he said as politely as he could.

"I don't have any plans for lunch. I mean, I brought it," she said, holding up her own brown paper bag, "but there's nowhere to go."

"I know," he said, "I usually just sit on the ground over there," indicating the bush, which suddenly seemed unaccountably scraggly and insufficient.

"That looks nice," she said. "Can I join you?"

"Sure," he said. "My name's Alex," and he wondered why he said that, but it on the name tag, and it was his name at this place, and he'd been saying it all morning.

"I mean Eugenio," he corrected himself.

"My name is not-Carla," she laughed, tapping her own name tag. "It's Diane."

"Pleased to meet you, Diane," he said.

"Pleased to meet you, Eugenio."

They laughed and settled down on the patch of weeds and dandelions behind the bush. Diane had brought a bologna sandwich, which Eugenio of his daughter and her fondness for just the same thing, which he could never understand. Nothing seemed more repulsive to him than bologna. But he didn't say any of those things out loud. It was clear, from his wedding ring, that he was married, and it was clear, from her wedding ring that she was too, and even though they'd only just met, randomly, in the middle of a busy day, they both had to admit to themselves that they had made a note of those plain facts on their fingers.

His plan for a short break fell through as they got to chatting about the job and the place. Diane had been there for only two weeks, but she too was getting the hang of it and especially enjoying the last minute rush, which reminded her of when she worked at Macy's one Christmas season. It was the adrenaline more than anything. You couldn't really give a shit about whether these strangers got the right present for the right person, any more than she gave a shit about the carbon footprints of these fucking buffoons on the phones. She talked that way, and Eugenio blushed at her language, even though the words and phrases running through his own mind were the same or even more so. They just seemed ugly coming out of her face. He told himself he ought to clean up his own act first, and he meant it.

He was changing. There was something inside him that was growing for the first time, and he wondered if it was self-respect. I'm such a pushover, he thought. All it takes is a little tiny bit of positive feedback and I'm the king of the whole fucking world. Then the slightest setback and I'm the biggest moron who ever lived. I don't know how I go on like this. But he didn't want to spoil the mood, so he smiled and laughed and kept up the small talk even when he was more than ready to shed Diane for good and get back to the phones. He felt he had already seen all that she was, but she was not as eager to move on, so it took a while longer, and eventually Eugenio had to stand up and make noises about commissions waiting upstairs for them both. She hoped to see him again soon. He wished her a good weekend, then sighed with relief when he got back to his station and his phone. This kind of thing was exactly what he wasn't looking for.

Twelve

Later, when the bell rang and the shift was over, and the blood was still pumping through his veins, and his mind was racing a mile a minute, and there were incredible savings to be passed on, and he was full of advice for every one in every situation, it was time to go. Time to deal with the Richie situation, hopefully once and for all. As he gathered his jacket and headed for the staircase, he caught a glimpse of Diane. It looked like she was heading his way and he said to himself, "no, I can't do this. Now now. Not today", and he picked up the pace and scooted on out of there, reaching his car unmolested and zipping out of the lot as fast as he could.

He had plenty of time to reach the 7-11. In normal traffic he'd have fifteen minutes to spare, but that was fine with him. He wanted to collect his thoughts, calm down if he could, plan out his approach. When he got there, exactly as early as he'd predicted, he sat in the parking lot remembering to breathe and fingering the items he'd been carrying in his pocket all day. The snail interested him especially. He hadn't paid much attention to it at first, but now that he looked closely he saw it was made from several different bits of steel, shaped and welded together in a peculiar way. The body of the snail was in the form of concentric circles of flat dull metal, while the head was a flat dip attached to two long nails. The base was oval and pewter-ish, while the tail was another nail, bent up. Someone had gone to an awful lot of trouble to craft the object, and he wondered where it had come from.

The chicken leg was pathetic in comparison, just a blob of brown rubber made out of spare gunk in some junkyard in Malaysia most likely. It barely looked like a chicken leg at all, just enough that it

didn't look like anything else but a chicken leg. It felt slimy, too, as if the rubber was still dripping from the tree when they made it, and it never quite solidified. He put that one back in his pocket but kept the snail out, rubbing its outermost layer with his thumb, like Aladdin rubbing a magic lantern. If only a genie would pop out! If he ever could have used a genie, now would have been a good time.

But there was no magic, not in the snail, not in this world. There was only a case of mistaken identity and a problem that had to be cleared up. Eugenio took a deep breath, stepped out of the car, and made his way into the 7-11. He was surprised to see it was completely deserted, except for the huge woman who manned the front register. She bore a name tag proclaiming her to be "Mac". Her face was covered in large brown freckles, and her curly red hair was short and shaggy. She didn't look friendly, but she didn't look ferocious, either. More bored than anything from what he could tell. She looked up and greeted him as he entered.

"Howdy do," she said with a half of a smile.

"All right I guess," he said. He realized that all that time he'd been driving and then sitting in the car he hadn't been thinking of any plan at all. He had no idea what to say or do.

"I've got the chicken leg," he blurted out, and fishing the thing out of his pocket, he held it up for Mac to inspect. She sniffed and nodded slightly.

"In-di-vis-a-ble Front," she snorted, pronouncing each syllable with separate but equal disdain.

"I guess," he shrugged.

"You guess?" she seemed surprised. "You mean you don't know?"

"Don't know anything about it," he admitted. "I never heard of that whatever-you-said."

"Huh," she paused. "So if you didn't come about the Indivisible Front, then why the hell, pardon my French, but why the hell are you here and why the hell, excuse again please, are you holding up that motherfucking chicken leg?" This last she said with rising volume and a developing sneer on her face.

"Beats me," Eugenio said. "Somebody thinks I'm somebody else, and they threatened me, said I'd better come here and better have the chicken leg or else."

"Oh. Must have been Lobster Boy," she said. "He gets like that."

"Little guy? Kind of mean? Blue suit?"

"That be him," she nodded.

"Is he here?"

"You sure you want to know?" she asked. "I mean, if I was you, and I was so completely clueless as you sure seem to be, I would, pardon once more, get the flying fuck out of here right now and hit the road fast."

"I've got to deal with it," he said. "I don't want your Shrimpie or whatever coming around again."

"Well then," she said, "it's your funeral, Jack. They're in the back," and she indicated with a jerk of her head which way he ought to go.

"Thanks," he said, thinking he ought to buy something or at least put a dollar in the tip jar if there was one. He headed towards the back, still wondering why there was nobody else in the store. He didn't think he'd ever been in an empty 7-11 before, especially around that time of day. People didn't want shitty coffee and cheap hot dogs anymore? Maybe the world really was coming to an end.

As he neared the swinging doors at the rear, he began to hear voices coming from the storage room. First he heard a man say,

"We blow the whole mother fucking thing sky high. Fuck those mother fuckers. We blow it up and we

blow it the fuck up tonight!”

Then a woman's voice came, seemingly to the right of the man. Eugenio slowed and stopped just outside the door to listen.

“No, Richie. How many times we have to go through this? We expose them. We have the paperwork. We have the facts. We go to the newspapers now. We shut 'em down the right way.”

“Fuck that,” a third voice said, coming from the left side, near to where “Richie” had been. “They own the fucking newspapers, and the TV, and the radio, and the whole fucking internet. You think they're going to do a damn thing about it? I'll tell you what they'll do. They'll round us up, that's what! Every last one of us. Bug our phones, tap our homes, follow us around. We're as good as goners anyway so I'm with Richie. I say let's take 'em out and go down in flames right with 'em.”

“Listen to yourselves!” came a fourth voice. Eugenio couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman speaking this time. “We're supposed to be the Indivisible Front! We've got to get ourselves together. We can't be going around like this. One side kidnapping Richie over there, the other side kidnapping Gabby here. Have we all gone crazy?”

“You're the fucking nut,” Richie said. “You started it, nabbing me like that. What the fuck? Now you're like peace-out and all that shit? Fuck you! Fuck you and fuck you too, Gabby. Stupid mother fucking boss bitch! Like you couldn't have ever told me who you were?”

It seemed like as good a time as any. Eugenio flung open the door and walked in. There to his left, stood Richie, a.k.a. Alejandro Martinez, and damned if he didn't look almost exactly like Eugenio himself. They were like twins, same age, same height, same stupid look on their poorly shaved faces. Next to Richie stood Lobster Boy, who seemed to actually know Richie now. When had they met for real? Across from those two Gabby stood next to one of those bald goatee-wearing tattoo mother fuckers. These guys, Eugenio thought, they're like those check-cashing stores. You see one and you know you're in the wrong fucking neighborhood. All four of them gaped at Eugenio.

“I brought the chicken leg,” he said, and held it out.

“The fuck!” Richie said.

“Fucking moron!” added Lobster Boy.

“What are you doing here?” asked Gabby.

“Your friend here told me I'd better come,” Eugenio said. “Beats me why.”

“That's MY fucking chicken leg!” Richie yelled. “Where'd you get my shit.”

“He's got your desk,” Gabby said. “He took your place after you, you know.”

“After you fucking kidnapped me?” Richie snarled. “Then you fucking hired clone boy here? What the fuck? Give me my shit,” he demanded.

“I just have this,” Eugenio lied.

“Fucking drawer was empty yesterday,” Lobster Boy pitched in. “Fucking thief.”

“Look,” Gabby stepped forward, “Alex here doesn't know anything. Right, Alex?”

“Right,” he said. “Just what this guy said,” gesturing at Lobster Boy.

“So you just go,” she said, stepping closer with her arms raised aiming to push him back out the door. “You just get out of here.”

“I want my shit back!” Richie shouted. “You'd better not fucking be there on Monday.”

“Except to bring my shit back,” he added as Gabby was now physically shoving Eugenio. She was tiny but determined.

“He won't be there,” she said, and then looking up at Alex she added, “you're fired. Do you understand? You're fired.”

He thought he saw tears forming in her eyes as she said those words, and it slowly began to occur to him what she was doing.

“Now get out of here,” she pleaded as they went through the swinging doors back into the store. “Just go!”

He didn't need to be told again. He placed the chicken leg in her palm, closed her hand around it, then turned and walked briskly back towards the front of the store.

“Smooth move,” Mac winked as he rushed past her and out the door. He ran to his car, flung open the door and jumped inside. With shaking hands he managed to get the keys into the ignition and turn the car on. He peeled out of the lot and re-joined the long, slow line of traffic heading north, getting the fuck out of Trés Piños as fast as he could. It was a crawl all the way, but it felt like freedom.

Epilogue

He'd imagined that the hardest part would be explaining to Matilda that he had to return the toys to the company now that he no longer worked there, but when he put it that way she was totally on board and even eager to help him wrap them all up. She insisted on making perfect little packages out of toilet paper for each item. They made an adventure out of it, including a long walk to the post office, using colored markers to address the bubble-wrap envelope to the attention of “Gabby”, waiting in the long line and letting Matilda handle the entire transaction.

As for Richie's handwritten notes, Eugenio just threw them away. He didn't want anyone to know how much he really did know, and he was glad he'd made that choice when it came time to testify before the federal grand jury assigned to the case. All he could tell them about was the chicken leg, and it wasn't even perjury to confess that he had no idea what that was all about. By then he was well on his way toward completing his professional child care credentials and had long been steadily employed at a local day care center. Maybe his bad luck had simply run out, or maybe he'd finally aligned himself properly with the universe, but he preferred Matilda's explanation, that some of the magic that had rubbed off on the snail had also rubbed off on him.

The End