

TEX-MEX AT CHICO'S

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I. Couch Surfing

John Dodger woke up on a couch in the middle of the desert. This came as a surprise to him. He had a vague memory of being in El Paso the night before. How did he wind up here? Wherever “here” was. All he knew for sure was that it was hot. Ridiculously hot. John coughed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Ouch,” he rasped. His knuckles stung. Squinting, he discerned that the skin was torn and enflamed; splotches of dried blood lined the creases of his palms. Was that his blood? Perhaps it was tomato juice. He remembered eating deep-fried taquitos at Chico’s a few hours ago. Or was it a few days ago? John glanced at his wristwatch—or rather where his wristwatch should have been.

“What the hell?” That’s when he noticed that his pants and shirt were missing, too.

Squinting from beneath the shade of his hand, John dug an elbow into the couch and propped himself up. Even his elbow hurt. From the couch, he couldn’t see any roads on the horizon. No telephone poles, no rush of interstate traffic, no birds cawing. John saw nothing for miles but reddish, sandy earth dotted with large rocks and muted green shrubbery. There was also the couch. What was the couch doing here? Why did his head feel like a sack of bricks? Grunting, he ran a hand through his hair.

Son of a—! He felt his sunglasses. No boots, no pants, no shirt, no water, but they had left him with his sunglasses. Pain tore across John’s ribcage as he tried to laugh. His throat was taut and his flesh smelled like burnt hair. He slipped his shades down over his eyes. Both lenses were cracked.

“Aw, c’mon,” John rasped. With effort, he got to his feet and yanked off his glasses, chucking them into the nearest shrub. He wanted to strangle the person responsible for dumping and leaving him for dead. Maybe it was a mistake? No, that was wishful thinking. He remembered the news footage of five headless bodies recovered from the Rio Grande. The imagery sent a fuzzy tingle down his sweaty back.

John spied a willowy ocotillo plant and trudged toward it. Arid dirt and sand powdered the soles of his feet. He hadn't gone barefoot since childhood. If today was the day after yesterday—instead of several days later—then John figured he wasn't too far from civilization. Still, he needed to get his bearings.

The ocotillo was almost as tall as John. He pulled a green stalk forward and regarded its crimson blossoms. Ocotillos were supposedly heartier and less prone to sun damage on their southern side. *Thank God for beer and trivia night*, he thought. After a moment or two, John spotted a few blemished leaves. He smiled and headed north.

It was summertime, and John had been passing through El Paso on his way to Albuquerque. He was in the trucking business. Half the adventure of traveling was discovering quaint restaurants along the interstate. Chico's was hardly the best Tex-Mex in El Paso, but it was cheap; plus he enjoyed the arcade cabinets in the back. Recalling the previous night's activities only seemed to compound his headache. Why did his noggin hurt so badly? Did someone slip something in his tequila? Ah, tequila. He'd been drinking, but not in a bar. The sweat on his forehead glistened. The sun pounded against his skull.

He wished he'd kept the sunglasses.

After an hour of walking, John collapsed. First to his knees, then to his elbows. His whole body was enflamed. He imagined the sweat on his back sizzling like bacon grease, bubbling, turning black and catching fire. His lips felt like pieces of sandpaper rubbing together with each breath. His tongue weighed ten pounds. John wanted nothing more than to shed his skin and bask in the cool of his own shadow. It occurred to him that he hadn't run into any snakes yet.

"God," John whispered, "I'm sorry." He slumped to his belly, arms extended, face in the dirt. This looked like the end. It couldn't hurt to make peace with his maker. Besides, when had he last talked to God? Not since Sunday school. Those prayers had been anything but pithy.

Communion wafers, he thought. *I stole a box of communion wafers and a jug of grape juice!* The absurdity of his crime made him want to laugh, but his ribs were killing him. Lying on his chest wasn't helping. He rolled onto his back and let out a deep, painful gasp. Stealing—was that the eighth or ninth commandment? Either way, he knew it was on the list.

Moments passed. John's breaths grew shallower. The intensity of the sun was such that closing his eyes made little difference. He tried to look elsewhere. Anywhere. His vision settled on a rock beside his head that was occupied by a gecko.

"Hey," John managed. The words fell out of his mouth like loose gravel. "Can you save me money... on my car insurance? I drive a truck, actually."

The gecko didn't respond.

Oh well. Everybody dies, John figured. He didn't mind dying in nothing but his briefs. At least he wasn't naked. But dying with his boots off? That made him angry. Angry? *Yes, angry!* Had he been angry the night before? He shut his eyes, straining to pin down the fuzzy shapes swimming beneath them. They were too quick. They phased in and out of focus to the sound of cards being shuffled. The fuzzy shapes converged into a trapezoid, wider at the top than bottom. John recognized the sign. He had seen it nearly a dozen times before...

...the pink, flickering neon sign of Chico's. Half roadside diner, half tavern, Chico's attracted an odd menagerie of folks from both sides of the Rio Grande. *Like gnats*, John thought, gazing out the cab of his truck tractor. More than a few gnats had splattered on his windshield. He was idling at a Lucky's gas station across the street from Chico's and occupying three parking spaces.

John killed the radio and grabbed his keys from the ignition. Seconds later, he stepped onto corrugate pavement wearing a pair of tan cowboy boots, jeans, a white t-shirt, and an olive ranger vest. His stomach rumbled. It was almost sundown.

John drew a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses from his wavy, chestnut hair and put them on. He didn't have a beard, but he had gone three days without shaving. He liked the scruffy look. Chico's was only across the street, so he walked to the white line and waited for a lull in the traffic.

A green pickup squealed into a 76 gas station opposite Lucky's. John strained to focus as three Mexican men in black pants and short-sleeve shirts spilled out in a hurry. A striking bronze woman in a white dress shimmied out of the passenger seat. One of the men, in a surprise gesture of chivalry, took the woman's hand as she stepped off the truck's running board. She pressed a hand to his chest and leaned close, presumably to whisper something. The man looked directly at John.

Oops. He had been staring.

John deflected the awkwardness by pretending to rummage through his pockets. For added measure, he stomped the ground and jogged back to his rig as if he'd forgotten something. His ears burned with embarrassment. He stole a glance back at the woman. She was pumping gas now—chivalry had its limits—and the three men had presumably gone inside the mini-mart.

John slammed the truck door shut and jaunted across the street toward Chico's. His hunger pangs had begun to growl. As he entered, all thoughts of the beautiful woman vanished. The restaurant's decor was a mess of beige, maroon, and sea foam green with occasional bits of dark oak paneling. Doubtless it was the original interior from whatever Chico's had been a decade earlier. It was equal parts dingy and endearing.

Presently, one half of the premises was cordoned off with stanchions and a notice stating that minors were not allowed in the tavern. John rarely bothered with that side. For one, cigarette ash lingered in the air, and two, customer service was slower. Neon signs for Bud Light and Dos Equis competed for attention across four flatscreens seemingly stuck in commercial loop.

On the family side, John could seat himself anywhere. He chose a window booth and shut the blinds, stuck his Ray-Bans in his hair, and then perused a laminated menu. He already knew what he wanted. Along the far wall, a Ms. Pac-Man arcade machine chirped a happy tune as a teenager dropped in a quarter.

“Joker better not beat my high score,” John muttered. Eight minutes later, he was gleefully dipping a deep-fried tomato-juice-logged taquito into a melted mass of finely grated cheddar jack cheese.

This must be what heaven tastes like, John thought.

II. Murphy's Law

Officers Carlos Dominguez and Fernanda Medina found John about twenty minutes after he had passed out. They would have missed him altogether if not for his striking white briefs against the brown and green flora of the Chihuahuan Desert. The officers drove a Polaris ATV barely large enough for two people; John lay on the rear like a rag doll, his head cushioned by Medina's jacket. His raw feet dangled over the edge of the vehicle and bounced with every bump. Both officers wore the green and black regalia of the United States Border Patrol, including hats, sunglasses, and firearms. Medina wore her hair in a tight ponytail.

"He doesn't look so good," she said.

Dominguez, older than Medina and stockier, was just beginning to show signs of gray. A thick mustache tapered sharply toward the corners of his mouth.

"Probably dehydrated," Dominguez said, driving one-handed. "Better give him the rest of your water."

"What do you think happened?" Medina asked, craning over her seat.

"Somebody sure roughed him up real good."

Medina pressed her canteen to John's lips. He was unconscious but drank it. In his mind, he was still at Chico's.

John drained a bottle of tequila. It was only a little bottle, small enough to fit inside his vest pocket, and it wasn't especially good. He peered glumly through the bottom. To his surprise, a beautiful woman in a white dress entered Chico's. She was the same woman from the 76 station. The tequila bottle slipped from John's fingers and landed in the leftovers of his meal. Splat! Tomato juice and coagulated cheese performed aerial ballet, tagging his shirt and vest. He didn't notice.

The woman was tall, almost taller than John, and seemingly sculpted from bronze. Her skin was smooth, her lips were full, and her dress fit so snugly that it was a miracle she could move. John wasn't the only one surprised. Biker dudes, pubescent teenagers, and married men eating with their wives and kids startled at the sound of their jaws hitting the floor. John was on his feet and heading toward her in a heartbeat.

"Hi, I'm John," he blurted loudly, offering an open palm. He managed a toothsome smile but struggled to maintain eye contact. The woman seemed distracted. John retracted his hand and stuck it in his pocket.

"Elena," she answered in a bright voice. "Lo siento, pero... I speak little Inglés. Perdón."

"Elena," John echoed as she brushed past him. Her perfume was sweet and heavy on cinnamon; the aroma reminded him of Big Red chewing gum. He had grown up in a home with a father who spoke English as his first language and a mother who was bilingual. John could understand conversational Spanish but couldn't speak a lick of it. Elena disappeared in the direction of the restrooms. Watching her go, he felt like kicking himself. He also felt conspicuous for loitering in the entryway.

John returned to his table, cleared his tray, and grabbed a few extra napkins on the way out. That's when he noticed the tomato juice stain on his vest.

"Murphy's law," he grimaced.

Across the street at the 76 station, the Mexicans John had seen earlier were shouting at each other. Two of them were loading a tattered brown couch into their green truck while a third stood in the mini-mart doorway. Strange behavior but ultimately none of John's business. That's when he heard the gunfire. The man in the mini-mart doorway ducked back inside. Had the cashier fired at him? John shook his head, trying to dispel the pixie dust Elena had sprinkled on his brain. Was he sober? Yes. Good. He hadn't consumed enough tequila to get drunk. Whatever was happening at the 76 station would be over fast. Check. The time to act was now. Check!

John popped back into Chico's and shouted, "Call the cops! There's shooting at the 76 station." Without waiting for traffic to clear, he dashed across the street. Horns honked and vehicles swerved. He skidded to his truck tractor and retrieved a Remington 870 shotgun from behind the driver's seat. Popping open the glovebox, John grabbed four cartridges filled with rock salt and stuffed them in his vest pocket. He hadn't tested the rock salt cartridges before now, nor had he used the shotgun outside of target practice.

"Mr. Dodger," he asked himself aloud, "what are you doing?" *Don't be a hero. Just wait for the cops.*

Another wave of gunfire erupted. He had to do something. Anything! Swallowing a lump in his throat, John jumped out of his rig and took a deep breath.

The door to Officer Dominguez's Jeep slammed shut. He and Medina had finished carrying John's sun-burned body from the ATV to Dominguez's personal vehicle. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Dominguez turned the keys. The seats had been turned down so that John, still unconscious, could lay on his back with Medina beside him. They had thrown a lightweight blanket over his torso in the interest of decency.

"We're about ten minutes from St. Joseph's," Dominguez said. "Is he awake yet?"

"No, I think he's dreaming."

John's vision swam and his head throbbed. One of his eyeballs cracked open. He didn't recognize Medina, but her smile was reassuring. Comforting, even. She seemed familiar to him.

"Elena?" he mouthed. No sound came out.

"¡Elena! ¿Dónde está Elena?"

Thug el numero uno was shouting. His name was Emilio. He grabbed the arm of thug el numero dos and shook it, repeating the question. John was almost to the rear entrance of the mini-mart, Remington ready, adrenaline pumping. Luckily, they hadn't

seen him approach. His plan wasn't so much a plan as it was a loose interpretation of countless action films and cop shows. Even the shotgun shells filled with rock salt were something he'd seen in a movie. Would they actually work? He hoped so. Briefly, John entertained the notion that this was his *Die Hard* moment. That notion died a quick death as gunfire peppered the rear door of the mini-mart.

John startled, then hit the ground hard and rolled, skinning his elbows and knuckles on the pavement while avoiding a shower of glass. Inside, a woman shrieked. Elena? He heard a flurry of voices, all in Spanish. Another round of gunfire exploded. More glass shattered. Pieces of the rear door toppled forward and clacked to the ground, dangling from the doorframe like broken cornstalks.

“¡En el coche, ahora!”

Get in the car now, John translated.

“¡No!” That was Elena's voice and John's cue. He took a deep breath and scrambled to his feet, shotgun pointed at the shattered entrance. Nothing. Still outside, he peered in at an empty aisle of soda pop and potato chips. The thugs were either out front with the truck or still inside, hiding between the aisles.

John eased his way through the metal door frame, glass crunching underfoot. On the floor, he spied the end of a white tennis shoe poking out from behind a Hostess display. John knelt behind a freezer stocked with popsicles and reached for a glass shard on the floor. He flicked it past the display where thug el numero tres was hiding. That's all it took to spook him.

Thug el numero tres, whose name was Jorge, sprang up with a semi-automatic and unloaded a round of blind fire. The spray tore up a bulletin board full of music flyers and missing pet photos. *He's packing a lot of heat for a mini-mart ripoff*, John thought. Click! At the sound of Jorge's empty clip, John sprang out from behind the freezer and popped off a clean shot at a range of eight feet. Jorge went spinning. He collided with

the Hostess display and launched a dozen Twinkies into the air, golden missiles somersaulting like dolphins.

Thug el numero tres hit the floor as John ejected an empty cartridge. He loaded a second and beelined for the double doors at the front of the store. Thug el numero dos, named Raúl, was halfway outside when he spun around in surprise. John popped off his second shot, missed by a mile, and dove for cover. Gunfire chased him, shattering the cigarette case above the cashier island. Marlboros and Camels poured out like coins from a slot machine.

“Hey, how ya doin’?” John asked the cashier as cigarettes rained on their heads. They were on the floor with their backs against the cheap white cabinets of the cashier island.

“I’m OK,” she answered. Her name badge read Paloma. She was just a kid. *Poor terrified Paloma*, John thought. Then he noticed the revolver shakily clutched in her white-knuckled hands. *OK, poor terrified and well-armed Paloma.*

Outside, the green truck’s engine roared to life. Emilio was cutting his losses. He shouted something unintelligible at Jorge. Elena’s voice rang out, shrill and frightened. A door slammed. Was she in the truck or had she gotten out? John didn’t know, but he leaned toward to Paloma and whispered.

“Don’t worry—cops are on the way.”

With that, John loaded another cartridge and jumped up, shooting Jorge squarely in the shoulder. The other man yelped like a puppy and spun around, issuing a wave of gunfire, but John was already in mid-dive. Thug el numero dos dropped his semi-automatic and clutched his tattered t-shirt where the rock salt had peppered his shoulder. He was cursing as John scrambled to his feet, stepping over spilled candy bars and bags of potato chips.

“Hands up,” John issued, motioning with his shotgun. Jorge obliged. His face was awash in pain and anger. John afforded himself the luxury of gloating. “Call your boss

inside. Tell him to leave Elena alone.” That’s when Jorge began laughing. It was a broad-smiled laugh showing all of the young man’s teeth. He needed braces badly.

“I’m serious. You want another salt bath?” John asked. Behind him, Raúl, who was neither dead nor unconscious, broke a bottle of tequila over John’s head.

III. Loose Change

John awoke to the sound of glass breaking. His eyes racked focus to an orderly in white and blue scrubs sweeping up pieces of a flower vase. She was apologizing in Spanish as she worked. John's head, ribs, hands, and feet were all bandaged. The hospital bedsheets were refreshingly cool and clean, but it was the heavenly air conditioning that made John want to weep for joy.

"Thank you," he whispered.

As the orderly left, Officers Dominguez and Medina entered. John didn't recognize their uniforms. They didn't look like any police officers he'd seen before. Dominguez's face seemed especially unfriendly. Medina, however, instantly put him at ease.

"How do you feel?" she asked, approaching the bed. Her voice was layered with the cadence of someone who spoke Spanish natively.

"Better." His throat was sore. He asked their names and how they found him.

"Your underwear."

"My underwear?"

"Yes, saved by the briefs," Medina laughed.

"And Elena? Is she safe?"

"Elena?" asked Dominguez.

"The woman in the white dress. She was with them."

"Maybe you should start at the beginning," Medina offered. "Tell us what you remember. If you're feeling up to it, that is. Then we'll tell you what we know."

"Am I in trouble?" John asked. He already liked Medina.

"Not sure yet. Carlos and I are with the border patrol. We've filed our preliminary report, but local law enforcement will still need to talk with you."

After a plate of green Jell-O, instant potatoes, and shake-and-bake chicken, John did his best to recount the events of the previous evening. His half of the story checked out

with what local law enforcement had already learned. Paloma had witnessed the three men toss John into their truck before peeling out of the gas station. She had also snapped a photo of their license plate.

“Why do you think they brought you along?” Dominguez asked.

“I shot at least two of them with rock salt. That’s gotta hurt.”

“Maybe a better question,” Medina offered, “is why didn’t they kill you?”

John didn’t know. More questions followed, and he answered them as best he could. He was released from the hospital a few days later. The ribs, he was told, would heal. He visited the El Paso police station the following week and provided a full account of his actions. The police didn’t regard his heroism as highly as he had hoped. Also, his truck tractor had been towed for overnight parking.

The couch, John learned, had been lined with drugs. An unidentified party had dropped it off at the 76 station earlier that evening. In the cartel food chain, the thugs with whom John had tangoed were mere stooges trying to prove themselves. As for Elena’s whereabouts, nobody seemed to know anything.

Thugs one, two, and three hadn’t said much except to deny Elena’s involvement. Surveillance footage from the 76 station had only shown the back half of the green truck. Paloma couldn’t remember seeing Elena in the truck cabin, but then she had spent most of her time behind the cashier island. She made sure to let John know that she was turning 21 in a week. He was more than welcome to join her for shots.

“Thanks, but plenty of shots have been fired at me lately,” he joked, tipping a Stetson. The hat was new, but he was wearing his old clothes again. The police had recovered them when they seized the green getaway truck. Unfortunately, the tomato juice stain on his olive-colored vest had refused to wash out.

John exited the 76 station and headed toward his rig. It was a Wednesday afternoon, and he had stopped by to retrace his steps. The night in question was now a solid two weeks behind him. What little he could remember seemed like a fever dream. He wanted

—no, needed—confirmation that Elena had been real. She was real, wasn't she? Someone at Chico's must have seen her. The uncertainty gnawed at the edges of his brain. However, a more puzzling question remained. It was the question Officer Medina had asked him earlier. Why was he still alive?

"Kill him," John whispered. His pace slowed as he glanced over his shoulder at the gas station. A fragment of a memory stirred. Not so much a memory as a scent. A scent tinged with sweetness, like a whiff of something good cooking. Was that cinnamon? He closed his eyes. Voices in Spanish murmured then swelled, filled with anger and profanity. They belonged to his captors. They were arguing about what to do with him.

"Mátalo." *Kill him.*

John was remembering now. In the past, he opened his eyes. The inky nighttime sky was awash with stars. His head throbbed and his body bounced. He was on his back, on a couch, in the bed of a truck, hurtling down a dirt road. Elena's hair jostled about her neck. She was peering down at him. Somehow her face seemed luminous. Was she glowing? Was she an angel? The only certainty was that Elena held John's life in her hands—that and his bleeding head.

"No," Elena objected. "Quiero que Juan viva."

"I want John to live," John muttered.

Someone at the gas station honked their car at him. John jumped in surprise and hurried toward the sidewalk. That was it. The memory was over.

"Get a grip," he told himself.

In time, life returned to normal for John Dodger. He was assigned a new trucking route, one that didn't pass by Chico's. He kept the Remington stashed behind the driver seat and stocked the glovebox full of rock salt cartridges. His hope of finding Elena and thanking her for saving his life began to fade; before it faded completely, John visited several churches in El Paso. His stint in the desert had provided clarity about the state of

his spiritual life. Anonymously, he donated eight boxes of communion wafers and eight jugs of grape juice to each church. Stealing, it turned out, was the eighth commandment.

John also enrolled in an online Spanish class. Studying while on the road was a challenge, but he made a list of rest stops and cafes that offered free wi-fi. He became competent in reading Spanish if not speaking it, much to the delight of his gray-haired mother Yolanda.

About two years later, John found himself at Chico's after purposefully missing his exit. He sauntered into the restaurant feeling confident and nostalgic, decked out in blue jeans and a plaid shirt. He had a full beard now, too. Chico's hadn't changed much by comparison. John wondered if anyone had beaten his score on the Ms. Pac-Man cabinet. Despite his curiosity, he couldn't bring himself to look at it. Instead, he ordered his favorite taquitos with tomato juice and claimed a spot near the window. The food tasted OK. It was definitely better in memory than reality.

With a sigh, John emptied his tray and headed for the exit. On the way out, he bumped into Officer Medina, who spilled a handful of quarters on the floor.

"Lo siento," John apologized, kneeling to help pick them up.

"Don't I know you?" Medina asked, tilting her head in surprise. She wore her hair long and was dressed in civilian clothes. John almost didn't recognize her.

"You're the guy in the desert. With the briefs! It's John, right?"

"Si," John answered brightly. "I mean yes! Sorry. Force of habit." He was racking his brains to remember Medina's first name.

"Fernanda," she offered, along with an open hand. "I was just about to challenge the high score on Ms. Pac-Man. Care to join me?"