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THE OTHER BARRIO

It was on the corner of 16th and Valencia, the Apache Hotel, a once elegant residence for out-of-town visitors, now a run-down joint for several dozen single men and some desperate families. Every time I go by the intersection, I still hear the screams, the cries for help of those who were caught in the fire the night the Apache Hotel burned down.

The newspapers screamed the headlines the next day: SEVEN DEAD IN FIRE. They didn't state the cause. I didn't want to be dragged into it but I had cited the place three times, not for fire hazards, just the common stuff: garbage and rodent infestations. Had there been a fire hazard, God himself could not have stopped me from making sure the owner took care of it that very day. Now, it was going to come down on me. That's why Choy had taken me off the case. He was my shithead boss at the Department of Building Code Enforcement, and my job was on the line if my report had failed to mention a fire hazard. Which it did not. Seven people had died, and I wasn't going to carry those dead. Let whoever killed them carry them.

It was Friday evening, and Choy's order to report for a Monday morning meeting had appeared on my desk as I was leaving. I decided to take my Apache Hotel file with me. I had the weekend to find the cause of the fire. Sometime after my

Wednesday inspection, maybe 36 hours afterwards, the hotel had burned to the ground. It's not easy for a building that size to burn as fast as this one did. This wasn't going to be easy. My skin was on the line. And then, there was also my own outrage. There was no reason for those people to have died. No reason at all.

The fire had started early Friday, about three in the morning. The newspapers mentioned witnesses, and I had to track them down and get their story firsthand. The persons who'd called 911 had been identified as employees leaving a nightclub nearby. I'd have to hang around the hood till 2 a.m. to interview them. In the meantime, I was nursing a beer in a little dive on 24th Street, mindlessly staring at the yellow spot on the brown bottle neck, trying to make sense of this case and my own life.

My girlfriend Amanda had recently left me. Being in our formerly happy loft usually put me in a funk of depression, so I stayed away as much as I could. Usually in bars like this, where a couple of Mexicanos shot an easy game of pool and Miss Mary from San Pedro Sula, with her smile wide as her hips, poured beers. I was living in a former can factory on Alabama Street, now converted into a den for unwashed but creative folks who'd taken the iron-age dinosaur and made it somewhat habitable. Now, the dot-comers were popping up like mushrooms in cow shit. You'd see them cruising in their beamers, calculating how much it would take to run everybody out of here. In all irony, I was working for the city as a building inspector. I wasn't; interested in being a cop, I just made sure that rental units were habitable for human beings.

Don't get me wrong, this city is beautiful, but I live in the barrio, the dirty, low-down underbelly of town. Some of the rental units here make the hovels of Calcutta look like the Taj Mahal. The garage units house three families packed as tight

and desperate as boat people. Closets have been remodeled into bedroom suites. Such is life. And death. I was going to visit Death at nine o'clock in the General Hospital morgue. She wasn't dressed like you'd expect, but there is no mistaking her when you meet her.

At nine o'clock, I met *La Pelona* face-to-face in the basement. A Samoan in scrubs and flip-flops led me into a walk-in cooler the size of a *taquería*. Inside were row upon row of gurneys, each with its own stiff. He pointed out a corner where seven of them were stretched out on the floor.

"We ran out of gurneys," he laughed.

I took no offense.

When I lifted the sheet on the first one, I was surprised to see the face was contorted like those mummies in Guanajuato but unburned. "What happened?" I asked.

"They died of smoke inhalation."

Nobody even knew these poor bastards' names. I could see the process that would now start: immigration tracking clues, an envelope with a name or perhaps a phone number in one of their pockets. Find their hometown, relatives most likely, and tell them. Arrange for transportation. These guys were human sacrifices, but to what god? Why did I go see them? I needed the rage to keep me going.



Valencia Street on a Friday night is an ant hill of suburbanites afraid of their own shadow crawling around in groups of ten. Sometimes more. One of them was standing on the corner, speaking into his little cell phone, asking for directions, looking like a contestant in that TV show "Lost." It's for them the ruins are being created, the families forced out, the murals destroyed. The other night, I overheard one of them ask,

“What’s this neighborhood called?” And her blonde friend replied, “I don’t know, but it used to be called the Mission.”

I slid behind the counter at the Havana Social Club, the walls covered with photos of poets, famous and obscure, many of them dead. I ordered the specialty of the house, *ropa vieja*. Don Víctor had the box booming “*Chan Chan*” by Compay Segundo. I’d just heard that Compay had checked out after 93 years of smoking cigars and that his real name was Francisco Repilado. This year, my poet-friend-brother Pedro Pietri had moved to the other barrio, too. And today was the anniversary of my *comadre*’s death. I’d known her for thirty years. Now, there were seven more checked into the other barrio.

The dead were all around me, urging me to keep on living, to keep their memory alive.

I paid up about midnight and still had two hours to kill.

I stepped outside, and there was a white SUV with its engine running at the curb. Two creeps with necks like wrestlers were inside. The uglier one rolled out.

“You Morales?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Mike Callahan wants to speak with you.”

“I’ll have to check my social calendar.”

The creep said nothing but opened the back door for me. He was maybe six-feet-four, three hundred pounds.

“I was going that way myself,” I said, not knowing which way that was. I got in the SUV.

I named the muscle-head driving, Huey, and the ugly one, Dewey. I knew Callahan, Irish Mafioso, head of a renegade builders’ association. He moved around city hall like a man with a lot of muscle behind him, which he had. Muscle but not the brains. The thugs he’d sent to pick me up were quiet the whole time they drove. Except when Dewey farted, and Huey said to him in all seriousness, “God bless you.”

We drove to the city's industrial area near the freeway. As kids, we used to play in these empty lots, riding our bikes down Pot Hill, as we called it. Now giant commercial buildings, all chrome and steel, were in the throes of being born. We went under the freeway and took a side road behind a construction site and parked. We were at Mission Creek. I knew the place well, another childhood hangout where we'd gone swimming. Now, fancy houseboats were docked alongside an occasional, massive catamaran or yacht. Nearby, the freeway roared with traffic headed downtown, and I could see the city skyline, like a neon sign flashing billions of dollars.

Huey indicated I should go to dock number 10. Moored there was a fancy houseboat without any real taste, painted whorehouse red, in fact. Callahan was alone in the back room, the air thick with scotch I could smell from ten feet away. He indicated I should sit down.

"You smoke cigars, Morales?" He was about to light a big stogie with a gold plated lighter.

"I hate cigars ... and Republicans."

"Don't be so uptight. We're relaxing. Follow me?"

"Okay, we're relaxing"

"You know what these are?" He handled the stogie like a pool stick in his big ham-like hands. "*Cohibas*. The finest of all Cuban cigars." He let that sink in for a moment. "And ... illegal in this country."

"What's it to do with me?"

"Hey, I'm trying to show you that we all have our imperfections. But you're not listening. So, what you pissed off about? Go on, spit it out."

"I cited the Apache Hotel."

"The one that burned?"

"But never for a fire hazard. Because none existed."

"I don't follow you."

"It burned on my watch. I'm the fall guy, and I don't want to be the fall guy."

"If that's what you're worried about ..."

"You don't get it. Seven people died. I don't think it was an accident."

"It was a fleabag hotel. Everything changes."

"It's against city ordinance to tear down low-income housing."

He shrugged. "Someone was careless ... that's the way to look at it. It won't be an inconvenience to you."

The way they looked at people as an inconvenience made me sick.

"Why don't you explain it to the seven stiffes in the morgue?"

He rose from his chair, the cigar swinging in his mouth. "Take a look outside. There out the window." He gestured to the lit-up skyline, the buildings glowing, sucking up whole dinosaur herds of energy, perched like radioactive towers spewing radiation. "That there, let me tell you, is the highway to the future. You can ride it or ... you can, well, be run over by it." He laughed at his own joke, his jowls trembling with fat.

To me it seemed like a nightmare. "I intend to find the source of the Apache Hotel fire ... in case you're wondering."

His eyes turned grey like those of a great white shark. "You have a loft that's not warranted. It's, ah, how shall I say ... a safety hazard."

"I have the permits."

"That's a matter of opinion. One of your neighbors might file a complaint. Claim it was illegal."

"We're all illegal here. Except the Ohlone. And we killed them all."

"So, you're a do-gooder, is that it? Look, Morales, nobody appreciates a smart-ass like you stirring up trouble for other

people. Let me remind you ... with your illegal loft, your shit smells just as bad. So, think about it.”

He went back to his cigar, and I knew the interview was over.

Huey was waiting for me.

“That’s all right,” I said. “I’ll walk.”



At two in the morning, 16th and Valencia is a current of human electricity, AC-DC all the way. I’d caught the last show at Esta Noche, the tranny club on 16th. I wanted to see “La Jessica,” advertised as the most beautiful illusionists in the world. The soft spotlight in the smoky club made her indeed seem beautiful, at least creating the illusion of beauty, draped in sequins and sheer glittering gowns that gave the impression she had a body like Angelina Jolie. But at three am, when La Jessica was out of costume, she looked like any other lonely soul hanging around, waiting to pick up a drunk to bounce or bed for money.

She smoked a filtered cigarette, and the apple in her throat bobbed with each phrase.

“*Mira*, I was standing right here *mismo*. And the flames just shot up at once, *Dios mío*. It was like a woosh, licking up the side of the building.”

“The flames didn’t come from inside of the hotel?”

“No, *chulo*, from the outside.”

“What else you see?”

“Two men running away.”

“You sure of that?”

“I’m sure they were men. As sure as I am La Jessica.”

That was proof enough for me. That and the burned-out hulk of the building across the street, standing like some pre-Colombian ruins in the jungles of the city.

“These men, could you identify them?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Did you get a good look at them?”

“Well, they had big muscles ... they were, you know, *muy fuertes*.”

I thanked La Jessica and went home to Alabama Street. I would have to return the next day, sift around for evidence, take plenty of photos. I walked into my loft without turning on the lights, without checking for messages, just letting the glow from the street fill up the emptiness inside me.

I had nightmares all night, screams and bodies burning, people leaping from buildings to their deaths. I woke up early and reached for my file. There wasn't much there—kinda like Oakland. The notes on my three visits, including the one Wednesday, three days ago, described the minor stuff I'd cited. The listed owner was F. Delgado et al. The address was on South Van Ness, among those old Victorian mansions in the heart of the barrio. It was on my way to the ruins of the Apache Hotel, so I dropped by on the off-chance F. Delgado might be around. I didn't know what I was going to say, but I could look someone in the eye and right away tell if they're up to something evil.

In another century, the nineteenth to be exact, South Van Ness was millionaire's row. Victorian mansions lined the blocks. They were ornate ladies in wood lace and wrought iron curlicues. Even old man Spreckels, the sugar baron, had his digs here, on the corner of 21st and South Van Ness. Later after the earthquake, most of these notable scoundrels parked their hats on Snob Hill, leaving the best weather to us poor folks in the flats.

I knocked on the door of one of these mansions from that era, all restored and pretty. I tapped once, twice, nothing happened. After I leaned on the doorbell, a maid finally cracked the door but kept the security chain latched.

"Look, lady," I said, "I'm not a cop."

She blinked once but didn't budge. So, I said, "*No soy policía. Busco a un tal F. Delgado.*"

"No Delgado here ... this *Señora* López house."

Then a voice came from behind her. "What's the matter, Carmen?"

A woman I had not seen in years, and thought I would never see again, stepped out. Sofía Nido was as beautiful as ever. Seeing her brought back that summer at Puerto Escondido, so long ago it seemed like another lifetime. Ten years ago, we had spent a torrid summer together, dancing on tables, making love on the beach, living like the apocalypse had arrived. But to her it had been a fling, and she had come back to her fiancée, and we had gone our separate ways. I had never gotten over her and had drunk many beers in her memory.

"Roberto ... what are you doing here?"

"I guess I could ask you the same thing. I came to see a certain F. Delgado. Ring a bell?"

"Can't say that it does. But maybe my aunt might know. I'm her attorney."

"Any chance I can talk to her?"

"What's this about, Roberto? Are you with the police? That is so unlike you."

"It's a bit complicated."

"I see. My aunt is very ill. She really can't see anyone right now."

"Maybe when she feels better?"

"Perhaps. But, Roberto, excuse me, I'm late for an appointment. Can I give you a ride anywhere?"

"I'm on my way to 16th and Valencia."

It didn't faze her, which was a good sign. I wanted to see how she'd react to the fire scene. But I soon forgot all about that as I watched her drive, her profile like an Indian goddess, her eyes, big and dark.

She drove a red roadster and moved smoothly into the traffic headed down South Van Ness.

"I hardly recognize you, Roberto So, you're with the city?"

"Department of Building Inspection. I go after deadbeat landlords who don't provide habitable housing. And with rents so high, many landlords are ripping off their tenants. Especially in this barrio. And you, why such short hair?"

"I'm between men. Short hair makes me feel in control."

"Yes ... and my girlfriend just left me."

"You mean you've lost your touch with women?"

"It happened when I lost you."

She looked at me hard, and I wished I hadn't said that. I changed the subject and took a crazy chance. "Say, there's a band playing tonight from Nueva York. You feel like maybe ...?"

She shook her head, in exasperation, I guess. "I can't believe you asked me that. I guess I'm an idiot, but sure, why not? Haven't gone salsa dancing in years."

I bailed out at 16th and Valencia. "Pick me up around nine in front of the old can factory. Later alligator."

I watched her drive away. My emotions were so tangled up, knowing how dangerous it was to be involved with her again. And yet, that was exactly what I was doing. It wasn't till later that I realized I'd forgotten to check her reaction to the smoldering remains of the Apache Hotel.

A chainlink fence surrounded the scorched rubble of the hotel. Two cops were guarding the site, looking bored. A big

tractor inside the gates was headed for the burned-out walls. I whipped out my camera. but one of them jumped in my face.

“Morales, what the hell you want?”

“Photos of the site.”

“For your scrapbook? Get outta here.”

Just then the tractor slammed into the building and knocked down half a wall.

“Hey, you’re destroying evidence. Who gave you the right?”

“You’re a day late. The D.A. has all the photos they need.”

“How can he if you’re knocking down the building?”

“Are you doubting me, you flat-assed Mexican?”

“Look, Johnson, I know you hate my guts, but seven people died here. I want to know why.”

“I bet you do. It’s on your ass, isn’t it? You’re the one that overlooked the fire hazards. This is on your conscience. If liberals like you have a conscience...”

“Have it your way, pinhead.”

The word was already out on the street: the frame was on. The bulldozer had knocked down the side of the building facing Valencia Street, but the fire had started on the 16th Street side. I stood in front of Esta Noche and shot a whole roll, clearly showing the charred side of the building where La Jessica claimed to have first seen the flames. It was obvious to me what had happened. Something had caught fire in the alley, right underneath the fire escape. The bastards could have spared the fire escape, giving those inside a chance to get out. But they hadn’t even given them that.

I saw Johnson on his walkie-talkie, so I made myself scarce.

I wanted to meet La Jessica again, show her the photos and have her mark where she saw the two men and the flames.