SHORT STORY

Cesar Chavez

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"Remote Escape" by Oliver Bliss, www.oliverbliss.blogspot.com

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“Norma! No puedes creer que me paso hoy!” I announce into my home as I burst through the front door. My energy should be drained since I washed windows outside all day, but this news sparked a joy in me that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Cesar, por favor. English. We live in America. We have to speak English,” Norma says as she steps out from the kitchen.

My wife was an English instructor in Mexico; we’d agreed that once we got here we would only speak to each other in English. I’d heard somewhere that in moments of passion one’s native tongue comes out. That must be what happened to me.

“I’m sorry.” I try again, “Norma, you will not believe what happened to me today.”

Norma walks back into the kitchen as she responds, “What happened?”

I follow her into the kitchen where I see Lola, our two-year-old daughter, sitting on the counter. My mind shifts to Lola. I spread my arms as far as I can, which isn’t very far before they touch the two walls in the kitchen, and I make a humming noise like an airplane as I speed towards Lola. She starts to giggle as my arms wrap around her and my hairy face touches her soft cheek.

“Hola Lola!”

She giggles more. “Hi!”

I turn my cheek towards her. “Can you give Papa a kiss?”

She brings her lips to my cheek and says loudly, “Mwah!”

“Thank you, Mama.” I kiss her on the cheek and turn back towards Norma.

Norma is smiling at me. “So, are you going to tell me what happened to you today or not?”

I smile back and reach into my pocket. I pull out a piece of paper and hand it to her.

She takes it and looks at it for a moment. “Wow. A phone number? How cool.”

I take it back from her, “No hombre. Don Miguel gave me this number. This number is going to make life easier for us.”

Norma looks at me for a moment. She’s not smiling, but she isn’t frowning either. “What do you mean?”

“I mean Don Miguel said I need to call this number, and the guy will be able to get me papers!”

Norma leans an arm against the counter. “What do you mean he can get you papers? Like a green card?”

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I put the paper back in my pocket. “Not exactly. Don Miguel said he can get me a fake Social Security card that looks just like the real one!”

She stands up straight again. “No Cesar. No.”

I scratch my beard. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

“I mean no, Cesar. We risked so much to come here. We can’t risk it all with such a stupid idea.”

“A stupid idea? This is not a stupid idea.” I walk out of the kitchen and lean against the living room wall. “Norma, what’s stupid is how much that little card could help us. I won’t have to drive in fear anymore. I could get my license. I could get a real job with that.”

“Yeah, or you could get caught and get deported. No seas pendejo, Cesar. You’re too smart for this.”

I walk back over to Norma and take her hands in mine. “Norma. Por favor. I think this will work. It will be good. We’ll be safer if I get it.”

Norma pulls her hands away. “No.” She walks back into the kitchen and comes back out with Lola in her arms. “Can you take her to bed?”

I silently take Lola.

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A week later I get the text I’d been waiting for: “37 Oak Wood Lane, Apartment 2B. 7:00 PM.”

Luckily, I get done with work at 6:30. I pressure washed all day today. On my way to the apartment, I stop at McDonalds and order a Big Mac. There’s nothing more American than that. I eat my fries as I pull into the apartment complex. The clock on my dashboard says it’s 6:50. Plenty of time. I reach into the bag and pull out the Big Mac box. I open it and I quickly realize they got my order wrong. No cheese. “Putos,” I say as I throw the burger back in the bag.

At 6:58 I get out of my car and walk towards the apartments. I look on the first floor and I realize all the apartments are the letter A. I go up the stairs and sure enough the top floor is letter B. I knock on the door labeled 2B.

“Who is it?” a female voice calls out from behind the door. The voice took me by surprise. I’d assumed I had been texting a man.

“Cesar.” I pause for a moment, but she doesn’t respond, so I add, “Chavez!”

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I hear the door unlock and as it opens, I see a tall black-haired woman. She's in baggy sweatpants and a hoodie. She's really pale. If she was in Mexico, they would take her to the hospital convinced she was sick.

"Come on in." She leads me into the apartment, which is very empty. In the living room there's just a red couch, brown coffee table, and a small tv sitting on the coffee table. There are no decorations on the wall. "You can just sit on the couch. I'll be back in a minute."

As I am going to sit on the couch I realize that the coffee table is a lot closer to the couch than I'd thought. I slowly move between them, careful not to bump into the table. I look down at the couch and notice a black stain on the cushion I'd been about to sit on. I sit on the middle cushion. It looks the cleanest.

The woman walks back into the living room holding a folder in one hand and a Spongebob lunch box in the other. "Hey, can you move that tv so we can use the table?"

I pick up the tv and look around for a place to set it down.

"You can just leave it on the floor, it's cool."

I carefully set it on the floor next to the coffee table. She sits on the couch cushion that has the black stain and puts the folder and lunchbox on the table. I sit next to her.

"The folder is yours my guy," she says as she opens the lunch box. A familiar smell hits me, a skunky smell. She takes a ziplock bag out and opens it. The smell reminds me of the night I met Norma. I smile.

"Are you going to open the folder?" She interrupts my memory.

I look inside and there's a small card sized piece of paper. I've never actually seen a Social Security card, but Don Miguel said this is the best fake I could get. I admire the green color of the card, kind of like the color of money, as I gently pick it up and look at the nine numbers. These nine numbers will change my life.

"That'll be $250 my guy."

I reach into my back pocket and pull out three hundred-dollar bills.

She takes the money and stuffs it into the pocket of her baggy sweatpants. I wait for her to give me my change, but she doesn't. Instead she takes a joint and puts it in her mouth. Her lighter flicks, she inhales, pauses, and exhales. "Do you want your change, or do you want some of this instead?" She gestures towards the lunchbox.

"No, gracias. I do not smoke anymore. Not since I came to this country."

She takes another hit, "That's cool my guy. I'll go get you your change then."

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She stands up and disappears from the living room. I look at my new Social Security card one more time before gently putting it in my front pocket. She walks back in and I stand up. She hands me the change.

“Thank you.” I put the $50 in my back pocket. I head towards the door, but before I walk out, she says, “You know, Miguel’s guys usually take the weed.”

I turn around and she’s still standing up, “Yeah?” I ask, not sure why she’s saying this to me.

“You gonna try to get a license with that?” She nods her head at me.

“Yes.”

She takes a small hit. “Ask for Catherine when you go. Tell her Mara sent you.”

“So, your name is Mara?” I ask.

“Yeah, and your name is Cesar Chavez? Like named after *the* Cesar Chavez?” She takes another hit, and this one did it. She starts coughing like a sick person. I wait for her to finish coughing, “Sorry about that.” She places the joint in an ashtray.

“Yes. My mother wanted me to be Cesar Chavez.”

“That’s cool man. You know, you’re smarter than Miguel’s usual guys.”

I smile. A compliment is always nice. “Why do you say that?”

“You took the cash. They take the weed. I usually give them $25 worth of some mid. They don’t know the difference.”

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The following Sunday I go to church alone. Norma stays home with Lola.

Pastor Luiz can give a very powerful sermon, but today I cannot focus. I had told Norma about the Social Security card the night before. She said to me, “If you get deported don’t come back. Stay in Mexico.” I stayed up most of the night thinking about that.

The service ends with the choir going up on stage and singing, “Tu eres todo poderoso.” I never went to a Baptist church in Mexico. I was strictly Catholic. A coworker told me about Pastor Luiz, and after one sermon we became Baptist. It’s much more fun to listen to this choir sing passionate songs than to listen to a small group sing hymns about Mary.

I stay in my chair after the service ends and wait for Pastor Luiz to be alone. I don’t know how long I wait, but eventually the church empties out until it is just Pastor Luiz left. I stand up and make my way over to him. His back is facing me. His gray hair has gotten longer since the last time I saw him. It’s down to his shoulders now.

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“Hola Pastor Luiz.”

He turns around, his eyes open wide and he smiles big showing off a graying tooth, “Cesar! What are you still doing here, hermano?” He opens his arms wide and I accept the gesture. We embrace in a tight hug. His hand smacks my back. It hurts but the affection feels nice.

“Queria hablar con usted, Pastor.”

He’s still smiling. “Cesar, in English please or Norma will be very upset with me.”

I let out a soft chuckle. She would never find out if we spoke in Spanish, but I love Pastor Luiz’s commitment. “Can we talk?”

“Of course, Cesar!” He points his hand towards the door, “Let’s talk outside, hermano. That way we can talk and still enjoy the beauty that God has given us.”

I follow him outside and we sit on a wooden bench facing an empty parking lot. I’m sure Pastor Luiz doesn’t think the parking lot is beautiful, but the sky is a perfect shade of blue and a big cloud is covering the sun allowing the temperature to be hot enough to feel warm, but not hot enough to make us sweat. “It is beautiful out here,” I say to Pastor Luiz.

He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Tell me Cesar, what is on your mind?”

I silently reach into my front pocket and take out the card. I hand it to him.

“Where did you get this?” Pastor Luiz asks.

“Don Miguel,” I say as I look at Pastor Luiz.

He hands the card back to me. “Listen Cesar, I do everything I can to help the people of the church, but Don Miguel is someone I could not help.” He inhales slowly. “Why did you get this?”

I look away from him and look down at the card. It gives me a powerful feeling, a feeling I hadn’t felt in a long time. “Do you remember when you met me, Norma, and Lola? Lola was still so little.”

“Yes, I remember. First time visitors usually do not stay to say hello to me, but you did.” He is smiling again.

I put the card back in my pocket and let out a sigh. “We were very close to going back to Mexico. We had nobody here. We realized Lola would grow up without her family, and that my family would get old without Lola. But for me, I realized I may never see my parents again.” I think about my mom, I wonder if she went to church today.

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I look back at Pastor Luiz. He stays silent, so I continue, “We wanted to go back until we came and heard your sermon. You said something like this: ‘The sacrifices we make for ourselves can be important, but the sacrifices we make for the benefit of others are the sacrifices that will change lives.’ Norma and I thought about that for so long. It was the reason why we stayed. We want Lola to have a better life than she would in Mexico.”

I pull on my beard as the last words come out of my mouth. Pastor Luiz puts a hand on my shoulder, “Cesar, I really didn’t know my sermon had such an impact. Thank you for sharing that with me, but I’m sorry. I don’t understand what that has to do with the card?”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t know Pastor. I have sacrificed a lot. I sacrificed seeing my family. I sacrificed my friends. I sacrificed my language... Pastor, I sacrificed my freedom. This card can give me some of that freedom back. If I could just drive without fear of being pulled over that would be more than I could ever ask for.”

“Cesar, I know it is hard. But God knows what he is doing. He will reward those who do what is right, and you using that card is not what God wants. Stay honest and good things will come to you.”

I look at Pastor Luiz silently. He looks into my eyes, the wrinkles around his eyes are more prominent than I remembered.

“There is a right way and a wrong way to do things, hermano. If you use that card,” he points at my pocket, “then you will be doing things the wrong way.”

“Bueno.” I stand up. “Gracias Pastor.”

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Pastor Luiz’s words and Norma’s warning stay in my mind as I drive to the DMV the following morning. Mara told me to ask for Catherine; if Catherine is not there then that is a sign that I should not be doing this. If Catherine is there, then everything will be okay.

I pull into the DMV five minutes before they open. There is a small line formed outside the door. It looks like it is mostly mothers with their teenagers going to get their license. My mind flashes to Lola. I wonder if she’ll be able to get her license when she turns sixteen.

The doors open and the lines move quickly inside. Once inside they ask us to take a number. I’m number six. I take a seat and look up at the tv in the waiting area. “STAR ID will be required for flights in the US starting in October. Ask about STAR ID today,” is posted on a sign just underneath the tv. If I get my license, will they give me a STAR ID too? Will I be able to fly? I hope so.

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Ten minutes later I hear, “Number six!” I turn around and see an overweight blonde woman standing up. Again she calls, “Number six!” I make my way over to her prepared to ask for Catherine, but I don’t have to. Her name tag reads, “Catherine Mitchell” I let out a sigh of relief.

“What can I do for you?” She asks.

“Hi Catherine... um, Mara sent me. I am here to get my license.”

“You said Mara?”

“Yes.”

She gives a quick look around. “Do you have the card she gave you?”

My hand shakes as I reach into my pocket to pull out the Social Security card. I hand it to her.

She takes it from me and looks at it a moment. Without a word she stands up and walks away with the card. My eyes follow her as she walks into an office. In the office is a bald man with glasses. I can feel my heart in my chest. It feels as if it is going to burst.

Catherine walks back and takes a seat in front of me, “Okay, while he looks at that you wanna do your fingerprints and vision test?”

I didn’t know they’d be needing that. I thought they would just give me the license, but as I look around, I see others doing the vision test, so I say, “Yes.”

She pulls out a small digital pad. She wipes it with alcohol, “Okay just place your thumb and roll it. The print will come up on my computer.” I do that with each finger. It only takes a couple of minutes. Then she tells me to look into a black device that was to my left. “This is the vision test,” she says to me as I look into the device. “Pick the sign that looks the closest.”

I focus for a moment. “The stop sign.”

There is a pause, “Are you sure?” She asks.

Is she helping me? I look again and realize the difference now. “Oh, the yield sign I mean.”

“Good.”

Another few minutes go by, and I am feeling much more secure now. Catherine helping me with the vision test gave me new confidence.

The confidence was quickly replaced by a horrific feeling as I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Stand up.”

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I turn around and there is a police officer standing over me. I look around and all of the people at the DMV are staring at the police officer and at me. I look back at Catherine, she gives me a sad smile. “I’m sorry.”

My fear goes away, and a feeling of defeat overwhelms me. I stand up and the officer handcuffs me. “The fake Social Security never works in real government buildings dude.”

I turn my head to look at him in disbelief, my life is ruined, and he is calling me ‘dude.’ He gives me a smile similar to the one Catherine gave me. “You have the right to remain silent...”

My mind blocks out the rest of his words. As I am taken to the car I think about Don Miguel. Why would he allow this to happen to me? Did Mara know this would happen? Why didn’t this work?

The officer drives away from the DMV, but he leans his head back towards me. “You could’ve lived here without any problems man. The moment you tried to use that card you committed a crime much worse than coming to this country.”

I hear him, but I stay silent. He continues, “I’m really sorry about this. I hate to do this, but I have to.”

I intended to stay silent, but instead I say, “It’s okay.”

The officer stays quiet. I think of Norma and Lola. I think of the sacrifices I wasn’t strong enough to make. I think of my mom at home. I close my eyes and say a prayer.

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