

GET AWAY FROM ME, DAVID
(Excerpted from *BIG CATS*)

There was an earthquake at the bank this morning: totally minor, maybe a 3. This is peanuts for the central valley, but the tellers, I swear to you, acted like it was the Fall of Pompeii. When the first jolt knocked some ten key machines to the floor, Windows 4 and 5 completely lost their shit, clutching onto their countertops, screaming. After that, the hysteria really caught on and it wasn't very long before all eight of them were bunched up in a little herd back against the safe.

I'd like to say for the record right now: This was nothing close to a natural disaster. It was like sitting down on a cheap vibrator bed for about fifteen seconds, if you want to know the truth.

What really happened was that there was this incredibly loud clang when some of the stanchions in the merchant line fell over. They do this plenty of times without seismic help. The only problem was that there happened to be an elderly customer hanging onto those stanchions when they went down. This caused Jose Martinson, the Lending Manager, to come striding out of his office like a superhero, and like a superhero, Jose Martinson had to sweep this customer up off the linoleum and usher this gentleman, a perfectly-fine-seeming person of the Mexican persuasion in an Izod sweat suit, to one of the folding chairs along the wall next to the drinking fountain.

I should mention by the way, that when I saw the guy in the sweat suit fall down, I was planning to go provide whatever assistance I could in this non-emergency, but Jose stopped me as he whisked past my desk. "No, David," he said. "You sit down. You hang onto your monitor right now."

Actually, the way Jose delivered that sentence it sounded more like
“Youhangontoyourmonitorrightnow.”

In a perfect world, i.e., one in which I didn't work at the Bouquet Canyon Bank of Modesto for Jose Martinson, I would turn to this man I didn't work for, and when he said something like, “You hang onto your monitor right now,” I would say something like:

“YOUSUCKMYCOCKRIGHTNOW.”

But the world was and is not perfect, so at that point I looked at Jose and smiled and cast a silent and negative spell on his family for all of eternity. “Sure, Jose,” I said, and as he walked away from the Lending Area, I wondered if this was going to be the day in which I took just one tiny sip of the Vick's Dayquil that I've been storing behind the mortgage re-financing forms in the second drawer of my desk.

By then the plate glass on the front and sides of the bank was quivering quite a bit too, and it was kind of exciting to wonder whether or not the whole place was going to shatter like a wineglass. I'm a person who does well with a lot of physical stimulation so I found the whole thing to be pretty invigorating myself.

I opened up the top drawer of my desk and instead of the Dayquil, I ate four baby aspirin from the slide-open package with the tin soldiers on it that I keep up front by the writing utensils for class B situations. I knew the baby aspirin were not going to alter my physiognomy in the least, but I took them anyway, even though I could barely swallow them due to the situation of the earth moving around like it was. I also figured the placebo would give me courage to do what I had really set out to do before the absolutely harmless earthquake started, which was to, actually, in reality, walk across the linoleum floor toward the front entrance of the bank and approach the official work area of the not-

exactly-beautiful, but still strangely compelling security guard, Elizabeth Sabretta, in the cowboy boots and the badly bitten-down hangnails, who, ever since her divorce settlement finally came through, drives a silver Honda Acura with a little bumper sticker in the shape of a yield sign pasted to the rear window that says: GODDESS ON BOARD.

At the thought of that bumper sticker, I popped an extra aspirin, and then I put my arms around my computer like Jose told me to, and as I hugged it tightly against my chest, I wondered if I was *not* able to walk across the floor of the bank today toward Elizabeth Sabretta due to the earthquake, was it going to be the day in which, actually, in reality, I was to take just one tiny sip from the abovementioned Vick's Dayquil, just to see what might happen. Just to see if maybe I'd end up back in Strawberry, New Mexico, where I used to be completely involved in My Old Life, which was drunken and miserable rather than just sober and miserable like it is now.

I considered taking out the Dayquil right then, just to look at it maybe, just to consider the possibility of complete and utter self-ruination just for a sec, but at that moment, I couldn't do that because during the whole time Jose was helping the old man brush off, during the whole time he was getting the old man out of the way and seating him in the chair for safety, Jose kept glancing over at me with this look on his face that said: "David—you should be me right now," and I had no choice but to glance back in a dishonest way that said: "Jose, you're probably right," even though we both know Jose has no idea how to delegate. He's what my sponsor Nate would call, "an angry and resentful doer."

As I said, the shaking didn't go on for that long, but after it stopped, everybody was still frozen in their places like right before a shootout. Jose has the place decorated like an old ghost town with wagon wheels and other western style items, and I could swear at that moment I saw some tumbleweed blowing across the floor and butting up against the old man's ankles, who was sitting right in the chair where Jose had propped him, like a knick knack.

"Stay still for aftershocks," Jose called out to everybody.

The tellers started to whimper when he said it, but the whole thing was fine with me. I kept my arms around my computer monitor, and I faced directly toward the front entrance, where Elizabeth Sabretta was standing with her spine straight as a parking meter, her feet planted shoulder length apart, her knees bent slightly, and her arms braced on either side of the doorjamb, i.e., exactly like it says to do in the "Earthquakes in the Workplace," brochure.

Along with her security guard's job, Elizabeth Sabretta is also a cocktail waitress at the Desdemona Room on Buena Viela Avenue in downtown Modesto, and one day I am planning on asking her whether or not she'd mind if I came down there some night after ten and had an ice water-no whiskey at some point in the future. She wouldn't have to say when. I've talked about this idea with my sponsor, Nate, who says given my relationship to bars that this is not such a good idea. I'm not really in the position to argue with Nate to his face, but I am aware that the Desdemona Room is a public establishment. I could go in there in a goddamn bunny suit if I felt like it. As long as I didn't seek chemical enhancement of any kind while I was in there, I could do whatever the fuck I want.

After Jose got the old man situated, he walked out in to the center of the floor and with a ceremonial flash of his samurai sword, set the stanchions in the merchant line back in place. “Okay, ladies,” he said to the tellers, bowing in their direction. “The party’s over. Let’s get back to work.”

There was a round of applause and hysterical laughter from over near the safe, as if what Jose’d said was actually a witticism of some kind. Then he and Windows 1-6 gathered into a huddle and gave each other a group hug while Windows 7 and 8 stood around them clapping. Fortunately, I was not a part of that, but because of my central desk placement I had to watch the whole thing. Jose in the center with all the women cooing around him, touching his sweater with their fingertips, fixing his hair.

When Jose was done with the teller treatment, he went over to Elizabeth Sabretta, who was still frozen in the doorjamb. He put a hand on her shoulder, shook it a little, and said, “Hey. Everything okay out here?” and Elizabeth Sabretta nodded at him slightly and said, “I guess so. Yeah.”

I didn’t realize I was still holding onto the computer until Jose swept past my desk and gave me a slap on the back.

“Thanks for your help back there, David,” Jose said. “You can let go now if you want to. It’s over, guy.”

“Don’t ever touch me,” I wanted to say to Jose. “Don’t ever call me, *guy*.” But I can’t get into it with Jose because he is actually two people. One is Jose, and the other is his corporate enthusiasm, which is so large and lifelike, it’s like a twin brother walking alongside of him. When Jose talks about the bank in staff meetings sometimes, the

glowing terms he uses bring tears of embarrassment to my eyes. I cannot decide if this utter lack of skepticism is real or the result of medication, but I find it disconcerting.

Whenever, I bring Jose the paperwork for anything, a loan for a new sunroom on a home or a new billiard table, he falls all over himself thanking me.

“This isn’t sales, Jose,” I want to tell him. “This is the economy.”

Modesto is growing like a weed bed these days and we’re giving money out to practically anybody who asks. It’s a town of white-collar Robin Hoods with bandanas across their faces, I swear to God. I sit across from people in my suit and tie who have no prospect of ever paying me back for what I’m giving them and no idea what is going on behind my face. They have no idea how easy it would be for me to open that Dayquil, take it down in one swallow, and run out into the endless desert sunshine with all their money gobbled in my fists. I wish someone would punish me for my sins. I don’t know what’s wrong with this country.

I watched Jose hustle past me into his glass office which is located about seven feet from the back of my skull. It’s soundproof in Jose’s office, and even though I couldn’t hear him, I could still feel him, darting around back there, getting things done. I let go of my computer and sort of hunched over my blotter, trying not to let Jose’s activity get to me.

In the doorway, Elizabeth Sabretta took out her blood pressure kit. She set the works on the stool Jose has given her for that purpose and took out the arm band attached to the curly black tube. I watched her roll up the sleeve of her security uniform and cinch the armband tight around her upper arm. Elizabeth Sabretta has arrhythmia, so she is supposed to check her blood pressure several times a day and sometimes more if she is

under particular stress. This is entirely amazing to watch, especially the part where she flexes the arm up and down and the air squeezes out of the little black bag.

I was imagining this might be a good time to walk over there and say something to her like, “Hey. Everything okay out here?” and she could nod slightly, and say something like, “I guess so. Yeah,” but just then Jose materialized again.

“David,” he said. “Do you know what day it is?”

I shook my head.

“Oh, come on.” Jose came around to my side of the desk. He did it so fast I didn’t have time to react. “Stand up, David,” he said. “I want to shake your hand.”

Even sitting down I was a head taller than Jose. I am a large man, but I am not at all powerful. Jose put a hand on each of my shoulders and kind of pulled me out of my chair. It was a strange motion because it felt like my chair was sucking me down at the same rate that Jose was yanking me up. It was like one of those NASA anti-gravity things. Sometimes I can work a whole morning without getting up once.

Jose put his arms around my waist. “I want to welcome you, David,” he said. “Your probation period. It’s over, man. How does it feel to be a full-time hire?”

I looked down at the top of his head. Jose took a step back. His eyes were bright. He reached out and took one of my hands and clasped it in both of his. My fingers were sticky from the baby aspirin. “Tell me David, he said, and then he was back in my arms, so close to me his words were muffled against my shirt front. “How does it feel?”

Tucked beneath my chin, the top of Jose’s head was perfectly round. I imagined reaching inside his skull and pulling out his brain. I imagined taking a bite out of it like an apple and then being poisoned by all the chemical well-being that must reside in there

and then being buried in a pine coffin out by the airfield and having strangers walking by that grave-marker where I was and saying, “Look at that loan officer guy who ate a branch manager’s brain and died.”

“It feels good,” I said...

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