



ISAAC BOONE DAVIS

Tom Fires Juan

DAVIS

Tom fired Juan today just after our Two O'clock Break. We watched through the window in Tom's office, the one with "Dwell In The Possibilities" stenciled into the glass. Tom kept pointing at his chair, but Juan wouldn't sit down. It was something out of a World War II movie. Let me die on my feet. After three minutes Tom nodded and Juan started spreading his arms like he was expecting the Madrigal choir to appear behind him.

Juan lost his job for all the normal reasons: he wasn't making his calls; his attitude was bad; and frankly, everyone knew he was drinking more than necessary. And he was going crazy. Had been ever since his daughter, Diega, had died three months ago. Maybe ever since his wife had left him for Tito, the landscape designer. And now it was all over. He'd clean out his desk and leave his headset in the box; the ghost of one of us who hadn't faked it till he made it.

Juan wasn't going to come back and shoot us. It wasn't that great of a job. Nine an hour plus commission doesn't warrant emptying a banana clip into the office. Plus, Juan was afraid of guns. When he was fifteen he watched his cousin Chester shoot himself in the head playing Russian roulette. Juan had been nine and hiding behind a door watching the gang initiation. The second the hammer clicked, a puff of Chester's skull slapped Juan in the face. Ever since, even the sight of a gun on TV made him smell burning hair. He's been telling that story a lot lately. He told it one day in the break room. Then he repeated it, a week later. And, again, about a month ago. After he'd tell it, he'd look at you like a drunken wolf and say, "What do I need a pistol for? Shit, I'm big enough and mean enough I could put the bullet in you myself if I wanted to." Juan is 5'7" and looks like the greeter at a cell phone store. There are puppets that are more intimidating. But his kid had died. And he was sad. And fuck it, we had calls to make.

Juan and I lived in the same apartment complex. I'd give him a ride to work and he'd talk the whole way. I tried to smother him with the radio, but it never worked. The silence scared him and he tried to beat it back with

a whip made of babble. The stop at Starbucks was his bitching about Tom and his endless Air Force stories. The freeway ramp could be either a rant about his fantasy basketball team or Tito and his platinum lawnmowers. The light at Webber and Kirkman was this girl he'd met on the Internet named Arlene, who had already had phone sex with him. Every day, rinse, lather, repeat. The old, friendly, quiet Juan had left. New, crazy Juan repeated himself and passed out at his desk. He got pushy and mean. Became a serious one-upper. Even when Justine's aunt died, he just couldn't resist.

"Ok, buddy, just make your calls, alright?" Tom would straighten his tie and look down whenever he said something like this.

"For sure man. And hey, thank you for your service to the country." It was November and by now Juan had been taking generic Xanax and drinking in the bathroom. Once he unsuccessfully tried to flush an Evan Williams bottle down the toilet. He'd keep talking. He'd tell us about his D.U.I. or about the marlin he'd caught that weekend in Amelia Island. One day in the break room he even told us about doing penis kegels so he wouldn't come too fast when he met Arlene. Gotta say, for a guy who was supposed to be in mourning, he talked about

his dick a lot.

If no one would listen or his jaw got tired, he'd tap his picture of little Diega against his class ring like a metronomic throat clearing. I remember pressing my phone against my ear trying to drown out the clinking of his ring against the cheap metal frame. Everyone complains about telemarketers, but nobody you know has spoken to one in years. That was most of the job. Listening to people's voicemails and Juan's tinkling drum. By Eleven or so, you couldn't tell the difference.

About a week before he fired Juan, Tom called me into his office.

"I want to let you know that we don't hire everybody." That day the tie was the Van Gogh print and he almost beat it into his chest when he spoke. "A lot of people think we do, and I understand that, but we don't."

"OK Tom."

"I was hard on you last week. And I'm sorry. But you kind of hurt my feelings." He was referring to the temper tantrum I had pitched at him when the Coke machine wouldn't take my rumpled dollar. It involved thirty five

years of age, eviction notices, constant rejection, sore coccyx and a job that would hire a kindergarten class, O.S.H.A. permitting. Tom's response was perfunctory. "I wish my car ran on self-pity, then I would fill it up at the Doug station. Because you have so much of it. And you give it away so cheaply."

"Oh shit. Tom I'm sorry. I was having a really bad day."

"Hey, buddy, I get that. And I was hard on you last week. I know your numbers aren't what they could be and I know, I mean, I heard, that you and Justine aren't seeing each other anymore." Tom had grown up in one of those southern towns where the coalmine had been shut down and all the high school kids would fight at the abandoned drive-in. Useless Valley, Utah. Broken, Alabama. Surrender, Tennessee. "You eat at McDonald's every day, pretty soon you start thinking like McDonald's. Conformity, that's the name of that game." So he had joined the Air Force after high school. On his desk there's a picture of him in his flight suit and another serving lunch to a few grateful looking Pakistani kids. His hair, face, and jawline are creaseless creatures interested only in building a better you.

"But Doug we don't hire everybody that comes through that door. I know it may seem like it sometimes.

But that's just not the case."

"I wasn't trying to be insulting, I just got really frustrated."

"No, I understand. I look around and I say to myself where would these people be if they weren't here? And I know it can tough when you're not doing very well. But we don't just pay commission, we pay hourly as well. That right there should tell you we want you to work here."

"I hear you, Tom." We stroke our ties in harmony.

"Nother thing. That name you guys have been using for Archie, it's got to stop. It's funny and all but cut it out."

"Will do." We had been calling Archie L.E.S.O.—lazy eyed sex offender. The nickname was literal.

"Hey Doug," Tom's voice jumped. "Every sale has five basic obstacles: no need, no money, no hurry, no desire, no trust. That's good, right? Zig said that."

"Kind of a downer for Zig."

"He had more range than people give him credit for. He understood the human condition. But he didn't let that stop him."

"I know things have been slow this past week. I'll do my best to pick it up."

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Just do

what you can.” I was halfway to the door when he said my name again.

“Last week we had a kid come in here for an interview. Had a baseball cap on. Can you believe that? A baseball cap to a job interview? We didn’t hire him.”

So, now, Juan won’t leave Tom’s office. It’s been at least fifteen minutes. The business park used to have a security guard, Felix, but he quit a month ago after the company shorted him on his overtime. So calling the police was Tom’s only option. But he didn’t do that. He just let Juan punch himself out, Kubler-Rossing his way into the carpet. Eventually, he stumbles out and begins to shuffle the workday necessities from his desk into his red canvas gym bag. The LeBron bobble head, the emergency supply of hot sauce packets, and finally the picture of Diega placed like a shroud. Juan stares at me, then Justine who can’t hold his gaze. He raises an accusing finger at the clock. We hear him sobbing before the door shuts.

It’s a contrast to the way he had been three months before at Diega’s service. Silent, motionless, probably stoned. Nestled between his mother and his sisters in the

corner of the chapel. His head slumped into their collarbones while the piano player rearranged Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. Justine and I were still together then, although it wasn’t clear why. All we did was fight and bait each other over the dumbest shit.

“I’m not even sure we should be going. It’s not appropriate. We didn’t even know her.”

“Of course we didn’t fucking know her. She was six months old.”

The funeral had been arranged like a wedding: greeters, food, giving away the bride. There was also the matter of just how she had died. Someone said it had been a crib death. Someone else said that she had fallen out of her crib. A third story, the one that was apparently true, and the one that made Justine double up on her Melatonin at night, was that Diega had fallen out of her crib and crawled to the crook of the bathroom door. Where Tito had accidentally broken her neck, on his way to expel his evening six-pack.

When Tom got up to speak after a long run of screaming and solemn men, I have to admit I cringed. After all he was one of us. The moment was too big. But he stuck to the script. He leaned into the microphone

and began to speak softly and slowly, almost a croon. He talked about Juan; his service to the company; his dependability; his attention to detail. It was the mark of a man, he said. Justine and I sat in the back with most of the rest of the company. Tom returned and we clapped. One of us had done a good thing. I looked down and saw my hand wreathed with Justine's. My dirty fingernails touched her scar; just a little flesh in the house of God. Sharing a prayer in a room somewhere.

"Mrs. Berrigan would you say you enjoy reading more about the outdoors, automobiles, or current events?"

"I enjoy reading about that myself. How important would you say family is to you?"

Tom stalks the dry-erase board. He throws a lipless smile around the room and grabs the cowbell from the corner desk.

"Justine got another one." It's that time of the week again. Someone actually made a sale. Tom finger-guns the sales room. Then starts a stadium clap, like Bono coming out for an encore.

"Yes, Mrs. Berrigan," I turn my head to cover the noise. "I understand what you mean, but we need the

credit card to open a promotional account." The bell beats a sonic fault line from the carpet to the air conditioner. Justine stares into the phone clicking her pen against the desk.

"Justine is killing this week." Tom starts to wave for applause. "That's right. That's right! Ok. Bonus right now, next sale gets a twenty-five dollar gift certificate to the Ponderosa Steakhouse. No bullshit. I'm not kidding."

"I can't say exactly where we got your number, Mrs. Berrigan. No, not because, I can't say, I simply don't know." Justine stands up and curtsies. She's wearing a pink blouse and dress pants. Her face is as solemn as an Irish Hymn.

Outside I can see Juan. He's sitting on the curb by the dumpsters squawking into his cell. He's drinking something out of a 7-11 Slurpee cup. He puts the phone in his pocket then he whips the drink at the garbage. Then he throws his keys at the fence. Then he throws the air. Then he sits down. I grab Tom by the elbow as he passes my desk. The bell droops from his left hand.

"Tom, I'm Juan's ride."

"And just last week you were saying you'd never accomplished anything."

“You want him in the parking lot until five?”

“I don’t care what he does.” Through the window we watch as Juan lies in the Handicapped Parking space and spreads his flabby arms and legs like a snow angel in the gravel and tar.

“What is he doing, you know what? Just take him. Get out of here.”

“Tom’s a dick, man. You can get your job back.” I flip on the radio in my Chevy Cobalt. Juan spreads himself through the passenger side. The seatbelt abandoned, only makes it to the corner of his shoulder like a lonely chevron.

“I can’t believe myself.” He sounds stunned, echo-y.

“You know all that soldier stuff is bullshit, right?” Juan isn’t listening to me anyway. I turn onto the freeway. “I mean he was there, sure. But he was in the fucking air force. I mean c’mon. Takes a lot to fly airplanes over a bunch of people who’ve never seen a fire hydrant.”

“Long distance death dealing,” Juan mumbles.

“What?”

“That’s what they call it. The air force, my cousin in the army, that’s what he calls it. Long distance death dealing. Kill them before you’re there.”

“Exactly,” I say.

“Doug, I need my job. Do you think if I—”

“Yeah, probably. But who needs them? It’s a fucked up job. No one ever sells anything. Justine told me one time she had a guy start crying into the phone. Then a minute later she heard like a shotgun blast.”

“For real?”

“Yeah, it turned out the guy was fucking with her. It was from the TV. He started laughing at her. But how fucked up is that? Like he’s got some sound cued up on his TV or computer and he’s just waiting for a telemarketer to call.” The Cobalt’s Check Engine light has been on for a month. The highway floods our eyeballs with subdivisions, nail salons and smog. We are the billionth customers served.

“You think Tom is going to try and get with Justine?” Juan asks.

“I hope not. That shit would be unprofessional as hell.”

“How come you never had kids, Doug?”

“I don’t know. I guess because I’m a telemarketer. You know, money. No offense.”

“Yeah.” He wipes his nose and pats his head. “Hey Doug, can you take me to my Mama’s house. I don’t want to go home right now.”

Juan's mother lives in a gray house half a block down from the Little Cedar trailer park. When I was in high school it was a popular to refer to the place as the Little Seizure in honor of the complex's monthly drug sweeps. My sophomore year a girl was raped and killed there by a part-time security guard named Jason Marisol. Marisol was a local rich kid (he had actually been captain of the debate team) whose father had gotten him the job because he was worried about his son's general lack of ambition. The whole thing had been a civic shit show. Depending on whom you asked the incident was either "sad" (my grandmother's analysis) or a reminder of the oppressive classism that's marked this city since we jaw-jacked the Tainos. There were angry town hall meetings. America's Most Wanted showed up. And a reporter wrote a true crime book, *No Security*, which can still be found at the neighborhood Goodwill next to the used fondue pots.

"Hey Doug, just wait a minute OK? Don't leave yet."

Juan's little brother, Dennis, is inflating air into his bicycle on the front porch. His broken glasses droop off his face. There's mud on the brim of his Lakers cap.

"Man, that man fired my brother? The tall man?"

"Yeah, he did. He's an asshole, he—geez, Dennis, you got a black eye?"

"Boys jumped me last night in *The Seizure*." He assures me. As if I would have been worried that this hadn't happened to him.

"You know, that ain't cool man," Dennis tosses the pump and begins to screw the valve with his fingers. "He grieving. My niece died like three months ago and now he loses his job. That shit is arctic."

Inside I can see Juan and his mother across a red checkered tablecloth. Her hands cover his ears but she whispers anyway. He cries his way into the lumber. Probably trying to explain the liquor on his breath and the tar on his back. When his mother kisses his head, my phone rings.

Tom wants to know when I'll be coming back. The shift isn't over.

"Justine made another sale. Could've been yours."

"You know what, Tom? I'll be back when I'll be back. I clocked out. I get it, you can fire people. It's a real job. You're a real boss."

"Do you think this is easy for me? This is not easy for me. I offered him time off. I don't have to explain myself to you, but understand I offered him time off. Juan just didn't want to try. All I ask for is effort. And he didn't

want to try. This is not how I wanted it to go.” Juan walks out onto the porch. He pulls a lawn chair over and tells Dennis to leave.

“It’s all about attitude, Doug. Positivity. Look it up.”

“I’m a positive person, Tom. I’m the most positive person on your whole team.”

He relaxes his voice. “You are positive, Doug. I’m just frustrated.” He talks for a while longer while Juan makes the jerking off motion and wipes his tears. Tom tells me how proud he is of Justine. And that it’s a pleasure to work with me even though I suck. And that I can take the rest of the day off, if I want.

Juan reaches into his pocket and produces a hip flask of Early Times. I grab it from him on the second drink. It tastes like bleach urinated by a werewolf.

“You really drink this shit?”

“As much as possible,” Juan nods. Between Juan’s mom’s house and the Little Cedar there’s a trail of stolen shopping carts and litter. A skinny, shirtless guy with more chest hair than chest stumble-skips out of the trailer court and scowls at us.

“Your little brother told me he got jumped over there last night.”

“His dumb ass. He gave a boy thirty dollars to get some weed and the boy never came back. So last night he and this other little idiot went into The Seizure and tried to get it back. Stupid.”

“You going in there? Gonna whip those boys’ ass? Defend your brother’s honor?”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Juan giggles. “In The Seizure? Fucks no. Let him learn. Plus, I got to go shoot up the office tomorrow. It’d be confusing if I got shot the night before I went on my rampage.”

“I thought you were big enough and mean enough to put the bullet in you by yourself?”

“Oh yeah? I did say that.”

“What did that even mean?”

“I don’t know. I had an uncle that used to say that.” We go on like this for a while. We belch whiskey and pretend that today never happened.

Maybe this is the part that I’m supposed to ask him about Diega. Or confess to him that I never made Justine come. Not even with my mouth. But mostly we just talk shit about Tom. His cowbell and his understanding of the human condition.

“I’m *so* proud of Justine,” Juan rubs his nipple and

makes Tom sound like Al Green drunk on sizzurp.

“He wanted me to let you know this wasn’t easy for him.”

“The first thing I’m going to shoot is that fucking dry erase board. No, fuck that. First I’m going to shoot fucking Tito. Then the dry erase board. Hey Doug, you ever been fired from a job before?” I had. Many times. I was halfway through my story about being sacked from Domino’s for delivering pizzas with a used condom stuck to the box when Juan began politely barfing into his shirt. His eyes slant. His gut doubles. He starts to get up but the gorge bounces back up through his throat.

“Man, I’m sorry Doug. Fuck, I’m so sorry. Just wait a minute. I need to get something to clean this up. I’ll be right back. Just don’t leave. I want to hear the end of that story. Please don’t leave.”

It’s Four O’Clock and the evening’s coming round. The combination of Juan’s mom’s flowers and the vomit funk makes the porch smell like a combination of folded laundry and nuclear apocalypse. But Juan comes back. And even though I want to go I’m happy to see him. He’s holding a can of bleach and another bourbon bottle.

“You’re still here man, I thought you were going to leave.”

“Nah, man. When did I say that?”

“I guess you didn’t.”

The lawn chair has made my ass feel like its been stamped by an angry Uzbekistani blacksmith, and I can’t move. So instead I sit with Juan. We drink and talk and we wait for the nighttime with the stolen shopping carts, and the thirty-dollar debt, and the human condition, and all the other things that will never come home.