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Nuts

BILL OSBORN

Lester Moore and his wife Donna have just bought a house in Chingadera. There has been a small fire and Donna connects with one of the firemen who comes to put it out. The fire also results in Les paying a brief visit to the emergency room of the local hospital, provides the neighbors an opportunity to be generous, and causes Donna to offer to wash and dry the sopped clothing of the firemen, a noble gesture that gets defeated by a stuck drain. A dachshund, a little girl named Mary, and a U.S. Marine named Jarvis are continuing antagonists. All of the above and more are referred to by Donna in her speech about nuts. The novel-in-progress from which the following scenes are excerpted takes place over an Easter weekend and the working title is "The Chingadera Shift."

An hour later, Donna, who'd been working indoors, came outside. Her cheeks had reddened and her forehead shone; she'd been laughing. "Howie wants a word with you," she said.

Les raised his eyebrows.

"Something medical," she said.

"I'll bet I know. I didn't tell you this, but at the hospital last night there was this severed leg. It was in this ice bucket, and these two guys, you'll like this, they started talking it over?"

"I'm sure I'd love to hear about it, Les, but he's waiting and you'd better go in. And honey? Make nice, would you?"

Now why would she say that? Even to those he didn't know well he was mannered and at the very least superficially cordial. She had no reason to think talking to the fireman would cause him to be anything else. It irritated him that she'd made this request gratuitously. He wished she'd keep her trap shut sometimes and just think a little.

"Howie?"

"Mr. Moore, sorry to bother you, but I need your help. I'm sure you remember the limb I was watching when you came to the hospital last evening, and also the guy

who came over with his notebook. Round wire-rim specs? Balding? A mustache? Now I know it's a longshot, but I was wondering whether you'd seen him before, if you knew any possible way of my getting in touch with him."

"Funny, I was just going to tell my wife about him. No, I don't think I'd know any more than you do. But wait. Yesterday afternoon a man over here . . . he looked like that. Now that I think about it, it might actually have been the guy. He's in the National Guard."

"Good," Howie said. "Thanks."

"That helps?"

"It gives me a place to start."

"What's it got to do with the leg, if you don't mind my asking? He didn't make off with it, did he?"

There was a pause. Then Howie said, "You know how it's always the outsider they try and pin the blame on when something goes wrong?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Well Mr. Moore, we brought in two of them yesterday—cousins, as it turned out, with the same build, both blond, both B-positive. Different cars but the same accident, and the strangest thing is that both of them lost their right legs at the knee. Anyway, believe it or not, they stitched the leg, the one we were able to bring in in one piece, to the wrong cousin."

Les did believe it. He listened for horror stories like this on the news and when he collected one he generally got to talking about doctors, a societal blight almost worse than lawyers. Connecting a fresh hospital accident to the ones he already knew about and to the overuse of technology and to trends toward excessive medical costs was good for a ten minute dissertation that would eventually solve half the problems of America and send Donna to the kitchen for the wine. Les waited, but Howie didn't go on. "So how'd they find out?" he asked, finally.

"Well, they got everything back down—you know, vessels, bone, tendon, muscles . . . as much as they could ever hope for—but the patient didn't accept it. It's tissue rejection syndrome. They knew only then that it wasn't his leg. The tests they hadn't had time to wait for the results of showed the error."

"They should just remove it, then, shouldn't they, and put it on the right guy?"

"They can't. It wouldn't survive a second surgery—the first connections haven't even started to heal yet. Sewing good tissue is hard. Sewing tissue in the condition that leg is in would be like trying to bring together, I don't know, canned cat food, maybe. But that's not what's stopping them. They'd do it anyway if they could figure out who it belongs to."

"I thought you said it belongs to the other guy."

"Well, yes, it did. But the cousin who has it now also owns it, right? He's attached to it. It's his body supplying it with nourishment."

Did every point have to be so contentious? Talking with this man was like wearing a wig in a windstorm—all defense. "I still don't get how you're involved," Les said.

"We were very careful out there, Mr. Moore. We tagged that leg to the man and to the plates on his car. I brought it down personally. I made sure the car's owner, who'd gotten thrown out on the pavement, came with it."

"You're saying the switch came in the hospital?"

"It had to. But all I need is for you to simply remember I was there, standing by like I was supposed to."

"I've got no problem with that, Howie."

"Good. Just if somebody asks. Ah, Mr. Moore—your wife? Well, we were talking about the Easter weekend, and I got to asking her if she'd like to come with me tonight and witness the holy vigil."

Wasn't this a little beyond the—

"You're welcome to join us. But of course she says you never, ah, that church isn't your favorite activity."

"No, right, that stuff's not for me," Les said. "I don't make her decisions, either. If she wants to go, she'll go."

"Sorry you won't be along, then. But there was one other thing. She says she won't be able to finish washing our clothes until your garage drain is fixed. The guys at the station were wondering when that might be."

Les felt his scalp prickle. He said, "Howie, your clothes will be finished when she gets them washed."

A hesitation. Then Howie said, "No use your popping off at me, Mr. Moore. You were the one with the fire. If you hadn't had the fire, we wouldn't even be talking."

If Les hadn't had the fire, he couldn't have helped the fireman avoid blame for the botched surgery, either. He wished he was as good at confrontation as that little Mary was, because then he'd point out the error in Howie's thinking. As it was, winning didn't seem important enough to justify continuing the fight. What was important was limiting the drain on his energy, ending this call and getting on with the work. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "you can pick them up and clean them yourselves."

"No can do. Your wife used a hard-water detergent. Until that's rinsed out, we won't be able to put the clothes in our machine. We're on a softener over here and we'd get a foam problem. We have to use a special lowsuds soap. If we didn't, since we recycle our dish and laundry water into the tanker, we'd end up pumping foam on the job. Not only wouldn't that look good, it could wreck the pumps, and that could cost property and even lives. And we're firemen, Mr. Moore. We're on a four-day shift just now, and we can't just leave the station to go home and get dry underwear. We're not whining. The lack is causing us a real problem finding comfort."

Funny that Howie could go off to a church service but not be able to take ten minutes to pick up fresh clothing. Les supposed this manifested a misguided conception of the freedom of religion. But why resist? He said, "I was already planning to call someone."

"We'd appreciate that," Howie said.

When they hung up, he felt as if he'd been socked. Then he heard something that made the defeat begin to lift. It was new, completely unexpected, and eerie—a hollow metallic twanging that seemed to focus him until only the sound itself existed. There were several distinct notes, but as far as he could tell they were not arranged along any sort of scale. He strained to hear more, enough to make sense of. But it was gone now. Must have been his damn ears again.

Outside, a different noise broke the calm. It sounded like a distant chain saw. Donna pointed. Buzzing slowly toward them from out of the setting sun was an ultralight aircraft. It turned out to be a red one, with black insignia that looked like World War One iron crosses. "You know, Donna," Les said, "Right now I'm wishing that was me. Just think how it would look from up there, how small all this would seem."

"The work you could avoid," Donna said.

The plane circled until it was now only half as high. They could see the pilot waving an arm and that he was shouting something. "The engine's too loud," Donna said. "What's he say?"

The craft's steady drone broke . . . caught . . . broke again, and behind it appeared a puff of orange smoke. A second later they heard the report, like a firecracker. Then there was no more engine noise—only the whine of the wind in the stabilizing wires. The craft began to whirl in a tight descending spiral. Donna's mouth was gaped. "I hope he can bring it down safely," she said.

He circled once, broadly, just above the neighborhood, then swept back toward them. They lost him when he dipped below the Czknmptis' roofline, but then he swooped back in view just in time to get his right wing up. It looked like he was moving sideways, but he managed to settle miraculously to the street. As he rolled by he stared at them. He wore an unsnapped aviator's flight bonnet and round goggles. His mustache formed an inverted V. What Les noticed most, though, were the perfect teeth. The damn fool was grinning!

He touched a switch, the motor started, and he lifted off. Unfortunately, he wasn't nearly high enough to clear the trees at the end of the street, and the last they saw was the top of the craft as it veered left. But they heard no crash . . . only the sound of the engine fading in the distance.

Some seconds later Les said, "He won't last, but I've got to say I admire him. There was an art to what he did. It was like . . . bold assertion. It was virtuosity. You don't see much of that these days. These days everything's all done by plan, by formula, with the result preordained for shoddiness. And if he fails, then by damn, at least he goes down big. What more of an end could a man ask for than that?"

Donna said, "If you ask me, it was plain nuts, and I've had enough of nuts. It's gotten to the point where I've begun to believe nuts are not nuts, they are sane. I've seen so many of them lately. Where do you think that leaves me? Am I nuts? No, I

am not. So I don't want any more of nuts. I'm going in now."

He followed her to the porch. Beside the door mat was a black steel lunch box, inside which was an array of food, all in bowls covered with cellophane. Salad, bread, fruit, butter. She lifted out a metal thermos. She seemed calm again, her voice a little dreamy when she wondered aloud what this was about.

Les said, "We'd better treat the thing with care. It could be some kind of trick."

"Oh, nonsense," Donna said. "It's the neighbors again, being generous. I'm very impressed with them, aren't you?"

The dachshund trotted out from behind the new palm. Before Donna could push her away, she had her forepaws inside the container. "Foof," she said.

"Shoo," Donna said. "Our food. Go home."

"She said food!" Les said.

"She woofed."

Les scratched his stomach. "Anyway, I think she's a pretty nice dog," he said.

"She's a long-hair. I'm sure she's got fleas. Might be a stray, too."

"No, she belongs to Mr. Schmidt, across the street, there. Now what about the drain?" He patted his pockets. "Didn't that matchbook have a number? Where'd I put it?" he wondered. "Hell, it must have gotten in with your wash."

"Use the Yellow Pages."

"I can't. We've only got the old Mierdas Blancas book."

"So try Chingadera Information."

"Can't do that either. You have to have the actual name of the business, and I can't remember it. Anyway, it's about seven and nobody's working. I'll call tomorrow. Too bad for the firemen, but we have enough to do ourselves."

"True enough," she said. "Les? Howie and I were talking about church."

"Yes, he mentioned some kind of vigil."

Donna looked away. Then she said, "Do you mind terribly? It's something I'd really like to see."

Yes he did mind. He minded a lot. But she kissed him sweetly on the mouth just then, brushing his lips with her tongue, and he thought he must be wrong, his instincts off, that he worried too much. They went in. He put the lunch box in the kitchen, then went in the bedroom to take ten. The shower ran. The bathroom door opened. She was doing something just outside. Then she padded away. He heard a drawer close in the kitchen. He'd thought she might be getting ready to join him.

She sat on a counter stool, finishing a yellow Tupperware bowl of what looked like cream-of-mushroom soup. On a red-and-white ceramic plate was a tossed salad. "Did you think this was just for me?" she asked. "Where'd you go? Were you pouting in there?"

"I felt worn down again."

"Mm-hmm. Well I'll be leaving at eight," she said.

He hadn't heard the phone ring. He said, "Did you call him?"

"We'd already arranged it."

"You're . . . my God, Donna, you're blushing," he said.

"It's in Mierdas Blancas," she said. "As it happens, Howie lives down there."

"You'll be driving, then."

"He'll pick me up. He works here in town, remember."

She tipped up the last of her water; a sliver of ice stuck above her lip. "I should get with it," she said, and went for the bedroom.

So she was really going to allow herself to be escorted by this, this weasel from the fire department. Les should go with her. Not that anything would happen, but why take a chance. But no. He hadn't gone before because he hadn't wanted to, and that hadn't changed. Besides, he had too much to do here. And what if he went with Donna and then, while they were gone, Jarvis showed up? No telling what Jarvis would do if the place were vacant. Of course, if nobody was here, nobody'd get hurt, either. But in any case, she should be back not long after midnight. He'd trust her. What the hell choice did he have?

"How do I look?" she said, behind him.

He turned on his stool, and there she was. She had on a navy blue dress—the skirt pleated, the top quarter-sleeved. She wore a dark pillbox hat. She'd put up her hair. It was burnished with brushing, and a few wisps of gold had fallen in front of her ears and across her neck. She spun. "This ought to hold'm, don't you think?"

"I'm sure it will," he said. "But look, Donna . . ."

She came to him. She peered up into his face. She took his elbows, then, and squeezed. "I know," she said.

But shouldn't she be feeling the burden too? He felt empty about the move and the hole in the roof and at the thought that she was about to abandon him in the middle of it all. "Oh, right," he said.

She frowned. She said, "Don't be sarcastic. I just want to see it, that's all."

A horn beeped outside. Neither of them moved.

"That would be for you," he said, finally.

She smiled and pecked him on the cheek. At least she wasn't wearing perfume; she smelled only of soap. She turned. "Donna," he said.

He hoped she hadn't heard the catch in his voice. She faced him again, her eyebrows up, the color high in her cheeks. She was waiting. Hell, she'd be glad. She was like that sometimes. Sometimes he had to be firm. But of course she might refuse. And anyway, asking her not to go would make him look weak, and she was not above exploiting weakness if it suited her purpose. And lately, oh, she'd had purpose.

"I hope . . . I hope it's worth it," he said.

Her shoulders fell. She said, "I'm sure it will be."

She turned and walked past the boxes. He heard the front door open and close. He stood there a moment, then went in the den. If he left off the lights and cracked the blinds, the one-way window film would keep him hidden.

They stood talking on the passenger side of a fire-engine-red Jaguar convertible.

He couldn't make out what they said. Howie had his back to Les. Donna faced them both. She made frantic circles with her hands and whatever she was saying she finished with her mouth half open and her tongue pushing out her cheek, and this caused Howie's perfectly-ringed coif to tilt back as he laughed. She gave him her hand and backed into the Jaguar's leather seat. Howie turned toward the house. He was beaming. He bent to close her door and walked around the car and got in. He pushed a black knob on the dash, then reached across her lap to open the glove compartment and get out a package of cigarettes. Les tried to smile. Donna didn't use tobacco anymore. She wasn't going to appreciate Howie's smoking.

He offered; she took. As he reached for the dash she intercepted his hand and pulled out the knob herself. In the darkness under the black canvas top he saw the glowing orange circle of the electric lighter. Howie cupped his hands around hers. A cloud of smoke obscured him, and now, deftly, she too lit up.