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David Toscana

THE NEW GUY

Victor raked his fork over his dinner of eggs and potatoes while making a conscious effort to establish himself body and soul within the stillness of the apartment and leave his office work behind at last. Mariana asked him how many tortillas he wanted, and since he didn't respond, she put four into the warming dish.

"And how did it go for you today?"

"Oh, fine," he responded. "For me, you know it's always fine."

After a while Mariana turned off the oven and put the hot tortillas on the table. She turned on the TV and waited for a few moments until the screen came alive. The first image was a cosmetics commercial. Victor looked up, not to miss a single detail of the model. She turned it off again, disgusted, and he went back to his eggs and potatoes.

"You aren't going to watch your soap opera?"

"I'm tired of it."

"Then put on the news."

"I'd rather watch the soap."

And even though the TV stayed off, both of them kept looking fixedly at the screen. The silence allowed a burst of laughter to drift in from the adjoining apartment, along with the sound of water running through the pipes. Then it was the squeaking of the fork being drawn over the plate as Victor tried to pick up the last trace of egg. It seemed to him that laughter was such a bothersome noise if he didn't have anything to laugh about.

"They've already hired the new guy," he spoke as if responding to an interrogation.

"Really?" Mariana asked absently while she stood up to collect the dinner things from the table. She noticed that there was still a little milk in the glass, so she left it where it was.

That afternoon, when they introduced his new office mate, Victor had smiled and stood up to greet him. "I'm at your service," he told him and explained that it was a pleasure to have new blood in the office, that there were a good many interesting projects, and working on them as a team would give the best results; that he shouldn't hesitate to ask him anything at all, and it would be a pleasure for him to help in any way he could. Then he stood

there with his hands crossed behind his back, gritted his teeth, and prepared himself not to address a word to him for the rest of the shift.

“I bought you something,” Mariana said while washing the dishes. “I’ll get it for you in a moment.”

He smiled and an impulse came over him to give his wife a tender hug, but he lingered too long while thinking what he would say to his new office mate to instill some respect for himself. A remark had already been bouncing back and forth for awhile inside his head. “Listen, boy, I was at work here before you were born.” But he couldn’t decide whether those words qualified him as a man of experience or simply invited pity.

“They hired the new guy,” he said again and immediately the impulse to hug Mariana faded away.

“Ah,” Mariana bent over the sink, feigning interest, taking care that her husband would not see the expression on her mouth. “And what’s his name?”

“It’s not important, he’s just one of those cocksure kids who think they learned everything in school.”

He went on to comment that the kid had no manners; who would have thought that on his first day at work he would come in cotton pants and a T-shirt?

“So?” she said. “He’s just young.” And Victor’s stomach turned over to think that his wife would defend his new office mate with such an empty argument.

In the distance the train whistle blew with unusual stridence. Victor wiped his sweat with a napkin.

“I really ought to do something,” he said and got up from the table to turn on the TV. Nevertheless, halfway there he changed directions and dropped into the armchair.

In the nearly twenty-two years he had been in the same job he had seen eight office mates go through. Five of them had been promoted and the other three left the business looking for better opportunities. Even the general manager had been his office mate at one time.

“Like what?”

He wouldn’t have answered except that his wife made him feel an obligation, standing there facing him, arms crossed, gazing fixedly.

“Work harder. I can’t let this kid jump over my head.”

“You’ve said that before—” Mariana stopped short. She had opened her mouth without thinking and now she did not want to meet her husband’s

eyes. Fortunately she recalled the gift she had bought him that afternoon. "I'll get your present."

The train whistle shrieked once more.

"Why does it always need to let me know it's going down the tracks? Why me? I'm just at home, trying to have myself a little peace and quiet."

Though he didn't expect a reply, the blood mounted to his head after a few seconds of silence, an eternity in which his wife, with her arms still crossed, gazed at him as if she were looking through a window.

"It's just that they need to warn the—"

"I know," Victor interrupted, "you don't have to tell me. But why bother so many people? Just to warn some idiot that he shouldn't cross the tracks? I don't think the engineer cares about one more soul on his list. Do you have any idea why he blows the whistle? Do you?" and since Mariana just shrugged, he himself answered, "To annoy us, that's all."

Mariana turned on the TV, adjusted it to the news channel, and went off in the direction of the bedroom. Victor wasn't interested in what a man was saying about the economic recovery of the country. He was thinking that perhaps he should really work an hour longer every day. Or two. Besides, there were Saturdays and Sundays, just to make sure that this time they wouldn't pass him over. When you think about it, he told himself, this new guy's going to be an incentive for me.

"Look what I got for you," Mariana put on a hopeful expression.

She placed a small bundle in her husband's hands. From the size of it he guessed it might be a pack of cigarettes, but not with that much weight. It was wrapped in paper with figures of lit candles and a snowman. Victor's face clouded over to think of Mariana pawing over Christmas things in mid-August.

"What is it?"

Mariana waited a moment before answering. She got up to turn off the TV and came over to the table.

"Open it."

He tore off the wrapping paper and saw with displeasure a pack of playing cards. He looked at them carefully; the text indicated that they were the Bicycle brand, for playing poker, made by a company in Cincinnati, and with an air-cushion finish. Like a pillow? he wondered, trying to imagine the cards filled with air. He didn't need to look up to know that his wife was expecting some kind of response. He was on the verge of thanking her for them and

coming out with some phrase that would imply enthusiasm, but he ended up saying, "And so?"

She looked down at the floor for a moment, embarrassed. "It could be fun. Instead of spending the evening watching TV we could play. I remember when I was a girl we used to play fish, war, rummy, canasta, pinochle, hearts. . . ."

Victor raised his hand to shut off the flow, as he had no patience for hearing about any more games. He stuck the pack in his shirt pocket and got up to turn on the TV. The image had barely begun to clarify when he decided he had made a mistake. It was better to turn off the set and heal things with his wife.

"But the pack says they're for poker."

Mariana looked at him without answering and in order to seem busy started putting things away in the kitchen. Victor was thinking about the next morning, when he was scheduled to take the new guy through the whole plant, introducing him to the other employees and sharing the secrets it had taken him twenty-two years to learn.

"And I'll bet the dumb idiot's just going to be interested in the secretaries."

She took a moment to comprehend what her husband was talking about, but even after constructing herself a mental image of the young man, she preferred to keep quiet. Again laughter was heard from the apartment next door.

"Aren't you going to drink your milk?"

Victor went to the table and picked up the glass. When he got it in the light he could see the marks of greasy fingers on the crystal and no longer had any desire for it.

"Too warm," he said, and as Mariana still kept her back turned to him, he added, "I'll just go out for some beer and then let's play a couple of games if you like."

He knew it was useless. Mariana wouldn't agree to play now. But this way he could throw the blame off on her and then, without a complaint, he could sit down to watch TV. With a little luck he would find a good movie.

He was grateful for the cool breeze, and even more so at this moment, because he recalled the occasion when the office staff was celebrating some anniversary. It was a stifling evening, the beer was too warm, and someone complained about there being no wind. Victor, almost drunk, let loose with the first thing that came to mind: "Only the wind blows freely." Everyone

who heard it applauded his words, and his boss said he was a philosopher. He never confessed that he hadn't the slightest idea what the words meant and that he had simply been repeating something he saw written on a motivational brochure.

He hadn't even walked half a block toward the store, still feeling annoyed by the weight of the pack of playing cards in his pocket, when a taxi caught up with him and with a timid beep on the horn invited him to get in. He said to himself, Why not? and motioned to the taxi.

"Where to?"

"Close by," he indicated; "the Chemical Fibers plant."

The VW moved ahead slowly, its motor roaring as if it were going top speed. They went straight past the store while the taxi driver was explaining that this was his last trip before finishing his shift: oh yes, sir, of course it was a little late and they were waiting for him at home, but no need to complain, things were harder these days and you have to try to get ahead. Victor wanted to get up the nerve to ask him just to be quiet, but he resigned himself to the idea that Chemical Fibers wasn't very far off. Five blocks away, they reached the railroad crossing. The taxi driver stopped and turned to both sides before continuing onward.

"Why such precautions?" Victor asked. "Just pricking up your ears is enough."

The taxi driver made a scornful gesture and kept still for the other six blocks they needed to reach their destination. The moment he got out of the taxi Victor ran into the smiling face of the guard who watched over the factory gate.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" he asked.

"What would you expect?" Victor said without feeling eager to respond. "You've got to get ahead."

He mounted the stairs to his office. On other occasions he had worked at night, and in the circuit breaker box he easily found the switches that gave light to the section where his desk was. His first act was to get rid of that irritating dead weight in his pocket that pulled his shirt down as if underneath it he were carrying a nursing breast. BICYCLE PLAYING CARDS, he read, and he could not avoid an expression of disgust when he saw on the pack an engraving of a naked angel riding a bicycle. On top of the desk lay some papers with half-finished calculations concerning the savings possible in the event they installed a process for recovering nylon waste. Victor turned on his calculator

and began to type numbers. He thought about his boss, who all week had been harping on the importance of those calculations, and he assumed that if he didn't finish them quickly they would hand over the project to the new guy.

"The fucking new guy," he talked out loud.

The air conditioning was off and the airtight windows gave him the feeling of being asphyxiated. He unbuttoned his shirt and, noticing his puffy belly, felt the kind of pleasure that comes from breaking a rule. If that kid comes to work in jeans, I'm not going to button my shirt, he told himself, and almost immediately discarded what he felt as a childish, pointless reasoning.

He recalled the reason he still had not finished those figures on the nylon waste recovery. He needed one additional piece of information: the percentage of irrecoverable material.

Victor revised his plan: it would take him at least ten working days to get the samples and do the lab tests to figure that percentage. To his boss that would seem like too much time, but he would arrange an explanation about the importance of obtaining precise, reliable figures. He got to his feet and tried out the proper tone of voice.

"A small error in the calculations could cost us big, sir."

He sat down again, satisfied, although only for a few seconds, because very soon he imagined the new guy saying he'd be able to obtain the results, and just as reliable, in less than a week. He took off his shirt and tossed it on the new guy's desk.

"Bastard," he said.

He supposed his wife would be missing him by this time, and with her in mind he opened the pack of cards. He wondered why those figures that looked like a black heart were called "spades"; and why someone had taken it into their heads to include clubs as one of the suits. He didn't concern himself with the hearts or the diamonds. They're all right, he said to himself. Just as he expected, he found two jokers, which in this pack were a pair of kings on bicycles. One of the jokers, moreover, bore the printed notice claiming that if you found a defect in the pack they would replace the whole thing with pleasure. He started shuffling them, and no matter how much he felt them and pressed them he couldn't figure out what the hell an air-cushion finish was.

He heard the train whistling in the night, but this time it did not bother him. He placed the bunch of cards on his working papers and with his right

hand picked one at random. The eight of spades. Why not? he asked himself, and with a red pen wrote the number eight on a sheet full of mathematical operations. That's a rather logical percentage. He got to his feet and held out the paper.

"Eight, sir," he said.

He had barely sat down again when he remembered that reality was rarely so exact, so neat. He took another card, the three of diamonds, and stood up again.

"Eight point three, sir."

Oh, the power in those cards! It seemed fabulous! In just a few seconds he had avoided ten days of work. He would count the ace as the value of one, and the jack, queen, and king as eleven, twelve, and thirteen respectively. When would he have the figures ready? Since the month has thirty days, he would draw two cards, maybe the four of clubs and the queen of diamonds: by the sixteenth, sir. If he needed numbers from one to a hundred, he would take the sum of eight cards; that wouldn't be exact but life isn't ever exact either. And he imagined that the joker would give him full liberty to choose whatever. What time will you return, Victor? The queen would say, "At twelve"; the joker would say, "Whenever I want." What channel do you want to watch? How many tortillas would you like?

The phone began to ring. Victor assumed it was his wife, but it seemed so absurd for him to be seated at his desk at that hour of the night that it felt equally absurd to imagine his wife on the other end of the line. Mariana probably thinks I've run into some friend in the street, or else that maybe I've gone out to get drunk. Odd or even? he wondered, and since the card he drew was a seven of clubs, he decided not to answer.

Victor experienced a sudden joy and was absolutely sure that the new guy would not be jumped ahead of him now, because from now on he would always have precise, immediate responses for each of his boss's requests. How many workers would be needed for such and such a process? Who is the best supplier for such equipment? Dates, sums, percentages: ace, two, three, four—all the numbers at his fingertips!

He put on his shirt without buttoning it, gathered up the cards, and went out of the office, quite elated. The guard let him know his wife had called.

"I know, I know," he responded, "but I came to work."

He set to walking the eleven blocks that separated him from his apartment; a jack of blocks, he thought. Again the night breeze seemed pleasant to him,

even more so than when he had gone out for the beer, because now the wind was cooler and his shirt was unbuttoned and the plant guard had seen him leave that way and only the wind blows freely. He went on turning over in his head the possibilities offered by this pack of cards, but it was getting harder to work up new ideas, and he was gradually losing interest even in the ones he had been enthusiastic about just minutes before. If they ask me to calculate the accumulated production for the year, I wouldn't know whether to use one or ten or all the cards. Same thing if they ask me about the price of some equipment. With the eight point three I was lucky because the figure isn't totally out of line, but what would I have done with an ace? My boss wouldn't have accepted one percent. And with my wife, if a king comes up, there's no way she'll heat up thirteen tortillas.

By the time he reached the railroad tracks, he had learned that the cards were only useful to decide between alternatives, but then tossing a coin would turn out to be more practical. Yes or no? Odd or even? That was all. He now was embarrassed by the enthusiasm he had felt a few moments ago and, above all, it surprised him how his mind had run off the deep end like that without the benefit of several beers. He sat down on one of the rails and took out the bunch of cards.

"This is where I stay," he said aloud to feel that his words would be taken as a solemn agreement, "unless I draw an ace."

He raised his hand to his brow in a gesture of concentration and then caressed the backs of some cards until he determined on one of them. It was the king of hearts. There was no train whistle, no vibration on the rails. It must be around midnight, he thought. There were no cars, no pedestrians.

"We all deserve second chances," he said.

He repeated the process of raising his hand to his brow and feeling the cards. Now it was the two of diamonds. He recalled a movie in which, just for the fun of it, some boys were in the habit of lying down face up between the rails and letting the train pass over them. The noise was deafening and it was really exciting to see the cars one by one brush past their noses. After the caboose went past, the boys got to their feet, laughing like maniacs, as they finished dealing with their adrenaline. Victor imagined that if he were to do something like that, probably his nose would present no problems, but one of the passing cars would surely carry him off by his belly. He placed both hands on his gut and thought about the air-cushion finish.

“One more,” he whispered. “The last one.”

The third card was the eight of spades, the same card that had helped him figure the percentage. Now he recalled a news item about a couple of illegal immigrants who fell asleep on some railway tracks near San Antonio. Only one of them lived to tell of it, the lightest sleeper. Victor couldn't decide if you had to be really tired or truly stupid to die like that.

He felt the rails slightly trembling and quickly drew another card.

“Yes, I deserve another opportunity.”

He was relieved to see that it was a joker, as good as an ace. He stood up immediately and set off toward home with the new disillusionment that the cards couldn't even help him with decisions. The only thing he was certain of was that the very next morning, no matter what, he would hand his boss a report that would clearly establish the percentage of irrecoverable material as eight point three, no more, no less. He wouldn't have to let those ten easy days go by the board, and incidentally he would give the new guy a lesson in speed on the job.

He moved along wearily, with a great desire to own a bicycle like the one ridden by the naked angel. He reasoned that the cards had saved his life in the fourth chance and that tomorrow he would start his ninth chance in the office. It's time for a stroke of luck, he concluded with satisfaction, and perhaps it is inevitable. He discovered the store was closed and he didn't have the energy to go anywhere else looking for beer.

Upon reaching the apartment building, he was overjoyed to see that all the lights except those in his apartment were out and that there were no voices issuing from the windows. As he mounted the stairs he felt an enormous desire to thank Mariana for the gift of the cards; he would ask her pardon for treating her so coldly, for having been gone so long without telling her, for not answering the telephone. He would give her a kiss and even ask her from the fullness of his heart to sit down with him and play any of those games she had mentioned. But when he opened the door and saw her sitting so alone in the big armchair, so forsaken in front of the blank TV, he was filled with fear.

“That new guy's going to jump over my head.”

Mariana stood up to give him a hug; she mussed his hair and pulled him over to sit beside her. Taking his trembling, sweating hands in hers, she told him with the greatest love she was capable of, “I knew that already, Victor, and there's nothing we can do.”

Translated by Leland H. Chambers