

Leo: A Christmas Story

by *tb mcglone*

I live in a small upstate town that borders Connecticut. With the shopping days of December breathing down our necks like the foreboding chill of a hyped-up Nor'easter, combined with the imagined obligation of our civic leaders to justify their collective suckling of the taxpayer teat, the town has recently taken to decorating the streets with columns of pint-sized Christmas trees. I have to think this is a not-so-subtle attempt to mirror what has been going on for decades in the neighboring, decidedly more "toney" town, just over the state line. One difference: our town fathers decided to stray from the classically simple, traditionally virginal white lights – like those adorning the evergreens of their Connecticut counterparts – in favor of crimson red. It was a bold choice, to be sure, and certainly sets us apart from those highbrow New Englanders. No cookie-cutter Rockwellian picture postcard for us. As you approach the center of town, the presentation is startlingly ominous, like the prelude to a nightmare. Turning onto Main Street, dozens of these sinister hell-trees, staked in front of darkened realty offices, shuttered campaign posts, and assorted pizza joints, herald the coming of something...something, yes, but exactly what? To me, the message is gruesome with just a dash of cherry flavoring. Our own brand of seasonal profligacy. The perverse bleeding even extends to the local elementary school, hemorrhaging with strings of those bloody red bulbs along the sidewalk out front. It feels downright ghoulish.

And this is where we educate our zombie children, the realtor quipped.

Once awash in the light of these jolly corpuscles, my mind runs to the Clint Eastwood movie *High Plains Drifter*, in which, attempting to scare the shit out of a marauding band of ruffians, the flawed hero gets the humble townsfolk to paint every inch of the town's façade red. It worked in the sense that, shaky with fear, the bad guys didn't shoot so straight. I wonder what message is really lurking behind this bizarre decision to titivate our town like some portal to the Underworld? Are we expecting those out-of-towners who stray across the border to bask in the hedonism of our big box discount stores and neon-lit pawnshops to swoon with the joy of capitalism, or is this portentous Yuletide meant to subliminally fleece our neighbors out of something more precious?

"This is our town?" I keep asking.

As quaint and "Mayberry" as this hamlet can be without artificial color, it is hardly backwater. Ronnie and I moved here in the mid-nineties when our first was born. We thought we'd found paradise, a mere two hours north of Manhattan. Of course, it didn't take long to find the usual transgressions, both big and small, inherent to all societies. We've had murders and attempted murders, and our share of sexy fodder for the police blotter. Although the county lockup might not be full *every* Saturday night, the constabulary is seldom idle. I have to think that the universal notion associated with "red lights" could not have escaped the imaginations of our Selectman's office. Seventy-five years ago celebrities of the time with weekend homes along Route 22 would frequent local houses of ill repute, solidly established, not ten miles from my own porch light. That trade may have moved elsewhere, but still – could I be the only person around here to associate

streets lined with red lights with the decadent districts home to gin joints and loose women, encouraging the kind of libidinous carousing more at home in a Hemingway novel? In far off places, distant corners of the globe, those “red-light districts” may shine brightly all year long. But here, in the bucolic hills of a modern day “Bedford Falls,” it’s confined to the winter holidays, and given the fact that the creeping sanguine spirit of goodwill is now in its third year running, the die seems to have been cast for perpetuity.

Another connection I invariably make as I part the red sea through our otherwise unassuming streets has to do with certain Christmases of my past, indelibly inked and linked forever with this holiday.

Here’s the thing: In the leisure and latitude of my youth I traveled twice into those illicit neighborhoods south of the border, both trips taken at this time of year. On the first occasion, it was the major holiday break between semesters at University, and going south in winter satisfies a natural human urge that seeks out warmth and something akin to comfort. A perfect way to stall the oncoming Northeastern winter, as well as recharge the batteries for the second half of the academic year. When virtually an entire continent and a half is immersed in a four-week holiday, you can’t help but generate great memories.

During those two sojourns we wound up celebrating the birth of our Savior drunk off our respective posteriors in the company of women-for-hire. I don’t like the word “hooker”. It sounds degrading and discourteous. The women we met were smart, noble and fierce. They were also proud of their unique positions of being able to bring in money to what was otherwise an impoverished household. This line of work allowed them to have a good time while earning a decent living. Plus, they liked being around men. They understood the species and called the shots. Perhaps it was our unique experience, but we did not encounter oppressed women suffering under the domination of a pimp-daddy. Read the paper today and you can see the sad stories of women forced into living terrible lives at the hands of evil opportunists. Thirty years ago, the bartenders, bouncers and working women we met were playful, funny, independent, and had found themselves in these small communities for their own individual money-making reasons. At least that’s what I remember.

The places we visited were not on what you might call the traditional tourist trail, per se, unless your thing is visiting brothels, dive bars and donkey shows (not for the faint of heart.) We were there on a lark, and during Graduate School the cynical attitudes towards punk rock, Ronald Regan and the decline of Western Civilization were right at home in these austere, unpromising, oddly fragrant and astonishingly happy places. During the early 80’s the fear of deadly STD’s had not yet moved beyond the anecdotal for us. It was more than three decades ago, but the image of those joyful vibrant streets still resonates. It’s not the smell of chestnuts, but the smell of cheap perfumes mixed with charred meat and toasted tortillas from improvised sidewalk grills; not a Bing Crosby Christmas Carol, but those sung by José Feliciano and Mariachi bands; not the tiny sterile white lights, but the inviting allure of intoxicating reds. I think of these happy places. And I think of Leo.

Exactly three Christmases ago Leo called, using a phone card he had been given at a church-run food pantry. Once we connected, I called him back and we caught up the way

we usually did, about every three or four months. Leo wasn't well, physically and mentally, and I was at a loss as to how to help.

"How's the hip?"

"It's fine. Unless it rains, of course. No, it's this other thing."

"What? What's up?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy".

"No, Leo. *Crazier*, maybe."

He laughs, at himself and at the joke. We have this history. He knows his illness and thinks rationally for long periods of time. When not in the deepest depths of his depression, he can be pulled out with this kind of humor. Most of the time, anyway.

"Yeah, I know. But, this is really strange."

"What's going on?"

"Ok. Here it is. I wake up in the morning and find that, in the middle of the night, someone has rearranged the furniture in my living room."

"Leo, you live alone."

"I know."

"You don't have a roommate."

"I know!"

"Obviously, you lock your door at night. Who could possibly get in?"

"Locks don't mean anything to these people."

Whew. People. He was at least thinking that his nemeses were human. They were not always human.

"What people?"

"Government people."

"The 'Men in Black'? I thought you said they operated beyond the control of any government."

“Yeah, I know, but, I keep racking my brains and there’s no other explanation. It’s them. It’s gotta be them.”

I was sure it was too early to ask the next question, but I was occupied with a hungry three-year-old pulling at my pant leg. I knew I could get Ronnie to help; she understood Leo and was sympathetic. But only to a point. Right now my stock was not what you might call favorable. I could hear her supervising the other two kids in the living room, decorating the tree. That voice, the one with the hair-trigger edge. I could imagine the tightness of her face, the forced patience, and after almost fifteen years, I’ve learned to choose my battles. One hungry three-year old may not be the best time to call in the cavalry. So, I cut to the chase.

“You stopped taking the medicine, right?”

“Tom, I can’t think straight when I’m on that stuff. The doctor has the whole cocktail all messed up. I needed to stop to figure out which one of them was messing with my sleep. I keep waking up. It’s all screwed up.”

“Why don’t you go back to the doctor and get him to change the prescription?”

“I have an appointment in three weeks. This guy, he only works at the clinic once a month. They prescribe these really powerful tranquilizers. I can’t think straight when I’m on them. I have to see someone else. My friend Rich tells me that this psychophaline they gave me is addicting. I can’t be hooked on this stuff.”

Rich is Leo’s friend from his hometown in Long Island. He’s in his late sixties, works as a greens-keeper, when he chooses to work, has only one arm and is a self-described alcoholic. He has a lot of free time, what with his government checks coming in, and spends a lot of it on the internet, going down strange paths into even stranger weirdnesses. He then feels the need to broadcast his bizarre findings and, unfortunately, Leo is an easy target.

“He thinks I need hypnosis to get this monkey off my back.”

It sounded promising. But coming from Rich.... His ideas were generally half-baked.

“Hypnosis can get you off smoking, lose weight. He might have a point.”

“He does. But I can’t do it.”

“Why, Leo?”

There was a pause. He was holding back something. I provide the prompt.

“You’re going to tell me something crazy again, aren’t you?”

“Oh, you know me too well. Here’s the thing. You can’t predict what’s going to come out after you go under. Remember how I told you once about that time I lost eight hours of my life, all of that time unaccounted for?”

“You were abducted by aliens, sure.”

“Now cut that out!” Leo did a pretty good Jack Benny impersonation. His timing was spot on.

“What, you weren’t?”

A pause.

“The therapist I am seeing, the shrink, she tells me that I can’t have been abducted by aliens, and that if I continue to say this, she won’t continue me as her patient. She says I’d have to go to a psychiatrist to get more specific pharmaceuticals. I can’t lose this therapist.”

“She’s that one who you told me about, right? Pretty? Big guns up top?”

“Oh, yes. Beautiful. Very easy on the eyes. Very proportional, if you know what I mean. And, no, I can’t lose her. She’s all I’ve got. Really. And, you know, she could be right.”

“You mean, it’s possible you *weren’t* abducted by aliens?”

Another pause. I could tell he was hurting, and that the time for jokes was waning. This is the part of the conversation where I had to listen and console. Laughter should not be expected again. As I regrouped to consider the right words, I walked to the calendar to check the date. The possibility of driving down to Baltimore and visiting Leo crossed my mind. I had a free Saturday in a couple of weeks. As I flipped the page, I saw my son over by the trash, chewing on a cupcake wrapper that he had pulled from the bin.

“Excuse me, Leo. I have to get your godson out of the trash can.”

“He’s dumpster diving? Already?”

“You know, they say that the apple doesn’t fall far from the godfather’s tree.”

God forbid, I say to myself, as I place the child in his highchair, lock him in, then pour a couple of handfuls of Cheerios onto the tray. That would hold him for a few minutes while I heated up the banana gruel he sometimes liked.

“I know that sounded sarcastic, about not being abducted. Sorry. But, -er, what does that have to do with any of this? Tell me why you don’t want to be hypnotized? I mean, besides the fact that Rich recommended it and the last time I checked, his medical certificate was revoked by the University of Looneytunes.”

“Ok. Under hypnosis, you know, don’t you, what’s going to come out? If I went under and started to have one of those, you know, “Communion” kinds of experiences, I just, you know, I just couldn’t handle that.”

He’s referring to the book by Whitley Shrieber called “Communion”. Shrieber, suffering from depression and other problems, discovers under hypnosis that he was abducted by aliens. Not once, but repeatedly. And the lingering experience has plagued his subconscious, affecting his ability to function in normal society. The story, in case you didn’t know, is not sold as fiction but rather as something that he believes really happened to him. That was just the first book.

“You know that Shrieber came out later and said that he was suffering from mental stress when he experienced that.”

“Yes, but he came out after that to say that he could have only made up *part* of it, and that the whole alien piece was real.”

“So, what part did he make up? What could you *possibly* invent that would add credibility to a story of being abducted by aliens?”

“Well, that’s why he said he did it. Plus, he was pretty depressed. Medicated. He didn’t know what he was doing, caught up in all the drugs.”

“So, you don’t want to go under and discover that you have been anally probed.”

“No, *THAT* I wouldn’t mind.”

We laugh. A rare return to his old self.

“Well, do what you think is best. Hey, I was thinking of coming down for a visit. I got nothing much planned the weekend of the 18th. What do you think?”

“You know, Tom, the annual convention of kooks, fruitcakes and nutters takes place that weekend, but I might be able to squeeze you in for a visit.”

“Hey, I’d like to go to that!”

“Sorry. Guild members only.”

“Rats.”

Leo rings off. Later that night, Ronnie listens to my recap of the conversation. She tells me to definitely go down there and try to get him to lighten up a little. It’s been a while since Leo and I spent a weekend together, not since the christening, in fact. So I plan to make a plan. But life intervenes and I never get to Baltimore. And I wonder about how he is going to make it through this holiday.

Leo has stopped drinking, even beer, under the advice of his doctors. The therapist routinely accuses him of secretly drinking, and he can't figure out why she doesn't believe him. I do. Leo is a whole lot more fun when he's drunk. But his problems with depression and not being able to hold a job have driven him to thoughts of suicide. He knows, when he's thinking rationally, that suicide is wrong. And when he's got his wits about him, he generally makes the right choices and takes care of himself. The potential negative effect resulting from mixing even a little alcohol with some of the anti-depressants scares the hell out of him. But thoughts of suicide scare him even more. So, off the booze and on the drugs he stays. My few visits over the years have been more and more sober, more depressing for me. Leo used to be the definition of the word 'fun'. His quick wit and unique observations would get a room rolling.

Graduate school in the early 80s was my last chance at living what I would call a truly irresponsible existence. The government provided loans to cover tuition and a part-time job in a school office paid the food and electric bills. I also worked a little on the side for a cleaning service, graveyard shift. This helped pay for the extras. It amazes me how much energy I had back in those days, the days before kids, before even Ronnie. In my mid-twenties, the whole wide world was my oyster. And, as is always the way with seafood, the smell is never as good when she takes out the trash.

I don't know. It's one of Leo's sayings.

Leo was studying in the same college, and we met in a macro economics seminar. What there was to debate in the world of economics interested me about as much as the lint in another man's belly button. But it filled a requirement. Leo was good at economics and could hold his own in any financial discussion. Almost 15 years older than most of the class, he already held two undergraduate degrees and was now working on his Master's. Late night beer blasts, pub crawls and party-crashing soon led to an offer to share an apartment over the summer with another co-sufferer of supply and demand, George. The three of us found a place near the main street, and that led to a two year living arrangement that took me and George to graduation and Leo to the indefinite. His degree was eventually earned through random credits at a local college in Baltimore, supplemented by a required petition and three letters of recommendation from his former professors. But while the degree was in fact awarded, the struggle did not produce the expected fruit. Leo was still left with Leo, and that was perhaps the problem.

In our two-plus years of sharing an apartment, Leo, George and I were able to scrape together the funds to do a Caribbean cruise during one winter break. The ports-of-call took us to the coast of Mexico, where we were granted a two-day pass to explore the coast. The plan included plenty for free time, sun bathing and meals at interesting restaurants. That is, if we followed along with the prescribed tour. Leo, George and I felt smothered by that assembled body of rolling flesh even before we left the murky Floridian waters. Our plan was to bust away from the group and do a little exploring. Once set ashore, we caught a ride in a pick up with a geologist from Texas named Virgil who was roaming the Yucatan in search of oil prospects. He pleasantly related his experiences in this part of Mexico, shared some of his grass and soda pop, and imparted homespun west Texas philosophy on the current state of affairs in what he referred to as "this third-world cesspool." At a rest

stop we found ourselves bumped from the truck by a rushing group of Mexican men who misunderstood Virgil's offer to "take us another good piece up the road" as an extended offer to everyone to climb aboard. Virgil shouted at the mob to "get the heck out of his truck," then hit the gas before we could get back in and soon disappeared in a thick cloud of dust, shedding Mexicans, dogs and various food vendors in his wake. We never got a chance to thank ol' Virgil.

George's map identified San Geronimo as the closest town of any size. As we considered this option, Leo discovered that the gas station sold beer: a definite mood changer. After a few quarts we stopped cursing Virgil and considered what prospects might lay before us in San Geronimo. As Leo painted his Sam Peckinpah scenario where the Gringos arrived just in time to save the town from the evil land baron, a taxi driver who spoke English pulled up and made us an offer we couldn't refuse.

On Christmas Eve, slightly buzzed and smiling warmly, we found ourselves in the glow of red lights outside of a small yet beautifully spirited Mexican village. The girls were inviting and we had a little expendable cash, so, in our inebriated state, we made the most of it. It was certainly a night to remember. As the morning light shined through the slates of the paint-peeled shutters, George and I gathered our things to head downstairs in search of some food.

"Don't leave me!"

The shout erupted from a rumpled pile of bedclothes in the corner. The girls, gone hours ago to continue their shift, had let us use this room to sleep it off. They were really wonderful. Our money helped, of course, but their hospitality seemed genuine. Maybe it was just the holidays.

"Don't worry, Casanova, we ain't leavin' ya."

George threw Leo his pants and he quickly got himself together.

"I feel like I did something very bad last night."

"You did, and her name was Esmeralda."

Buttoning his shirt, Leo looked around, seeing the room for the first time in focus, "You think they'd put a coat of paint on the walls or hang a fern or something. This place is, how can I say it? In need of a little cheering up."

"Hang a picture, maybe? 'Tis the season, after all." Having no natural gift of wit myself, I was content prodding these guys towards even higher plateaus of jocularity. It was my humble role as straight man.

George pointed to a dark stain on the wall. "Look, there's the birthday boy."

Jesus hung amongst the shadows in a goldish oval frame on the wall. It was the painting that, when looked at from one angle, revealed his bleeding heart; then went back to being the praying Jesus when you tilted your head another way.

Leo noticed. “That’s it. That’s all I’m saying. A splash of color. A little pride. It makes a difference.”

George surveyed the room a little closer. “And I think that one next to it is one of the Popes.”

Leo walked over to the wall with the two framed pictures. “Pope John.”

“Pope John was the patron saint of sporting women, was he not?”

“And cockroaches, apparently.” Leo flicked a fat cockroach off the Pope’s face.

My head was throbbing and I was dying for some coffee. “Don’t forget to fill out your comment cards at the reception desk on the way out. Let’s make like a Viking and Leif. Who sees a door?”

The taxi drove us back to the center of town where we found an open café and some fantastic local java. The smells were intoxicating. A festive day was blossoming around us. Music had already begun to fill the square. A marimba band played “Feliz Navidad” somewhere off in the direction of the fancy hotel.

The realization hit us simultaneously.

“Right! *Feliz Navidad, muchachos.*”

We clinked our coffee mugs.

George, the strongest constitution of the group, reminded us of our mission and called over the waiter.

“Tres cervezas, por favor.” George’s accent was good. I envied his fluency. He had scored the prettiest girl last night because of it, too. When the beers arrived we toasted the day again. Then the town. Then the Mexican señoritas, the waiters, Pancho Villa, Mrs. Villa, all the Villa children, the entire Mexican population and their dogged yet tireless efforts to enter our country.

Leo considered the plight of the undocumented alien. “Mark my words. There is no reason to think our country would be any worse off if we were to allow more Mexicans to come up north, freely.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because they’re hard working people. They love life. Have a healthy perspective, spiritually balanced to recognize what is important. We could all use a little bit of that.”

“No, why should we mark your words?”

“Oh. I was just trying to sound profound.”

“Nice try.”

“Thanks.”

I checked my watch, suddenly concerned. “Hey, when do we have to get back to the boat?”

George finished his beer with a resounding belch, then stood to search the vicinity for his backpack. “Yeah. Right now. Time to boogie.”

Leo was in an entirely different gear. Settled comfortably into this street-side oasis, he wasn’t about to rush the experience. He took a sip of beer and tried to get us to sit back down. “Guys. We’ve got time. Look, they’re bringing fresh tortillas. Besides, I need to pick up a bottle. I wanna remember the smells of this place.”

Living with Leo had taught me many things. One was that it was possible to collect air. Along the shelves of his bedroom were small coke bottles, old milk bottles, and recycled mayonnaise jars with labels like “Nova Scotia spring, 1962”, “Big Brother (Joplin) concert, 1968”, and “New York City Subway Platform, 23rd street, July 1977”. In a rare mood, he’d offer you a whiff of an Atlantic City Garbage Dump or one special Winter in the Poconos. I doubted that this could really be “a thing” until I took a snort of “Niagara Falls, 1960 – Canadian side”. There really was something to it.

As a hobby, it was unique, sure enough. Here in Mexico was the furthest Leo had ever been from his home in Long Island, and he was collecting samples religiously. On this trip he had already bottled seven different varieties of sea air, two bottles that captured the rich smells of the buffet line, plus one that was simply labeled “Quaff”. We didn’t ask. His luggage clanked like a milkman’s satchel.

With no opening for discussion, George dropped some pesos on the table and flagged down a cab. Just when it looked like he would be left behind, Leo grabbed his duffle bag and, begrudgingly, climbed into the taxi. My first Mexican Christmas memory ends with us speeding right by the “Zona Roja” on our way out of town, and us waving drunkenly to phantom girls inside who, in the radiance of those lurid red lights, were nestled with visions we could never fathom on that Christmas morning.

We arrived at the boat just as the plank was being pulled up. How we could be so casual back then is a mystery to me. Nowadays, everything is so carefully planned. Arriving anyplace “right on time” would never occur to me. And what about sex? Back then, sex was not something to be afraid of. Well, usually. At worse, a shot of penicillin would do the trick. Today, the threat of violence and disease makes everything so much more

serious. And for me, probably contributed to the idea of getting married and settling down. I don't know. What kind of life would I have led if I had hung around more with Leo? If I had not taken the job in Hartford and begun to slowly bore myself to death underwriting insurance policies? I can't say. I don't think that I would have turned into Leo, but I certainly didn't see myself making some of the choices he'd made either.

Starting about three months before the date of graduation Leo sunk into a deep funk. He stayed in bed more, attended most classes but couldn't finish an assignment, couldn't prepare for his seminar. He lost his teaching assistantship, then lost the use of his left side. Doctors couldn't figure it out, and his claim of having experienced a "Minor Stroke" was not medically supported. George and I graduated and moved out while Leo was admitted to a long term facility where he was counseled and medicated and soon regained the use of his limbs. His mother died while he was recovering, and that hit him hard. A relapse into depression followed and then more medication. The hospital provided help in finding a place in a half-way house for people dealing with emotional problems, and they even found him a job at a church, cleaning and gardening. The counseling must have given him hope, as he began to talk more freely about shoring up his resume and passing it around to some of the local businesses. Unfortunately, the time spent out of circulation, plus his advancing years, made it difficult to find long-term employment in his field. Sporadic stints as a pizza delivery boy was the best he could do, until even that gig proved too much for him to handle. In about a year the small sum he had inherited from his mother was used up. With only pennies coming in, and excessive free time on his hands, Leo began to talk, of all things, about another trip to Mexico. I didn't ask where the money would be coming from; maybe he'd managed to squirrel something away. If he had, I'm sure it wasn't much.

"We should go find George and take another cruise. Or, hell, just fly down there and spend a week in that tiny little Mexican garden of Eden. You remember that place? George would probably never go for it. What do you think?"

George. I fully expect the phone to ring one day and to hear George's voice on the other end, drunk as a skunk, telling me to hop on down to Rio, or Acapulco, or on a yacht off some tropical island and join him in some new adventure. But, at the same time I expect that that day is a long way off. Right now, I had no idea in what port George might be holding up. I was surprised to hear Leo mention his name.

Leo and George had a falling out. There was never any major incident. Almost immediately after graduation, George found success: big money, a large home, and eventually a wife of the genteel class: a peahen to compliment his new peacock lifestyle. He also found Leo too depressing to deal with and soon stopped talking to him. Leo extended himself repeatedly only to be shut down. No phone messages returned, no letters answered. He was simply ignored. Eventually, Leo caught on. You could tell George's mysterious "disappearance" hurt Leo more than if he'd come right out and told him to fuck off.

George and I stayed in touch for a few years, and he would refer to Leo as a loser and a waste of a life, if he mentioned him at all. George lacked the patience to deal with Leo, grouping him with the indigent, burdens of the state, those responsible for his high taxes,

those removed from the class of people with whom George had begun to associate. Funny how your politics can take a dramatic turn once you join the upwardly mobile. To avoid the sour tone in his voice, I learned to stop bringing up Leo's name.

Using his Spanish, George began to work internationally, moving up the corporate ladder with programmed alacrity. He would send Ronnie and me a card around the holidays, usually from some exotic locale, tanned and tropically festive, but even those cards stopped coming several years ago. I have come to realize that there are people in life with whom you share intense experiences, and then, almost over night, you never see them again. It's a shock to me, the realization, and I can sometimes feel a powerful melancholy if I let myself dwell. It had been a relatively slow process, as separations go, but George eventually fell off the map. He is now relegated to that trunk in the attic where I keep some of the favorite people I have known... John Stiles and Dave Flask, the Mick Jagger impersonators from Mrs. Bailey's high school pre-calculus class; Kevin Larkin, who taught me that old folk songs can sound cool in two-part harmony; Deacon Birch, no doubt certifiable, but a warm soul from the south who knew how to welcome a fellow outsider. Those guys, plus a couple of special girls... It's a trunk that is becoming very hard to open, and even harder to close. For teaching me the value of homemade beer, the thrill of venturing into the less-traveled corners of the globe, and the spirit of youth that need never die, George had earned his way into that dusty old trunk.

"I haven't heard from George in years. I wouldn't count on him. What was that, though? You're talking about Mexico?"

"Yeah! I need a change of scenery. This place is depressing. Gotta get outta here."

"You think you're ready for that?"

"I don't know, Tom. But I know one thing. If things don't change, I just don't see much point."

Now a pause for me. Leo was talking about giving up. Call me a sucker, but I just couldn't take Leo sounding so defeated. And I have a habit of rooting for underdogs. I held out an enticement that was more fluff than substance. But it worked.

"I'm going to think about this, seriously. I just may be able to join you."

Leo jumped on that. "Really? That would be very cool."

"But, ah, you know ... Let me think about it a little. There's a lot going on right now."

"Hey, man, we can make this happen. It's dirt cheap down there. Just plane tickets, right? How much could it be, I mean ... And I've already got a little saved. Let's shoot for this summer."

We left it at that. More than anything, I was just humoring Leo, expecting very little in the way of follow-through on his part. That had always been his MO back then. Still, deep down, I understood exactly what Leo was saying about a change of scenery.

I wished that there had been someone else who knew Leo, both the old Leo and this current incarnation. Someone like George, although I pretty much knew what he would say. You had to know him, had to have met him when he was younger and more jazzed about life. In those days, nobody I knew could relate, and I found myself wondering if I was the only person on the planet who had a connection with this man, and if so, shouldn't I be playing a more responsible role in his life? Heavy ponderings for a puerile rudderless spirit not yet twenty-five years old.

I met a woman named Angela during that last month of school and after dating for about six months, we were pretty much living together. She maintained her own apartment to keep her father happy, but that was turning into an open sham. Anyway, on the night of this particular conversation with Leo she was out with her girlfriends at a bridal shower, going places I really would rather not know about, and with a clear expectation for a very late return. Not that I really would have discussed much with her.

Angela had met Leo, of course, but knew very little about him. I had gotten her to listen to me talk about his problems once, shortly after we met. It was a mistake. Angela did not suffer fools lightly. The one thing I found fresh and real about Angela when we met was her confident sense of humor, usually delivered in the form of biting sarcasm. She approached life with an aggressive left jab, knocking down society's ridiculous norms and scattering her greasy banana peels for others to slip on. She could pick up on a person's idiosyncrasies like a predator senses fear, and construct amazing comedy from almost any quirk. Needless to say, it was a quality that did not come with an equal measure of empathy, so talking to her about a friend who was down on his luck was asking for trouble. I didn't see a problem with making jokes about Leo to Leo, but something about hearing other people put him down, that just crossed some kind of line. The crazy thing is that I'm pretty sure this attitude towards Leo was the tipping point for me, as far as Angela goes. It made me think hard about what I wanted in this relationship. Ridiculous, I know. But it's true.

Six weeks after getting back from the second trip to Mexico I asked Angela to move out. She did that night. Her exit was calm, but the look in her eye as she left was not. The wheels were already turning and the curl in her lip before she slammed the door told me that my own foibles would soon find their way into a footnote in her routine. Some time later, I saw her from the vantage point of a McDonald's drive thru window. She was inside at the counter and had her arm wrapped in another man's arm. I could see her eyes dart between the people behind the counter, then caught her whisper in her man's ear. He smiled broadly, then told her to hush. She was still at it, making small jokes, probably quick witted and funny. Probably funny to some. She should go into writing for late night talk show hosts. Not that I watch much of that kind of thing anymore.

Compared with the first, the second trip to Mexico was about as opposite an experience as could be imagined. I'd like to recall the revelry of two festive nights spent amongst the

girls, barkeeps and locals as a hedonistic romp through another ebullient Red Light District. I'd *like* to. The truth is, that entire trip was a complete mess, a disaster from first to last. And of course, for years afterwards, that's what I mostly dwelled on: the mistake I'd made trying to re-create the folly of my youth. Following *Leo* of all people!

Something about being in your mid-twenties, I heard someone say once, justifies a smug, self-satisfied arrogance. You've made it. You've earned the right to yammer. As a teen you feel immortal. As a twenty-something you feel important. What a joke. While you're playing at being an adult, you pretend your experiences up to that point amount to something worthwhile, weighty, worthy of contribution. And, viewed from your lofty perch, you feel you've *earned* the right to be express yourself with assertive, opinionated cocksurenness. In other words, be an asshole. Yeah, that pretty much described me during those unsettled years after grad school. One self-centered crybaby.

It took years to unpack everything that came out of that second trip and appreciate the experience. Certainly more character building, as these things go, in hindsight.

No surprise the trip didn't happen that summer. It took until December for Leo to gather enough money for airfare. We decided to look on this as a blessing, since the experience South of the Border would be more greatly appreciated during the colder winter months.

See? I can be positive.

After unexpected flight delays due to a fluke storm coming up from the south, long lines of holiday travelers in bus stations in Mexico City, and a quicker than expected round of severe lower intestinal "Twister", we were half dead by the time we arrived in Vera Cruz. We may have been spent. But the town certainly wasn't. Not by a long shot.

Vera Cruz was primed. Locked, loaded, and ready to *festivar*. That town knows how to throw a party. Lively marimbas, happy people dancing in the street... if you've got the scratch, you could do a lot worse. Unfortunately, the price of hotels in high season drove us to the smaller towns further afield, and eventually the beach, where we camped for free. In the middle of the night a wind storm that turned into a sand storm cost us our tent and sent us back towards Vera Cruz, to a very sketchy motel by the highway. It was after being nearly bitten to death by fleas that we packed up and headed west, back towards the capital. Hitchhiking was difficult, but better than waiting hours at the bus station and battling for a seat amongst the livestock and pickpockets. I know I was a miserable traveling companion. With patience at a premium, I cut those around me very little slack. But my real target was Leo. By the time we stopped moving that long, exhausting day, we were barely talking to each other.

I can't recall the name of the town we wound up, but it began with a "T". Desperate for a beer, the cab driver suggested the Red Light District, or the "Zona de Tolerancia", before we even asked. I have two or three strong memories about that first night; the rest is mostly a blur. My tunnel vision directed me to follow the advice of some biblical worthy, who advised, "Drink wine to lighten the spirits." I suppose if it had been an Aztec mystic, the elixir of choice would have been tequila. I made due. One thing I do recall is that, as

drunk as I became, I still managed to haggle our way into a very convenient and modest room just above an equally humble, yet clean, cantina for two nights at a ridiculous price. Another general recollection is being surrounded by some very playful people, hard-drinking Mexicans, plus a few attractive young ladies, and laughing stupidly for most of the night using my pathetic high school Spanish. I remember working hard at having fun. I also remember not having sex.

Oh, and it was Christmas Eve.

It was still early when we arrived. As the joyful music filled the streets and people prepared for the night ahead, the happy exchanges between the women and men arriving on the busses and those setting up shop painted a kind of ‘South of the Border’ Grover’s Corners. The cheerful atmosphere gave buoyancy to the natural friendliness, and at our bar-slash-hotel, we were invited to join in the celebration. After about the fifth wave of *Felicidades* -- this time from a young man sporting an elaborate, sequined Roy Rogers outfit, offering a broad grin of welcome as he sauntered by -- I caught myself. And just in time.

“These are the holidays,” I told myself. “This is my vacation. I deserve a break. And I don’t get all that much time off at that crummy job. Maybe this is not what I had in mind, but you need to lighten *the fuck* up!”

And that's when the serious drinking began.

What Leo did that first night is a mystery. He ducked out at some point and, glad to be free of the sight of him, I didn’t care to inquire. I don’t think I was focusing on much more than my own selfish needs, one peccadillo being the inconvenience of budget traveling when I considered myself well past the age of your average backpacker. Fueling that dark cloud was simple, and I might have spent the evening stewing in my own pathetic juices had I not been taken in by the communal spirit of those around me.

In our own cantina, where we were renting the room, I became friendly with the bartender and settled into my cups. I was destined to end this night with my face, not cradled in the arms of some mocha-skinned vixen, but rather face down in a toilet with no seat. Leo may have sat with me for a time, while I suffered the ill-effects of self-indulgence and intemperance. But like I said, much of that night is murky at best.

It’s strange to see the Red Light District in the daytime. It’s part Ghost town and part ordinary village. Bars and shops are closed up and mothers appear from nowhere sending their young children off to collect water or to barter food. If it weren’t the holidays, a school bus would pull up outside the gates of our little community, and a dozen urchins in tattered shoes and bright, clean school uniforms would scurry out to meet it.

This morning there was a surprising amount of activity, at least from my perspective. After a brief game of charades, the owner of the bar where we were staying sent a boy out to bring us some food. It was more than likely cooked over a wood fire grill made in a barrel outside the gates where the old women set up their makeshift kitchens. We tried to stress the importance of coffee as part of the order, but who knows what the kid understood. We

sat out on the “sidewalk” in order to enjoy the bright sunshine and wait for the boy to return with the food.

It took a while for the food to show up, and we sat there, not talking, watching the people, young and old, go about their morning routines. From around the corner came a small girl leading a donkey on a short, worn length of nylon rope. We watched her approach from far off, kicking up dust as she came.

I didn’t want to point out the obvious, but the silence was starting to feel uncomfortable.

“I guess someone has to exercise the donkey.”

She led the burro out towards a field beyond the gates. Upon entering the walled complex of bars, it was hard not to notice the weathered sign erected on a large billboard advertising the unique entertainment on offer at this particular establishment, with its star, the donkey, prominently featured. An artist’s rendering extolled the virtuoso’s unique skills and promised an unforgettable night in big, bold letters.

Leo watched it go by and winced, “How can it walk?”

“Resilient creatures.”

“I hear that’s what they’re bred for.”

The boy returned with tortillas, beans, spicy Mexican eggs, farm cheese and coffee. We immediately sent him back for a second round of the same, and, through pathetic Spanish and gestures, charged him to bring back as much black coffee as he could physically carry. He took our pesos and ran away, but not in the direction of the source of our food.

My Spanish was, in a word, pathetic.

“I guess I wasn’t clear on that one.”

“It’s surprising. You’re doing an outstanding job talking to the people down here.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I’m no George, that’s for sure.”

“Well ... never be another George. I half expect to see him coming down the stairs right now to join us.”

“That’d be something.”

We finished our food, but there was no sign of the boy, nor the second helping of food we requested. Just as well, since I was unsure how my stomach was going to handle what I had just placed inside it. Thoughts of aspirin and ginger ale began slowly forming into words when I heard the sound of television coming from inside the bar. It got Leo’s attention, too. We walked in to find the owner of the bar and an older, short, squat woman,

dressed in her Sunday best, and the boy who had delivered our breakfast, all staring up at the box on the wall. They were watching “Star Trek” in Spanish.

Leo jumped. “Hey, I know this one! It’s the one where they come upon an early Christian community out there on some planet. It’s like, they find them trying to practice their religion, but the guys with machine guns won’t let them.”

He certainly knew his Star Trek. We sat. The three other people were glued to the set. At a commercial, the owner brought us two Corona Beers without us having ordered anything. When we showed our puzzlement, slapping my pants to indicate ‘no wallet’, he raised a bottle of his own and gave the toast.

“No. Les invito.”

We looked puzzled and grunted a simultaneous “Huh?”

“¡Navidad!”

“Well, fuck my burro. *Feliz Navidad* to you, too, my good sir!” Leo answered back.

We had almost forgotten. Yes, it was Christmas Day. And the man had bought us a beer!

The day went by in the same lazy way. No hurry. No expectations. Out here so many miles from the center of town, there is only one real element of diversion. Well, two if you include the donkey. Leo and I were content to hang out, and so we did. He broke out the cribbage board and we passed a relaxing afternoon playing and talking. Leo filled in the gaps of his life story since leaving the hospital, and I gave him a few details of my life and the indefinite future I sensed I had with Angela. His voice became quieter and more thoughtful when he spoke of his own future. Specifically, being the last living member of his family. Being the “end of the line” had been a preoccupation, and now, with no blood relatives left, he wavered between feeling responsible for leaving something significant and tangible behind and wanting to just give up. There is a lot I could say about that now, but back then, I was too young and stupid to realize the importance of my position. I grunted and shifted awkwardly in my seat, hoping he would change the subject.

“These people take their religion seriously, don’t they? Did you see that woman come in from church this morning?”

Oh, great. Religion. That’ll brighten things up.

A Christmas carol rang up from a boom box somewhere along the street, Nat King Cole singing *Chestnuts Roasting*.... It was very late in the afternoon and the red lights were beginning to stand out against the purpling western sky. My stomach had settled down and my head was mostly clear. I caught one blinking red light above the window of an empty display across the street and inspiration finally hit.

“You should have seen my old man around Christmas time. He decorated the house like it was his job. The lights, the manger on the front lawn, Santa and eight reindeer on the roof. And an entire set of plastic Choir Boys on our front lawn. That crazy bastard loved the holidays and knew how to put on a show. I think about that now and wonder how the hell his blood pressure withstood the spike in the electric bill.”

These reminiscences helped lighten the mood a little. Leo grunted in affirmation, memories of his own past Christmases streaming within.

Nat Cole was soon overtaken by a wailing Mexican Ranchero, a wounded soul lamenting a forsaken love. Leo looked annoyed at the intrusion, then shared a few of his own Christmas memories.

He'd grown up an only child in a small Long Island home. Quaint, just Leo and his parents. A very old-world Christmas was part of it. Very much the opposite of my experience, his was not a bright lights and Christmas-carolly kind of house. Still, though, he recalled it as a very special time of year for the three of them. His mother cooked foods from the old country. The wrinkled Polish gentlemen would come by after church to play cards. Dad might have a drop of sherry, if it was a cold evening. They were not flashy people, his parents, but they loved each other. He was pretty sure of that. His religious upbringing was fairly traditional, too, but the fifties and sixties were not traditional times. He rebelled more than was necessary, he said. I could see by his face the regret was returning. The quiet told me I was going to lose this battle. So might as well swing for the fences.

“You know, I was surprised you didn't go to church today.”

That got Leo's attention.

“Me? Why?”

“Don't know. Thought you went to church.”

He looked up from his cards and then shook his head.

“You know what I think about organized religion in this country.”

“Where, Mexico?”

“No, the US.”

I did know. But getting him fired up about something would be better than watching him wallow in a depressing funk. I played dumb.

“Sure, you told me once before, I think. You said you started going again, though. No?”

Leo sounded offended. “What? Look at the way the politicians have manipulated religion to serve their own purposes. The hypocrisy, man, the hypocrisy! How a thinking person can stand it, I will never know.”

His voice was getting a little louder and more animated. This was more like it. My prompting had struck a chord. A little more and I’d have him marching on the Virgin of Guadalupe.

I lobbed one over the plate. “You were a big Jimmy Carter fan, right? He made it cool to be both a politician *and* a Christian.”

“And look at him now! Out on the fringes. Nobody in the mainstream considers anything he has to say because he’s decided not to play their little game. Not part of the machine.”

The "religio-political" machine, as he put it, had no use for honest Christians. These people currently running the country pointed to just the right bible passages to justify their greed and wealth, their huge churches, their racism and reactionary opinions. The US was founded on principles of religious freedom, yet many of those ruling the country were determined to lock out anyone not belonging to the same pale, white tribe. Did they not see the irony?

“How would society operate without religion? The stupidity of it all! Take this holiday, for instance! Christmas: a celebration of commercial proportions. Religious considerations come second or third or not at all.”

My own agnostic posture notwithstanding, I shared a recent poll I’d seen. “I read that a growing number of Americans don’t bother connecting Christmas with religion anymore. And speaking of irony, you don’t have any problem discussing religion given the particular location we currently find ourselves in?”

“Look, these working ladies and the community that supports their, ah, activities, they have more spiritual depth, more substance, more *soul* than most people I know back home, and certainly more than any politician in Washington. More honest, too.”

While we were talking, two women entered the bar. They sat at the counter and paid little attention to us. It took me a while to figure out that the mirror behind the bar provided them with what they needed to survey the clientele. They had sized us up in an instant. Lingering near the bar, then pretending to look at the jukebox that was beside our table, they smiled. We smiled. No heat. No invitations. Just cordial politeness. I’m sure they were friendly enough, but their approach was so programmed, so mercenary, we looked around and realized something had changed. Drawn back down from our philosophical high horses, we saw it was no longer daytime. Darkness had fallen like somebody threw a switch, and in no time we could expect these bars to become active places of business.

We didn’t want to get caught up in all that, nor lose our places in the cribbage game, so we gathered up the cards and carried them upstairs. After a few more rounds, we suddenly lost interest in the game. Red light from the surrounding establishments began to tint the walls

of our tiny room and the air seemed to clear. As the night began to take hold you could feel the town come back to life. The realization hit us at the same time.

Yes, up until now the trip had been fairly shitty. And what were we doing about it? Cribbage? Come on! That's not what we came to Mexico for.

It only made sense to join the party. For me, I admit it felt sort of forced. Perhaps I was still groggy from the night before. But staying in this room, waiting for the conversation to return to the good old days...*Nah!* Nostalgia is so overrated.

No. Not tonight. Not on Christmas.

Surely, all we needed to do was to make a little effort and the "fun" would come to *us*. I told Leo it was time to do what we came to Mexico to do. We washed up, changed into our tropical finest, and hit the streets. Something to eat first, of course, before setting out to meet our fortunes... that was just good sense. Decadence, depravity and debauchery could wait a while longer until our stomachs were full.

As we stepped out on the sidewalk, Leo pointed to a street vender selling tacos.

"That's what I feel like. A couple of tacos."

"Tacos? Leo, baby, this isn't just any ordinary night. This is *Navidad!* Why don't we bop around the corner to that place with the giant palm tree out front. Señor Swanky's or whatever it's called. It's gotta be the best place around for carne asada, based on the smells coming out of there. Maybe we'll get to meet Mr. Swanky himself!"

Leo hesitated.

"You worried about money? I can pick up dinner. Hey, it's my gift."

"No, no. You've been picking up the tab almost every night. I, I --"

"Ok, so you pick up the tab."

Before the words came out of my mouth, it hit me.

"No, I'm kidding. Wait -- Leo, how much money do you have left?"

Leo shrugs. At the restaurant, after a couple of beers, he comes clean. Leo is nearly broke. He has about five dollars US and about that much in pesos. I become quiet and occupy myself with studying the few characters who have decided to indulge in Christmas dinner at Señor Swanky's. His attempt at small talk sickens me, and I can't look at Leo right now.

With only a few bucks to his name, I thought about the three days we had left in our trip. What was he expecting to do to get by? The trip would require bus fare, lodging – even

flea bag dives cost money – and food. And what about this evening? You don't come to a place like this if you're broke. What was he thinking?

And once again I am regretting ever coming down to this country, sick of all the hassles and being so far from home. What the hell am I doing here? And why did I agree to saddle myself with this loser? I can hear George's voice echoing in my head, "I told you, man. Your own fault." And now I can't stand the sight of him.

I am so tired of Leo and his bullshit I almost get up and walk out of the restaurant.

Mentally, I count my money and realize that there was no way both of us could afford very much in the way of "entertainment" tonight. As it was, we would be operating at the minimum, and if we ran into any glitches, we would have less than that. After calculating expenses, I arrived at a figure of twenty dollars. Twenty dollars to play with. And there was no use in splitting it.

When I look up, he's checking out a woman sitting by herself at the bar. From behind she had a tight body that I could tell she took care of. By her confident, straight backed posture, the easy way she held her glass, it was clear she was at home in this restaurant. When she turned in our direction, her youthful smile seemed friendly enough but the lines in her face told a different story. I guessed she had recently passed forty. Leo appeared fascinated by her, and told me so.

"Holy cow, look at her move."

She was up now and gone into a back room.

Leo's eyes remained fixed on that curtain behind which she'd disappeared. "I wonder if she works here."

"I'm sure she's just here with the Amway convention."

His eyes get dreamy. "Imagine what she smells like."

"Did you bring a bottle?"

A stupid question. He tapped a bulge in the pocket of his blazer and I heard the distinctive <clinck!>

His eyes grew wide when she returned, swinging her purse and taking a seat at the end of the bar closest to us. I looked around the place and saw only two tables occupied and she wasn't going to get much action from the family of six eating in the corner. Nor from the pair of drunks at the other side of the room who looked like at any minute they might fall off their stools.

She smiles demurely at us, lowers her eyes in a shy and reserved manner.

Leo lets out a breathy, “Holy cow.”

And he can't take his eyes off her. Clearly, his need to get laid is profound.

Something in my head clicks.

It finally hits me. This is my “come-to-Jesus” moment. I realize what an asshole I’ve been. Am. Always was.

Shit.

I pay the check then give Leo the twenty bucks. Making the introductions in my pathetic Spanish, I make sure she knows his intentions and his limited financial worth. She nods. She has entertained a gringo once or twice before, and my words are largely unnecessary. The look in her eye tells me she understands. With a slap on the back, I leave him to work out any sundry details. In return I get a stupid, drop-jawed expression on an incredulous face. It happens so fast, it takes a few moments for Leo to register what this means and what is about to happen. He stammers and I quickly turn and walk away, giving him no opportunity to object. (Well, I like to think he would have objected.)

A “Feliz Navidad” to the room, and I am out the door.

The night sky felt fresh and clear, and I was surprised at the slight chill in the air. There were a million stars so bright and so close it seemed you could scoop up a handful just by reaching out and grabbing them. I decided to walk around to cool off, while telling myself that it was a nice thing I just did for Leo. For a while there I was ready to blow my stack. After a few minutes I calmed down enough to realize how much Leo needed this, how much he needed the proximity of female companionship. In the end it was no sacrifice at all. Some wayward Christmas magic in the air? I proposed to myself, and started to smile. How else could you account for me giving up what I had just given up? I stopped at the corner and saw the road sign. Yep. They'll be calling this ‘Miracle on Juarez Street.’ Only explanation. That Leo better get himself laid and laid *good*, that’s all.

The three blocks that make up this “town” are long blocks and I mellow into an easy canter. The center street is where most of the bars and dance clubs are. There is a paraphernalia shop on the corner with a convenience store attached. You could buy videos there or bread, bottled water or an extra-long purple dildo. Every appetite gratified. The man behind the counter had his children sitting around him, eating dinner and watching television. I bought a bottle of water and decided this was a good time to practice some Spanish.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Chicken.”

“How delicious. Who’s the lucky one who got the head?”

I thought I was being cute. The Dad beamed proudly.

“Everybody!” His smile was as broad as Christmas Day.

I leaned over and looked into their bowls. Each bowl was filled with five or six chicken heads floating in a broth with carrots and some other root vegetables. I stammered out some kind of parting line and left quickly.

There was a lot left to learn about the world. What a presumptuous asshole.

The circuitous route I chose ended and I turned onto the western street. This block, I discovered, had two gay bars and seemed a little less bright, or rather less spirited than its neighbors, set apart as it was from the rest of the community. But the hawkers were no less aggressive, calling out to me just as vigorously as their heterosexual counterparts on the other streets. Roy Rodgers from earlier in the day beckoned me over with a promise of creative entanglements. Or so it seemed. Feigning a lack of comprehension, I waved a greeting, then took larger strides until I was out of earshot. The third street, on the opposite side, is a mixed bag of solo window displays (women in underwear), apartments above bars, both active and boarded up, and the one club at the end of the street advertising the Donkey Show. The headliner was tied up out front, appearing bored, munching hay. It is an even quieter street, with not as many functioning red lights over the doorways as the other two streets. I sensed that Christmas had hurt business. Only a handful of clubs – dive bars, really – open, and those appeared to be desperate for clientele. Everywhere I went people were calling me their friend. It was a nice ego boost, even if it was artificially inflated. I smiled and wished them Feliz Navidad.

In no time I’m back at our digs. I pause and consider a second lap, but realize I’d only be taunting the touts who were obviously working on commission. Not cool.

Beer sold on the street is cheap and, because I’m renting his room upstairs, Jesus, the bouncer, doesn’t stop me from sitting out front on the curb and nursing it. I sip the beer, watch the people get out of their taxis and walk to their various destinations. Jesus occasionally hawks at a passing cab, telling them to stop and come into the “best bar in town”, but no one does. There are no white people, no tourists. Very few people in fact, and everyone is local and knows exactly where they are going. Jesus tells me he’s not expecting much of a crowd tonight. I tell him in mix of broken Spanish and English that I like the art work on his biceps. He smiles, revealing two gold teeth. He pulls up the back of his shirt to show a tattoo of an elaborate crucifix decorated with long vines with thorns, blood and roses. It covers his entire back.

“Lo conseguí el año pasado. Last Christmas.”

He smiles proudly.

“A Christmas present? From last Christmas?”

“Yeah, a present from last Christmas. Nice, huh?”

“Very nice. Did it hurt.”

He shrugs, acting cool and tough. “A little bit.”

Then Jesus does a dramatic shift, cracking a broad smile, “Nah, man, it hurt like a mother!” He laughs loudly, then adds in English, “He’s Jesus, like me, right?”

“That’s right. Like you.”

I raise my beer. “Happy birthday.”

He nods, but he doesn’t get it. Jesus’ birthday and it being Christmas. Before I can explain the remark, the owner calls him inside.

The red light across the street comes on. A curtain opens and I see a woman pull a chair up and sit in the window. She’s wearing a negligee, bright red, high shiny black boots and a Santa hat. She waves to me and I wave back. She waves me over, but I shake my head and gesture a thumb behind me, as if to say, “gotta wait for my friend.” She knows it’s a ruse, but she accepts this. I figure she’s in her early thirties and does not have many more nights like this left in her. She looks good for her age, and this makes me wonder about how Leo is getting on. This is the kind of lady Leo likes to talk to.

Before I know what has happened, a girl appears out of nowhere and plops down on the curb next to me wearing a short tight black cocktail dress. She is almost sitting right on me, in fact, but does not look at me. She dangles a small black purse between her legs and lets out a big sigh.

“Ay, Dios!”

The knowledge that I am broke and have no prospects is actually quite liberating, even refreshing, and I’m more relaxed, knowing I won’t be making any deals tonight. Plus, I get to practice my Spanish. I repeat what I had heard a hundred times this evening.

“¿Qué pasa, mi amor?”

She looks at me for the first time, pretending to suddenly realize someone else was occupying these few inches of curb. She is young, maybe 19, and looks like she has gotten herself all dressed up for a date that never showed. Thinking this may be a good talking point, regardless of how it turns out, I take a stab at it. In my thick gringo accent, I smile and playfully put my arm around her. She doesn’t move it.

“What’s up? Are you Ok? Where’s your man?”

Her Spanish is slow enough for me to understand, at least at first.

“No man tonight.”

Big sigh. She is acting like she's been stood up, but the act is way over the top. Her apparent fatigue is in contrast to how meticulous she has gotten herself together.

"Poor thing. Well, if you want to, you can sit here with me. I'm not doing anything."

She turns and looks at me again through half-open eyes, considering the offer, and I decide I can read her mind. 'I *am* already sitting here, fool, what do you think?' Again, clearly exaggerating, she rubs her eyes, sighs a third time, shrugs, then puts her own hand around my shoulder. Then she takes my beer from me and drinks.

My next assault on the Spanish language rings with Middle School confidence.

"What's your name?"

"Crystal."

"I'm Tom. Nice to meet you."

It's my turn to perform. I offer my hand and we shake, formally. Jesus returns to the front door and sees Crystal. He speaks quickly to her. Obviously they know each other. But it's not clear if they are friends. With some authority he's telling her to get moving. She makes a face and tells him to eat shit. He makes some kind of threat under his breath. Crystal appears to stiffen, and shifts uncomfortably, moving away from me. I sense that she's not "licensed" to work this particular piece of the strip and has been told to move along. Perhaps there's some fee associated with his bar that she's opted not to pay. In any event, Jesus isn't happy with her.

For my part, I'm enjoying the weirdness of the situation. I'd rather she stay a little longer just to see how this develops, and say as much to Jesus, in English.

"Jesus, she's tired. Come on. Let her sit a few minutes. She's my friend! Es mi amiga!"

Crystal smiles a little and moves back in, closer to me. Jesus mutters something, which I don't get, and Crystal responds. Her tone betrays an annoyance, and she tells Jesus he's an idiot. He turns to go inside the bar and says something that sounds like she'd better be gone before he gets back, followed by a garbled statement I can't understand. Crystal turns to me and speaks in English.

"Are you gay?"

"Excuse me?"

"Jesus says you're gay, that you smile at the boys and don't go to bed with women. Is that true?"

I turn to peer inside the bar. “What the hell? Jesus said that? Geez, you think you know a guy, and here he goes telling people... No, Crystal, I am not gay. I like women very much.”

“Oh. Good. You like me, then?”

“Yes, yes. I like you. I like you very much. You’re very beautiful.” And she is. Remarkably so. Her long black hair is straight and falls into her eyes, causing her to move it behind her ear. A simple gesture that for some reason I find provocative.

She pauses only a second, then makes a face, like, ‘So, what’s taking you so long? Ask me to bed.’ But she doesn’t say this. She just stares me down with those bedroom eyes. I pick up the conversation.

I decide to deepen our friendship. “OK, what makes you happy?”

She doesn't understand. “Huh?”

“What, ah, what are you looking for? What are your passions, your heart’s desire. What do you want out of life?”

Crystal closes those beautifully dreamy eyes and leans in to kiss me on the cheek. Very platonic. Maybe even sisterly. Except she allows her tongue to brush ever so lightly along the side of my face.

I immediately feel a stirring in my magic place and gulp. She picks up the conversation.

“What do I want? What I want is what you want.”

“You want to go to bed with a beautiful woman, too? Wow! What are the chances!”

Crystal looks confused, and snuggles in, putting her head on my chest. Her hair smells like fresh flowers and has a clean shine. She looks up to me and stares with half closed eyes. She forms a mischievous smile, then shakes her head slowly, no. It finally occurs to me what this is, why she’s acting this way. She has just woken up. I laugh.

She wants to know why I am laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“You are sleepy, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She yawns. “Yes, I’m sleepy. Very sleepy. But I have to work.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

I said I was sorry because I felt bad that she had to work while I was on vacation. I have teacher friends at home who are always telling me they’re “sorry” whenever I run into them

during July or August. But that's not the way she took it. She took my "I'm sorry" as a rejection.

More than that, I'm sorry I can't offer her any employment. She's doing what she needs to do. Her reasons are her reasons. And I'm sitting here casually joking with her. Looking down at her slumbering face, I feel like shit again.

Fortunately for me, she's on a completely different wavelength and clearly will take no part in anyone's pity party. She brightens and with a straight face chirps matter-of-factly.

"No? OK. You don't want me. So, you are gay."

"No, no. I want you! Believe me, there's nothing I want more, but... "

"What...?"

"No money."

"Oh. Well, how much do you have?"

Not giving it much thought, I tell her, "I have enough for about two beers."

She nods slowly, as if doing a little calculation of her own. She looks around at the empty street, considers the hours ahead, and then seems to make a decision. She reaches for my beer, finishes the bottle, then lets out another big sigh.

"Ok. Good."

She stands up and reaches down for my hand. I'm not getting it. She waves for me to take her hand, then grabs hold of my arm up and pulls me up on my feet. Then she leads me down the street.

"Where are we going?"

"Two beers."

If I had enough Spanish, or her enough English, I would have attempted to communicate that I was planning on spreading those two beers out over the next three days. A couple of beers with this girl meant I'd shoot my entertainment budget for the rest of the trip.

Leo had better be getting some mind-blowing sex right now, or else preparing himself for some serious ass kicking when we got back to the states.

Crystal brought me to the end of the street where an old woman stood with a bucket of beer on ice. The old woman wiped the bottles lovingly and handed them to me with a toothless smile. Crystal promised to return the empties.

The two women knew each other, and Crystal referred to her as Doña, a title of respect. They spoke about the holiday, the lack of customers, and the mild weather. I understood almost all of what was said. That was cool. The old woman smiled at me as if she approved of my company. I was baffled. Clearly I was operating on borrowed luck at this point. I mean, just holding this girl's hand... it felt like a privilege. What did I think I deserved, anyway? A beautiful, confident, lovely girl like this? Get real.

I had to tell myself to shut up. Stop second guessing, stop thinking. Just go with it.

We walked around to the third and less crowded block in this neighborhood. Crystal looked up and down the street. No one was out and the loud music coming from the bar on the corner was wasted on empty chairs and tables.

Crystal started to say something in Spanish, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Something about her lazy drawl and those particular words, well, I was baffled. In the end she decided it wasn't worth the effort and instead took a drink from her beer. She let out a long and ponderous burp, swallowed, then smiled, looking straight into my eyes. Her head tilted to the building across the street. I looked at the building, a flickering red light hung over the entrance to a locked door and a stairwell. An apartment building, more than likely. She knew I had no money, so I was a little confused. I looked around. Were there hired goons lurking behind that pile of rubble? Or possibly under the stairwell?

"What's up? Why are we here? I don't understand."

She could sense I was nervous. Then closed her eyes. She told me in Spanish to take it easy, *Tranquilo*. She indicated that this was where she lived.

I took in the surroundings. It was a certifiable dump, by any right-thinking person's standards. Of course, I wasn't in any position to judge, so I played my joker card.

"Nice place. Kind of a fixer-upper, though. Rent controlled?"

She didn't understand my English, nor did she care. As a response she yawned in my face.

"I need to sleep. Come. You, too."

"Me? But I told you –"

She put her hand over my mouth before I could finish.

"No talk. Just come."

I followed her upstairs. It was the third floor in an unusually quiet building. Her key opened three locks, and then we were inside. She locked all the doors with three quick turns. The room was small and contained kitchen, table to eat at and a double bed, made up with pink and red pillows. There was no bathroom. If you wanted to pee, you had to go outside and down the hall. No major inconvenience. What I would consider a workman's

slop sink was a significant fixture in the kitchen, set beside a cube refrigerator that sat on the floor. The sink doubled for washing dishes, body parts, and the neighbor's Chihuahua, I later learned.

A large stuffed animal rabbit with floppy ears stared up at me from the bed looking about as surprised as I was. Crystal thrust it aside and pulled back the bedspread, while at the same time kicking off her shoes. She tried to get the fastener on her necklace undone, but it was getting caught in her hair. She was getting impatient, and turned to me, whining like a little kid who was tired and unreasonable. Her look told me that if there was any value in my being there it was at a minimum to help her get that necklace off. Once it was off, she took my hands and placed them on the zipper of her dress. I pulled it down and the dress dropped to the floor. She flopped in the bed and quickly got under the covers in one quick motion, but not so quick for me to see she wasn't wearing any brassiere. And then another jingle in my magic places. Before I could react, she was giving me more orders. Pick up the dress, put it on the hanger and hang it in the closet. Then take your cloths off, fold them, place them on the chair and come to bed. It was done more with motions than with words. In her final instruction, she smoothed the space in the bed beside her and said simply, "Ven, mi amor. Ven."

In a minute, the girl was nestled in my arms, snuggled and warmly locked in a perfect, comforting embrace, her feet rubbing up and down my legs, and the floral smells off her body filling my insides with unexpected release. How quickly she had fallen into position; it seemed so natural. She appeared to have selected me to play some kind of protector's role, like a human security blanket. Something firmer than what the oversized rabbit could provide.

I held my breath for a moment, took a survey of the situation, and recognized my improbable luck. Certainly more than I felt was due any mortal man. Allowing myself to take stock in how, in this place, on this night, I happened to have found myself in this pretty girl's bed, stroking her bare back while she clung fiercely to me, pressing her naked breasts into my side and bare chest, providing a comfort to one another that neither felt obliged to explain. Life was funny, I heard myself say.

The next thing I heard was a faint snore.

"Crystal?"

No answer. She really was tired, I guessed. Ah, well. This was still good. Better than good. And, who knew? Something might still happen. That's what I told myself as my left hand stroked the long, dark, full hair of this lovely, delicate and exhausted creature lying beside me. I saw our beers sitting over on the table next to the door. Beads of cool water were forming on the outside of the bottle, heightening the thirst-quenching potential they offered a sweaty American on holiday in Mexico. But on that table they would remain. I wasn't planning on ever moving again. Crystal gave a high pitched, tender coo, a gentle sigh this time, as she raised her knee up my leg and rested it on my crotch. Her hand moved up my chest. I pulled her closer. Listening to her soft breathing, my hands

explored the small of her back, and then the elastic band of her panties. Without wanting anything more, I recognized at that moment I had found a little slice of heaven.

The things that ran through my head... If I ever experienced any kind of spiritual awakening or connection to a higher plane it was there in that bed. The serenity was a joy without words. All my senses were roused to their full capacity: her smell, fresh lavender, her touch, fine gossamer, the sound of her breath nestling into my chest, the look of her angelic profile... the only thing missing was taste. I briefly considered licking her just to confirm what I already knew – a sweetness all its own. *Dolce vita*.

There are other senses at work in the human body, beyond these five, and I felt them that night. The fact that humans have yet to identify them does not mean that they don't exist. I believe that certain senses can only be experienced when two bodies come together and join as one. Some unknown sense, more tangible and specific than mere spiritual bonding, was at work at this time sending messages of rapture through our combined union... messages that expanded and left our bodies to join in the infinite joy of the universe. And through this connection I felt more alive than I had ever felt before.

And yet it was exact and total simplicity. It was peace, lying there with this girl. The calmness and the security that we were providing each other was worth so much more than words can describe or even money can buy. Two beers? By some miracle I'd landed on the right price.

I don't know how long I lay there thinking and drinking in the ambrosia. A slight move of my hand along her thigh or a lock of her hair falling across my face and these sensations returned with new ripples of ecstasy. I know I prayed for this never to end. I thanked the gods or the fates or whoever is in charge of directing our paths for their generosity and, for once, for paying attention. While I wasted time occupied with meaningless trivialities, they had arranged this spontaneous encounter. My self-absorption and immaturity so petty, I confessed my unworthiness for such an angel. Driven to tears of regret, I only asked for one thing more: An eternity of this.

Eventually my thoughts and emotions must have overwhelmed my spirit and I fell asleep.

In the early morning hours there was sex, and it was nice. Better than nice. Initiated simultaneously and equally pleasing to both. Soothing and comforting to start, then playful and funny. I remember laughing a bunch, like two kids discovering some new game with unexpected prizes. Up until that point in my life, I don't remember ever having a more honest, wholesome human exchange, while at the same time experiencing such intimacy. Foolish to label it "love", right? But what else could I call it? To the outside, we were perfect strangers. On a grander level existence, on some ethereal plane, we were perfectly compatible, old souls who had reconnected after traveling in disparate worlds.

She told me her name wasn't really Crystal, but Ingrid. Ingrid Alvaro Velazquez. I told her that all her names were nice. She had no coffee, nor anything to drink, except the beer. Warm beer will taste surprisingly good under the right conditions. I knew that I had to get going and then remembered Leo. Crystal-slash-Ingrid had affected me so much I even

looked forward to seeing the old codger. She told me she had to go soon as well, having plans to visit her grandmother who lived in a small village up in the mountains. It was where she had grown up, and she needed to bring her 'abuela' food and other things she needed. I asked her to describe her town, "¿Cómo es tu pueblo?", and she painted a picture of serenity, her voice softly stroking the canvas with color and a gentle texture. I understood more from the tone of her voice than the words, most of which were unknown to me. But I got the gist. She was working to support the family. Her devotion was as pure as her determination. I always get a charge out of very confident girls. Particularly the young ones. Probably something a shrink could work out for me.

As she dressed it hit me that I would never see this beautiful creature again, and became immediately sad. With nothing to offer her, I told her that I wanted to send her something when I got back to the US. She dismissed this, but I persisted. I asked her for her address. It was difficult to communicate the idea, and what she finally handed me was some words and numbers on a page that didn't make much sense to me. Back in the U.S., I wrote to her, in both names, but I have no idea if they ever reached her. Perhaps she had moved back to her grandmother's house permanently in the village up in the mountains. With no work up there, it was not very likely. But that's where I see her, even today, when I open the trunk in my attic.

We walked back to our "hotel" and found Leo in the bar drinking coffee. The smile on his face matched mine, which made me curious about his own adventure last night.

"You're looking good."

Leo admired the girl standing in the doorway. "So are you. Who's the lady?"

"Oh, meet the wife."

Leaning on the door frame, Crystal shared a conspiratorial smile.

I winked at her. "Right hon? We decided to do the honeymoon first. Sort of a non-traditional girl. Hey, she's calling a cab to take us into town, be here in about ten minutes. I'm going up to take a quick shower and get my things."

At that moment Jesus came in from the back room and stood looking at me, looking at Crystal, then back at me. Sizing me up, I thought. I stopped, turned, and walked over to Crystal. Pulling her to me, I placed a deep and spectacular kiss on her lips. She responded in kind, adding a greedy grab for my crotch as an underscore. Lots of lip and tongue. It was sloppy, I can tell you. When we finished, I held her very close, stared into her eyes and made a short, animalistic <hiss> sound, as if to "mark" her as my own. She lunged for my mouth once more, hanging on to my lower lip, biting down gently for a few seconds before letting go. She showed her teeth and growled, playing her part to perfection.

I directed her in English, "Wait for me, baby."

She addressed Jesus as I turned to go upstairs.

“Gay men make the best lovers.”

We shared a cab into the city. In the short ten miles to town she had completed an amazing transformation. In a navy blue skirt and white blouse, she lost her girlishness. I could see she was much more business-like when she was rested, moving with purpose and confidence. She was able to leave the playfulness of her night-time persona back in the Zona Roja. We said goodbye amidst the diesel smoke of a kind of roadside truck stop. Against all logic and fiscal responsibility, I pressed ten dollars into her hand. She momentarily resisted, then smiled and gave me a sisterly kiss on both cheeks. She walked briskly away, down the narrow street into town to find her own bus up to her mountain village. Leo and I both watched her go. It was a final beautiful sight for both of us, the last worthy memory of that trip. What a truly beautiful ass. Stunning.

“Wow.”

“Words can do no justice...”

A moment or two after she turned a corner we were both still staring. Eventually I came to my senses.

“Well, better get to it.”

“Yes. Which bus will we take, the first class or economy.”

I looked at Leo and smiled, knowing how much he will chew on the next words out of my mouth.

“Leo, my friend, tell me. What’s beyond ‘economy class’? Well, whatever it is, that’s what we’re taking because I just gave our bus fare to my new friend, Ingrid.”

I adjusted the straps to my backpack as Leo pondered the meaning of my words. I adopted a carefree attitude and started walking. “Which way is the highway, down here? Yeah, that’s the ticket.”

All of a sudden, Leo burst out laughing. He caught up to me, laughing and slapping me on the back. “You jackass! Do you know how guilty I’ve been feeling because of last night? Good for you, Casanova!”

As we headed out to the main highway, I could tell that Leo was dying to expound on the details of his exploits of the previous evening. But he wasn’t going to give it up for free. He was waiting for me to ask. But I didn’t bite. It wasn’t until at least five hitches, two lousy nights sleep (one in a ditch on the side of a road) and a dozen street tacos later that I was able to relax and forgive Leo for not holding up his financial end of the bargain. We were in the airport bar when I finally found a place that accepted my American Express card. After a beer and an honest-to-God hamburger, I asked Leo what happened that night. In his own way, he filled in the details. This woman was named Caterina. She spoke

enough English to understand his simple requests. She was accommodating and, it turned out, very perverted, according to whatever standards of perversion Leo might hold. Ultimately Caterina was, in his own words, just what the doctor ordered.

“I’d let you see some of the pictures, but I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You took pictures?”

“And I got some amazing air. You can’t imagine the *smell* the inside of that place...”

“What place? Never mind. I don’t want to know. Just tell me, how are you feeling? Overall. Pretty good?”

“Yeah, I’m feeling real good. Tom, that was one of the best times I think I’ve ever had. What an amazing trip.”

When I didn’t immediately concur, he shifted in his seat and launched an offensive.

“What, you didn’t think so?”

“Well, you know, a couple times, I really... I don’t know.”

“Yes, there was a time or two that really sucked, wasn’t there? But as much of a pain in the ass as all the little shit, even in the worst of it, even in the middle of that sand storm... Man! I felt alive!”

I thought about this. This is what Leo was looking for. Feeling life and being part of it. And here I was complaining about a little discomfort and inconvenience. I shook my head and let that sink in a moment. Then my own experience, my engagement with life, and in particular, one special human being ... and I began to smile.

“You know, there is one thing I will never forget. Ingrid Alvaro Velazquez.”

“Who’s that?”

“Crystal.”

“Oh. Right. She was a cutie.”

“You have no idea.”

“Too bad you didn’t get any pictures, though.”

“Stop.”

“Or bottle her feminine smells.”

“Enough!”

Back in the US, Leo seemed to keep himself fairly busy. He did some volunteer work at the library. He joined a bird watching group where he made some new friends. In the early nineties, he was able to hold a part time job at a pet store, and for a while that seemed to be all that he needed. It only lasted about six months. In misinterpreting a kind gesture from the store’s assistant manager as something romantic, he presented the woman with a Valentine’s Day gift: a certificate for a massage at an Asian spa. The inappropriateness was communicated to the store owner – her father – who pointed out that his daughter was still in high school. He was summarily dropped from the payroll.

I encouraged him to apply to be a substitute teacher in the local schools. He was called once, and the results were catastrophic. He was able to get away with what he called a moral victory in that the parents of the children involved eventually dropped the lawsuit. I didn’t ask him to elaborate.

In a half-hearted attempt to return to the temp world, he discovered that the agency had instituted a new policy of testing employees. Leo had trouble with the psychological evaluation, and was subsequently never again called for an assignment. He continued to talk about the bigger fish, however, that one good job with medical and a 401K, but he rarely got an interview. The fact that he was in his early sixties and could not account for much employment outside of the University work, church jobs and sporadic temping was difficult to explain. When things looked their bleakest, he returned to the church where he had first found work after leaving the hospital, and they created a part time job for him. It wasn’t much money at all, but he could pay the rent. He spent his free time engaged in his hobbies, collecting air in different parts of Baltimore and along the shore of the Delmarva peninsula, reading outdoor magazines at the library, volunteering at the Audubon and the yearly jazz festival. He seemed happy enough. When our third son was born, we needed a godparent. My brother and Ronnie’s three siblings had already been tapped. I wanted more representation from my end, and I remembered Leo. I was reminded of that old comic chestnut, “You know, it’s so crazy, it just might work!” When asked, he leapt at the idea. He had never been asked to play this role, and it was clear that this meant a lot to him.

“Who’s my godwife?”

“Excuse me?”

“My godwife. Is it one of Ronnie’s sisters?”

His voice sounded vaguely lecherous.

“No, we’ve run through the sisters and moved on to co-workers. It’s a friend of hers from the hospital. You never met her.”

“What’s her name?”

“Marie.”

“Is she, you know, hot?”

I wondered where he was going with this. “You do realize that becoming a godparent is only a commitment to the child –”

He cut me off. “Hold on. I don’t get to consummate the relationship with my godwife? This sounds highly irregular.”

It was funny, but I knew that if I breathed a word of Leo’s quip to Ronnie, she’d make me drop him for Marie’s husband, Mike, in a heartbeat. I needed to get Leo to take this more seriously.

“Marie is married.”

“Oh, come on, Tom. It’s a new millennium. Besides, even in an arranged marriage –”

“Who mentioned marriage?”

“Even in this kind of arranged, ah, arrangement, she could learn to love me. Not that that’s a deal breaker, either.”

“Ah, Leo. You have to play this down or Ronnie’s going to get upset.”

“Understood.”

“Really?”

“Completely.”

At the christening party, Leo embarrassed all concerned by introducing Marie as his godwife. While clarifying that his intentions were strictly honorable, he kept repeating his unique position in the ménage, playing up the innuendo to anyone who would listen. Marie’s husband smiled politely, but was clearly uncomfortable with how far Leo was taking the joke. Marie herself feigned a headache and took her real husband home before the cake was cut. Ronnie was cool, but later told me she wished Leo hadn’t drunk so much.

“Yeah, he gets like that when he’s had too many.”

In actual fact, I knew that Leo had not had anything but a few sips of champagne the whole party. We never spoke about it, but I saw the tiny pill bottles lined up in the downstairs bathroom. There was some new medication at the bottom of this. Perhaps. I might have asked him, but I didn’t want to suggest his behavior had appeared erratic or strange. He had been a little too happy, and that extra portion of glee came off as forced or artificial. Now I was suspicious of the drugs. It’s not like Leo to take drugs, unless prescribed. But it *is* like Leo to take anything and everything on the recommendation of any passing snake-

oil salesman, infomercial crackpot or holistic wacko on the corner. He willingly bought in on the promise of a quick fix, and the results were usually unpredictable.

Leo hung around for a few days after the christening, taking day trips out to the University to drop off resumes at various offices. He wasn't sure what kind of job he was looking for, just something that was connected with the University, and had benefits. That was the main thing. He was keenly aware of his age and his ailments and said he needed to address these health issues sooner rather than later. I was to learn about what those health issues were over the course of the next ten months or so, and discovered they were largely psychological in nature, with psychosomatic symptoms heading the list. For now, Leo wasn't saying much beyond the persistence of nagging back pain, made worse by long periods of time driving his 1986 Toyota Corolla.

On the day before he left, Leo met me after work at an Irish bar in West Hartford. The old wood décor made it a favorite of mine, and I wanted to show it to Leo. He drove in and parked on the street. I met him as he was getting out of the car.

“It says you can't park there.”

“Where does it say that?”

I pointed to the sign. It'd been twisted, backed into by a delivery truck, I'm sure, so that the arrow on the “No Parking Here To Corner” sign was actually pointed upwards. Leo looked up and down the street.

“That's very ambiguous. It could mean anywhere.”

“It's happy hour and the parking spot directly in front of the pub is open. Doesn't that tell you something?”

He thought about it a moment, then smiled mischievously. “It's my lucky day!”

“Your ticket, not mine. Let's go.”

We sat down in a cozy booth at the back and ordered a couple of pints. Leo stopped at one glass, saying that he was trying to cut back on the beer, repeating his doctor's reasons for it not being good for him.

“He asks me three questions, jots down a few notes on his pad and says I may be an alcoholic. That's his diagnosis. And so, to prove him wrong, I suppose, I have to stop drinking. At least for a while.”

“Well, it won't be easy. For you or the farmers who grow the barley. Cheers.”

“To your good health.”

Leo enjoyed his beer, and cutting back was not going to be easy. I knew that this recent job search had been futile and just about defeated him. He wasn't in the best frame of mind. Alcohol was something he seemed willing to negotiate, a "Hail Mary" pass to the endzone, a simple modification to help set himself up to rejoin the working class. I never thought I'd see the day he'd say "No" to beer, and told him so. His response implied that somehow, without him knowing it, he'd been cheated out of his slice of the pie.

"You have a lot to live for, Tom. A wife, good job, three kids, a house. You're living the American dream."

"The job sucks, but the rest of it is Ok, I guess."

"Many would kill to be in your position. No, I have to start working on this, whatever it is, take it more seriously... Figure out how I'm going to, you know.... "

In saying so, Leo became silent, turned inward. Oh, shit. This was not going to happen. I didn't call Leo to this bar to watch him wallow. I wanted to laugh, forget my own miserable day, delay the inevitable parenting that awaited me after the long drive home. That could happen if I could see a little of the old Leo. Call me selfish, but I wanted "Fun Leo" back. We could discuss his problems later, over the phone, preferably with a good ball game on ESPN. A quick subject change. That's what was needed.

"Hey, thanks again for coming all the way up for this christening. I know Ronnie appreciates it. You are a good friend, Leo. Salud!"

"Yes. To us, the compadres."

"Compadres!"

We drain our glasses and let out a collective satisfied sigh. Leo muses over the word 'compadre' and is moved to open a new line of discussion.

"There's Mexico...."

"Yes, there'll always be Mexico."

A shit-eating grin forms on his face. I'm not really paying attention, though, as I'm trying to get the attention of the woman in black who supposed to be serving us. Only half tuned in to his wavelength, I drive the conversation in the direction that promised more grins rather than chagrins.

"Why suddenly bring up Mexico?"

Leo shrugs.

"It's not Christmastime, for one thing. And, hate to state the obvious, you're broke and speak no Spanish."

Leo nods, then reveals what he's been thinking about for some time. "Remember how cheaply we lived down there? Remember how kind the people were?"

A server with an infeasibly large bosom finally catches my eye, and I order another pint for me and a ginger ale for Leo. His smile grows bigger as he notices the server. He waves to her and she smiles and waves back.

"Wait – do you know her?"

"We were talking earlier. When I ordered. Nice girl. We're both Leo's."

"Huh?"

"She's born under the zodiac sign. Leo. Like me."

"Storybook romance. But back to Mexico. You forget –"

"I remember everything. Especially how I talked one very special lady into spending an unforgettable evening with me..."

"How *you* talked –?"

"Caterina...I can still smell her distinctive bouquet. Exquisite."

Once again, I provide the cold, hard slap of reality.

"Leo. That last time. It was a fluke, finding that little town."

"What great people. Remember the donkey?"

"We ran out of money. Had to hitch-hike back to Mexico City, barely made our flights. Good times."

"The best."

Leo didn't seem to pick up on my sarcasm, so I put it another way.

"Things have changed down there. Mexico today? Not exactly safe. And hitchhiking is definitely out. If anything, you need *more* money to survive."

"I have a little social security coming in. I could make it stretch. What do I need? Street-food. One room apartment. Maybe get a bartending gig, you know? People always told me I'd be a good bartender –"

"You don't speak Spanish!"

“ ‘ Necessity is the mother of Invention.’ ”

“What does *that* mean?”

“If forced to, I’d learn it.”

“Leo! How old are you? Honestly. I mean, forgive me for saying this, but – *really*?

“Everything’s gone bust up here. What other options are there?”

Incredulous. I reminded myself that this was Leo. Leo was a talker. He existed in a succession of emotional ups and downs. No follow-through. Hell, it had been so long since he’d traveled, it was highly unlikely he’d even have a valid passport....

Let the guy dream.

I drank. Leo ordered another ginger ale, then we got to talking about other christenings he’d been to. As a kid, out on the island, his family had been invited to many weddings, christenings, and, towards the end, a lot of funerals. These used to be pretty big gatherings.

“Being Catholic, and especially being Polish Catholic, meant some great shindigs. And the food. Jesus. But this whole thing is going to change soon.”

“What do you mean? What whole thing?”

He took a last sip and drained his glass. “The whole biblical view of religion. It’s only a matter of time. Ten, twenty years tops, they’re going to find the evidence, and the concept of organized religion as we know it is going to be stood on its head.”

“What evidence?”

This was getting into strange territory, but not so strange that it mattered. The beer was doing its job.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. One day an alien space ship is going to land right on the middle of the freakin’ White House lawn. No more cover ups. No more mystery. In broad daylight with camera crews and digital phones recording every detail. People are already talking about it, making plans. And on that day, our minds will be opened.”

“What, by the aliens? Who are we talking about?”

“No. Our minds. Just by the simple fact that their existence will no longer be in doubt.”

I nodded. Before he could speak, I held up my hand for him to stop. He studied my face for signs of sarcasm. He would expect me to either kindly mock his outlandishness, or take him seriously and ask a follow-up question. That’s what he expected. What I was actually thinking was, can I get another beer delivered by that waitress with the big boobs before he

really gets rolling on this whole alien thing. No luck. Impatient, I get up, use the john, order at the bar, then I'm back at the table, full beer in hand. I give him permission to begin.

“Ok. Let's hear it.”

“What were the Jews expecting in the form of a Messiah back in the Old Testament days? One of their own wearing knock-off sandals and a second-hand tablecloth? Hell, no. They were expecting a general, another David, a powerful king riding a chariot across the sky, come to smash their Roman oppressors. They certainly weren't expecting the son of a carpenter. Now, here we are, barely getting our feet wet in this new century, and what are people waiting for in the second coming? A miracle worker? A prophet to rise from the masses? A blond-headed blue-eyed sword-wielding Adonis? Someone who conforms to what they think a Messiah *should* be, right? But guess what? The new age shall be heralded forth not by any Messiah fitting their Christian stereotype. When he, or she, or IT, comes, it will be as alien to our way of thinking as, well, as an alien would be. The new religion will come when we realize that we are not alone in the universe. And with that we'll all realize that God has been keeping one nasty little secret. We are not so special. Hold on. Other planets? Other people? Millions more of God's creation, and guess what? They look different, speak different, and by virtue of their superior technology, claim supremacy over all things. Just like we used to do as conquering imperialists, showing up with our high tech weapons, canons and shit. And these aliens begin to indoctrinate us primitives, preaching an uncomfortable truth, a concept the ignorant, earthly evangelicals could never fathom, and it's this: In all the universe, God does not have a favorite.”

Normally, I would be happy to play along. This promised to be a whopper of a treatise on the future of humanity. But now it was getting late, and this rant of his was fueled by some wild hair that had been nurtured and groomed for who knows how long. It was hell and gone out there, and I couldn't keep up with him. It required too much beer and I had to get home. But finding my exit was not easy. Leo continued.

“Now, the truth of it is, right now, if word got out that there definitely was other intelligent life in the universe, what does that say about our religions here on earth? And why is there no talk about alien life in the bible? You think Jesus might have mentioned it?”

“You got me there.”

“Right? But wait. What if there actually is? All depends on how you read it.”

“Yeah. Makes you think.”

“It does, right? So what is there, really, for humanity to fall back on? What is the truth here? It's a real existential crisis, and they know it! If word gets out that aliens actually exist, it's all over! But it's gonna happen. Ten, fifteen years tops. And then? The big lie revealed, religion will hold no relevance, no moral frame to contain our actions, no tangible evidence that anything really matters. Not anymore. Result? Society crumbles.”

“Hmph. Well, as crackpot theories go, I have to say, yours is pretty flamboyant. Sadly, it’s getting late and, as much as I’d love to peel back the many layers of this cheeky onion, I have to go to work in the morning.”

“You’re working Saturdays?”

“Did I not mention how much my job sucks? The flipside to 'living the dream' they never tell you about in college. I gotta go in for a few hours. You have a long drive, too, right?”

On our way out on the sidewalk, Leo continues his lecture on the demise of all religion as we know it, just as soon as the irrefutable proof of extraterrestrial life hits page one.

“Sure, we may be willing to accept that, on our tiny planet, God has picked his chosen people, and the rest of creation is out of luck. Are these narrow-minded pulpiteers able to explain why the Almighty has chosen our group over the infinite number of souls living in the far reaches of the galaxy? Thousands, maybe *millions* of planets inhabited by all kinds of intelligent life, what will the organizers of our puny religion say then? God has chosen this tiny ant hill as his own, but the multitude beyond? So sorry. All damned to hell. Are the preachers prepared to defend that idea? They know they couldn’t, and that’s why the government intentionally keeps us in the dark. Finding out there *is* no such thing as religion ... it makes our own existence very small, very insignificant, doesn’t it?”

He makes a good point. That’s all I can tell him. Because I’m all out of words. And I drank too much, too fast. We hop in our cars and he follows me back home, which is about an hour’s drive west, just over the state line.

The next morning, I’m off to a sluggish start. A few beers never used to slow me down, but now, for some reason, I don’t bounce back as easily. Knowing I’d be tied up with work, Ronnie has the kids all organized with activities and playdates, and she’s out of the house early, leaving me a few extra moments with Leo to linger over coffee and chitchat before it’s time to go: me to work and Leo back to Maryland.

As the months rolled on we talked with greater infrequency. The phone call I got from Leo about the ‘Men in Black’ coming into his apartment at night was three years ago. The following Christmas he called and sounded very up, very jolly. He had started a new anti-depressant and it made him a little maniacal, he admitted, but the people at the clinic were getting to know him and together they were working on it. The priest at the shelter let him call on his cell phone, “free minutes”, he was told, so there was no need to worry about the cost. We talked for nearly an hour. He brought up Mexico again, wondering if I had any interest in joining him.

“You mean, you’re serious? You’re, like, really going back?”

“Start out in Vera Cruz, like we did. I won’t bring a tent this time...learned that lesson the hard way, didn’t we? So, what do you say?”

“What, me? Ah, not a great time for me right now, with all that's going on. But, hey – if you're serious about it, if you got the money, I say go for it!”

“I just might do that, Tom. I just might.”

He asked about his godson and we made plans for him to come up to visit in the summer. Of course, that never happened. A harried call in August from a bus station payphone mentioned an accident and some legal action he was planning to take against the city. He wasn't clear on the specifics, other than he was trying to find a lawyer who would take on this case of clear-cut negligence, pro bono. I couldn't get him to give me any details about the accident, or even where in the city he was calling from. It sounded like a busy place. There was no way to call him back, he said. The phone did not accept incoming calls. And then he's talking about Mexico. Out of the blue. He was determined this time, once the lawsuit was over. Or even if it wasn't. I was about to get him to clarify, probe the details to see if he had taken any actual steps in either direction: lawsuit or Mexico. But then we were cut off. The change he had deposited had run out or something, and I was left with a million questions. I expected him to call back at some point to finish the conversation. I'm still waiting.

Ronnie and the kids are watching “It's a Wonderful Life” in the living room. I'm in the kitchen, finally finishing the chore Ronnie has left me: adding my signature to the stack of Christmas cards we send out to far too many people. *Does your gynecologist really need a Christmas card from both of us?* I protested. *Does the mailman? I mean, we're just giving him one more thing to carry!* I seal up the last envelope and wonder how much I should care, how much should I invest in this battle. Long ago I relinquished control of the day-to-day operations of the house to my partner, and I have to say, for the most part, it's been a blessing. Signing my name several dozen times isn't much to ask if it makes her happy.

Sealing up the last envelope, I sit in our warm kitchen with a cup of tea and think about how lucky I am. From the other room, I can hear George Bailey's rant in Martini's bar about how much his life sucks. I know this part. He's about to get socked in the mouth by that guy, the teacher's husband. Then he's going to head towards the bridge ... and make a bad decision. Or come pretty darn close.

I look out the glass doors on the perfect winter's scene. The life I have is pretty wonderful.

It's Sunday afternoon and heavy snow has been falling on our bird feeder all day. I'm wondering how that family of cardinals is going to make it through this freezing night. And then I think I'd really like to call Leo right now. But Leo doesn't have a phone. I don't even know if he has an address, permanent or otherwise. I have thought about going down to Baltimore and looking around for him. It's possible he stays in contact with that church. They could direct me to the shelters, anyway. I might find him. A slim chance. His last words on the subject of religion did not sound like he had plans to attend mass with any regularity.

I sip my tea and stare at the phone, then out the back yard. A daddy cardinal lands on the edge of the feeder and starts kicking at the snow, digging for the seeds beneath. His bright plumage stands out against the pure white powder.

How many forms of blazing red surround me this time of year? The bird turns and looks in at me, watches me watching him. It's an unusually long stare, like he's expecting something from me. What does he expect me to do? I start to feel uncomfortable, look away, then back. His eyes are still riveted on me. I start to think peculiar thoughts, like it's not a real bird, but a tiny robot that's been programmed by somebody, or he's part of some alien spy network, when it occurs to me that he must be seeing his own reflection in the glass. But no. It's me he's got his sights on. In a sudden burst of energy, he flutters his wings, appearing impatient or maybe irritated with my lack of movement, with my impotence. Who knows. It could just be fleas. And in a final, dramatic flit, he's gone.

Leo never calls back. It's been more than a year and a half since I've heard from him. I'm not ready to move Leo to the attic. I can't see him and George in there together yet. They're not ready to make up. In that cramped trunk, George would kill him. I look at the phone again, then think about what is happening these next few weekends. The kids, the in-laws, work. There's no free time to spend combing the streets of Baltimore.

Forgetting the tea, I get up and pull an icy Corona from the fridge, pop the top and move to the window. I raise my bottle and toast the daddy cardinal, wishing him and his family well. He's been supplied with the skills to endure even the bitterest cold and the harshest of conditions. With his red coat and survival instincts, his maker has given him exactly what he needs to make it through this intrepid night. He will lead the bird equivalent of a full and happy life. It's crazy to think that his future is more certain than Leo's.

And then I toast Leo.

“Feliz Navidad, compadre.”

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