



A Way You'll Always Be

PD Collar

From the Collection:

Minor Chords

Jack Stone had never been less sure of himself.

He raised his hand to rap at the glass pane but failed on his first knock, his knuckles falling short of the door. He stood in the hot courtyard, eyes surely in every window, poised guiltily within the inner sanctum of the walled perimeter of the rock baron's compound. The temerity to admire the piles of raw geodes, agate, obsidian, hickoryite and other treasure that enveloped him frightened him, but Jack came by the fascination honestly and felt himself entitled to step gently upon such hallowed ground. Mounded slab cuttings accumulated to wait their turn in the tumbler. A grove of petrified wood stood piled like unstacked firewood in a heap. Against the wall were stacked the trappings of the trade: wood crates, stacks of newspaper, empty cardboard beer flats. Lest the dogs be set upon him at once, Jack squeezed his eyes tight and cringed at the sound his small knuckles made on the thick crystal pane.

He waited for many seconds and wanted to walk away, nobody home. But instead he knocked again, this time a little louder and convinced himself that he had no reason to be so nervous, that he was not an intruder despite the way he felt. But the door swung open to leave him face to face with the legend himself. Jack stared up at the hole in his head where his left eye was supposed to be and stared up frozen in his surprise. The great disfigured man's look of suspicion turned gradually south into a scowl.

"What the hell do *you* want, kid?"

The first thing that you noticed about Mr. Butch "Mad Dog" Walker—after you got beyond his missing left eye—was the enormity of his belly. It was big and round, like a pregnant lady's, massive and spherical. But it was the only part of the man that you could nearly call fat. Jack had never seen Mad Dog without his eye-patch before, and he choked down his shock. The wife-beater was stained and grimy in front where Jack figured he probably bumped his belly up against things pretty regular. Yellow crescents under the man's pale upper arms rounded out Jack's first impression. Because of the size of his belly, the old man wore his Levis so low on such tiny hips that Jack figured he couldn't turn around probably without showing his butt crack. Walker's polished head was as brown as his forearms. His ears were choked with stiff grey hairs that would dull mom's clippers, and Jack figured his hearing simply had to be affected. The fingernail of his left middle hand curved

around the end of the finger all the way to the other side and was thick and yellow, diabolic practically, and Dad said that it was one of Mad Dog's methods to rap it sharply against the table in negotiations with equally rough men that reached his Mexican-desert outpost to buy and trade mineral specimens.

"I'm here because I've come to work for you, Mr. Walker, Sir," Jack announced.

From the frown this evoked, you'd think the great man had just spooned up a dog turd from the bottom of his coffee cup.

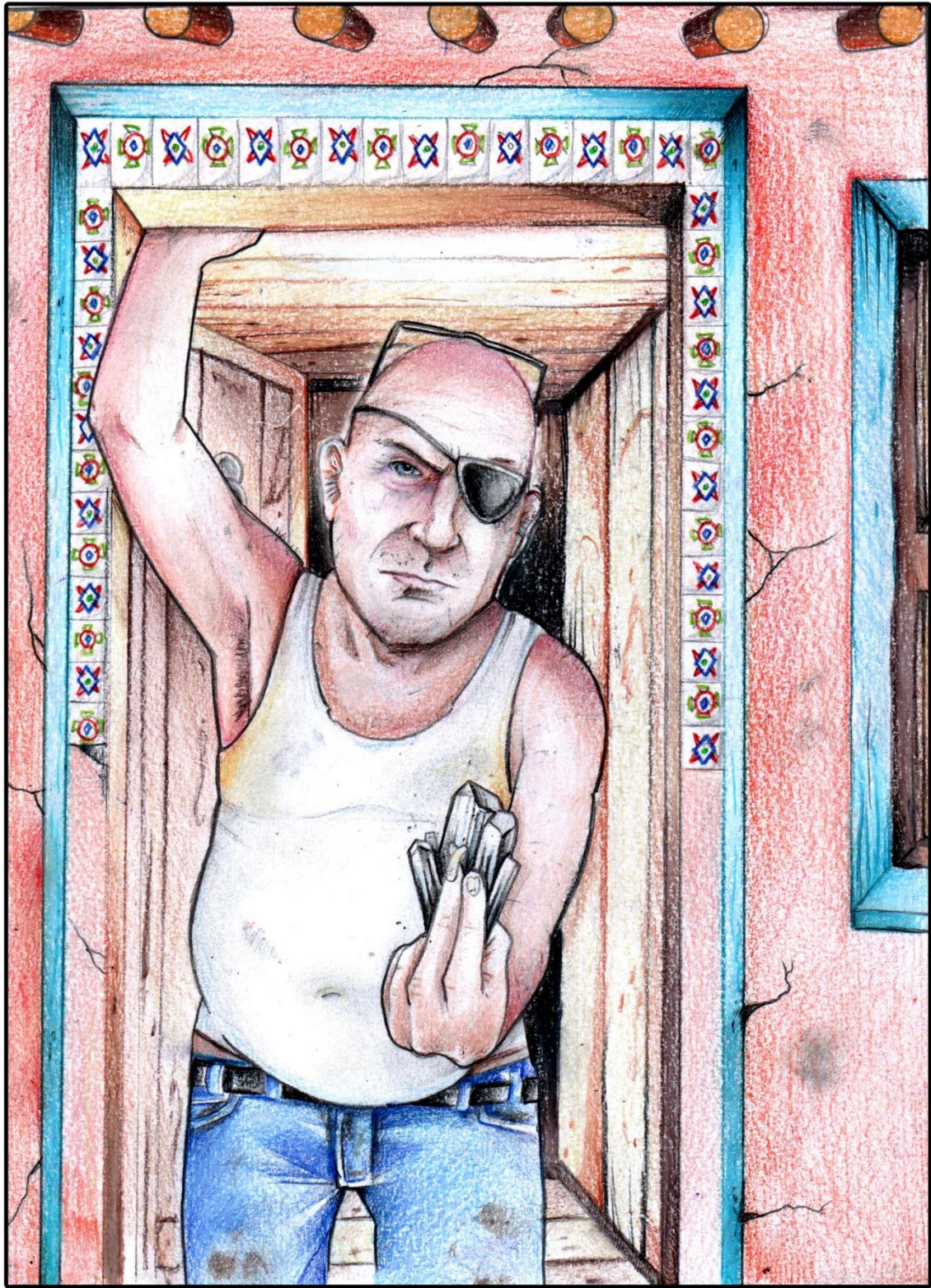
"Say what," said Old Man Walker softly, his eyebrows and tone forging a stand somewhere between irony and sarcasm. Jack cleared his throat and looked up with a renewed purpose and a temper risen for the occasion. The adrenaline was like a freight train, but his voice beat his own expectations, and he rolled with it.

"My name is Jack Stone, and I'm here to work in your shop." He wasn't budging on this one. Jack had never applied for a job before, but he'd have to be doing it all over the place soon enough and might as well start getting used to it, even if he was only just going on the eighth grade. Jack had settled on this Mad Dog Walker plan the night school let out for the summer and had been turning it over now for a full week.

"But you're just a *keeyud*," the merchant pointed out.

"May be," Jack replied, "but I'll work long hours and do anything needs doing, all for the pure pleasure of learning from the best."

The old man eased his eye-patch over the crater of his left eyehole. He narrowed the glare from the operational orb on the other side of his face and looked the kid over a bit. He glanced off up into the air off to the right for a full second or two and then back down at Jack. "And what, Little Sir, do I need you for?"



“Well, you need me because for one thing, I can identify any mineral that you put in front of me . . .”

Like a cat-monkey, the old man thrust a handy mineral specimen before Jack as he stood in the glaring sun of the courtyard. It was like a magician’s trick. Mad Dog’s hand at rest turned into a blur in his reach inside the darkness beyond the door to reach out a mineral that emerged as a blur out into the sunlight front and center. It was suddenly there when the blur regained the form of Mr. Walker’s hand jutted toward him, dead still in the air, this time clutching a mineral specimen at the level of Jack’s chin, leaving him little option but to look down and have a hard look.

He reached up to take possession of the piece and studied it. The old man glowered.

“That’s arsenopyrite,” he pointed to the prismatic termination jutting upward, “with sprays of hemimorphite on chalcopyrite matrix with a single calcite floater, a double termination.” He looked more closely. “Zoned calcite, no less; nice specimen, Mr. Walker,” he handed it back.

“Lucky guess.” Mr. Walker’s glare lacked the full malevolence required to drive the boy away. He reached in to fetch another for form. “You’d owe me a thirty-five bucks if you had dropped it, you know,” he arched his eyebrow, this time over his working eye. What about this one?”

Jack studied it. “This one I could drop, and it would be just fine.” He tried to hand it back.

“Not so fast, Junior.”

Jack took a deeper look. It was not turquoise but was the same color. He frowned. “Will my pocket knife scratch it?” He asked without looking up.

“See for yourself.”

Jack produced his pocket-knife and left a small silver line on the surface of the rock; it was harder than steel . . .”

“Well, it’s not rosasite,” he said. “I would have to do a bead test or two to be sure and see what effect my acids have on it, but I’ll just bet it’s a copper mineral, probably aurichalcite, that’s been silicified . . . looks like pretty good cutting material.”

“Hmm . . .” the old man snatched it back. “I don’t need no scientist kid to identify rocks. That’s grade-school shit.”

“Well, that’s just for starters,” Jack barked. “I am skilled with cleaning, trimming, and packaging mineral specimens and have been collecting for two years and am good with thumb mounts and micro-mounts. I letter neatly, have good spelling, and speak

Spanish fluently. I am a subscriber to *Lapidary Journal* and *Rock and Mineral*. I haven't had the chance to do any work yet with slab saws and trim saws, but I am a quick learner, and I am sure that I will be able to make the best cabochons you've ever seen. Truly. In short, Mr. Walker, I am here to help turn *Walker's Fine Mineral Emporium—Retail and Wholesale* into the most successful rock shop in all of Gómez Palacio."

"It's the *only* rock shop in Gómez Palacio, kid. It's the only rock shop in all Coahuila State."

"Well," Jack shrugged. "That makes it easier then, sir. Right?"

"You're that principal's kid ain't you? I seen you in the shop."

"Superintendent. Yes sir."

"Principal, superintendent, same thing."

"Yes sir," Jack agreed. "Same thing. I just want a chance. You don't have to pay me anything if I can't cut it. Just try me out. I'm going to be a geologist, and I want to learn the most I can about minerals from a master of the trade. Teach me, Sir."

"Emilio!" Walker hollered up to the shop.

Emilio was a large, muscled man with short-cropped bristling hair so black it tended blue and a trimmed severe mustache with a scowl even more impossibly forbidding than that of the boss. His clothing was soiled beyond any acquaintance with its original self, and when the shop man walked up to frown at his boss and to glare in turn at Jack, the smell of diesel came with him and now enveloped the three. He snarled. "*Que pasó, patrón?*"

"This altar boy says he wants to work here."

Emilio looked Jack up and down for a good while and began to lose the temper in his lip. Once he got tickled, it rolled out like thunder, and he burst out laughing. The hilarity coaxed a conspiratorial smirk from Walker, and the kid glared up defiantly at this new challenge.

"What does he think we do here, boss? Jump rope and play patty-cake?"

"I want you to put him to the test, show him the error of his ways," the old man said gravely, looking back down at the boy.

"Give me four hours with him, boss, and he'll be back at his momma's skirts."

"You see to it then," Walker agreed. He shook the kid's hand.

"Does that mean I got the job?"

“Kid, look, I needed help, I’d have help. But here’s what I’m going to do for you. You make it through the rest of the afternoon, I’ll let you come back tomorrow. “

“Yes sir!”

“You hold up good a full week, I might pay you something.”

“Okay, Sir! I’ll do my best, Sir.” Jack Stone stood tall and saluted like he’d seen it done in the movies, and the old jarhead turned on his heels and rolled his eye to step back inside. He slammed the door a bit for good measure.

Inside the dark shop, a line of saws buzzed, and in the corner a polishing table shuffled under a load of slabs. In the far corner two different sized tumblers rolled a perpetual cascade of agate in muffled tinkles as the motors hummed and a regular click ratted out a nicked gear or a broken chain link in the mechanics, and inside the roiling hubbub, Emilio replaced his menacing scowl with bemused circumspection.

“First thing, I need you to open the lid on that saw,” Emilio pointed.

Jack dropped the lid right away, but not before the blade had wetted him from forehead to waist with the coolant. It was the first step, Jack reasoned, in getting him adapted to the dress code. He wiped diesel from his eye sockets and slung bits of crud onto the floor and turned to look up at his new task-master.

“Bet you won’t do that again,” Emilio grinned.



“You told me to.”

“Lesson one, trust no one,” Emilio smirked. The slab fell with a muffled clatter onto the cut tray inside the saw, and the whine of the blade lost its pierce, the motor running faster now. “Look,” Emilio came over, “turn it off here, first, always, and wait for the blade to come to a stop or at least get too slow to throw up lube. Latch the top back like this. Now, see how the chain is set for the length of the rock?” The rock, Jack saw, was hickoryite. “That’s an automatic cutoff in case we’re at lunch or caught up in other things. So, release the tray with the clutch here and pull the whole thing back like this to line it up for the next slab and crank that knob right there ten rotations clockwise to line up another cut. That gives a 1.25 cm thick slab, which is what we want before the grinding and polishing; now look at me.” Jack looked up to find Emilio really serious. “Always make sure when you’re turning this knob that the rock is free from the blade; this is a 36” diamond blade. You don’t want to know what one of these babies costs. You bend one of these pups, and it’ll take you a year or more to work it off. You hear me?” Jack made a note. “Once you’re done, line it back up and release the clutch; now you’re locked in, see the tiny space between the rock and the blade? Now just reset the chain, lower the lid, and hit restart, like that,” he said. “Got that?”

“I think so.” Jack looked up and pointed as the saw at the end made the same noise. “Can I get that one?”

“I’m cutting geodes there, go ahead.”

Jack powered down the saw and opened the lid when the blade slowed. He picked up the half on the tray. “Filled,” he said.

“Yeah, not many hollow ones in this run. Unclamp it there,” Emilio pointed out, and reload; there’s your feed bin, and the cut halves must stay together and go over here to get washed once that tray fills out. You gotta keep the halves together. Got that?”

“Clean when the tray fills out. Keep halves together. Got it!”

“So, how much you getting paid?” Davy asked around a bite of meatloaf.

In Durango they had had two maids, one for the kitchen alone, and one for other things, and both lived with them. Here in Torreon they only had a part-time day maid that lived elsewhere, and Mom did the cooking. It was meatloaf and scalloped potatoes tonight, and she’d held dinner a full hour on account of his long commute.

“He’s starting me at a buck an hour,” Jack relayed coolly.

“A buck an hour...?” Davy’s eyes glassed over as he ran the numbers. “You could buy a bike,” he figured. “After only a week of working, even. You got it made.”

“I may have to think about a scooter, even.”

“Not so fast, Jack,” Dad chimed in.

Davy chuckled around a bite of potatoes.

“It sure is a long way over there...”

“It’s only two bus changes, Mom. I can make it in an hour and a half.”

“That’s an awful long way, Jackie. You did pretty well with shoe-shining and snow cones in Durango, remember? Without having to stray from the neighborhood . . .”

“Oh, he strayed from the neighborhood plenty, Mom,” Davy pointed out helpfully.

“Mom. This is my career we’re talking about. I can’t shine shoes and wash cars forever, you know?”

They ate in silence for a minute or so. “I don’t see that a few days can hurt,” Dad covered at last. “See if it works out and if Jackie likes it,” he looked over at Mom.

“It sure is a long way,” Mom sighed. “But if you’re sure this is what you want, Jackie, I am not going to stand in the way.”

“Okay” Jack agreed. “Thanks, Mom!”

“Still,” Dad looked over gruffly. “This career thing is a bit premature, Jack.”

They ate in silence another couple minutes.

“So . . .” Jack spoke up, turning to Mom. “I won’t be paid till Saturday, I figure. And it’s going to cost me \$0.18 each way in bus fare daily, which is \$1.61 all told for five more days till I get paid plus \$1.25 for lunch, \$8.05 total.”

“That’s pretty expensive,” Mom studied the scallops in her potatoes.

“Mom, I need \$10 from my account to cover me till Saturday, till payday. Whudduya think?”

“Your account is empty,” Davy challenged.

“Well, I think I have \$125 transferred from YOUR account for the stamp collection.”

“You’ve spent that. I know you have. You spent nearly that much on that crystal-growing kit alone. I know you did. You gotta face it, Jack; you’re a spendthrift.”

“Better than a weasel worm.”

But Davy wouldn't rise to the barb. He poked meatloaf into his face. "You just haven't learned how to save," he retorted.

The next morning the big job was cleaning two of the saws, and Emilio was only too pleased to point out what had to be done. Jack followed instructions but stopped to attend the running saws as needed. Emilio cut cab blanks on the trim saw.

"I'll show you this afternoon," he promised, "but you gotta get these two saws back up and running first."

Jack drained the diesel into five gallon buckets, and Emilio carried two and Jack carried two out through the courtyard to the waste tank in back. Emilio showed him the easiest way to do the transfer and dusted off his hands and turned it over to Jack. By ten he had scraped the crud from the bottom of both wells and Emilio declared the saws clean. He pointed out the fill line and gestured toward the canisters of fresh diesel.

"Hey," Emilio said as noon drew near. "That's a great lunch stand over there across the highway. I'd show you myself, but the old lady likes me to come home for lunch . . ."

As Jack ate a *lonche* among a rough lunch crowd, an old American walking by and stepped under the awning to sit on the picnic bench across the table from him. A group of construction workers ate just down the table and laughed and joked together and made a lot of noise.

"Mind if I join you?" the old man smiled. "I seen you working at Mad Dog's; he says you're a real rootin' tooter on the rock saws!"

"Lunch break," Jack said gravely. He figured it was probably still polite to keep on eating. "They don't have waitresses," he offered. "You gotta go up to the counter there to order, and then they'll bring it to you. That's how it works here."

The old man smiled. "I'm going to go have me some *huevos rancheros* up the street." Their table-mates broke out laughing at some punch line the fat one delivered in understated gravity as Jack's new pal said something about "breakfast."

"I'm sorry," Jack glanced down the table and then back at the man in front of him. "I didn't catch that, what did you say?"

"Do you need me to lend you an ear?" the old man replied.

"Huh?"

Jack started as the old man pulled off his right ear and offered it across the space between them to the boy. The table fell silent and the crowd of young men stared at them. Suddenly the whole place was still, all faces turned. But there was no blood and Jack saw that it was a fake and took another bite of his sandwich, and the old man laughed and the crowd tittered a bit and everyone turned back to their food, companions, and work. Jack wasn't so sure it was such a neat trick and watched as the old man stuck his prosthetic back on the side of his head.

"Pretty funny," Jack allowed. "How'd you lose your ear?"

"Kidnapped when I was a kid. The old man refused to pay the ransom. So they sent him my ear to get his attention."

"Must have worked," Jack said.

"That's another story," the old man smiled. "For another time."

"Well, I am pleased to meet you," Jack said, standing to extend his hand across the table.

"Thanks for showing me the *lonche* drill, kiddo." The man's hand was large, his palm cool, his grip firm but controlled. "My name's Michael. But you can call me Uncle Mikey. I'll let you get back to your lunch." He winked at Jack. "See you in the funny papers, Kimosabe."

"You look out for him," Emilio told him later. "Don't listen to what he says; he's a doddering old fool. But he and the boss go way back. They were soldiers together in your country's war on Japan, so he must be put up with. Put these goggles on; I'm gonna train you on the trim saw."

They'd come ashore told it was a mop-up and were cut down in cross-fire before they got past the high-tide line. Private first class Walker was the only one of his squad to make it off the sand and dug madly into a clump of saw grass in a tiny grove of three coconut palms that equilaterally contained him at the forest's edge. He squatted in the middle and waved his M-1 around the periphery and quaked, not yet fully aware of how alone he was. The machine-gun fire was somewhere else in the intermediate and far distance. He took it in and hyperventilated and darted the barrel this way and that when a large clap hit him hard in the shoulder and he was yanked out back onto the sand, this time on his back. He looked at his hands, and sure enough there was no longer a rifle in them.

"Mortar, kid," he heard as he was dragged back across the sand. Walker scrambled beneath the dragging and managed to turn himself over and scrambled from his belly

to his knees to his feet and loped off with the man in front pulling on him. Bullets lifted puffs of sand around them as they reached the rocks. An explosion went off, and Walker awakened to a buzz of stars in front of his face and got up to dive behind boulders into a patch of coral sand surrounded by lava rock. He looked back over a scoria rim to find the clump of grass between the palms where he'd been now smoking from a direct hit, a small rain of sand falling back down to Earth. The man that had saved him was sprawled on the sand a few feet away, a big hole blown in the side of his head.

Walker hunkered down and wondered about his rifle and looked back over the rock after a quiet spell. The prone man came to and shook his head. He scrambled to his knees and scuttled up over the boulders and once behind cover came out of the straps of the heavy pack and leaned back against it and looked up in disgust through a face covered with blood to angrily pull out a pack of Luckies and spark one. Walker gaped as his hulking companion sat cross-legged on the sand open-mouthed and felt the hole in his head as his tailor-made hung from his bottom lip.

"Sumbitches shot off my fuckin' ear," the man grumbled. "If that don't just beat all. God *damn* it!" He looked up at Walker for the first time and his eyes widened. "Ain't you a mess," he squinted. "We're gonna have to clean you up, son."



Walker felt something wet clinging to his jaw line and wiped away the clear slime and slung it with a gathering sickness off his finger, and it glistened wetly in the hot sand. He rubbed his fingers together and felt the warm twang of the mucus. He covered his right eye and found the world black and fainted.

Mad Dog Walker tapped his wrap-around fingernail three times sharply on the table surface and glared at Mike.

The mescal made it from his mouth to his stomach without losing the shape of its vessel and Mad Dog sat the shot glass on the kitchen table gently as Mike's followed with a sharp rap. His guest scowled and shuddered.

"I can't stand this shit," said Mike. "I can't see why we're still drinking it."

"I never could stand it," agreed Mad Dog. "But I tend to not *listen* too good to my inner voices."

They never talked directly about their island. Mike came down every year and spent a couple weeks tooling around northern Mexico, sometimes in his own wheels, sometimes winging it, holing up in one of Walker's spare bedrooms from which he would make short trips to Ciudad Victoria, Monterrey, Durango, Mazatlan, Chihuahua, wherever. He'd been doing it for years, ever since tracking Walker down fifteen years or so ago, and on that first visit they had talked about it, like today, over the mescal they disdained so fondly. Since that time they would refer to it obliquely, finding the chances to throw out sad little zingers to memorialize the awful time.

"I need me a good woman like you found you, Butch," Mike might say. "So keep your eye peeled for me, will you?"

"At least I don't have to tell you things twice," Walker might find the opportunity to announce. "Anything that goes in that ear got no way round getting stuck."

Mike was flashy and vain. He wore gold chains and hid his scarred head with that expensive prosthetic. He wore a toupee, even, and over-used Old Spice. But Walker didn't read into it, didn't have to, didn't care. The man had paid plenty of dues, more than Walker had, and had earned his little eccentricities. Hell, he'd even moved on to Special Forces after Peleliu and re-upped for Korea, even, a real glutton for abuse, that was sure. Mike had referred a couple times early on vaguely to real estate, but both of them knew it was for form, and Butch figured his old buddy had him some kind of racket back in Chicago. From how he followed the sports on WOAI up in San Antone when it came in at night, he figured Mikey probably for a bookmaker. Whatever he was or did, Walker was not inclined toward judgment. Mostly they did not talk about real things and Mike was welcome to come

back as many years as he wanted. The old lady tried to be polite about it but did not care for Mike, said he gave her the heebie jeebies.

Walker saw in Mike's hesitation and downward glance that he was about to break the unspoken bond they had, about to dredge up their little dead and buried hell island and revive it.

Mike sighed loudly for effect and glanced down. "I'm going back in November," he looked back up through watery blue eyes folded between thick red lids to announce.

"The hell you say."

"Thirtieth anniversary . . . got some shit to work through."

Walker sloshed them another and sliced a couple wedges of lime and they sat there and glared at one another. He lifted the eyebrow above his patch after thinking this over. "How the hell you even get to Pel from here?"

"Puddle jumping from Samoa. And there's a weekly from Honolulu."

"I'd rather live out my nightmares than ever set foot back on that place."

"Yeah, well, we ain't all wired the same way, is we, Walker?"

By Thursday, Jack Stone had been walked through all the shop operations and considered himself nearly all trained up. He was looking forward to the grit change-out in the two tumblers scheduled for tomorrow, but beyond that he had gone through all the shop's other regular operations, and he knew where everything went and what to do. He felt as much at home nearly in this dirty shop as he did back in front of his ordered lab bench in his bedroom. It was early afternoon, and Jack's tongue pushed through the corner of his mouth as he cut the cab blank down on the trim saw, all decked out in a rubber apron, gloves, and goggles. He had slipped into a good after-lunch rhythm with the whirring water-cooled diamond blade with Emilio still off at the metal shop seeing about the Number Six shaft and was in his zone when "Uncle Mikey" slinked up behind him and ran his fingers up and down Jack's ribs. Jack shrieked and the cab went flying and landed on the concrete floor, and Jack burst away as the old man cackled with laughter. Jack scrambled around on the floor and recovered the blank from under the table it slid beneath, daring to breathe once again only when he discovered it intact.

"This could've broken," he held it up to show the man. "I could've been fired over this! You should not do that sort of thing!"

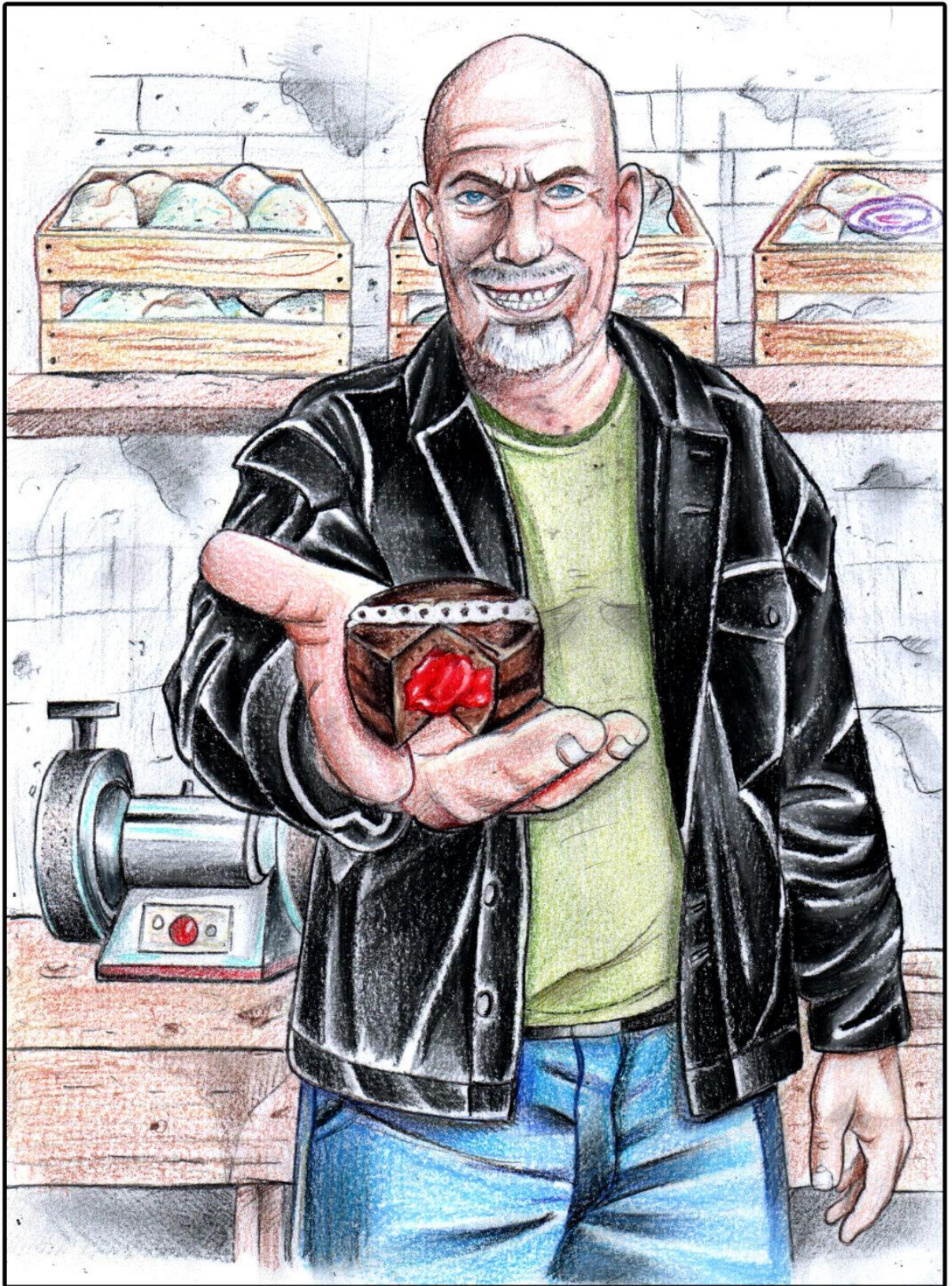
The old man pared his laughter back to a grin. "I'll make it up to you," he said, fumbling in his pockets. "Look what I got . . . I'll share it with you."

It was a *pinguino*, and the old man tore open the cellophane and offered him the end.

"I wouldn't care for any, thank you. I'm on the clock, so if you don't mind," he motioned to his station, where the old man had taken up residence, one elbow on the trim saw table, the blade whirring.

"Oh, kid, what're you talking about?" The old man took a bite and showed him the bit off end.

"Chocolate sponge cake, and gooey strawberry filling, and chocolate icing . . . mmm that's good. You ain't tellin' me you don't want some of this. Have some." The old man extended the vile thing again to Jack.



"Thanks, but I don't eat that sort of stuff," Jack stood firm. "I don't care much for sweets."

Uncle Mikey crammed the rest in his own mouth and around his outsized bite said "come on over here and show me to cut up one of these fancy cabochons; teach me something I don't already know." But Jack held his ground, and a slab fell in a saw, and he smiled at the excuse to get away and turned to attend to the saw. He found Emilio standing just inside the shop door, the repaired shaft in his left hand, glaring over at Uncle Mikey. Jack was aghast at being caught red-handed not doing his job and focused on the saw change-out. When he finished up and looked up to find the old man gone, he fell back on the trim saw and prepared his table.

"You okay?" Emilio sidled up and said sideways, arranging the slab feed line to the left of Jack for form.

"Look, I'm sorry," Jack looked up, his shame pushing water toward his eyes. "I didn't mean to. He made me."

"Did he hurt you?" Emilio grabbed the boys' shoulders and eyeballed him hard.

"Well, no, he didn't hurt me, unless you fire me over it; that would hurt."

"What did he do to you?"

"He wouldn't let me work. I told him I had to work, but he stood right here," Jack pointed to his feet, "and he wouldn't move and wouldn't let me work . . . he . . . he wanted me to eat a *Pinguino* with him!"

"A *Pinguino*?"

"Yes!"

"That's disgusting!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Look, I'm sorry, but it's not my fault. It really is not, and you really can't fire me over this. It wouldn't be right. That man should not be allowed in here to disturb work, even if he is the boss's great war buddy."

"It's okay, Jack-o," Emilio smiled. "Hey why don't you finish that one off and come help me put Number Six back together."

"Yessir!" Jack turned to make the final trims and kept Uncle Mikey at arm's length in his head from the things he focused very hard on to do a good job and moved from one to the other and back again to accomplish. He looked up at the clock to wonder where the day had gone and admired the line of ten cab blanks that he had cut out, stunned and unhappy that he had only two more hours until quitting time, when he had to leave. Yet, when Emilio did finally shoe him off to the bus stop and locked up

the shop behind, Jack felt an oppressive cloud lift off him, and he passed the time counting VWs on his way home and made it up to eighteen beetles and seven vans before his last bus stop finally reached his stop and the western sky worked its way from crimson to purple, nighttime chomping hard at the bit.

“Honey, I think you need to go look in on Jackie; something is the matter.”

“Huh?” Harry Stone looked up from the newspaper.

Marge had stopped grading papers and looked across at him. “He barely touched his dinner, and you know chipped beef on toast is one of his favorites.”

“Honey, he’s just whipped, I’m sure. The kid gets up at four-thirty and spends three hours a day on buses and hauls rocks around the rest of it. I know I sure couldn’t do it, and he’s just twelve years old.”

“I don’t like it, honey; it can’t be good for him.”

“Baby we need to let him figure this one out,” Harry set the paper aside and put his hand on his wife’s knees. “You know how he is about this.”

“I’m just worried about him.”

“This is good for him,” he looked at her.

“Harry, there’s something wrong that has me worried.”

“I’ll figure out a time and place to talk it over with him when it’s right,” he assured her. “Maybe this Sunday when he’s off and well rested. Whatever it is right now he just needs to work through it.”

“You are out of your mind, Marco!” Emilio slapped his hand on the kitchen table and Lupe jumped.

“It’s already been decided, Emi,” his brother replied. “This comes down from Torreón.”

“Marco, damn it! I am not part of your mob! Why are you telling me this?”

“You work there. Don Sancho needs you to arrange it.”

“Marco, Don Sancho and I have no business together and nothing in common. I will have nothing to do with this!”

“Don Sancho says the old Mad Dog would want to know. We do not think that he is complicit in this sordid business.”

“Go tell him yourself. I’ll have nothing to do with this and nothing to do with you. Get out of my house!”

“Emi,” Lupe gasped.

“Emilio, don’t be that way. Look, this is going to happen, and I owe you this for your own safety; I have no moral alternative but to tell you. This is not my choice and it is not open to suggestion. This is something that is going to happen. What’s better, Emilio? A drive by shooting or a nice clean inside job, everything tied up? You tell me...”

Emilio laughed. He looked at his wife, his vexation transformed into a half grin.

“Emi,” she looked at him; “you know this man is a monster.”

“I don’t know that,” he objected. “I don’t know that at all.”

“Well, you think he is,” she reminded him. “You’ve said so. Emilio, it’s the same thing.”

“No, Lupe, no it’s not the same thing. I am not his judge, jury, least of all the bastard’s executioner. Who am I to judge any man or anything? I’m just a working stiff trying to do good!”

“That’s the beauty part,” Marco cut in. “You don’t have to judge him. He’s already been judged. You don’t have to sentence him as that has been decided as well. It’s all set. Now it’s just a small question of how it’s going to be done, that’s all.

In his room with the door closed, Jack looked glumly at the solutions on the book shelf in which he had seeds growing crystals. The potassium ferricyanide solution stared redly back at him, beckoning him over to examine it, but he would not rise to the occasion. He forced himself to go and arrange his lab bench, but the things there were already in their places. He un-stoppered the sulfuric acid bottle and passed it beneath his nose in order to do something he knew he should not. In old times they had called it ‘vitriol.’ The nitric and hydrochloric acids on the shelf were very potent and would leave a pretty bad burn, he was sure, untreated. Mixed together in equal measure, it was called ‘aqua regia,’ which as far as old-timey names go sounded better to Jack than ‘vitriol,’ but which heated was capable of dissolving even gold. A large rough stain on the tile floor showed what happens when you drop a bottle of concentrated hydrochloric on the floor. Like old Jesse James, Jackie had been adjusting a picture on the wall but rather than get shot in the throat he had just slipped

off the chair he was standing on and knocked the bottle onto the floor and then fallen backwards onto the broken glass and the sizzling puddle of acid as it ate into the tile. That was a couple months ago, and Jack had hopped up and peeled off his clothes and gotten into the shower quick and then hustled up the baking soda he kept by the fire extinguisher and shook it all over himself. His shirt had been eaten to shreds, but Jack had neither been cut by the broken glass nor burned by the acid. But sulfuric acid had a different character. It would supposedly melt the skin away and leave you disfigured. When evil men splashed a woman's face with acid somewhere in the news, it was this acid that they did it.

It was eight-thirty, not quite late enough to try to sleep. He turned on the fan and took his clothes off and got into bed with a copy of *Lapidary Journal* and forced himself to read an article on faceting tourmaline, but he merely moved his eyes across the words, his mind chained inside an old cellar as a faceless villain bricked it up and locked it away from the light like in that Edgar Allen Poe story to rot in its home-spun prison.

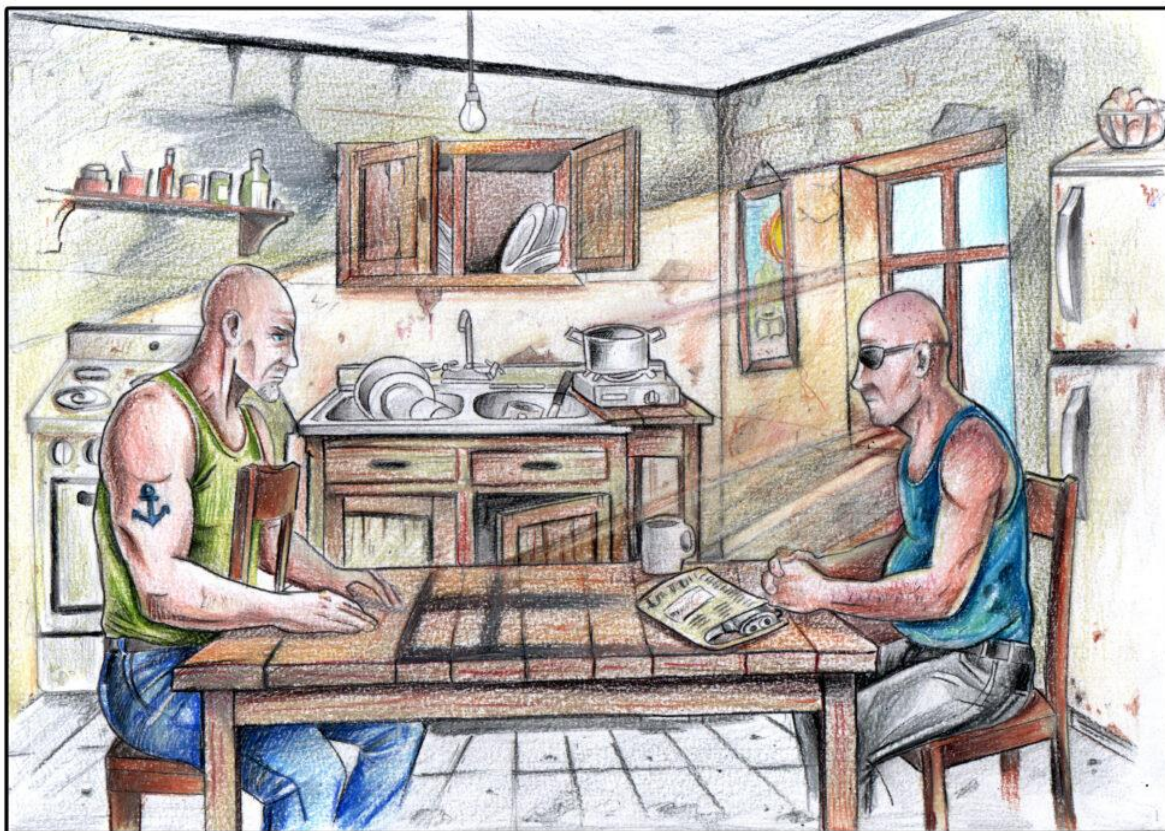
He lay in bed a long time and tried to recall how stories about that movie, *The Exorcist*, had scared him so bad last year that he had had to go in and sleep on the floor in Mom and Dad's room. Of course he had just been eleven then, still a kid. The empty dread inside him was worse now than being scared out of his wits then, but this was not something that sleeping on the floor in Mom and Dad's room would help. Being scared was at least being alive. Running away and hiding from monsters in a dream was at least doing something to stay alive. He felt hypnotized and being put through motions toward an awful final frame where the bad thing long expected would finally happen.

After a long time of lying still, he drifted into a jumbled dreamscape that danced lightly between the States and Durango and Torreon and new friends that had come and gone in these past four years on the move. In one of them, his old fourth grade pal showed up to play soccer with Jack and his classmates at the American School, but dressed out in football pads and helmet. The Mexican kids shrieked with glee as Bowerman ran after the ball and picked it up to run with it. Jack ran after him, horrified, trying to explain to him that it was a different game, that you weren't supposed to touch the ball with your hands, but Bowerman would have none of it and outran Jack, evading tacklers that stood aside and pointed and laughed, making for the goal. 'Can I lend you an ear,' Uncle Mikey leaned in to ask. 'It's filled with gooey strawberry and it's real yummy, here have a bite...'

Butch Walker sent the wife off at dawn to her mother's house. He checked the load of his Browning and chambered a round and set it on the kitchen table and read the paper while he waited for Mister Mike to make his regular eleven-thirty appearance. The kid had not shown up for work. He had told Emilio last night to not come in, everything considered, so he had the privacy if he needed it. He even worked in a bit of sleep and had been up and sitting there for a couple hours before he felt movement in the house. He took a drink of coffee, folded up the paper, and laid it on top of the firearm.

Michael stepped into the room and stopped to look at Walker. "Don't tell me," he said. "I'm in a shit pot of trouble."

"Get a cup and sit down in front of me here so I can tell you what I got to say."



"Don't get nervous on me, Butch," Michael glanced across at the newspaper. He turned a chair around and leaned his chest into its back and tipped the chair forward into the table and wrapped his arms around it and brought the coffee gently to his

lips using both hands. He smiled. "I was figuring it might be time for me to be skedaddling," he smiled at his old buddy.

"I reckon it ain't too late, yet, for you to do that."

"In fact," Mike put the coffee on the table and turned his palms up. "I'm all packed. I'll drink this down and be on my way. I hear it's lovely in Bangkok this time of year."

"It may not be that easy, Pod."

"I ruffle your feathers? Your feathers don't look all that ruffled to me."

"Ain't my feathers that's ruffled."

"Whose is then?"

"Them's."

"Them's . . ."

"Yeah. Them's."

"Whose them?"

"Everybody."

"Everybody?"

"Well. Everybody but me."

"And you know this for a fact."

"It's what I'm told."

"Mind if I have another cup?"

"Help yourself Mike."

"They want you to kill me, don't they?"

"Well. They put it different."

"How'd they put it?"

"Said they was going to allow me the honor."

"But you just can't bring yourself to do it?"

"It wouldn't be right."

"How do you know?"

"Well, Pod, let's just say that this is one of those things that I can see pretty clear."

"You might be doing the world a favor, you know," Michael smiled. "You don't even really know me."

"Don't talk me into it."

Michael smiled again.

"But once they realize I ain't killed you, you see, they'll do it themselves. That's where your problem comes in."

"Plenty people's wanted to kill me before," Mike smiled. "Ain't nobody's got me yet. I'll take my chances."

"Well good luck to you, then." Walker stood and turned to the door. "I'm going out," he opened it and tossed his head at the newspaper. "You can take that if you don't already have yourself covered. Everybody oughtta at least have a fighting chance . . ."

"That's very white of you, Butch, thank you rightly, but I'll be okay on my own."

"Don't be here when I get back."

"Hey, what's the matter, son?"

Davy was in band camp and Marge had early summer session classes to teach, but with regular school over, Harry didn't need to make it into work before nine. Jack had been the one that left earliest in the morning, so his son's presence behind the bedroom door must have gone unnoticed in the morning diaspora. But passing by the closed door on his way out, Harry stopped there sensing something and knocked before opening up. Jack was sitting on the edge of his bed and holding back tears. He choked them back further in his sudden discovery.

"Oh, I don't know, Dad," Jack said. "Nothing, I suppose."

"Oh bullshit, son, what's up?"

"I can't go back to work, and I'm not sure why. I'm, well, I'm scared, but I don't know exactly what it is I'm scared of." He held one of the big yellow glasses in his hand between his knees. It had iced tea in it, about half full. Harry Stone looked at how much the ice cubes were melted and did the numbers on how long his son had been sitting here like this.

"What's up, Jackie? Tell me what happened."

The glass slipped through Jack's hands and fell to the floor. It was a large thin-walled yellow glass that held a lot of tea, now about half full and the ice nearly all

melted. It landed on the ceramic tile between his feet, upright. Waves broke upon the surface of the tea inside the glass, and as Jack looked down, a ringing died slowly in echoes inside his bedroom, the full glass standing upright intact on the floor.

“I’ll bet you a dollar you can’t do that again,” Dad said after the ringing died down inside Jack’s bedroom.

“I figure the commercial angle of it isn’t my end-all,” Jack looked up at his dad and then over at his lab bench in the corner. There was his Bunsen burner and array of acids and reagents on his table in the corner, tools on the right, nichrome wire and supplies on the left, lined up, ceramic mortar and pestle in the middle. “I have decided to quit the Emporium and settle myself on the science of it.”

Harry Stone pondered this over a good long while and nearly lit a cigarette.

“I don’t understand why a balance between commerce and science can have you so upset, Jackie.”

“Well . . . there’s this friend of old man Walker’s that’s staying there. He’s really weird. He creeps me out, Dad. I don’t want to be anywhere around where he might be.”

Harry studied this over a moment. “You want, Son, I can drive you over while you settle up with Walker.”

“No, Dad, I gotta do it myself. I’m steeling up. Tomorrow’s pay day anyway.”

“You sure? You gonna be okay with this? We could just give Walker a call on the telephone and save you a trip over there.”

“No, it wouldn’t be right, Dad. Besides, I gotta go collect so I can pay back that \$10 I got borrowed against my account.”

“Well, okay then, but you can always change your mind if you want. After you study it over some more.” Dad eased out of the room but looked back in. “Since you got nothing better to do, maybe you can wash the car this afternoon.” Dad winked. “Make your momma proud, maybe we’ll do pizza tonight. Out.”

Once inside some Mexican version of a safe house he disarmed his three captors and beat them unconscious. He dragged them one by one into chairs and tied them there with their own belts and shoelaces and dug his lock-blade out of his pack and cut their clothes off them and into strips. He tied them down one by one and then went around and gagged them. The second one—the big guy, the one they called Marco—he had to punch sharply on the chin to put him down again, but the others

stayed knocked out. One shitty snub nose, one Ruger 9 mm, and a good old Colt .45 automatic... He swung open the cylinder of the Saturday and dumped its load on the floor and threw the pistol over toward the trash can. He checked the loads on the automatics and walked through the rooms to case the joint and glanced through the blinds pulled down on grimy windows. It was a corner house, sketchy neighborhood but not bone poor, one-way streets. He went through the cupboards but there were only a few mismatched plates and a few cups and glasses. In the fridge there was sour milk and some eggs and a pitcher of water. He carried it back to the living room and splashed his boys' faces. Only two of them came around.

"Where you boys keep the hootch around here?" he asked.

The two men looked at him blankly. The third kept his eyes closed.

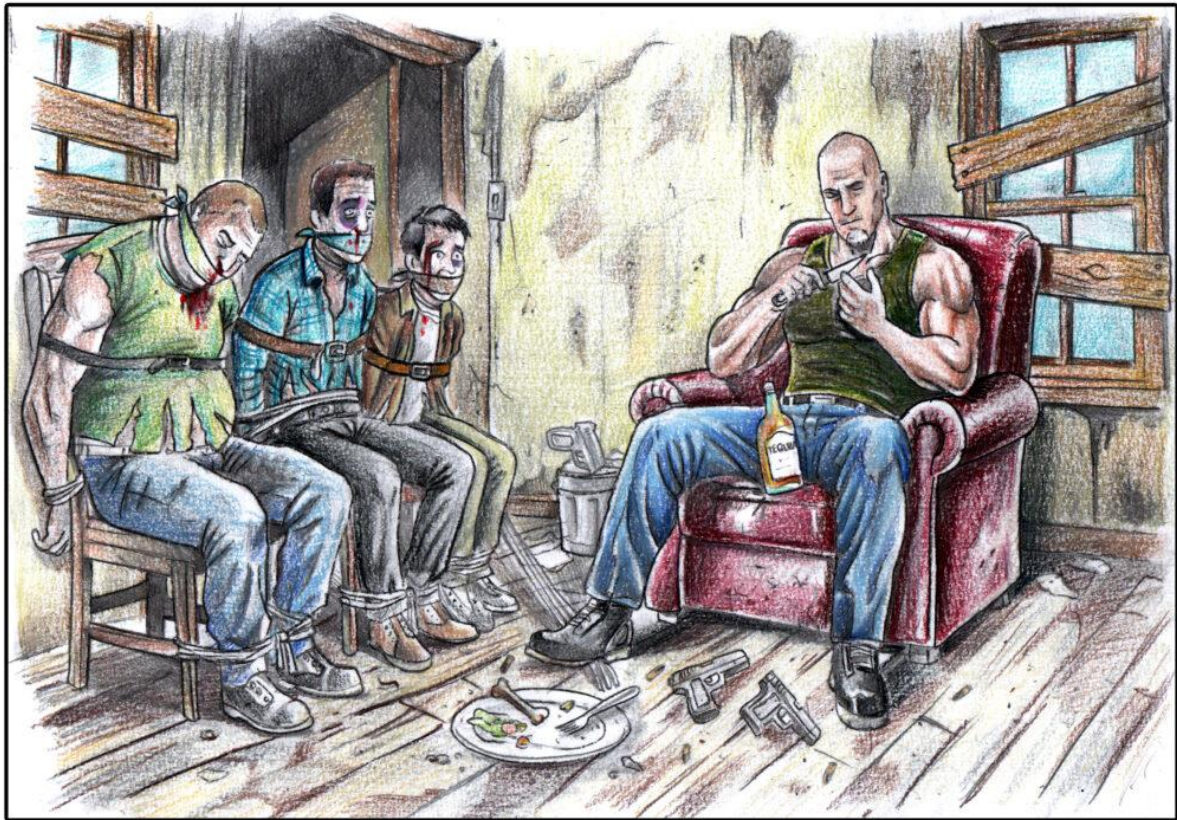
Michael tipped his thumb toward his throat three times, his pinky sticking out.

"Donde, compadres?"

"*Pa e e que qui e eia a,*" the little guy tried to get around his gag.

Mike raised their pistols in both his hands and aimed one at each of their noggins and gaged their reactions in turn. "I didn't say 'try to talk to one another, fellows; I said 'donde?'"

The big one tossed his head toward the back room, and there Mikey found a suitcase and dragged it back out and in front of his two boys dug a half drunk bottle from inside wadded up clothing and some toiletries. "Gracias," he smiled, setting the guns down to unscrew the top and take a gentle three-finger pull.



“You boys is in a world of hurt,” he shook his head sorrowfully, seated before them with his legs crossed. He pulled out a pack of Luckies and lit one and blew the smoke above their heads and looked back down at them and smiled.

“I don’t know what your boss was thinking, but all you had to do was shoot me.”

One of the men began to quake. The other glared at him through twitching eyelids.

“But, no, one of you geniuses gets the brilliant idea to take me alive. Probably plan to pull my fingernails off one at a time, something like that . . . dumb, dumb, dumb.” He shook his head, bemoaning their fatal error.

The young guy began to sob, but with the gag in his mouth it made for a pitiful performance.

Michael sat back down in front of the men, and picked up a pistol. “Here’s the thing about torture,” he swung the barrel down in the big man’s face and shook it a couple times. “It’s like the death penalty,” he explained. “It ain’t about the guy getting executed; it’s about everybody that ain’t getting executed. Likewise, torture ain’t for the benefit of the guy being tortured, whether you decide he deserves it or not. Torture is for the benefit of the ones doing the torturing. It’s a kind of sick business, fellows. If you know what I mean.”

He took another long drink and held the bottle up. From the fading light that filtered through the blinds, he figured it for seven p.m. and found a final three fingers left, just enough to start the evening off with a light buzz.

“But if that’s your little perversion, then who am *I* to lecture *you* boys; I’m sure you understand it all very well.”

They didn’t understand a word he said, but in their awful position they were certainly reaching their own understanding of equally weighty things, the little one wondering at which point the lecture would end and the shooting begin, the big one holding out still for the sudden arrival of some gangster buddies in the stairwell to bust in and him to somehow survive the crossfire.

“Yeah,” Michael smiled at Marco. “I kind of wish your friends would come over to play also. I like this game; it’s fun.”

He took the last drink and tossed the bottle in the direction of the trash. He stood and opened his lock blade. It made a loud click. “You boys ready?”

He took one gun over to the little guy and inserted the knife blade between the cloth gag and the little man’s face and smelled urine as he cut the gag away. He folded the knife and put it in his pocket and ejected the clip of the Ruger into his free hand and tossed it in the direction of the trash. He held the gun right up next to the man’s thin sweating face, the business end pointed across the room. “Open your mouth, kid,” he said, then pantomimed. He pulled the bolt back to eject the chambered round into the man’s mouth. “Now swallow.” He pantomimed. The man swallowed. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? I want you to remember me when you pass it tomorrow.”

He turned to the big guy. “It’s your turn, now, big fella.”

But he was tired of the game and opened his knife back up and pressed the blade against the side of the man’s neck instead, right where the aorta ran. They were both very still, and Michael petted the man’s head and watched as the indented skin moved against the blade with a quickening pulse. He let the blade up and pulled the man’s head gently back by his pony-tail to look him good in the eyes and smile. He had always had a fondness for the Colt .45 and was pleased to slide this one in his waistband. He adjusted his Hawaiian shirt out over it and shouldered his pack.

Michael turned from the door to smile. “See you three stooges in the funny papers,” he said and walked out the door.

The second bus was unusually quiet, and Jack rehearsed his brief resignation spiel as the bus roared up eerily silent Gomez Palacio streets. The working-class bustle of the small stepchild city of sprawling Torreon was by that hour of the morning typically bustling, the air outside the bus diaphanous and bright from the dust lifted from the desert by the pedestrian and vehicular traffic, everyone with a place to go. But outside today's window the sky was deep blue and the sidewalks quiet, the streets with scattered traffic. In today's preternatural calm, the northern horizon out Jack's window was a ribbon of brown hovering above the desert surface. Above the ribbon of interface turbulence the sky grew into a pale blue and higher up the color gave way to a deep, nearly cobalt blue, one that reminded Jack of the color of the water where they had fished for marlin off Mazatlán that time. The conductor drove unusually fast, braking at bus stops to discharge or take on one or two passengers at the stops that a conventional day might see twenty or more swap the steps for the sidewalk and vice versa.

The odd circumstance that brought about the emptying of the streets was not one particular to Gomez Palacio but one that indeed infected all three cities comprising the Tri-City, from the dominant and vast Torreon, down to the tiny and sullen red-haired step-child, Ciudad Lerdo. But the epicenter of today's disquiet was Gomez Palacio. Mothers kept small children inside and their older siblings constrained to courtyards. Restless teens and grown children living still at home were brow-beaten to keep their movements restricted to their neighborhoods. The men strayed well beyond the walls but many respected their old lady's preference to skip work. They sought each other out in neighborhood stores over the premise of packs of cigarettes and drank coffee together at the taverns and cafes to compare the intelligence and speculation. A building head of steam was certain to burst out in a spate of violence, and everyone felt the thrill of renewal as a social thunderstorm built to move across town and fill the arroyos with floodwaters in which some unfortunate people were likely to be washed away to their deaths.

"Don Sancho has really gone and done it this time..." the consensus ran. "He won't be able to survive the shame; they won't let him to keep his place... What if he decides he won't go? He can't go up against Torreón, and if he did, Ciudad Lerdo would be snapping at his flank and they'd wipe him and all his gang out..." He's fucked, they generally agreed.

Don Sancho had held the city's working poor knitted together for the better part of two decades through deft alternations of patronage and intimidation, always keen to the political winds blowing across the arroyo in Torreón, where Don Adán had remained the kingmaker since emerging from a period of gang strife in the early fifties. By the mid-seventies, their rackets continued to be conventional ones, prostitution, protection, gambling, extortion, the odd political intrigue requiring

underground muscle. There was a growing share in the drug trade that came in from the Durango highlands in the form of marijuana that was smuggled off to El Norte, but old-school mobsters like Don Sancho disdained the trade and taxed it even more heavily than regular rackets. But for the most part, the mob of the three cities discharged civilian duties that their power imposed upon them and kept an easy peace on streets where policemen and security forces were not welcome yet where civil society still required some modest protection from the excesses of drunken wife-beating husbands, teen gangs pulling stickups to trick out their Fords and Chevys, the odd rapist, and most certainly child molesters.

It would certainly have surprised few of the city's underbelly to learn that Don Sancho had been assigned the task of attending to a particularly offensive sociopath wandering the town's streets, a gringo whom it now circulated widely preyed upon young orphan boys on the streets and was rumored to have played Papa Noel in orphanages in Chihuahua and Ciudad Victoria in a big red suit and false white beard, where he would have them sit on his lap and would laugh and give them treats. As word got out that Don Sancho's three men had been overpowered and humiliated in their own neighborhood by this gringo, it was unthinkable that Don Sancho would ever live down his calumnious failure to take care of this particularly important piece of civic duty.

Jack looked around from the locked up store front of the Emporium, spooked at the emptiness of the sidewalks. It was almost as if it was all related, that the streets were empty and the store closed due to the same thing, but he couldn't imagine how that could be. Anyway, Jack had come early to get this ugly piece of business done while Uncle Mikey slept in and was going to stick to his plan. He fished the key from where Emilio kept it stashed and opened the gate and stepped inside the compound and walked down the grooved concrete ramp under a sizzling morning sun and stood outside Walker's front door and looked up at the fateful panes of glass embedded in the door.

Walker knew only what he was able to gather from fragmentary neighborhood gossip that Lucinda had shared with him over the phone. He reckoned simply that Sancho's boys had come to a gun fight armed with knives and he chuckled at how easy they all surely figured it was going to be. Now the native pride would flare up and somebody would have to pay. Walker laughed. He didn't cotton much to those that fed off the underbelly, that were unacquainted with an honest day's work. Still, he wondered if the whole situation warranted a man or more than one man to lose his life over it. But he didn't really give a rat's ass, and why should he? Barring any further nuances to the situation, he'd re-open on Monday like nothing ever happened and the world would return to normal. Walker coffee-ed up and spilled it on his hand as he jumped at the unexpected rap on his front door and dropped the cup and

watched it smash on the tile floor. It was that damned kid out there, not enough goddam sense to get in out of the rain. He yanked the door open drawing breath for a stern one-eyed lecture, but the kid was all spring-wound and beat him out of the gate.

“Mr. Walker, Sir,” Jack pronounced solemnly. “I’m sorry, but I must resign. The challenge here is bigger than what I got to give, Sir.”

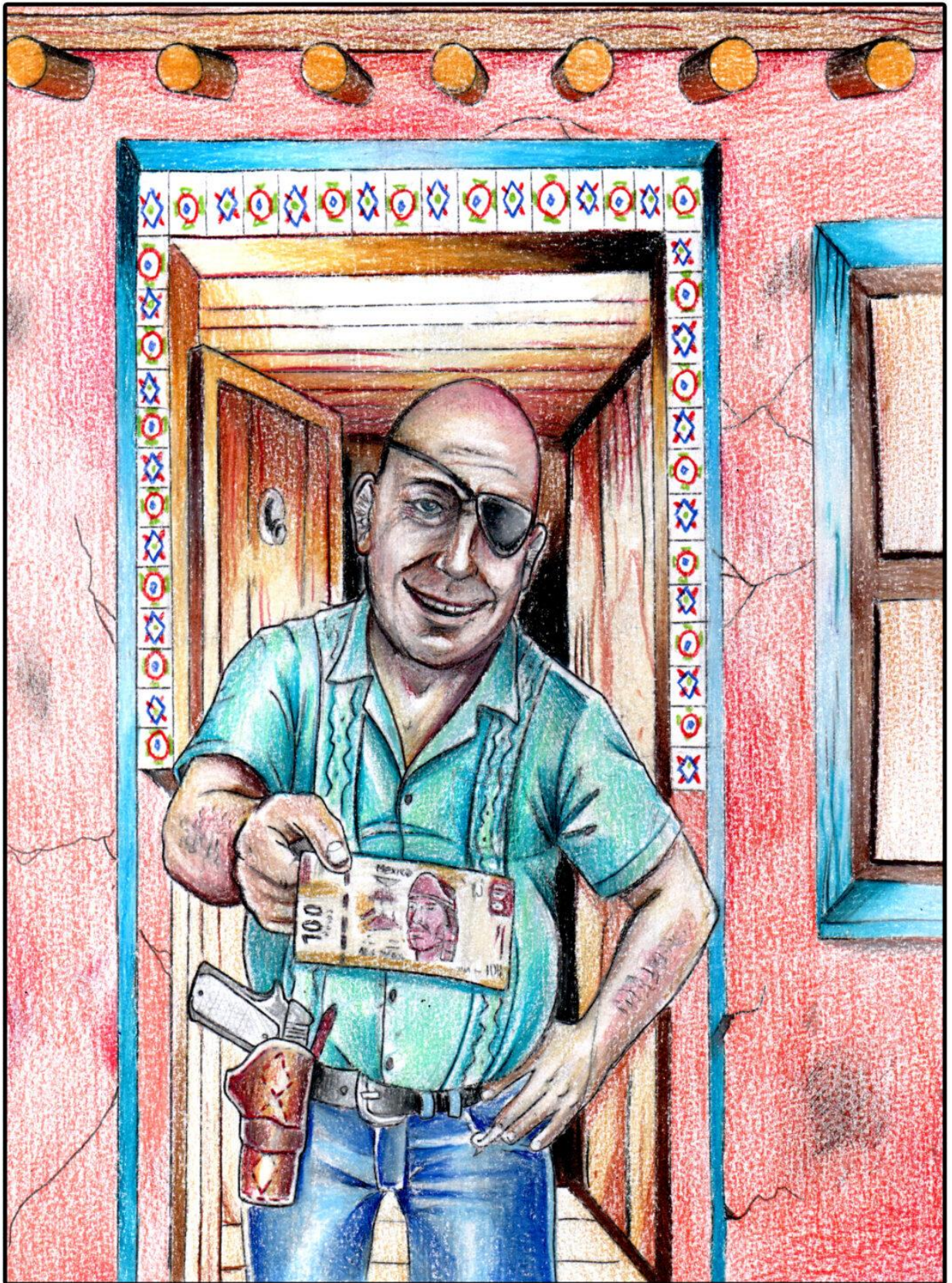
“But you’ve done well, son,” Walker had to admit, taken aback by the boy’s odd formality. “You sure you don’t wanna think her over?”

“I’ve done thought her over, Mr. Walker, Sir.”

“Well, okay then; sorry it didn’t work out for you.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Sir. Jack Stone reached up to shake the big man’s hand and turned away.

“Here, kid,” the man said, peeling off a 100-peso note from a wad he pulled from his pocket. “Take this; you earned it. Good luck to you.”



“Thank you, Mr. Walker, Sir.”

“I’m gonna walk you out if that’s okay.”

They walked out the gate and Mad Dog waited on the sidewalk with his Browning tucked between the crack of his ass and his Levis and out front of the shuttered shop until Jack got on the next bus and looked up and down the street, and only then did Mad Dog Walker withdraw back inside the wire, locking the gate behind him. Jack had the one-peso fare handy and had another two coins for the transfer that he would catch in downtown Torreon. There sure were plenty of seats, and Jack looked around to make sure he was not being watched by suspicious characters to pull out the bill and look at it. It was a 100 peso note alright. The peso was at 12.50 to the dollar, so his pay added up to eight bucks. He had logged 32 hours in total, so that worked out at twenty-five cents an hour. His costs, adjusted for having missed yesterday and not having to buy lunch today, were \$6.80. He studied it all over and had to admit that from the start he had offered himself up for free, unpaid, so he didn’t have any reason to grumble at coming out of the whole thing only \$1.20 ahead. At least Mr. Walker had covered his expenses. At least his first real job hadn’t wound up costing him anything. Still, Davy was right, his account *was* empty, and Jack had his eye on the fly-tying starter set from Orvis, and that was \$78. Kids in the States had it so easy; they could all go out and get summer jobs and make loads of money and *really* get paid a buck an hour—and even more—and save all kinds of money. But in Mexico you could just make a fraction of what you could in the States. Still, the rich neighborhoods got a kick out of an American kid washing their cars and shining their shoes, so Jack knew he had a working advantage over the Mexican kids that wandered the streets hustling up the same work. At the going rate of ten cents Jack would have to shine three pair an hour to beat out what Mr. Walker was paying and do so from right around his neighborhood without incurring travel and lunch costs. And at \$0.50 a car, which he could wash in as little as an hour inside and out, he only had 156 cars to go to have enough for the fly-tying kit. And that still left evenings for mineral work on his lab bench and for expanding his crystal growing horizons. Maybe the high school chemistry lab had some copper acetate to donate to his cause and save him the expense of having to buy. He sure hoped so because aside from whatever it would cost, he would have to figure out where to get it. Where do you go about purchasing copper acetate in Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico? Yeah. He’d have to sit Dad down over this to see if he could raid the chemistry lab’s stocks . . .

“Have another,” Mad Dog sloshed out a couple more shots and cut lime.

“My last,” Emilio said severely. “Two’s my limit, remember?”

“How’s your brother coming along?”

“Marco’s healing up physically,” Emilio smirked. “He gets the cast off his wrist in a week, but the leg cast has another month to go, and he’s stayed clean so far. But mentally, well, he’s got quite a bit to get over.”

They drank the shots and chewed the lime. Emilio wetted his index finger and touched the salt and brought it to his lips.

“How long you gotta put him up?”

Emilio sighed. “Well, the old man won’t let him back in the house, and he’s in a pretty bad way with his old crowd, the butt of all jokes. So, as long as it takes, I guess. Lupe grumbles, but it makes Mom proud. What can I do, Boss? He’s my brother.”

“You think he’ll get back in with his old crowd?”

“Lupe says he’s just holding out till they’ll take him back . . . but I’m not so sure about that.”

“You think he might clean up and fly right?”

“I ain’t gonna jinx nothing by speculating. But I know one thing. He does not want to run up against another Mister Mikey, that’s for sure!”

They laughed.

“How’s the new kid holding up?”

Emilio scowled.

“That good, huh? I figured he might have the stuff.”

“The kid is a machine,” Emilio granted. “Born to the gears, bred in the lube.” He jiggled his eyebrows and wondered at the boss’s sudden soft spot for under-advantaged neighborhood kids willing to work and learn. It was not like the Emporium was going to clean up the streets and pave the way to a bright shining future for northern Mexico, but it did not hurt anyone, and it was worth the added trouble on Emilio’s plate for the good it did. And the community recognized it, so it was good local politics too. Emilio was dismissive to those that brought it up in the barrio as casual conversation, but he was still proud to be a part of it. “The kid is golden,” Emilio assured his boss. “It was a good call.”

Mad Dog poured himself another and cut a wedge of lime.

“They can’t all know their rocks, Emilio,” he glared.

“Hard work is good enough,” Emilio agreed.

“It’s a tough business,” Mad Dog mused. “It takes tough bastards like you and me to pull it off.”

They mulled that over a bit as one of Walker’s old timey LPs played some gringo crooning music.

“Just don’t ask me for no fucking raise,” Walker winked at his foreman.

“Pour me another—I’ll make an exception this time to the two-shot rule,” Emilio said. “So you don’t have to drink that one alone . . . then I must get home to Lupe.”