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Title

The Big Schlep

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1w55j3x2>

Journal

Lucero, 14(1)

ISSN

1098-2892

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Publication Date

2003

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THE BIG SHLEP

EDGAR HOLZMAN

"Great is the Spanglish speech. What speech is so great as Spanglish? Engañol. It is the speech that will rule the land." — Gual Güiman.

I

I like Sergeant Lizardo. Cops complain about her bad genius, but she's always been a pussycat with me. As far as I'm concerned Liz earned her gallons the hard way: walking a beat for twenty years in some of this city's toughest barrios. When she calls, I come.

"Happy the eyes, Sarge," I said, stretching her hand. "You're looking more juvenile every day."

"What an occurrence!" she giggled coquett-

ishly. "I'm freezing fifty, Zap. But very gentle of you. And how is my favorite private eye? Still torturing everybody with your battery?"

"Nah, I stopped playing. Too many neighbors complaining. I'm into painting now, working on a dead nature."

"And your turbulent love life...?" Sarge asked with a motherly glint.

"All on wheels," I lied, and changed the subject. "Unlike my real wheels, which just got repossessed again. I'm hoofing it. I was on my way to the bank to arm a scandal when you called. What's up?"

"Hot potato. Missing kid."

I shook my head. "Rapt?"

"Looks it. Happened yesterday. Father's a widower. We're trying to contact him but he's on a boat in the middle of nowhere. Owns a couple of newspapers, so the mayor's sweating the fat drop thinking about the urns. Here's a copy of the note we found in the mailbox. They made the kid sign it. The lab techs are working on the original."

She handed me a piece of paper. It read: "I'M OKAY. YOU WILL BE CONTACTED. FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS AT THE FOOT OF THE LETTER. MY LIFE DEPENDS ON IT."

"How rare," I said. "There are no instructions."

"Exactly. Inside job, if you ask me: rich father goes off sailing in Bolivia, kid gets snatched here from the garden of infants. In my book, that adds up to inside info."

I nodded. "Who fed it to the raptors?"

"Two candidates: Archibaldo, the butler, and a baby sitter named Pepita. She may be a good piece. Or they may be in it together. She's a bombshell but slightly disequibrated, and was once married to a wise guy. Just too convenient that the kid is sequestered when their patron's away. Anyway, they're all from Texas, and since you speak the lingo I thought you might give us a hand with some discreet inquiries. Your usual expense account, of course. What do you say?"

"I'm a little oxidized..." I said modestly, "but hey, dispose of me."

"Brutal! Here's the carpet. I have to be in Judge Wong's courtroom at five. Meet me there."

II

When I left police headquarters it was refreshing. Already footsore, I hopped on the subway and got off at the next parade.

"I'm Winthrop Zapata," I yelled at the loan officer. "I want my car back."

He shrank back. "Mr. Zapata, please... You are altered. No need to exalt yourself."

"What do you expect? I don't want to be taken for a grocer, but you charge me an egg every month and still take my car?"

"Well, we do charge interest on morose payments, you know." He started to explain with hairs and signals how they computed their fees. I didn't understand a cucumber. At last he said: "Anyway, losing your stirrups won't help. Let me bring up your account."

He typed something into his computer. "You are behind in your payments, and between whistles and flutes it comes to a hefty sum. But we have not repossessed your car."

"What? Are you saying my car has been stolen?"

He shrugged. "If so, I ignore it. All I can tell you is that we don't have it."

"Bestial," I muttered sardonically.

Nothing more to be done here. I regressed.

III

Trudging back home, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. When I reached my doorstep I suddenly swung around, my piece in my hand.

"Quiet!" I barked.

Nobody there. You're getting neurasthenic. Tranquilize yourself. Inside, I fixed myself a drink, removed my interior clothes and gave myself a douche. Feeling refreshed, I decided to pay a little visit to the mansion.

It was in a ritzy barrio. Before ringing the doorbell I looked the place over. Big house. Must cost a

barbarity. "No Traspasar" signs were posted at regular intervals on the outside walls. I rang and the butler answered.

"¿Archibaldo?" I said. "Winthrop Zapata, ojo privado."

"Ah, sí. Llamaron del precinto para avisar que usted vendría.»

He made me pass. «Como usted sabe, el señor recibió una invitación de un relativo distante y está navegando en un resorte en Bolivia. ¿Desea examinar las premisas? Ayúdese.»

I registered the house, even the closets, checking the etiquette on each piece of clothing. Expensive. The house had every commodity but I didn't find anything rare. When I was done, I looked for Archibaldo in the kitchen. His left hand was bandaged, I noticed.

"¿Se injurió?" I asked.

"Apenas un escracho. Me corté con una de esas contrapciones..." he pointed to a row of kitchen appliances and smiled. "Es que soy muy gayetero, ¿sabe?"

Hmmm, I said to my insides. But aloud I said: «Echaré un vistazo al ático y me dejaré salir.»

As I left, I was certain that there was a locked-up cat in this house.

IV

Time to put the word out on the street. Leg-weary, I went looking for one of my snitches. This was ridiculous. I had to get my car back.

Gaston was not in his usual corner but half-way down the block, sprawled under a "Footwear Composure" sign that sheltered him from the elements. I motioned him over to the bar across the street. There were only a few parishioners.

"¿Cuál es la gran idea?" I said when we sat down. "Moviste tu oficina... ¿Problemas?"

He groaned. "El barrio se está gentrificando, Zap. Donde me instalo, ponen deterrentes: cadenas, rejas... o me piden que me haga escaso. No sé cuánto

tiempo más podré seguir haciendo esto.”

«No te vendas corto,» I said. «Eres mi mejor informante.»

I ordered a jar of beer and the usual double grappa for Gaston, who kept massaging his head. He took a small recipient from his pocket, agitated it, and drank the contents. «¡Qué dolor de templos!» he moaned.

«No deberías beber tanto,» I ventured, and immediately regretted it. Gaston has bad fleas.

“No me patronices,” he snapped back. “Estoy cansado de lecturas. Si vivo en la calle con la gente destituta y no en un desarrollo es porque rechazo el consumo conspicuo. No me apela ser un conmutador más de mirada langorosa. Es una cuestión filosófica. Además, mi trabajo es hazardoso. Por eso bebo y no hago huesos de ello.”

I let it go. «No te incenses. Necesito tu ayuda con la abducción. El padre del niño es un gran queso y el mayor ya está circulando los vagones. ¿Qué sabes?»

«No mucho: que hay una nota firmada bajo dureza por el niño. Y que los sospechosos son dos: el mayordomo y la niñera. ¿Ya los cuestionaste?»

«A ella todavía no.»

«La conozco ¿sabes? Crecimos juntos en Texas. Padre collar azul, madre rica. Pepita era la tostada del pueblo. Glamorosa, espoleada, vivía en la lujuria. Para darle crédito, después sirvió en Vietnam y la decoraron con dos medallas y tres cruces. Pero nunca bostea de eso. Luego supe que la habían cometido a un hospital psiquiátrico.»

«¿Y Archibaldo? ¿Puedes averiguarme algo?»

«Pedazo de torta. Pero te costará. Necesito un nuevo abrigo.»

«¿Qué pasó con el que te di?»

«La fábrica encogió y destiñó. Se lo regalé a otro derrelicto, un defectivo mental que no sabe la diferencia.»

«Me pones en un predicamento...» I said. The people who cut the cod in the Department were anxious about this one, but another mink coat... «Veré qué puedo hacer,» I said without compromising myself.

Gaston made me promise to keep his name out of the papers and left. I finished my beer and called the baby sitter. A machine answered. I left word that I needed to molest her.

V

“¿Pepita...?” As I approached the table in the restaurant I discovered my head.

“Llámame Pepa, como todos mis amigos,” she tended her hand and smiled. My socks fell. She was a knockout.

“Te debo una apología,” I said. “Me demoré porque ha desaparecido mi carro. Es prácticamente nuevo: aún no me han refundido los quinientos dólares que me rebatieron cuando lo compré. El banco dice que no lo tiene, pero debe ser un error clerical. ¿Ordenamos?”

“Sí,” she said, studying the menu. “Amo comer afuera. Hoy en día la gente vive tan insulada... Compra sus grocerías, las microhuevoa y se come todos los preservativos. Es revoltante.”

«Tienes un punto,» I agreed.

While we waited, I asked her to tell me about herself. Her family in Texas had been very poor, she said. They had no current water. Then, her mother had made a fortune exploding farm laborers. Poor people always get exploded, she sighed. But her father had dilapidated the money.

“Mi padre era un sujeto despicable,” she added with feeling, “un sadista y un bigote. Y yo no admito la bigotería. En retrospecto, creo que siempre odié sus intestinos. Supongo que por eso me enlisté.”

«Mira,» I said, «no quise ser intrusivo...»

“No, no, me hace bien hablar. En Vietnam volé en un escuadrón de bomberos. Nos lanzábamos en picada sobre la jungla y bombeábamos todo con agente naranja. No sé cuantas casualidades causamos. Un día, luego de un ataque particularmente vicioso, me derribaron. Envié una señal de destreza y me rescataron del mar. Fue una experiencia pivotal en mi vida. A decir verdad, quedé algo disturbada. El dolor en el hospital era excruciante, pero grité los dientes y poco a poco fue subsidiando. Cuando me descargaron, pasé meses en un retrete espiritual. Mi

denominación de origen es episcopal, pero me hice budista y vegetariana.”

The food came and I took a bite of my steak. «Me gusta la carne rara, pero...» I looked for the waiter. «This is crude,» I told him. He took it back to the kitchen.

Pepita told me about her marriage. She hadn't known that her future husband was a mobster. They met in Nevada and decided to tie the knot right away. He wanted to throw the house out the window but she talked him out of it. That very night they took a little vapor into Vegas and were married quietly in a private ceremony. But a week later he left her planted, she said. Why? Because she could never finish.

I gulped. This woman had no hairs on her tongue. “Perdóname,” I said. “No fue mi intención embarazarte. Cambiemos de sujeto. ¿Qué opinas de Archibaldo?”

At first they had sympathized, she confessed, but now she couldn't support him. He was a sock-sucker, always speaking pests of her behind her back. She had been waiting for a chance to sing him the forties. And something else bothered her about him. She didn't want to speak of vice, but...She pulled a snapshot from her wallet: «No puedo ponerle el dedo, pero... ¿ves?»

I looked at the picture: “Veo un infante bebiendo su fórmula en brazos de un hombre muscular.”

«Es una foto vieja de Archibaldo con el niño. ¿No ves el parecido?» She laughed. «Ponte los espectáculos. No seas vano.»

She was right. I put on my gaffes and peered closely. “¡Santa vaca! La semejanza es remarkable,” I admitted. “Pero ¿qué significa?”

“Tú eres el detective,” she replicated.

Why hadn't she given the picture to Sergeant Liz? There had been Moors on the coast, she said. Archibaldo was always lurking about. “Además, Archibaldo prácticamente me acusó de negligencia gruesa. Y al principio, tu sargento lo compró. Luego, cuando me notó un poco reluciente, se disculpó. Yo le dije que no había sentimientos duros, pero igual me chiquenié y no le mostré la foto.”

«Liz es algo cantanquerosa,» I said, pocketing the picture, «pero no te deludas. El Departamento está lleno de hombres sí pero ella no es uno de ellos.

Todo lo que pregunta es germano. ¿Por qué no me cuentas exactamente qué paso ayer?»

The waiter came by with a tray of desserts and she waved him off: «No me tentalice. Las confec-ciones engordan.» When he was gone she smiled sheepishly at me: «Pero sigo poniéndome tres cubos de azúcar en el café...»

It was already dark when she had gone to get the kid at the garden of infants. She tied his cordons and they headed out. “El niño estaba lleno de arvejas. Rumbo al éxito me soltó la mano y salió corriendo. Al salir a la calle tras él, un hombre me acostó. Me dragó pero no pude verle la cara porque me blindó la luz de un carro...”

Now she began to cry like a creature. «Per-dóname por sobar, pero me devora el remorso. No sé quién se lo llevó: esa es la verdad del Gospelsio. Pero Archibaldo tiene razón. La culpa es mía. ¡Quién sabe si ese niño vive aún!»

«No seas defitista,» I said. «¿Qué pasó después?»

The man snatched the kid and the car sped away. But she got the patent: ALO35P.

I almost had a brain commotion. That was the license plate of my car!

VI

On my way to the court building I stopped at a movie theater and bought two entrances. My feet were killing me. While making a dinner reservation for two at the little restaurant next door, my cell phone rang. It was Gaston.

“En la puerta de los tribunales hay una demostración de cientos de protestantes,” he said. “Uno de los piqueteros soy yo. Siéntate con Liz en el juzgado y espérenme.” He hung up. Now that I fall, I hadn't told him about my appointment with Sarge. Gaston knows everything.

The first snow was falling. I gave a rodeo to avoid the crowds, flashed my badge at the guards and dragged myself up to Judge Wong's courtroom. Liz was sitting in the second row. I flopped down beside her.

"How's it going, Sarge?"

"Pulling," she said. "You look beat. No car yet, huh? How did you make out with the suspects?"

"We made good crumbs. What's with the manifestation outside?"

"The usual. Another scumball caught with his hands in the dough. Rap sheet a mile long. He was cooking the books of a charity. When the pastel was discovered, he ran and we caught him. He was doing ten when he evaded himself. We caught him again and that's unfair." She let out a deep sigh. "Every death of a bishop we nail them, but for h or for b they're out in less than a cockcrow."

Sarge is not a liberal. Before I could open my mouth again, I heard Gaston's voice behind us: "¿Disrupto? No se den vuelta. Pretendan que no me concocen."

We did as we were told. I didn't ask how he'd gotten into the building. Probably strolled past the guards like Pedro through his house. He went on. «Archibaldo ha tenido varios cepillos con la ley. Es jefe de una pandilla de raqueteros predadores. Le dicen el Señor X. Tiene varias convicciones por arsonista y una por rapista. Está en la lista de los más queridos del FBI.»

I shifted uncomfortably on the bench. Something was giving me a bad spine. «Conque arsonista... ¿Y rapista, dijiste? ¿Canta rap?»

«No distortes mis palabras. Rapista porque rapó a una mujer en Texas. Al menos eso fue lo que dijo ella; él dijo que fue consensual. El jurado le creyó a ella y Archie sirvió tres años de labor dura. Me debes un abrigo.» He slipped me an envelope and vanished.

At that moment, the defense attorney stood up and addressed Judge Wong: "Your Honor, my client is a victim of entrapment."

"Baloney!" Sarge was on her feet. "Your Honor, this has no name!"

"Sergeant Lizardo!" Judge Wong boomed. "I will not tolerate ordinary language in my courtroom. Do I make myself clear?"

Sarge sat down. She was dying of rabies but said nothing.

"Well, Sergeant? May I expect an answer?"

"Sorry, Your Honor," she finally brought out. "I was in Babia. It won't happen again."

"It better not," Judge Wong growled.

"Sarge," I whispered, "Did you hear what Gaston said? We have to move. It urges."

"Yes," she said, gazing dreamily out the window at the raging snowstorm. "You know, Zap, when I was a kid I wanted to be an escalator. Mountains fascinated me. But I never tried it and now it's too late. You are right: we must act without dilation."

VII

«¡El juego es arriba, Archibaldo!» I shouted as I burst through the door of the mansion. «¿Dónde está el niño?»

He was in his bathrobe, sitting at a small table, changing the bandage on his hand. He smiled. «¿Ha perdido usted sus mármoles? Resiento la implicación.»

«Bórrate esa sonrisa derisoria y terminemos con esta charada, Archibaldo. ¿O debo decirte Sr. X?»

"¿Sr. X?" He found this gracious and laughed. "¿Está usted en ernesto? ¿Que idea bizarra!"

«No te parecerá tan hilarioso detrás de las barras.» I brought out the papers Gaston had given me. «¿Conque nada sabes de un cierto verano en Texas?»

«No tengo recolección de eso,» he said scornfully. «Venga al punto.»

«El punto es este: la mujer que rapaste murió y su hijo fue adoptado por tu patrón,» I snarled. «¡Tu hijo! ¿Me lees?»

«¡Preposteroso!» he sneered. «Usted está todo mojado.» But I could see that he didn't have them all with him.

"¿Y qué me dices de esto?" I precipitated myself over the bandage and ripped it off, exposing the tattooed X on a perfectly sane hand.

"¡Es la última paja!" he bellowed. And he bolted for the stairs. I panted after him, stepping on his heels

all the way to the third floor. At these heights he knew he was trapped. He scampered out a window and onto an icy ledge. I could see him shiver uncontrollably in his bathrobe, buffeted by the wind as he tried to steady himself against the driving snow. I drew my gun.

“¡Congélate!” I yelled.

Too late. He teetered on the brink and the next gust swept him off. There was a deaf sound as he hit the ground. I hobbled down the stairs and was at his side in a two by three. But Mr. X was no more.

VIII

“Y eso es todo,” I told Pepita the following morning while I soaked my aching feet. We were having breakfast in the kitchen of my house. “Lo pronunciaron muerto en la escena.”

Pepita looked lovely in her blouse with the tropical shrubbery design. She was gazing thoughtfully at my painting of the vase, the fruit and the dead chicken, which dominated the breakfast nook. «Me encanta tu vida quieta. Es un cuadro culísimo. No sé por qué te parece hideoso. Pero dime, ¿lo de tu carro fue una diversión?»

«Sí. Archibaldo apostó a que me llamarían porque soy amigo de Liz y hablo engaños. Mi carro apareció en el garaje de la mansión y el niño en un compartimento secreto del basamento. Un cómplice de Archibaldo derramó las arvejas y encontramos su diario íntimo. Quería recuperar a su hijo. Lo del rescate era otro arenque rojo.»

Last night I had explained to Pepita that Archibaldo had meant for her to pay the duck while he made himself smoke with the kid. We found the note pad he had subtracted from her purse to write the ransom note, and the lab had confirmed that her digital impressions were on it. Pepita was enraged. She called Archibaldo a hardface and a miserable and filled him with impropers. By now, however, she had serenaded herself.

“En fin,” she said wearily, “después de todo era su padre. Pero ¿cómo supiste que él era el Sr. X?”

«Elemental. Xocotlhuetzi es el décimo mes del calendario azteca, consagrado al dios del fuego Xiuhotecutli. Cuando vi la «X» en la foto, puse dos y

dos juntos.»

I didn't mention Gaston. I protect my sources.

“Pepita...” I said.

“Pepa,” she corrected me. “¿Recuerdas?”

“Pepa,” I began again. “No sé cómo rompértelo...”

She waited expectantly.

I threw myself at her plants. “... pero creo que me estoy enamorando de tí.”

«Sé mi huésped,» she smiled.

I smiled too. The movie and dinner last night had been neither *fu* nor *fa*, but we'd sure made up for it afterwards. She got up and headed for the door.

“I had a barbarous time,” she said. It was the first time she spoke to me in my own language.

“I passed it phenomenon, too,” I said. And with a twinkle in my eye added: “And... thanks for coming...”

“Thanks for having me,” she grinned.

We kissed one last time and she was gone. I checked my watch. I was already late for work but I didn't care. Long live Pepa!

* * *