

# *BIG LUCK*

Steven Key Meyers

ONE JULY MORNING a few years into the new millennium Ricardo took his citizenship application to an immigration lawyer high over Mid-Wilshire. It was filled out and ready to go, except that he had to check *Yes* where it said checking *Yes* would invalidate it.

He needed advice. He had to be honest, for that was his nature, but he could almost taste the joys of being American, feel the power it would give him to escape the dependent and passive character of his life.

“Ricardo, I don’t understand,” said the lawyer, a middle-aged Anglo. “Looks fine. Came here ’88, green card ’94. Should have done this *years* ago, in fact.”

His office faced the raw slopes hiking themselves up over Los Angeles garish as a gangbanger’s underwear. Smoke steamed from the fires above Altadena. Much closer, Ricardo could make out his little guest house in Silver Lake, perched over the garage behind the blue gables of Cosmo’s Craftsman bungalow. He could almost see Rex purring on the windowsill.

“Page 8,” he prompted. “Question 26.”

The lawyer turned pages, his eyes flicked down and his body recoiled.

“Of course!” he chortled. “*Have you ever engaged in prostitution?*” And you checked *Yes*. Change that *Yes* to *No*, Ricardo, and you’re in like Flynn.”

“But it’s true. My friend keeps me, for nine years now, and before that—”

The lawyer’s head went back and a kind of hood dropped over his eyes.

“Be that as it may, say *Yes* and you’ll never be a citizen and risk being deported. Say *No* and Uncle Sam will welcome you to the family.”

“But if he doesn’t want anyone who has engaged in prostitution,” Ricardo said in his light and precise voice, “I must respect that.”

“Look, no one really cares one way or the other—”

“I’m not a hypocrite,” said Ricardo, holding the lawyer’s eyes. “I cannot tell a lie.”

“I see. But bear in mind, we’re the land of second chances, and I’m sure you’d make a fine American.”

Ricardo drove his Beemer home, and late that afternoon was lying down with his feet up, Rex curled against him, when he heard Cosmo drive in.

Usually Cosmo would call 20 minutes later, ask him over for drinks and dinner. But today he phoned right away, from the terrace, with an invitation Ricardo could hear through both phone and window, asking him to be ready at 5:30 for dinner and a show in Costa Mesa. Ricardo scrambled to his feet, waved out the window to Cosmo and was ready almost on time.

On the 101, Cosmo turned for a long look while his serious Mercedes charged ahead.

“How handsome you are this evening, Ricardo,” he said, placing his hand on top of the other’s.

“Thank you,” said Ricardo modestly, although it was true. He had the face of an angel: the cheekbones, full lips and good chin, the black curls, the long lashes wreathing limpid eyes. Any depredations taking place, any likeness emerging to a certain pair of weathered Yucatán peasants, he trusted that Cosmo could not yet see. Though Ricardo had provisionally turned 30—in fact, was living that 33rd year men find portentous—Cosmo was to think him 27.

Cosmo patted his fingers. “Well, let’s enjoy the evening.”

Ricardo should have picked up right there on what the man was planning, but he didn’t.

They ate at a marvelous restaurant overlooking the water. Ricardo had crabs, filet mignon and a parfait, while Cosmo nibbled at a chicken breast. He was nearing 50 and changes were taking place, his hair going gray, his mustache salted, his face puffy. One hand kept fidgeting his jacket open and closing it again.

It was Ricardo’s job to soothe his anxieties. Slipping down in his chair he pressed his foot against Cosmo’s. Cosmo smiled and snapped his fingers for the check.

Twyla Tharps’s *Movin’ Out* was gorgeous. Ricardo found himself transported, and sexually stirred to his roots. He longed for a strenuous night—but not with Cosmo. If he were an American citizen

he would feel freer to leave him, to find his own partner and live his own life. Of course, pride and his native work ethic would see him through whatever kind of night Cosmo wanted—tonight and every night until he could somehow surmount the glitch in his citizenship application.

At the end of the performance, they were up and running out to the parking structure before curtain touched stage. But after riding the elevator, opening Ricardo's door for him, getting behind the wheel and starting the engine, Cosmo sat suddenly immobile.

"Let's hurry home, Cosmo," Ricardo hinted. "I have a candle scented with jasmine, and—"

"Ricardo, there's something I must tell you." Cosmo turned wounded eyes on him. "Something you may find almost as difficult to hear as it is for me to say."

But he fell silent. Around them cars were beginning to fire up and back and fill and creep down the ramps.

"What is it, Cosmo?" Ricardo reached for his hand as Cosmo squeezed his eyes shut. "Tell me, my friend!"

"My friend, it's like this. You know that I married as a very young man, before I left Iran."

"Yes."

"My wife has raised my son and daughter herself. She is a good woman, and I love her very much. You should have seen how beautiful she was! All this time I have been trying to bring my family here to be with me. Now I have succeeded, and I am so happy. And proud that my wife finds me her pure bridegroom

still. Never have I been with another woman—*never*, not all this time.”

He patted Ricardo’s hand gratefully. Cars were nosing past. Exhaust fumes clogged the air, lethal gray uncoiling against stained concrete. Ricardo lowered his window, but had to raise it again.

“I am moving, my friend. My family needs more space than my home on Hyperion Avenue affords, so I have bought another in Los Feliz. I hope to marry my daughter out of it one day. You and I can no longer see each other. You understand: My children, they are almost your age. I must give you your freedom.”

Ricardo said nothing.

“I will probably rent out my little home, but you may stay on at the guest house, rent free.” Cosmo peeped over. “Rent free until I decide what to do with it.”

“Thank you, Cosmo.”

“I regret that my son has need of the little BMW.”

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

“However. . .” Cosmo reached casually into his jacket, as though for his Cuban cigars, bringing out an envelope that he held in front of Ricardo.

“I don’t want that.”

Cosmo placed it on the armrest. “Please. We’ve been so close.”

“I can earn my own living.”

“Pizza Hut?” asked Cosmo, smiling. Pizza Hut was Ricardo’s first job in America: Whenever his turn came to answer the phone, he would muster up all his English to say, “Wrong number,” and hang up.

“If necessary.”

Cosmo grabbed the wheel and gearshift, and appeared surprised to find himself boxed in. The carbon monoxide was killing Ricardo. Eagle eyes on the rearview, Cosmo coughed and fiddled with knobs. A discreet *whoosh!* commenced, and Ralph Vaughan Williams on the speakers. And when a car hesitated ever so slightly, back swung the Mercedes and, expertly playing chicken amidst squeals and honks of protest, down a ramp it slipped.

The fires snapping in the forests over Altadena guided them home. Glowing fingers reached lower down the slopes than the night before. When they turned off the Harbor Freeway onto the 101, Cosmo had to sluice ash off the windshield.

He pulled into the driveway near the top of Hyperion with a precipitancy that expressed his intention of sleeping elsewhere. Steps climbed the side of the garage tucked against a steep hillside to the guest house on top of it.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening, Cosmo,” said Ricardo. Tears finally threatened as he worked his house key off the BMW fob. “Thank you for everything.”

“Ah, little one, you’re too beautiful to cry,” Cosmo said. He took advantage of Ricardo’s wiping his eyes to tuck that envelope into his breast pocket. “A thousand memories. Sleep well.”

Upstairs, Ricardo drew a hot bath and wept while Rex looked on skeptically. Not that he loved Cosmo, but being kept is sweet, especially for someone who grew up hungry. He remembered dinners when his mother had a single tomato to feed her family. America lulled him with the ease with which she

provides the necessities—thanks to Cosmo, the luxuries, too.

It was true Cosmo seldom took him anywhere. Never once to Vegas, for instance, though as a professional gambler—Ricardo thought mostly poker, but didn't know for sure—Cosmo spent much time there. Nor did they ever actually live together—bicker about what to eat or what to watch, fray each other's nerves with intimacy; Cosmo had his place, Ricardo his. But he wept.

Next morning the sound of the Beemer's revving woke him up. Looking outdoors, he saw it backing down the drive. A moving van snuffling like a diesel pig—*oinka-oinka-oinka-oinka*—maneuvered into its place and a muscular crew started carrying the finer pieces out of Cosmo's house.

Ricardo waited until the truck snorted away and then, because he always found the strength to do what had to be done, opened Cosmo's envelope. Inside was \$1,000. All right, he could mourn the best years of his life for a suitable interval before having to find something.

AT LUNCHTIME the next day his sister Silvia dropped by, yelling as she climbed the steps, "Ricardo, I heard from Carlos!"

Carlos was her illegal boyfriend from Chile. He was working at a chop shop in El Monte six months earlier when he called Immigration about legalizing his status. Gingerly fingering through the telephone minefield—"Press 4 to report an illegal alien"—he was advised to go home and apply for re-entry from

there, and the sucker did it. Ricardo expected him back in about ten years.

Hardest for Silvia was that, despite denials, doubtless Carlos was back with his wife and kids. Silvia was smart—she translated for AT&T, lying on the couch, her *telenovelas* on Mute as she assisted in all manner of commercial and personal conversation—so why she was stuck on a loser mystified her brother.

“Yes? How’s he doing?”

“Optimistic, found a new lawyer. Want to order Thai?”

“Not today.”

Pouring a Diet Coke, sharp Silvia elbowed dumb Silvia aside. “What’s the matter, little brother? Cosmo give you the heave-ho?”

“I guess. He moved to Los Feliz. To live with his wife.”

“Bastard! But you say Persians are small anyway, right?”

“Not that small,” said Ricardo. “If you had a boyfriend you wouldn’t have time to worry about me.”

“I *have* a boyfriend.”

“Who’s that?”

“Carlos.”

“Oh, *Carlos*.” She slapped him. “*Hey!*”

“Hey, *shit*. Treat your sister with respect.”

“How can I respect someone who carries a torch for a married man so stupid he does what the American government tells him to?”

He had her there. She finished her soda in silence.



“Poor *muchacho*,” she said finally. “Looking so *wrecked* these days. Least now I hope you’ll come work with me? It’s fun, you get in everybody’s business.”

Ricardo thought it a neat trick to earn a living in L.A. speaking Spanish, but Silvia did surprisingly well.

“I’ve got money,” he said, deferring any discussion.

After Silvia took herself home to Burbank Ricardo lay on his futon, feet propped on the wall, listening to Bach.

He had his freedom. But because honesty compelled him to check the wrong box at Question 26, he lacked the citizenship that would activate that freedom and get him out of bed.

There came an odd little sound extraneous to the music—a tinkling of glass instantly followed by the familiar *pom!pom!pom!* of automatic gunfire. Opening his eyes, he saw a neat round hole in a window and on the ceiling a small oval shadow, as it seemed.

Soon a helicopter began circling a few blocks away.

THE FOLLOWING THURSDAY, Ricardo was lying down with his feet up, feeling ahead of the game because at 10:00 o’clock he was already awake, when the telephone rang.

“Hello?”

“*Wassup*, Ricky Ricardo! This is *Travis!*”

“Who’s Travis?”

“Trader Joe’s? Showed you an artichoke, I was like, ‘Is this *food*?’ We came back to my place—”

“Never! I don’t do those things. I can’t help who comes up to me at the market.” Ricardo said this although in fact his fidelity to Cosmo was never of a punitive order.

“Remember, I look like a penis?”

“I *said* that?”

“No, man, *I* did. Remember?”

“Maybe,” Ricardo said remotely.

Of course he remembered: An out-of-work, 30ish actor who lived in manic rehearsal for whatever might come along, good looking in a simian way, always with a smirk: *You buying this, schmuck?*

And that line you’d think would go stale before he was 20: “I look like a penis!” Whether he does or doesn’t, once he tells you he does (and he tells everybody), that’s all you can think of as he bobs his too-big head with its big-mouthed grin. He was tall and generous of lip, with shaggy hair, luminous tanned skin, green eyes busy making assumptions.

After their Trader Joe’s encounter, Travis chased him so energetically Ricardo had to screen his calls for weeks.

“Listen, reason I’m calling? Proposition for you.”

“What?”

“Bro, something *amazing’s* happened, fucking *crazy!* Can’t spill it on the phone—matter of major *dinero.*”

“For *me?*”

“For you, me and your gambler friend. You’re still together, right?”

“I’m getting my citizenship soon,” Ricardo said evasively.

“Worth your while, we get together.”

Having nothing to lose, Ricardo showered, dressed, took the bus to Hollywood.

Travis’s apartment building was an orange stucco box pressed up against the freeway, three chipped, cracked and peeling stories wrapped around a swimming pool and spa. Its possible moment of glamour would have occurred in the Sixties, but Travis called it a holding tank for movie stars.

Aspirants had assets on display poolside as Ricardo crossed the lobby. A gleaming trio in the water brushed back their hair to check him out. Waiting for the elevator, he perused a bulletin board crowded with offers to sell L. Ron Hubbard cassette tapes for five-figure sums. Upstairs, a three-day notice to vacate the premises for nonpayment of rent was taped to Travis’s door.

Ricardo was reading it when the door opened.

“What you mean, he’s *busy*? It’s *Travis!*” Phone clamped to his ear, ignoring Ricardo, he ripped off the eviction notice.

“Hey,” Ricardo murmured, and went in.

“*Month* since we talked, if he wants to send a message, just has to *tell* me, I’m a big boy, but till he *does*, I’ll hound him day and fucking *night!*” Travis’s eyes came back from far away and his cheeks relaxed. “Talk to you later,” he said equably and hung up. “Motherfucker.”

“Trouble?” Ricardo asked.

“Fucking agent wants nothing to do with me, that’s fine. Soon’s he deigns to *tell* me, I’ll be a

Hollywood actor without one, like I always wanted. Should have stayed in New York.”

“He won’t tell you?”

“That’s how they do business here. But the fuck I care. Have a seat, I’ll tell you why. Looking good, Ricardo, looking good.”

“Let go, Travis. Tell me why I’m here.”

They sat down on plastic lawn chairs. The room resembled a motel’s—bed, desk, microwave, fridge, bathroom. Travis crossed his legs. Immediately he leapt to his feet and clamped on amber aviator glasses.

“Let’s get out of this hole. Lunch, my treat?”

“All right.”

Travis’s car was a Celica with battered fenders, peeling clearcoat and Alfa-Romeo rims. To start it required a push, which Travis gave with Ricardo at the wheel. Changing places, they traveled to the corner, turned onto Franklin Avenue and entered a strip mall, a trip of maybe 250 feet.

Travis pulled out the key and the engine chugged on for some seconds.

In the diner, empty but for a party of three at a four-top, they took a deuce by the wall, ordered and Travis launched into a litany of Hollywood humiliations that made him nostalgic for the snubs and put-downs of New York, until, peering over Ricardo’s shoulder, he interrupted himself: “Is that Brad Pitt? That’s Brad Pitt.”

Naturally Ricardo turned around, but he didn’t see anybody.

But Travis still stared, so Ricardo looked again. This time he saw a slender, fair-haired man

reddening under their gaze who craned around until with relief he saw the other table waving at him.

“Twenty million a picture? I don’t know, Ricardo, I mean he’s *good* – but \$20,000,000?”

“Maybe he feels the same way.”

“What’s he got that I don’t?”

“An agent who takes his calls?”

“Fuckin’ A.” Travis grinned. “OK, brace yourself. Why I called? Won the Lotto last night.”

“Goodie for you.”

“No, you don’t understand: I-fucking-*won-the-California-lottery*.”

“You’re a gazillionaire?”

“No, fuck it, *second* prize: \$407,811.” He leaned close: *You buying this, schmuck?*

Ricardo knew Travis. He was one of the small-timers L.A. teems with. He would never be a movie star. He would never have a series. He would continue to do little shots on crime shows until they stopped calling him, then sell cars or real estate with whatever success attends those who’ve been on TV. When he played a rapist with three lines on *CSI*, he carpetbombed the industry with a postcard of himself in character: “*Travison L. Scots, II is The Rapist.*”

A Travis *couldn’t* win first prize in the lottery: He was strictly second prize at best, and frankly Ricardo would have guessed Scratchers.

“That’s great, but if you’re not sharing, I can go home now.”

“No, no, no, no, no, no. Here’s the deal: Your friend’s a professional gambler, right?”

“So? I don’t understand.”

“So I *need* this jackpot, Ricardo: *All* of it. Lifetime money. Can’t piss it away on *taxes*.”

Travis saw that Ricardo was perplexed.

“See, IRS lets professionals—unlike you or me—deduct their gambling losses. So I give your friend—what’s his name?”

“Cosmo?”

“I give Cosmo my lottery ticket, *he* turns it in, they give him the whole enchilada, Cosmo pays me, IRS gets *nada*.”

“How much we talking?”

“IRS takes 20% off the top. Withholding.”

“My friend can save you more than 80,000 *bucks*?” Ricardo was impressed. “What’s *he* get out of it?”

“Jeez, for the trouble of going by the lottery office? How ’bout 10K? Take like half an hour.”

“Show me the ticket.”

“Can’t,” mourned Travis, pulling a face that flexed his Adam’s apple like a muscle. “But it’s in a safe place.”

“No way, then.”

“OK, come back with me.”

As Travis pushed the Celica to life in the parking lot, a familiar Hollywood landmark pulled in: a 1970s Cadillac, battleship gray, hood and trunk studded with plastic Academy Award statuettes, roof crowned by a lighted excrescence that pleaded *Cast Me*.

Travis took the wheel as the Cadillac’s driver got out.

“Don’t tell me, doing lunch with Brad?” He honked. The man warily looking over, Travis threw him the finger and squealed away.

“God, that felt *great!*” he exulted. “Got to ward off that guy’s *mojo.*”

Back in his room he plucked a lottery ticket out of his wallet.

“Believe it, machine chose the numbers?”

“You let the *machine* choose your numbers?” Ricardo had second thoughts about Travis’s seriousness. Though he seldom played Lotto himself, when he did it was with due *aforethought.*

“Watching the balls drop? Heart attack *city.* Get five, then miss the fucking *Mega:* Eighty-seven million dollars! *Motherfucker!*”

“How do I know – ?”

Travis thrust that morning’s L.A. *Times* at him. The first five numbers matched – second prize.

“OK, Travis, I’ll tell my friend.”

Ricardo escaped the pawing hands and caught a bus home. In the rear men were badmouthing their probation officers, except for one who got busy making *kissy* sounds at him. But Ricardo had too much to think about to notice.

FOR ALL COSMO’S insulting negligence to give him his new address, Ricardo knew where he lived and was waiting at his gate that evening when he got home.

He knew because he had commenced taking constitutionals in Griffith Park, every afternoon walking up from Sunset Junction through Los Feliz. One day while he waited for the light at Los Feliz Boulevard Cosmo’s Mercedes purred past. At the same hour a few days later he saw it enter a gate in

the wall of a big angular house adjoining the park. Inside this gate was parked his old BMW, fitted with low-profile tires and sporting a gash on the side.

So when the Mercedes came up, Ricardo stepped forward.

Cosmo lowered his window.

“Ricardo! My friend, how *are* you?”

While Ricardo conveyed Travis’s proposition, Cosmo did him the courtesy of putting the gearshift into *Park*. Then he put it back into *Drive*.

“Bring him by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Here?”

“Gabdarian’s. Santa Monica Boulevard.”

TRAVIS AND RICARDO found Gabdarian’s to be a coffee shop in a tough Armenian neighborhood near Western Avenue. On the sidewalk they stepped aside for a weary woman pushing a double pram.

“Twins!” Ricardo exclaimed. “What luck!”

“Oh yeah, *big* luck,” said the woman out of the side of her mouth.

As they entered the narrow store a scary-looking man in the last banquette washed them with cold eyes. Cosmo was in serious converse with this person.

“Cosmo, this is Travis.”

“Hey, man!” Snapping his aviators up onto his forehead, Travis shoved out his hand in irresistible invitation to the urgent narrative of his life, and Cosmo brushed his fingers.

Ricardo snickered at the instant assessment of Travis as force of nature: Not so much.



“Coffee, please, Vlad,” Cosmo said, and the scary man slid out of the banquette, and Travis and Ricardo slid in. “Travis, Ricardo tells me you won the lottery? Congratulations.”

“Big luck,” said Travis. “But only second prize: \$407,811.”

“But that is a great deal of money.”

“Before taxes, maybe, but the IRS will murder me. Which brings me to my idea.”

“So Ricardo has explained,” said Cosmo. “And it is ingenious: If I were to claim the prize, I would receive the entire sum, whether at once or through a refund later, whereas you, as you put it, would get *murdered*.”

“*Refund?*” Travis asked in alarm. “Won’t they pay the whole thing up front?”

“I am not sure. Lotto is not my thing. I think they might withhold the usual 20% – pay me the same as you, roughly \$326,000 – but refund the remaining \$81,500 or whatever after I file my taxes for the quarter, providing I show enough losses to offset it, which I will. Worst case, that means you wait until maybe December for the rest of your money.

“But two things concern me, Travis,” Cosmo went on. “One is the consideration that would induce me to help you defraud the IRS, and –”

“How about 10,000 bucks?”

“I am even more concerned about what happens with *you* in the interval between my presenting the ticket and getting the refund. Having to wait might inspire mistrust on your part.”

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” Travis protested. “I’m good. Just pass on whatever they give you, plus –”

thinking out loud here, wasn't expecting *refund*— plus like a deposit *towards* the refund, say half? 40K?"

Cosmo stiffened, his warm eyes shutting off so quickly as to jar Ricardo.

"This smacks, then, of a con game, Travis, where I am to display *my* good faith by advancing cash which, in the classic form, *you* will return as shredded newspaper. Sorry, not interested."

"*No, no, no, no, no, no.*" Blushing, Travis looked abashed. "No deposit, *none*. Don't know what I was thinking. Please, *please* accept my apology."

It took more coffee, accompanied by baklava, but Cosmo graciously forgave Travis and offered a counter-proposal.

"I suggest my consideration be not 10K but 20. Ten on Monday, or whenever—" He glanced at his Rolex. "I imagine they authenticate the ticket and pay off on the spot, but I don't *know*—and ten from the refund. Although naturally I will first see whether they won't pay the entire sum at once."

"Twenty grand?" said Travis, looking grave. "*Ouch*. But all right."

"For a cash transaction, 20K's cheap," Cosmo remarked. "However, on one condition."

"*Condition?*"

"Ricardo here has facilitated our happy agreement. Surely he has earned a finder's fee?"

"Thank you, Cosmo."

"How much—?"

"I suggest 10K, to come out of your first monies."

"*Double ouch*," said Travis. "*Fuck*. But we have a deal?"

“We have a deal,” Cosmo confirmed. “The kind I like, good for everybody. Obviously we cannot memorialize our deal in writing, owing to its being illegal, but I will gladly shake your hand.” They shook. “Now then, you have the ticket?”

Travis placed it in Cosmo’s palm, saying, “You see I trust you.”

“Our deal is all about trust,” Cosmo answered, inspecting the ticket closely. “I’ll sign this now, in front of you, if that’s all right?”

“And make me a Xerox?”

“Of course.”

Cosmo snapped his fingers and Vlad materialized. Giving instructions in Farsi, Cosmo signed the ticket and filled in his address. Vlad took it and left, Travis’s wide eyes following him out the door.

“Monday morning, first thing, I’ll go to the lottery office,” said Cosmo.

“Can I come with you?” asked Travis.

“No, let’s not presume we’re dealing with idiots. But I’ll get the check, cash it and call you right away.

“Where you must be patient is in waiting for the refund. It is not that I am on poor terms with the IRS, but they have been known to take their time. I file October 15. Although it has not been my practice to do so, this time I shall file electronically so as to speed up the process. We might hope for November. But, actually, who knows?”

“Well, with 300K, I’ll *try* and hold out,” Travis said with a smirk.

“Good.”

Vlad returned, gave copies and enlargements of the ticket to both, and returned the original to Cosmo.

“Cosmo, thank you very much,” Travis said.

“No, no, Travis, thank *you*.”

Ricardo spoke up. “Travis needs a place to live. Can he stay at your home on Hyperion?”

Cosmo hesitated a beat before saying, “But of course. That would make me very happy, Travis. As Ricardo can tell you, I don’t know what my plans for the property are. I fear it might be worth most as a tear-down. But until I make up my mind, you are welcome to stay there: rent \$1.”

“Thank you,” said Travis, slapping down a dollar bill. Cosmo gave him a key.

When Travis and Ricardo stepped onto Santa Monica Boulevard again, there passed like a portent a pink Corvette.

“It’s Angelyne!” People gasped at sight of the blowsy blonde at the wheel, the goddess stepped down from her billboards. “There goes *Angelyne!*”

BACK AT TRAVIS’S they stuffed everything he owned into the Celica. Then Ricardo watched as Travis tore up his eviction notice in front of the platinum-haired manager and enacted an invitation to kiss his ass.

“Stupid Klingons,” he muttered, after pushing his car started.

At that hour Ricardo would have taken surface streets over to Silver Lake, but Travis slithered onto the 101. They’d gone only a little ways before

everything stopped. Then everything moved again, and fast, except for the old Chevy in front of them.

“Come *on*, come *on*, let’s go!” Travis urged, stomping his foot. *Crash!* He rear-ended the Chevy, and when it moved ahead, so did they—by compulsion, for their bumpers were locked.

“Hey, hey, *hey*,” yelled Travis, honking. “Asshole, doesn’t he *realize*—?” Travis tried pushing the Chevy. No effect. Braking fishtailed both vehicles, they nearly sideswiped a truck. “Fucker’s going to kill us, Ricardo! We’re going to *die!*”

For a mile they were pulled helplessly onwards, until, as they descended the curve beneath Vermont Avenue, a pothole unlocked the bumpers and set the Celica free.

Travis swerved onto the exit ramp and jumped on the brakes.

“Crazy fucks in this town. *Crazy!* Which way, right?”

“Left.”

Hauling his stuff into the bungalow, Travis asked, “Feel like Chicko Loco? You call, they give Anglos the shitty pieces.”

MONDAY ARRIVED AFTER the longest weekend Travis or Ricardo ever knew. By afternoon Travis was exhausted from willing the phone to ring. He lay on the futon next to Ricardo, phone pressed to his breast like a Crusader effigy’s sword.

It finally rang at 1:00 o’clock. Travis forced himself to wait through two ring-tone choruses of

*We're in the Money* before casually answering, "Hello?"

It was Cosmo, with a double whammy of bad news. He'd redeemed the ticket, he explained, but although he'd informed the lottery people of his profession, the check they issued withheld 20% of the prize. "Everybody gets the taxes out, they told me," he said. "One blessing, though: no state withholding on lottery winnings."

"So you just file for the refund, right?" Travis asked.

"Exactly," said Cosmo, and sighed.

"It's OK," Travis assured him. "We expected this. So you've got my 300K and change?"

"Travis, I'm sorry to tell you that you must wait for that also."

"Fucking *kidding* me?"

"Not our lucky day, my friend. On my way to Wells Fargo to cash the check I stopped to pick up my mail. It was fortunate that I did so, because there was a letter from the IRS—as fate would have it, an audit notice."

"So? That doesn't change our agreement—"

"In fact, it compels a delay. If I were to give you your money while the IRS is examining my finances, they would ask questions that could expose both of us to criminal charges and you to the forfeiture of your prize, for which I could not forgive myself.

"No, instead of cashing your check, I deposited it in my account, where I'm afraid it must stay for the time being. Don't worry, it's safe: IRS knows even a gambler can get lucky. They gave me an appointment in five weeks' time. I have been audited before. I will

go in prepared, paperwork in order, and probably a month or six weeks after that things will be back to normal.”

“The *fuck*, Cosmo! Can’t fucking *believe* this!”

Travis frothed impotently for hours. Ricardo’s own concern amounted to a fraction of his, but having to wait for his finder’s fee put him, too, into a state of dejection.

That evening Silvia showed up with Chinese. She listened with interest as Travis ranted on about Cosmo.

“‘Trust me,’ he says,” Travis lamented. “Thing is, I *did* trust the fat fuck.”

“Cosmo’s not fat,” Ricardo said.

“Oh no?”

Silvia swallowed noodles and remarked, “Man dicks *me* about money, I don’t *talk*, I go *get* it. Home invasion. You want, I know some people—real bad boys.”

“I can take care of it,” Travis assured her, and told Ricardo, “Doing lunch at Gabdarian’s tomorrow, on you know who. You in?”

“I’m in,” said Ricardo.

A BRAND-NEW BENTLEY in lustrous green stood outside the coffee shop. Ricardo saw keys hanging from the ignition and wondered, *What fool leaves the key, neighborhood like this?* And realized: *Someone who doesn’t have to worry.*

Looking again, he recognized Cosmo’s lucky keychain.

They entered. Cosmo glanced up from conferring with the man of cold eyes and said, "Hello, Travis. Ricardo. Coffee for my friends, Vlad."

Travis shoved into the banquette after Vlad got out.

"Hand it over, Cosmo," he said quietly. "I want my money, and I want it now."

"But I told you," said Cosmo. "The IRS."

Ricardo looked him over. He *was* fat.

"Yeah, but know what?" Travis struck the tabletop. "*Not my problem.*"

"And what about my finder's fee?" Ricardo put in. "Friends don't owe friends \$10,000."

Cosmo frowned as Vlad topped off his cup. He took a sip, his face changing as he clattered the cup back into the saucer.

"Travis, you keep prattling on about money. *What* money? No idea what you're talking about, either one of you."

Travis gripped the table edge. "I have those Xeroxes—" he began.

"Photocopies of my winning ticket?" asked Cosmo. "So you do. So do I. So what?"

Ricardo felt kicked in the belly. Travis sat still for a time, then snapped the aviators down over his eyes.

"Come on, Ricardo," he said. "Let's get out of this—this *dump.*"

In the car he asked for Silvia's number and punched it in.

"Yo, Silvia, *Travis: Home invasion is on.*"



HE LAID IT OUT as soon as Silvia arrived.

“No crime, what we’re doing,” he emphasized. “Just taking what belongs to Ricardo and me.”

“Claro,” murmured brother and sister.

“He’d never go to the cops anyway. Tell your boys, there’s a thousand bucks in it for them, and for you, too.”

“Up front?” Silvia asked.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” Travis clarified. “From the *takings*. We go in, stockings on our heads, waving a gun—if we can get one—and scare ‘em, scare ‘em *shitless*. But not hurt anybody.

“Put wife and kids in a room while Cosmo we talk to. Reason with him. *Persuade* him. Cash in the house? Jewelry? *Ours*. Nothing else, he signs over the deed to the fucking house and title to the fucking *Bentley*. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” murmured the siblings.

They set it for the next day but one to give Silvia time to recruit her friends. She also offered to bring the gun hidden in the coal cellar beneath her neighbor’s that she’d seen gangbangers reaching in to retrieve or restore.

“Yeah, borrow it,” said Travis. “We’ll show it, but if he’s not stupid we’ll keep it just old friends.”

TWO DAYS LATER, it was Ricardo who dashed out to the 99 Cent Store for the stockings the others forgot.

Then Silvia’s phone rang with Gangbanger No. 1 bowing out; he had to work late at Jiffy Lube. But Gangbanger No. 2 pulled up promptly in his lowered

CRX. His name was Ernesto, and he was a mean-looking *cholo* with the shaved head, tattoos and too-big pants belted below the hips. It wasn't until Ricardo caught his eye that he began to suspect Ernesto was less a killer than a sweet kid who wanted only a soft girl and fat bawling baby, with maybe a plasma TV for his mom, for heaven on earth.

While in the background an ice-cream truck blared *It's A Small World After All*, they rolled stockings over the tops of their heads so they could pull them over noses and chins before going inside, clapped on baseball caps and piled into Silvia's Taurus.

A lovely evening was falling as they drove up Griffith Park Boulevard. The air snapped almost like champagne, and the moon began to slice its bright diamond edge across the sky. Near Marshall High some kids took one look at Ernesto and broke into a run. Travis high-fived him.

They parked beside the pylons at the dead end of Cosmo's street and worked up through a eucalyptus grove so as to survey the property from behind. Across its wall they could see pool and terrace and the house's glassy rear. Indoors, a dark woman crossed carrying a bowl.

"Bitch is *mine*," spat Ernesto.

Travis pointed out a limb from which they could drop inside the wall if ringing the bell didn't gain them entry, led the way around to the front and, pressing the button on the speaker, announced, "OK, guys, *showtime*."

The gate rolled open and they charged through.

At the door, Travis growled, “Kick it in!” but of itself it opened, releasing the smell of microwave popcorn.

“Yesss?” prompted the dark woman standing there expectantly.

“Cosmo home?” asked Travis, brushing past her.

She said something sharp, though not in English, as the others followed him indoors. They forgot to roll the stockings down, but fortunately the baseball caps hid them.

“Silvia, stay with her,” Travis said. “Don’t let her hit an alarm. Rest of you, fan out. You know what we’re looking for, people. Sing out if you find anything.”

No one else was home. Persian rugs on floors and walls softened the stark lines. There wasn’t enough furniture, but Ricardo recognized pieces from Hyperion Avenue.

He investigated the master suite. It had twin dressing rooms and bathrooms, both in marble. He found no jewelry, but behind Cosmo’s shoes discovered a safe.

“Travis!” he called. “In here!”

“Good work, Ricardo.” Travis tried the safe’s door – and it opened, revealing shelves empty but for a manila envelope. He reached for it. Inside were the family passports. “*Fuck.*”

“Any luck out there?” asked Ricardo, scrutinizing the passport photos with interest.

“Nothing but rugs,” Travis said. “We’d need a truck.”

They returned to the living room. Cosmo’s wife and Silvia sat on a couch watching *Survivor*. Ernesto

stood behind them, scowling at the screen and pulling at a Mountain Dew.

Travis dragged a chair in front of the couch. “Where’s—my—money?” he demanded, rubbing thumb and fingers together so there could be no mistake.

Cosmo’s wife flinched, flicking nervous eyes at Silvia—and then towards the kitchen, for suddenly the magisterial sound of a garage door going up and coming down again filled the house.

A minute later Cosmo called something friendly in Farsi. His wife replied shrilly. Holding a Big Gulp, her husband appeared in the kitchen doorway. He barked a question. She whined an answer.

“Didn’t expect *us*, did you?” sneered Travis, coming to his feet with hand in pocket.

“Welcome anyway.”

“Cosmo, you remember Silvia?” said Ricardo.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Small matter of \$407,811,” answered Travis. “Here to collect. I have a gun.” He pulled it out for an instant.

“Just so,” said Cosmo. Moving to a wing chair, he carefully placed the Big Gulp on its side table, sat down and crossed his legs.

“You *do* recall redeeming my Lotto ticket?” asked Travis. “For 326K, or something like that?”

“Something like that,” Cosmo agreed. “There was some Social Security we forgot about. I think it came to about 314K.”

“What a co-*inky-dink*,” said Travis. “‘Cause tonight 314K’s all we want. Give us that, we go home.”

“Told you, IRS is auditing—”

“Not my problem, Cosmo.”

Cosmo chose a cigar from a humidor on the table, clipped its end, lighted up.

“Travis, you’ve met my business partner Vlad? I owe him more than 314K, and he scares me a whole lot worse than you do.”

Aggrieved, Ricardo said, “Cosmo, I thought you were *rich*.”

“Just hanging on,” he replied from clouds of smoke. “Like everybody else.”

His wife said something and he sprang up.

“Sorry, no smoking indoors. Have a cigar, Travis? Cuban.”

So Travis trailed out after him to the pool, and for 20 minutes, both silhouetted against the opalescent water, Cosmo coached him in the arts of clipping, lighting and smoking cigars. Several times he reached across with his lighter.

During a commercial his wife and Silvia got up and went to the kitchen, coming back with more popcorn.

Travis and Cosmo finally shook hands and came inside.

“Let’s go,” Travis growled. “Wasting our time here.”

“Two minutes,” said Ricardo. “I want to see who gets voted off the island. I can never predict.”

BACK AT HYPERION, after Silvia dug into her purse for \$20 to give Ernesto and he left, she and Ricardo started in reading Travis.

“Should have known how the gay guys do it,” she said, furious. “Nice little *coffeeklatsch*. Tea party. Listen, Travis, take out a gun, you pull the trigger: That’s the *rule*.”

Ricardo piled on. “She’s right, Travis. Where’s the deed to his home we were going to get? Where’s the *car*?”

“Guys, *guys*: It’s like the man told me,” Travis answered. “Can’t squeeze blood from a turnip.”

“He *said* that?” Ricardo asked.

“Yeah.”

“*When*?”

“Out by the pool.”

“And you’re *taking* it?” asked Silvia.

“What choice do I have?”

“After seeing the man’s two-million-dollar home?”

“Mortgaged to the hilt,” Travis answered. “So what can we do? Go to the cops? They’d arrest *us*. Can’t kill him. Can’t sue him. In the end it’s like he says: What am I out, a buck for the Lotto?”

“Travis, I’d say I don’t understand what went down tonight,” said Ricardo, “except I think I do.”

“Yeah, you made a *deal*,” said Silvia.

“*What* deal?”

“He’s paying you to kill his wife,” said Ricardo. “When I’d do it for free.”

“Come *on*.”

“What, then?”

“Sorry to tell you guys, but that’s life. Got greedy and learned my lesson. I need work, that’s all. New headshots, new agent, and six months from now when I look back, I’ll *laugh*. Be part of my *shtick*, how

I won the lottery but got ripped off by the Persian mob or whatever. Make a great movie. Play myself.”

“What it is, Ricardo,” said Silvia, “Travis is a loser.”

“That’s right,” her brother agreed. “Plus he’s got cellulite on his ass.”

“There’s a diet that can help,” Silvia informed Travis. “And have you considered jogging?”

Travis made no answer. He simply left, clumping down the steps and going into the bungalow.

Soon Silvia went home, too.

Ricardo decided to have no more to do with Travis; he was an absurdity, Cosmo an affront.

But his position was not good. Taking action had failed. Taking action left him just where he was before—worse, for now surely Cosmo would evict him. He didn’t have much money left. So—Pizza Hut? Troll the bars for men with money? When first he did that he looked so young he had to paint on a mascara mustache before they’d even let him in. He didn’t look that young any more.

He was no nearer sleep when a police helicopter came calling. Nightly it haunted the gang neighborhoods of Virgil Village down the hill, but tonight was Hyperion’s turn. It arrived with a screech and began an orbit that shook the guest house as its night sun probed, traveling through the window to linger on Ricardo and his cat lying there.

Rex stalked indignantly away, but the beam exposed Ricardo’s misery, his loneliness, his passivity, sounded the depths of his yearning and the void of his volition.

Eventually the light angled elsewhere, but the copter continued to grind overhead until abruptly it left and silence reigned.

But still Ricardo lay awake. He was stuck, he told himself; not only alien, but *stuck*.

PAST MIDNIGHT A WEEK later, Rex was licking himself with his nose comfortably wrinkled and Ricardo petting him goodnight.

He was feeling a little better. Cosmo hadn't evicted him, and he'd meanwhile come to a definite decision: He would borrow money from Silvia that he might give additional thought to getting unstuck.

Suddenly Rex's ears revolved like radardromes and he jumped onto the windowsill. Instantly, as though it were red-hot, he leapt off again and dashed into the closet.

Ricardo heard snapping. Someone walking across the terrace's dry leaves? He stood up and looked out—into a column of flames rising from Cosmo's house 20 feet away.

He grabbed the phone, pushed 911.

"Los Angeles Police Department."

"I want to report a fire—"

"Hold on, please." Clicks, and another voice: "*Thank you* for calling the Los Angeles Fire Department. Our operators are busy, but your call is important to us, so please—" A voice broke in: "Fire Department."

Soon it assured Ricardo units were on the way.

The next few minutes were nightmarish. The bungalow was a package of fire consuming it to the



sound of furiously snapping twigs. Plumes of flame bent through the windows and danced across the roof with a transfixing beauty, but Ricardo resisted their call of “*Stay right there, we’ll take care of you, too.*”

Pulling on his clothes he phoned Travis. No answer. He left a voicemail imploring him, if he was home, to get out.

He found Rex sitting on the dirty laundry, his expression distant, and stuffed him into the cat carrier. He stashed his wallet in his backpack along with green card, passport, Social Security card, citizenship application and Rex’s rabies tag, and tossed in a crucifix and sweater, too. His hand hesitated over a framed photograph taken one happy day on Catalina: Cosmo in open-necked *guayabera* holding a drink and smiling broadly, big dark eyes offering a world of warmth.

Ricardo left it, abandoned his possessions as sparks flurried at the windows and cinders drummed on the roof.

He was running for his life. Heat blasted him when he opened the door. The stairs were burning. Reaching over the railing as far as he could, he dropped the backpack and, on top of it, gently as possible, the cat crate, climbed over and lowered himself by his hands. Opening them, he fell only five or six feet, so steep was the slope. Pack on his back, reassured by Rex’s raucous outrage, he somehow scrambled uphill to the rear neighbor’s fence, somehow got over it.

They were safe in a garden; safe but for a rain of sparks and the roar of flames creeping closer.

Sirens approached. Ricardo lugged the cat carrier out to Lucile Avenue, down towards Sunset, back around to Hyperion as fire engines thrashed past into Pandemonium. Neighbors in bathrobes were shouting and wetting roofs with garden hoses, others rushing into houses and rushing out with clothes, pictures, computers. A coyote trotted down the hill. Rex's scent whipped its head around, but it continued on its way.

Engines positioned themselves to attack the fire. The neighborhood was close-packed in the old Angeleno way, and it seemed unlikely Cosmo's would be the only house to burn down. Revolving, a ladder rose high up into the air with a fireman poised atop it, and he began to direct an arc of water onto Cosmo's bungalow, the guest house and the houses to either side and behind. The fire's wild wind carried drops to Ricardo's head, baptizing him with the blessed wet sensation of safety. Soon more hoses went to work and police corralled everybody across the street.

"I live there," Ricardo told a cop. "In the guest house."

"Anyone home in front?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure."

The Fire Department was expert as well as heroic, but nothing could save Cosmo's house. In a quarter hour it was gone. The garage and guest house vanished utterly. The house in the garden behind also burned, but its family escaped.

Ricardo felt sick. Travis perishing in the fury of those flames? The thought made him nauseous. But another made him even sicker.

After the fire was out, spectacle giving way to soggy smoking mess, a man with a clipboard showed him a badge. “LAFD Arson Investigator,” he said. “You lived in the guest house?”

“Yes. I called 911.”

“From what number?” He consulted a printout. “That was the first call. Tell me what you saw.”

Ricardo told about the snapping sounds and Rex’s curiosity.

“Did you see anyone in the house?”

“No.”

“Could the snapping have been electrical?”

“I guess.”

The investigator also interviewed neighbors.

Two cars got past the roadblock: a Bentley and a Celica. Parking facing downhill, Travis got out and stared at the ruins aghast.

Cosmo emerged from the Bentley in a blue silk robe.

“Ricardo, you’re all right? Thank God!” He embraced him, holding on tight as Ricardo, to his own chagrin and surprise, burst into tears and buried his face in the other’s chest. “There, there, little one, you’re OK, everything’s all right.”

The investigator came over. “You’re the owner?”

“Yes.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Cosmo shrugged. “All that matters is that my tenants survived.”

“Any idea what might have caused the fire?”

“No. Except the season’s so dry. And the wiring was antique – you know, that fabric-covered stuff? I was meaning to rewire, they told me I should.”

Travis put in, “Every time I turned on the kitchen light there was a spark. Spark every time, but I never thought anything of it.”

“Insured?”

“For half a million,” Cosmo said. “Thank God I updated *that*.” Ricardo saw Travis’s eyes gleam.

Firemen continued to play water over the mess and began raking coals. Stepping carefully, the investigator grabbed a rake, too. Soon engine companies were coiling hoses and leaving, and the police letting residents haul things back indoors.

“Ricardo, come sit a minute,” said Cosmo.

It was comforting to bury himself in leather, hugging Rex’s carrier to his lap as Delius played softly. An orchestral evocation of nightingales filled the car. Adrenaline and its residue were draining away, unmasking in Ricardo a fierce animal joy at being alive. It hadn’t been fun to have to concentrate on surviving, even when survival was the issue; not pleasant to be forced to take action, when taking action is foreign to one’s character. But Ricardo, alive when staying alive took some doing, felt glad; glad, and unstuck—ready at last to move on.

Travis got in the backseat and reported, “Faulty wiring seems the leading theory.”

“That old cloth kind,” chortled Cosmo. He handed a cigar over the seat. “So lucky you weren’t home, and that Ricardo got out.”

Ricardo knew that to Cosmo he was roadkill, vermin to be eliminated without a thought, and that Travis was his willing instrument in leaving him a lump of char awaiting the touch of a rake to communicate his former humanity.

Cosmo adjusted the treble.

“Told Travis he can stay in my pool house for now. You can, too.”

“No, I’m leaving,” said Ricardo.

“Better yet. Where are you going?”

“Mexico.” Even with his mind made up, the word wrenched a sob out of him.

“How?”

“Greyhound, I guess.”

Cosmo’s cigar made a wet sucking sound as he pondered.

“Oh, I think we can do better than that.” He peered into the rearview. “Travis, mind giving Ricardo your car?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Travis said, “Sure,” and handed the key over the seatback.

“Take some money, too.” Thrusting his middle upwards, Cosmo exhumed a roll from his robe and peeled off some bills.

“Thank you, Cosmo,” Ricardo said, tucking key and money away.

Cosmo also handed him a snowy white handkerchief. “For your face.”

Carefully applying spittle, folding and refolding the cloth, Ricardo burnished his angel features clean of soot as he worked out what he wanted to say.

“You’re the two worst assholes I ever met,” he finally announced, “but at least you’ve found each other. Go to hell.”

Booming with laughter, Cosmo said, “Good luck to you, too.”

“Fuck you,” said Travis. “Little *cucaracha*.”

As Ricardo opened his door the arson investigator tapped on Cosmo's window. Cosmo stepped out and conferred helpfully with him over the clipboard, puffing unconcernedly at his cigar. Scooching across the seat, Travis got out, too, and hovered protectively.

A bird made a first tentative call. The drama of fire was to be succeeded by the drama of dawn. The air smelled of smoke, but carried the scent of blossoms, too. Only one fire engine remained, its crew laughing.

Softly closing his door again, Ricardo slipped out from under Rex's carrier and got behind the wheel. He'd never driven a Bentley, but found everything in its proper place; moreover, the motor, supremely quiet, was already running.

Putting it in gear, he eased down Hyperion, and was just checking his mirror when Cosmo happened to turn and freeze in position, cigar at an awkward angle. A second later Travis turned, too, his arms and legs jerking as though tasered as he watched the Bentley slip away.

Turning onto Hoover Street, Ricardo drove through neighborhoods made desolate by muted streetlights, got on the 101 and swept past downtown's Oz of skyscrapers. The rearview showed light beginning to skin the hills pink.

Maybe he was a *cucaracha*, he thought. Certainly everybody tried to step on him. But who can kill one? And aren't they purified and reborn in fire?

Carlos's old chop shop was a Quonset hut beside a concrete arroyo in El Monte. Ricardo was glad to find it open for business, if discreetly so. As he crept

through the yard, its overhead door rolled up and someone waved him inside and, with some surprise, greeted him by name. No paperwork was involved beyond payment of a \$10,000 finder's fee in cash. Heads were shaken at the beauty of the Bentley, destined for some lucky buyer in Saudi Arabia or Russia.

One of the guys offered a lift; no point in anyone carrying a cat through the neighborhood at that hour. While waiting, Ricardo took a moment to go through his backpack and take out his citizenship application. Borrowing a pen, he crossed out his answer to Question 26 and inscribed a bold X in the box for *No*.

"Rex, what was I *thinking*? Want to be American, you go for it! Bet I understand this country better than George Washington ever did!"

On the way to Burbank a few minutes later—"Silvia will put us up, Rex, *happy to!*"—dawn was shoving their shadows ahead of them on the golden pavement.