

Cliche

by Kevin Myrick

They spotted Johnny as they cruised down Broad Street in a souped up Honda Civic, something too conspicuous for such work. But what were they to do? They had orders to grab the man as soon as he was found.

"Throw his ass in the trunk and bring him to me," Ronaldo said.

No one wanted to cross Ronaldo, not for a second. He was dangerous when he was calm; when a man stole from him, he went *loco*.

"Should we grab him?" Francisco asked. "Someone could see."

"Lets circle the block and see if he goes someplace out of the way. We can grab him then."

They watched in the rear view mirror as Johnny walked across the street and turned onto Maple Avenue, right where they wanted him.

"Rats always try to find a hole to crawl into," Ronaldo told them. "He will do the same. Let him go toward the hole, let him think he has hope. But don't let him get there, or else."

It wasn't too much work after that. Francisco pulled his revolver and then Marco grabbed him from behind and stuck let rip the stun gun into his side. He went limp in his arms. Handcuffed and with tape slapped over his mouth, Johnny could only flop around in the back like a fish on his last breath. No one noticed on their drive back to the shop.

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"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny..."

Ronaldo slapped him awake as he buckled against the handcuffs. "If I take the tape off, will you be a good boy?"

Johnny nodded. Francisco and Marco stood next to the door in the shadows, only there unless the boss needed them. The appearance of men like them was threat enough to make a man speak the truth. Ronaldo had done this many times before. There was no tolerance for thievery.

"Johnny, I only have one question for you. Where is my stuff?"

He gave himself up quickly, told him what he did. He'd sold it all, given some to friends. There was nothing left.

"That was four kilos." Ronaldo gave him a smack on the head for every kilo he'd stolen. "You know how long it will take you to work that off? Years my friend, years."

Ronaldo pulled a revolver from the small of his back, pushed it against Johnny's sweat-lined brow. "It would be easier to kill you and write off the loss."

"I have the money, I do. If you let me go I'll give it to you."

"You have the money on you? Right now?"

"No, back at the house."

Ronaldo smelled a rat, knew this routine all too well. Get him home, with his guns and he'd put up a bloody fight for sure. No one wanted that outcome, too much police. Bad for business.

But as it always seemed to the boys, he knew exactly what must be

done. Marco and Francisco will take you there, was the lie he told Johnny. Sure, you'll be fine, you'll be safe, just give them the money and leave town and never come back. He pulled Marco aside before and told him to put a bullet in his head and dump him on the side of the road.

"That's nice of you to let him have a funeral for his family," Marco said.

"Afterward, go find the money. If you do, you can have \$6,000 of it."

* * *

Six thousand dollars was a small price for a man's life. Marco was in the back seat of the Honda with Johnny next to him handcuffed, all tense. Francisco had it on a rap station, the sort of music that gave Mario a headache.

"Turn this off already and put on something good," he said.

"Nah man, that's got a good hook to it. Leave it on."

"Hey Johnny shut up, you don't get a vote. My car. My music. Put it on channel three Francisco."

It was a urban Latino station out of Atlanta, sometimes static came through in the dales as the ran up and down hills toward Johnny's place. They came up to Ezra Church Road. Marco tapped Francisco's shoulder to let him know to turn. He thought it'd be the perfect area to shoot and run, leave Johnny on the side of the road.

"Where are we going, the turn's not for another few miles," Johnny said.

"Shut up," Mario said.

They went another few miles down the road, well off from the farm houses and trailer park closer to the highway, when Francisco pulled over. "Get out of the car Johnny."

"So this is it then?"

"Yes," Marco said. He pulled back the hammer, ready to do the bloody work.

"No talking you out of it? You could just let me out and you guys would never see me again. I'll hand you the keys to my place and you can go get the money."

"We do what we're told," Marco said.

"Just like pawns on a chess board." Johnny sighed. There wasn't much else he could do now. "Can I at least have one last smoke?"

Francisco looked at him, shook his head. For some reason, Marco felt some mercy on him. Johnny would take it like a man, at least. Would he have if it were his turn on the other side of the gun. If his life was taken so cheaply?

"One smoke. Get out of the car to smoke it."

He took the handcuffs off him, let him fish the smokes out of his pocket.

"Give me your keys," Marco said, and motioned with his gun. He took those from his pocket too, tossed them at Mario. "Good boy. Any other last requests?"

"Let me have an open casket, for my mother's sake."

"Orders," Marco said. He squeezed the trigger and the shot rang out

in the night. Johnny fell to the ground, shot in the head.

"You didn't let him finish his smoke?" Francisco said as Marco got back in the car.

"What's the point? It wasn't going to kill him."

