

# Tarzan Syndrome

## Breakout

*by* C.F. Pierce

“You know the movie where two friends from prison end up on a beautiful sunny beach in Mexico?” asks Charlie, who is clad in a bright orange jumpsuit. His hands tightly grip the steering wheel of the old Chevy Cruze. His right foot is pushing the accelerator to eighty in a race toward the southern border. “This time tomorrow, Professor, we'll be on the white sands of Rosarito, stretched out on long wooden chairs under blue and white striped umbrellas, sipping Coronas, inhaling the salty Baja sea breeze, eyeing pretty señoritas in string bikinis. Only this won't be a movie. This will be real life.”

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” replies his orange-suited passenger. It has been an hour since they made it through the hot damp foul-odored underground pipe then up the manhole. “We're not out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot.” Still he had to admit, getting even this far was impressive.

“I couldn't find the dark T shirts and sweats to camouflage the convict threads. Did you see them?” asks the Professor.

“Nope,” responds Charlie, gazing hypnotically at the Botts' Dots on endless broken white lines of their winding lane. How liberating to see overhanging lights of the freeway, shadows of thick foliage and the illuminated green exit sign with the name San Juan Capistrano.

On the other side of the divider are bright headlights of a big rig heading to L.A, Jim's Supermarket in big bold red letters on the long flank. They marvel as they zoom pass lit rooms of empty office buildings and glowing blue arches of gas stations.

Berta had left the beat-up old Chevy Cruze where promised, a hundred yards up the dark dirt road from where they crawled out at one in the morning. "I can't be there," she insisted. "The keys will be under the driver's seat. You will drive to Chula Vista. I'll give you directions. Fake passports will be ready when you arrive. There'll be another woman with us. We'll take an SUV into Mexico. It'll look like two couples going on vacation."

"How about some music?" says Charlie.

"How about some local news?" says the Professor. We better listen up. Berta should be calling soon to see if we made it. Let's pay attention."

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Thick pine trees with sunlight seeping through the branches tower over a giant body of water. The top of the grove can be seen over the barbed wire fence while standing in the yard of Jungle Lake Correctional Institution. A tall muscular man with thick dark hair combed straight back is looking up over the fence when he hears a voice.

"Nice view."

"Yep"

"You're the one they call *the Professor*, right?"

"One and the same."

"I'm Charlie. Pleased to meet you. Why do they call you that?" The voice belongs to a younger and thinner man type with rugged features and wavy hair.

“In a former life, I was a grad student teaching classes and working on my doctorate. Then one morning, I shot my academic advisor. Went from university to penitentiary in no time at all.”

It's an unusually warm day for January. The sky is clear. They can hear whistles and shouting from the nearby basketball court where both teams wear identical uniforms. Every few minutes, they hear a buzzer followed by loud announcement over the PA about time remaining.

“Why did you shoot him?”

“Long story. Maybe I'll tell you one day. How about you? What are you in for?” asks the Professor, while pointing to the wooden benches by the weightlifters.

“I was tried and convicted for being too much of a romantic.”

“When did they make that a crime?” asks the Professor chuckling.

“They called it manslaughter. I'm talking about what got me into trouble.”

The men walk together to the exercise area where fellow inmates are pumping iron in bright shorts and no shirts, showing their upper bodies and arms covered in tattoos.

The equipment is on a large gray rubber mat covering the asphalt. They find an empty bench in front of the free weights on the dumbbell rack.

“I went looking for a job. Needed money. I had given acting a go and it wasn't working out. After doing a few commercials in downtown LA as an extra, I thought I would try to get some steady work. I went to an open-air shopping mall in Santa Monica. Real

fancy. If you ride the glass-sided escalator to the top deck, you can see the ocean and palm trees. I was going to ask around to see if there were any openings. I was thinking retail, but I was pretty much willing to do anything.”

“Went to Nordstrom's and the Armani store. Tried a few others. No luck. Then I saw a small shop called Nobility and Old Money Jewelers. Ruby necklaces and diamond rings on black velvet twinkling under bright lights in sparkling glass. From the outside, I saw this beautiful blond girl behind one of the display counters under gold chandelier. And it was like love at first sight. She had long thick, hair, light blue eyes, porcelain skin, tight red blouse, black wool skirt, with a swimsuit model figure underneath.”

“Sounds gorgeous,” says the Professor.

“And believe me, it wasn't just the looks. It was that irresistible smile, that cheerfulness. Wouldn't it be something to be around someone like that every day? She reminded me of those super upbeat women you see on TV reporting the weather. Always in a good mood while pointing to those big colorful maps behind them. Even when they tell you it's going to rain all week. Do you know what I'm talking about?”

“Indeed I do,” replies the Professor. “The kind that look like they've never suffered in their entire life, not even one day, not really. And when they see guys like us, they either look right through us as if we're invisible or turn the other way. Yes Charlie,” the Professor nods, “I know exactly what you're talking about.”

“I hear ya. But I'm thinking what's the worst that can happen right? I walked up to her counter and said, ‘do you have any watches under fifty dollars?’

“ ‘I'm sorry,’ she said. ‘Most of our inventory starts at \$1000.’

“ ‘And people really pay that much?’ I said.

“ ‘They certainly do.’ She beamed as if she were glad I asked the question. Then she said, ‘Anything else I can show you?’

“That’s when I said, ‘You seem really nice. I’d like to get to know you. Do you have a break coming up? Would you like to have coffee and cinnamon roll with me?’

“She tells me, ‘That’s very kind of you. I don’t think so. As soon as I’m done, I have to go back to campus to study.’”

“Why am I not surprised?” says the Professor, who stands up and throws back a basketball that just rolled in their direction. “Please go on,” he says before sitting back down.

“I say, ‘What are you studying?’

“She goes ‘I study business administration at Pacific U.’

“‘That’s great,’ I said. ‘I’m thinking about going back to school myself.’ To be honest, I’m not interested in watches. I saw you through the window and said to myself. That lady seems really special. Not only incredibly beautiful, but the way she carries herself, so classy and personable. I said to myself if you don’t say hello to her, you’ll regret it.’

“‘That’s so sweet,’ she said. Then she goes ‘My boss told me that if people are not interested in buying anything, I’m supposed to ask them to leave. I’m really sorry,’ she said sounding like she meant it. That happy vibe again.

“‘Could I get your phone number?’ I said.

"She goes 'I don't think so.'

"Then she turns toward this smug guy with every hair in place who's wearing a dark suit and tie. He is standing behind the engagement and wedding rings. She may have even raised her eyebrows at him. He responded with a concerned look.

"Then I said. 'Will you be here tomorrow? Can I come by and say hello? Maybe you'll change your mind.'

"She goes, 'I don't think that's a good idea. I think it would be best if you left. I'm sorry. Then in a very friendly even keel and pleasant tone, still flashing that winning smile, she said, 'I wouldn't want to have to do anything like call security.'"

"Call security," repeats the Professor. "Interesting."

"Exactly. Here I am telling her how wonderful she is, how beautiful she is, being super polite, wearing my heart on my sleeve, and she goes and talks about *calling security*. I didn't get it. I got totally confused and my mind went blank."

"Then what happened?" asks the Professor.

"That's the helluvit, Professor. I don't remember. The police report says I went to another store in the mall called Babe's Baseball and Sporting Goods and used my credit card to purchase a bat called the *Grand Slam Slugger*.

"They say I went back to Nobility and Old Money and went to work on the display cases as if they were fast balls I was trying to knock out of Dodger Stadium. I shattered most of them and a few of the revolving racks with earrings and necklaces. They also said—and I don't remember this either-- that I kept hollering the words "call security" in an enraged tone."

"I see," says the Professor. "You lost it. But why manslaughter?"

"Oh yeah. *That*. According to the witnesses, mister smug tried to wrestle the *Grand Slam Slugger* from me. I supposedly bashed his head in with it. He didn't make it. The only thing I remember is standing in the middle of Nobility and Old Money holding a baseball bat and seeing chunks and pieces of broken glass stained with blood all over the floor and a human body in a wool suit on top of them."

"What a disturbing story. So unfortunate. So unnecessary. If that pretty girl with the irresistible smile had accepted your invitation, all that death and destruction would have been avoided."

"Goddamn right," says Charlie.

"Not only that. I'm sure a beautiful girl like that gets hit on all the time by rich guys who feed her a bunch of BS to get her in the sack. If she had given you a chance, she would've seen something that she probably does not see much of."

"What's that?"

"Honesty. Sincerity. And she may have said, 'Wow this guy really means it. He is not like those phonies.' And if that happened, who's to say where it may have led."

"Fucking A," says Charlie.

The return to cell announcement comes over the PA. Then a loud prolonged buzzer. The muscle men return the weights and basketball playing comes to a halt. Directed by dark uniforms with batons, Charlie and the Professor stand up and march behind the others to the prison interior.

"I'm not saying if she'd sat down with you at the plastic tables by the food court for coffee in a foam cup and a Cinnabon the two of you would now be in a house on a hill with babies and a white picket fence," he says in a voice tinged with anger. "But you know what bothers me about this story. You know what really pisses me off?" The Professor pauses. "We'll never know. Will we?"

"No. We won't." Charlie exhales a deep sigh of relief mixed with the frustration of how long it has taken to get to this moment. "Finally, someone who gets it! I'm really glad we met Professor!"

"Me too Charlie. Me too."

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The blare of trumpets playing *El Jarabe Tapatio* startle the driver and passenger in the compact getaway car that has close to 150,000 miles on the odometer. The Professor wonders how much if anything Carmax would pay for it. The sound is coming from the cell phone that Berta left on the dashboard.

"Hello?" says Charlie nervously.

"*Hola mi amor,*" says Berta.

"Glad it's you babe," says Charlie. "We're on the way. We just passed San Clemente."

"You find the car OK? No problem starting?"

"Yes. We couldn't find the dark cover up clothes. Are they in the trunk?"

"Oh. I must have forgot. Just as well. Don't want you getting any ideas about doing anything but coming straight here. My friend says she has the passports with the altered photos. Should be here

any minute. *No te preocupes*. We'll be in Mexico tomorrow. My uncle at the hotel says he can get you both a room for work."

"Berta, you're the best."

"Can't wait to be alone with you," says the voice of Berta. "Do you love me? *Me amas?*"

"You know I do."

Berta replies with edgy laughter, "You'd better."

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A small conference room without windows. A long wooden table in the center of a concrete floor and a green chalkboard on the wall at the end. A short heavy-set woman walks in. Black business jacket with matching black skirt. A thick overly sweet perfume fills the space around her. The top of her breasts spills out of her low-cut fuchsia top. If she had not been obese, if not for the round face, double chin, thick arms, protruding paunch, enormous derriere, the display of cleavage may have been an issue in an all-male prison. The Professor looks at her and guesses her weight to be about 250 pounds.

"I am very happy to be with you today. My name is Berta. I am the prison social worker," says the anti-beauty queen a Mexican accent.

There are about ten inmates seated around the table. They all look under forty. None are smiling. Most have tattoos above the neck. The Professor guesses that these are a select few who might benefit from someone like Berta. The air conditioner is blowing hard and the men are rubbing their hands together. The temperature is like every other room at Jungle Lake.

"I'm here to talk about overcoming adversity and to try teach you skills to prepare you for life outside of prison. Many of us come from tough backgrounds. I am myself an immigrant and the daughter of immigrants. I grew up in South Central Los Angeles.

"We will mainly meet in groups. But if you want, I can also talk to some of you individually. And believe or not, most of what you tell me is private. But if you tell me you are planning to steal a knife from the kitchen and stab another prisoner with it, I have to report that."

The Professor scans the room and notices that half of the men chuckle at that.

"Any questions?"

Sitting next to Charlie is a bald guy with tattoo of a scorpion on his neck. He raises his hand.

"How can you help us? What can you do?" he asks with an edge.

"Teach you to take responsibility. A lot of people in here like to think of themselves as victims. They like to make excuses for their behavior by talking about their messed-up past. That don't cut it. We can't change the past. We must deal with the hand we are dealt. We might fuck up from time to time. But like riding a bike. If you fall, you get up again. You learn from it.

"My father was killed in a drive by shooting when I was 11 years old," she said. "I was in a gang for three years. I did six months in juvy for holding up a liquor store. Then I turned my life around and became a clinical social worker. It's hard. I know. Even now, I sometimes worry about fucking up. I don't think I will. But if do, I won't blame no one but myself. And that's what I can teach you."

That's when the Professor notices the disconnect. The way Berta looks at Charlie when she says *"I sometimes worry about fucking up."* What she is saying is not what she is thinking about.

The Professor raises his hand. "Where are you from?"

"Mexico."

"Do you ever go back?"

"Yes. My uncle manages a hotel in Rosarito Beach. I go back often."

"Sounds nicer than this place." The men at the table laugh.

"It's beautiful. I hope you get to see it one day. I have to say goodbye for now. Normally I have more time. Today I have to get to court."

"Are you testifying for a prisoner?" asks the Professor.

"No. It's family court. I shouldn't say this, but I find when I am open, it helps others to open up. It's for me. I am finalizing my divorce."

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"We have an opportunity here," said the Professor during lunch the day after in the prison cafeteria." They are across from each other on a Formica table eating meat loaf and potato soup on a metal tray. "I can tell she likes you."

"So what?" asks Charlie.

The Professor looks around and tries to keep his voice down. Most of the men have a blank look while eating the bland food. No fights today. So far.

“Tell her that it really hit home what she said about not making excuses. Tell her it was powerful. Tell her your story about living in a car with your mother for six months when you were in middle school and your aspiring actress mom was trying to break into the movie business. But thanks to her words, you know that you can't use that as an excuse.

“Let her know how wonderful you think she is. How much you appreciate her work. How you can learn from her. How much admiration you have for her coming so far. Gangbanger to prison social worker. Then tell me her reaction.”

“Sounds pretty messed up huh, living with mom in the car?”

“Better than having a mother with violent temper tantrums and hallucinations. Better than having to drive up with my dad 150 miles every weekend in a car with no AC to go to the insane asylum only for her to look at us as if we were the men from the moon. I would trade with you,” says the Professor.

“You hadn't mentioned that,” says Charlie.

“Truth be told, I've inherited a bit of mom's mental issues myself. Not as acute. Anyway, we all have our stories. You should use yours to get in good with Berta. Then ever so gradually, take it to the next level.”

An older big black man with short grey hair is seated next to Charlie. He is humming to himself and looking down, engrossed at this soup.

“Gradually. If you two get along, start asking if she can get us Hershey bars, cigarettes, then little bottles of cognac. Then if that works, you can work your way up to cordless drills and hacksaw blades. Baby steps.”

“What's this? Escape From Alcatraz?” The black man looks up and flashes a mocking smile. “You guys are too much. When you make it to the Cayman Islands, you be sure to write,” he says laughing with a toothy grin. “Don't forget your friends at Jungle Lake.”

“We won't,” says the Professor. Then adds, “We're just kidding around.”

“I'm just playing with you,” says the black man, who gives a knowing nod then returns to his musical meal.

“Five minutes remaining,” comes the voice over the PA, followed by a loud buzzer.

‘By the way, did you catch the line about the divorce?’

“Yes,” says Charlie. “Couldn't believe she was married. Wonder what her husband ever saw in her.”

“Nothing. He knows she is sack of--.”

“Don't say that man!” interrupts Charlie. “That's not cool. Come on. Like you said, she has come far. And if that's how he felt, why did he marry her?”

“Poor bastard, best he could do.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Think of it. If he could be with any woman on the planet, or for that matter, any woman in his neighborhood, you think he would be with her? She was the most desirable woman he could attract. Or rather, the least undesirable woman he could attract. I haven't seen the guy. He's probably no great prize either.”

“Wow. That is some dark twisted shit, Professor. Tell me this, since you're so smart. Why are they getting a divorce?”

“Couldn't take it anymore.”

“Who Berta?”

“Nope. Try again.”

“Her soon to be her ex-husband? The one you call poor bastard? He couldn't take it anymore?”

“Bingo. Charlie, trust me on this, there is an opportunity here.”

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Camp Pendleton to the left, dark Pacific to the right. The ocean and the sand are without color at this hour. The encore of Mexican trumpets rattles the Ex Con Express.

“*Mi amiga* is here,” says Berta. The passports look great.”

“Perfecto,” says Charlie.

“You're not going to make me regret this, right Charlie?” asks Berta through the cell phone speaker. “I'm starting to ask myself what the fuck am I doing? *Dios mio*, helping convicts escape from prison. Risking my job. *Que locura*. If you break my heart, I think I

would do something crazy.” She sounds like she is holding back tears.

The professor squeezes Charlie's upper arm hard and gives him a stern menacing look.

“Baby, I thank God you came into my life. I think you're the best. A number one. Numero uno, mi amor.”

“Ok” Berta says softly. “That's what I need to hear.”

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“How is it going with her?” whispers the Professor between the bars. Thanks to the influence of new friends at Prison Social Services, Charlie and the Professor are now next-cell neighbors.

“We're looking good,” says Charlie in a quiet voice. “Tools in a week.”

The cages across from them are dark. Most of the inmates are sleeping. It smells like ammonia and bleach after the cleaning today. The chemicals must have been poured on extra thick. The concrete floor looks somewhat cleaner. They are both at the edge of their cells leaning on the bars. They can't see each other, but they are within three feet. Every few minutes, they are interrupted by the grating hum of big heavy electronic doors opening.

“What did you tell her?” whispers the Professor.

“Today, I told her about living in the car. She came back with how her father used to often beat her mother, once so bad her mother was in the hospital for a week with a broken jaw and a concussion.

So when it comes to who has the most fucked up past, Berta might actually beat us both."

They stop talking as a guard in a black uniform approaches. They go back to their thin mats on their bunkers and pretend to be asleep. As soon as he disappears, they get back up.

"Sounds good," says the Professor. "How is her attitude? She cool about all this?"

You need to keep her happy. She needs to know that her feelings are mutual. That is key," says the Professor.

"She smiled when I told her how impressed I am by her. And you're right, she does seem to think I'm the cat's pajamas. Don't ask me why. She is really looking forward to some serious private time in Rosarito. We're limited here in the conference room. We're alone, and there's privacy, but there's always a chance that someone might knock on the door and intrude. But she hasn't let that stop her from performing a certain intimate act on me using her mouth. She puts a lot into it, very passionate and energetic."

"Sounds great", says the Professor.

"Yeah, it's OK I guess, but I can tell she is waiting for me to reciprocate."

"That's only fair," says the Professor.

"I've been stalling. Telling her I'm afraid we might get caught. I'm sorry. I don't see kneeling down on the grimy floor, pressing my head between fleshy thighs under that pleated wool tent and getting busy."

"Charlie, our freedom may depend on it."

"I understand. I just don't know if I can do it."

"Of course you can. All you need to do is close your eyes and pretend that Berta is the beautiful blond from the high-end jewelry store in Santa Monica."

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Trumpets sound for the third time minutes after the Chevy passes the illuminated twin steeples of the Mormon Temple near La Jolla. The Professor is tempted to throw the phone out the window.

"Where are you?" asks Berta. Her voice is loud. She is speaking fast.

"Getting close. We can see the lights on the wings of a big jet descending. Must be near the San Diego Airport."

"Charlie. I need to ask you something. I was thinking that we could get married by the beach in Rosarito. It's a really nice place for a private wedding ceremony. A lot of people get married there under white silk canopies on the sand. *Muy hermosa*. Wouldn't that be nice? Would you like to marry me on the beach?"

The professor starts to give Charlie a signal.

"We can talk about it," says Charlie.

"What the fuck do you mean talk about it? You think I'm dumb? You think I'm fuckin' stupid?" Her voice is getting louder. Her accent is getting thicker. "You think I don't know you're playing me. *Yo sé que no te importo*. I was hoping if I were good to you and treated you nice and tried to help you, your feelings would change.

“What did you think? We'd get down to Rosarito and you would start fucking around behind my back. With the young *muchachas* in those tiny bathing suits. The ones with the skinny little *cuerpos*, skinny little bellies, skinny little *culos*.

“You thought you would make a fool of me? I told you about how it was in my house and on my street. There's a lot more I didn't tell you. I've already taken ten lifetimes of shit, *cabron*. There's no room for any more. *No mas*.

“I'm packing my electric carving knife I bought last Thanksgiving. Great for slicing meat. And it's cordless. If you start fucking around behind my back, I'm gonna come to you with it while you're sleeping and cut off something of yours. And Charlie, you won't like it. It won't be pleasant. It won't be pretty. But when I'm done *cabron*, you won't be fucking no more of those skinny *pinche* bitches. I can tell you that.”

“Babe, why are you talkin' like this?” says Charlie. He is now speaking to himself. The phone call has ended.

“What was that?!” says Charlie. “What the fuck was that?!”

“That,” says the Professor in an unusually quiet and somber tone, “was our prison social worker having a moment of clarity.”

“Can we trust her?”

“Can we trust her?” repeats the Professor. “Let's analyze this. “Can we trust a woman who just threatened to cut your penis off with a cordless carving knife while you sleep? Tough question. Close call. But I'm gonna go with ‘No’.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“Who? Me? At a time like this?”

“What now Professor?”

“What now? repeats the Professor. “We're on our own.”

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“People break through all the time,” says the Professor, standing on the dirt in the middle of the night darkness at the southern edge of the United States. “There are hundreds of miles of border fence, but that doesn't stop Latin Americans from making it up north. We know that. They either scale the fence, or squeeze through the bars, or come through tunnels. The fence can be breached. We need to find an opening.”

They had just ditched the Chevy about 50 miles east of the official border crossing at San Ysidro. Looking for a deserted area, they left it on a quiet dirt road with no buildings in sight. Using their flashlights, they hiked down an inclining gravel path to get to the border wall.

“I wonder how many people try to sneak across the US-Mexican border to get into Mexico” says Charlie.

“Not many. If we succeed, we may be the first.” No headlights or streetlights in sight. If not for their flashlights, it would be pitch black.

“While we look for an opening, will you tell me why you shot that—what did you call him—academic advisor. What was that about?” asks Charlie.

“I'll tell you but we gotta keep moving and looking at the same time. Searching for that opening.” They continue on the flat dirt path walking parallel to the fence.

It's a muggy night. The sky is cloudy. The Professor detects the faint smell of exhaust fumes or engine oil burning from somewhere, maybe the other side of the border.

“On the day in question, I drove to campus to defend my dissertation, which is what you need to do to get a doctorate. It was a small college in San Bernardino.”

Both men are walking and shining their flashlights on the fence and the ground before them.

“I went to a conference room, come to think of it, not unlike the one at Jungle Lake where we first saw Berta.

“Don't remind me,” says Charlie.

“There were three people there. There was Dr. Kleinman and two women who were on the dissertation committee. Kleinman was bald in front with a thin gray beard to match thinning hair in the back. He wore a charcoal jacket and a white shirt with a pink polka dot bow tie. Kleinman was my academic advisor. He was supposed to have read my dissertation beforehand. But for some reason, I don't think he did.

“One of the women was older, about Kleinman's age. She had short blond hair and wire frame glasses. The other was Asian, probably in her thirties.”

“Got it,” says Charlie while examining the metal bars with his free hand.

"I said, 'My dissertation is called The Tarzan Syndrome: Symptoms and Seriousness.'"

"What is that?" asks Charlie.

"It's a term I coined for the condition that exists when one tries to function in an environment that is more sophisticated than the environment in which one grew up."

"Why is it called the Tarzan Syndrome?" asks Charlie.

"As I explained to Kleinman and the committee, many people grow up in families with severely dysfunctional parents. Before long, they have to interact with the world beyond. And when they do, they find themselves like Tarzan, trying to function in civilized society after being raised by apes. Now as I soon as I said that, the woman with the wire framed glasses chuckled. I glared at her and said, 'It's not funny.'"

"Good for you, man. Good for you," says Charlie, continuing to shine his flashlight up and down the border fence. "Then what happened?"

"Then I said, 'The Tarzan Syndrome is manifested by four symptoms. The first is *anger usually accompanied by violent tendencies.*'"

"Sounds like me," says Charlie.

"Hang on. I'm just getting started," says the Professor.

"The second symptom is *inability to fit in,*" says the Professor illuminating his flashlight on the wall in conjunction with Charlie's efforts. "Those afflicted by TS tend to be misfits and loners who do not do well in groups."

"Two for two," says Charlie. "Damn this is interesting."

"Glad you like it. The women also started warming up to it. The Asian took copious notes and the one with the glasses looked intrigued."

"That's good," says Charlie, examining the bars of the border fence with one hand while shining his flashlight with the other.

"Dr. Kleinman, on the other hand, was another story. He was seated at the head of the long mahogany table. He had a yellow wooden pencil in his right hand with a soft red eraser on top. Must have been new because it was long, like it had never been sharpened. He was tapping the eraser end on the table while I was speaking. His face had no expression."

"The third symptom may in fact be the most significant," I said.

"And what would that be?" asked Dr. Kleinman, barely looking up at me, still knocking the table with his pencil. His tone was challenging and hostile. And he wasn't smiling."

Charlie stops for a moment and turns toward the Professor.

"So, speaking slowly and making sure to enunciate every syllable, I looked him in the eye and said, '*Total complete rejection by all well-adjusted mainstream people.*'"

"Right. Very true," says Charlie. "What did Kleinman say to that?"

"He didn't care for it. He placed his pencil under the fists of both his hands, his short fingers curled under the yellow wooden

cylinder. He then snapped the lead instrument in two. The committee women stared at him.

“‘Do you have authority for this?’ he barked. ‘Your research seems thin.’

“So I said, ‘May I finish my presentation and then explain how I arrived at this theory?’

“He said, ‘I think the committee members would prefer to first see your research.’ I turned toward the women. They shrugged.

“Then he says, ‘You see sir, The College of Cucamonga is an institution of higher learning. Not a bar where patrons can spew whatever ideas come to mind. Not a talk show. Doctoral dissertations should be serious works based on research, data, studies, empirical evidence, academic sources.’”

Charlie shakes his head and points his flashlight on the rough terrain looking for tunnels.

“So I say, ‘How about nonacademic sources, Dr. Kleinman? For example, if you log onto Wikipedia and look up the bios of accomplished people, you’ll find 95% of them have accomplished parents. In addition to that being a jolting slap in the face for those of us without accomplished parents, it’s something from which certain inferences can be drawn. Wouldn’t you have to agree?’”

“Nice one,” says Charlie. “What did he say to that?”

“He turned red faced with rage, stood up and said, ‘How dare you walk through the halls of this distinguished university to defend your doctoral dissertation and cite Wikipedia. We will entertain not another point, not another *symptom*, not another word until we see the scholarly research on which this so-called theory is based.’

“Then he says, ‘If you don't have it, you may want to consider another career. Academia is not for everyone you know. The university setting is not for all. Some wannabe academics would be better suited standing at a corner on Hollywood Boulevard with a megaphone and shouting their theories to passersby. Now then, do you have any scholarly research for us or not?’”

Charlie stops moving.

“‘Absolutely,’ I said. ‘I have it right here in my backpack. Shall I take it out?’”

“‘If it's not asking too much,’ he growled in exasperation. Then he sat back down and rolled his eyes. That's when I reached into my backpack and pulled out the revolver. I fired the first shot into his stomach. A loud pop ricocheted off the walls. Kleinman reeled back and gagged and struggled to breathe. His expression was a mix of disbelief and agonizing pain. Blood flowed profusely from the wound. The women shrieked in horror.

“I said. ‘How is that Dr. Kleinman? Would you like to see more scholarly research?’ The next shot went through his bowtie into his neck. I aimed the last one at the center of his forehead—Italian restaurant in the Bronx, Michael Corleone style.”

“Wow!” says Charlie, pointing his flashlight directly at the Professor's face.

“Kleinman was motionless after that. I looked at him and noticed his eyes were still open as if he were deep in thought, maybe pondering a challenging academic concept. But he was dead, silent, permanently muted, incapable of ever emitting another peep about scholarly research.”

"I know I'm not one to talk Professor," says Charlie. "But don't you think you may have overreacted?" shining his flashlight along the bars of the border fence.

"At the time, I didn't. Looking back now, I can see how I might have handled it differently."

"Good thing we broke out of Jungle Lake when we did Professor. I don't think that answer would have gone over very well with the Parole Board."

"You're probably right."

"Hold on now. Do you see what I see? Under the fence where my light is shining. The ground. Those flowers. Daisies? Bougainvillea? They don't look right. They don't belong there do they?"

"We may have found a tunnel," exclaims Charlie.

They push away the flowers and clear away a huge layer of earth. Sure enough there is a ladder and a passage beneath.

Can you believe our luck?" says Charlie.

"Thank God for drug lords and smugglers," says the Professor. "Let's vamonos."

They descend the wooden ladder and see fluorescent lights hanging from a PVC pipe mounted to a concrete ceiling. Charlie walks behind the Professor through a narrow passage between gray stone walls. Under their feet are steel tracks that might support a railcar propelled by a small motorcycle.

“By the way,” says Charlie, following the Professor. “What is the fourth symptom of the Tarzan Syndrome?”

*“Social Acceptance by other misfits only.”*

“Makes perfect sense,” says Charlie, his voice echoing in the tunnel. “But misfits don't have much in common with each other. People are misfits in different ways. Isn't that a problem?”

“Excellent, Charlie. If you were my student, you would have just earned an 'A' for that astute analysis.”

\* \* \*

They make it up the ladder and step onto Mexican soil. The terrain is deserted and even darker than the American side. The Professor wonders if there might be farmhouses or other structures within a few miles. He imagines the landscape in daylight, green fields separated by a narrow winding road, cows and brown horses on one side and a muddy river on the other. But sunrise is hours away. The air is thick and there is a faint smell of gasoline.

“What now?”

“We look for someplace abandoned with food and shelter.”

In a flash, there are sirens and red lights all around them.

A police vehicle with Federales is surrounding them and shining orange lights in their eyes. Two officers are standing with guns drawn.

“MANOS ARRIBA. NO SE MUEVEN!”

“Damn” says Charlie, raising his hands. “Professor, what's that crazy look in your eyes?”

Last time this happened was when Riverside PD surrounded his apartment building after his deadly dissertation defense. Happens under stress. The Professor is looking at the Mexican Federal Police vehicle with flashing red lights and uniformed officers approaching, but his mind is playing tricks on him.

*He sees a ship with red beams from a planet millions of miles away and two-legged creatures in black speaking strange sounds who will take him there. And when he arrives, he will be astonished to find there are no borders or prisons or walls and that all variations of life forms in this world accept each other. After processing this, he might try to explain behavior on Earth. But his efforts will be in vain. Concepts like rejection will be so alien as to be beyond comprehension.*

“NO SE MUEVEN. MANOS ARRIBA!”

“Professor, Professor!” Charlie elbows him. The hallucination vanishes. Back on earth, the Professor realizes that guns are pointed at them. He smells exhaust fumes and smoke and hears sirens of more vehicles. They stop. More uniforms with weapons drawn approach. The Professor squints and sees a short stocky woman in the distance carrying a long metal object in her hand. Could it be? Can't be sure. They'll find out soon enough.

“I didn't want to believe it,” says the Professor, his hands at last reaching toward the sky.

“What?” asks Charlie. “That we could get caught?”

“No. Not that. The conclusion of my thesis. Very last page, final sentence. I had planned to point it out to the late Dr. Kleinman

before his untimely demise. Even though I wrote it, deep down I refused to accept it.”

“What? Better tell me quick.”

“Not only is there no cure for the Tarzan Syndrome, there is no escape.”

