

White Devils and Cockroaches

Gonzalez made a living representing crazies, weirdos, misfits, losers and plain folks who got taken. A damn good legal aid lawyer, ace attorney for the underdog, a craftsman in the courtroom with a bit of magician in his blood. That image had kept him at legal aid past the usual tour of duty.

Each morning he reminded himself he was not a burned out liberal who took up space on legal aid's payroll.

Joey and Pauline Maldonado had given the manager of a run down apartment building fifty dollars to hold a place for them for the beginning of March. On February 20th they showed up with a truck load of furniture. The rooms were filthy. The walls needed paint, two windows were busted, the refrigerator was broken and the lights were out. Rose, the manager, gave them a break, even though they were more than a week early. She was new. She let them unload their boxes and plastic bags in the empty rooms.

Rose later maintained they were only to store their things until the rooms were ready but Joey and Pauline settled in without lights, windows, a refrigerator or paint. Joey and Pauline stalled Rose on the rent for a few days. Joey found a job as a dishwasher at the White Spot on Colfax and he swore he would be paid in a week. He told Gary, the owner, that the check for the first month's rent was in the mail and Gary, who should have known better, let him slide. Two weeks later Gary ordered Rose to evict

the couple.

Pauline tried to explain their problem to Gonzalez as he sat across the desk from her, bored with a story he had heard too many times.

She was a skinny, pockmarked white woman of twenty-three. Her lips twitched and her fingers scratched at the insides of her elbows as she described the conditions in which she was living. Yellow eyes peered through thick glasses perched on the end of her nose.

"See, me and Joey knowed they wasn't going to do what they said about the windows, so we told them they wasn't going to get the rent until we got them fixed. That really pissed off Rose, so she turned off the electricity, and ya know how cold it gets here at night. We even had some snow a few days ago and me and Joey almost froze our asses off, excuse me, but ya know what I mean, Mr. Gonzalez?"

The lawyer tried not to believe her. Even so, he knew enough about Capitol Hill landlords that he was tempted to tell the wasted gabacha he would represent her and her old man.

"Joey's in jail, I told ya, huh? Some mistake about some old traffic tickets or somethin', I don't even know how it could happen, we only been in town a few months. We came from California, ya know? He'll get out in a few days."

He nodded and told her he would call the manager, talk to her about the heat, and then decide if he would prepare a defense so that Joey and Pauline could have their day in court.

Gonzalez did not learn anything more from Rose. She insisted he had to speak with Gary but she refused to tell Gonzalez how to reach the owner. Gonzalez had been through this routine before and it tipped the scales in favor of Joey and Pauline. He cut and pasted together a pleading that raised issues of implied covenants, express promises, invasion of privacy, and constructive eviction. He demanded not only the return of the original fifty dollars but punitive damages as well. Gonzalez could be creative when landlords tried to fool with him.

He filed the document with the court clerk, convinced Judge Kerso to waive the filing fees and set the trial for the next week. In eviction cases the wheels of justice did not turn as slowly as Gonzalez preferred.

Pauline called a few days later and asked about the trial. He told her what to expect and made another appointment to prepare them. "I need to talk to Joey so he'll know what I want from him when he testifies. Make sure you bring him." She promised.

Gary Donley, a young man with plenty of money, owner of several apartment buildings, knew the eviction process better than most attorneys. He was enraged when he read the pleading Gonzalez served on him.

He called legal aid and demanded to speak to Gonzalez. He was on hold for almost five minutes. The receptionist was working on the bugs in the new system and Donley was one of the unfortunate souls lost in the limbo of the legal aid telephones.

"This answer is a goddamned lie! How in the hell could you sign this piece of shit! I ought to have you and those two assholes arrested for putting a fraud on the

court!"

Gonzalez interrupted Donley in the middle of a string of epithets that alluded to the unsavory nature of Joey's ancestry. "Look, Donley. If you can't be civil, I don't think we can discuss this. Just tell me what you know about the situation and maybe we can work something out."

And Donley did. He told Gonzalez about the all night fights between Pauline and Joey. He talked about screams from the apartment, blood on the door, and the cops who took Joey away for chasing people down the hallway with an axe. He told him about the lousy fifty bucks and that the two had knowingly moved in without any lights. He said they had heat and gas and cooked something that smelled up the building like burnt horse shit. He ended by telling Gonzalez he would see him in court and they would learn then who was awarded punitive damages and "attorney fees, Gonzalez. How would legal aid like to pay me a couple of thousand because one of their smart ass lawyers defended a frivolous case?" Gonzalez knew legal aid would not like it, not one damn bit.

He visited Joey Maldonado in the City Jail. Joey was a short, pale Chicano with greasy hair. His eyes were dull and he talked with a slight stutter. Gonzalez had a hard time picturing him chasing anybody, especially with an axe.

"Man, those p-people are crazy in that place. They barge in whenever they want, they threaten me and Pauline, they cut our damn extension cord we had plugged in to the outlet in the hall so we could have some f-fuckin' lights. They're animals, man.

I hope we can just let the judge know about all the shit that goes on in that p-place, because I know a lot, man. That bitch, Rose, ya know the manager, she's a damn dealer. She's always tryin' to sell some shit to us, ya know, grass or some snort, even some m-m-meth. That's half the reason why they're f-fuckin' with us, ya know, we wouldn't b-buy any of her crap."

Gonzalez tried to get details about the arrangement with Rose when they moved in but Joey wanted to talk about the manager's criminal activities. Gonzalez left not knowing any more than when he walked to the jail from his office.

The day before the trial Pauline called to let him know she could not make the appointment. She did not feel very well.

"And what about Joey, Pauline? Where is he?"

"He was out but he got busted again. I don't even know if he'll be out by the trial tomorrow."

"What he get arrested for?"

"Some mix-up, I don't know."

Her words were slurred. She lost her train of thought. Gonzalez decided she was drunk or high on drugs. She cried. "But I'm going to fight this time, they can't push us around like this. I want a trial and I want you to be there. Okay?"

"Donley told me Joey chases people with axes, that he beats people up and that he's been trashing the place."

"No way, man. Joey ain't like that. Joey was arrested for domestic abuse. You

know how it is in Colorado now. They take away the husband for domestic abuse, throw him in jail. I told them I was all right." Something burned in Gonzalez's stomach. "But he don't bother nobody, except me. Gary's lying if he says Joey was arrested for hasslin' other people. Joey's only into domestic abuse, and that's all." Her words trailed off.

Gonzalez heard someone murmur in the background. A woman's voice urged her to continue.

He asked her again about the axe.

Alt wasn't no axe. It was just the head, it didn't have no handle, ya know what I mean?"

Pauline walked into the courthouse in the same dress she had worn when she met Gonzalez. She was drunk, disheveled and smelled like sour wine--vomited wine, thought Gonzalez when he talked to her in the hallway.

"I'm going to fight this one. You with me?"

She leaned on Gonzalez for support. He held his breath to keep from gagging.

"You don't have a chance. The judge is going to tell you to move and he'll give you forty-eight hours."

"I want my money then. They owe me fifty bucks, and they cut my cord. I want the money for that."

"You'll be lucky if you walk away from this without owing Donley a couple

hundred dollars."

Lines of worry creased her forehead. She did not want to owe anybody any money. She had no idea what would happen if the judge said she had to pay Donley and she did not want to learn.

"What can I do then?"

"How much time do you need to move?"

"Jeez, I don't have no money, and I don't know when Joey's gettin' out. I don't even have a place yet. Two weeks, at least two weeks."

"I'll get you a week. But if you don't leave, Donley can have the sheriff out there to move your stuff, you understand?"

"Sure." She paused for a few seconds. "I can do that. A week. No sweat."

Gonzalez had to sell the idea to Donley.

Rose was ready to testify and Donley had memorized his arguments. He wanted his court costs, the rent for March, and something for cleaning up after Pauline and Joey.

"Look around you, Donley. The courtroom is packed. Judge Kerso is still on the 8:30 returns and it's already 9:45. He's up there giving lawyers hell for not knowing their cases should have been assigned to Courtroom 9-H. He's only warming up. It will be 11:00 by the time he gets to us. And sure, he's going to tell Pauline and Joey to move their junk, but I'm going to convince him that you rented a place that doesn't meet the Housing Code. He's likely to order the Health Department out to your place just so they

can close you up for a while."

"Gonzalez, you must think I'm an idiot. You know he can't do that. He's not on the Code Enforcement docket anymore."

"No, but he sure as hell would rather be there than in this courtroom listening to all this bullshit. His old habits are going to take time to break, Donley. You know we're going to be here until this afternoon, which means a simple eviction will throw off his whole docket today. He won't like that, especially when I let him know we were willing to move out if you hadn't been so stubborn about trying to get some money out of these people. You ever hear about blood out of a turnip?"

Donley agreed to give Pauline a week.

On the way out of the courthouse Pauline touched Gonzalez's arm and told him thanks. He could not shake the feeling that he had missed something.

The next day started badly for Gonzalez. His beat-up van gave out on him on the Speer Boulevard viaduct. He backed up traffic for two miles before he found the loose ignition wire and managed to tighten it enough to make it to the office.

The uneasiness that started during Pauline's case returned. He felt on the edge.

The receptionist chewed him out for not telling her he would be late. He grunted and picked up a dozen telephone messages from his mail slot, all marked "urgent". His desk was stacked with intake sheets, all marked "urgent". Case files littered the floor, the bookcases, and the tops of filing cabinets.

He loosened his tie, shut the door, and turned on his radio. Music from The

Blasters asked him if he was going to have a time tonight. He nodded his head to the beat as he waited for calls from clients stuck in crap up to their elbows. They would continue almost nonstop until lunch when Gonzalez escaped for some green chile and a beer at Joe's Buffet on Santa Fe.

That afternoon the chile churned angrily in the pit of his stomach when his secretary told him Crazy Chuck was in the waiting room. Chuck wanted to talk about a few problems at the projects.

Charles Luevano was a big, muscular Chicano in his late forties who had spent more time in prison than his age would allow, or so he said. Gonzalez had seen his record and he was amazed at the list of burglaries, hold-ups, assaults, drug busts and bad checks. How many crimes can one man commit in one life? Gonzalez guessed that Chuck was free because he was stone crazy, loco, "a few problems with my head." You had to be a little insane to survive on the streets.

Chuck loved to talk. He could go on for hours about things that made no sense but that, according to Chuck, required the immediate filing of a complaint in federal court because his "civil and due process rights were abridged, man."

Gonzalez stared at the hulking, fidgety man. Chuck had salt and pepper hair brushed straight back from his forehead. The rolled-up sleeves of his blue work shirt revealed tattooed roses, initials, crosses, and a leaping black panther.

The uneasiness had turned into a pounding knot lodged in the middle of the lawyer's forehead.

"Mira, ese. I got to have something done, m-a-a-an. Those white devils in the housing are going to spray my place for cockroaches, and I ain't got none, man. That spray only kills me. It don't do nothin' to those bugs. They been around for a million years. What do those honkies know about killin' those bugs? My system won't put up with that stuff, man. I'm allergic to that spray, it screws up my lungs, makes me cough. Shit, man, that shit will kill me before any of those goddamned roaches kick. They just sprayed last year and what happened? Not a goddamned thing, except to me, man. I'm disabled, a ward of the government, they can't do this to me. They know how bad I am. I got a bullet in my gut." He lifted his shirt and showed Gonzalez the scar. "And they want to spray with some poison that will just jack me up, m-a-a-an."

His words came out in a slow, sinusy whine.

"You know me, man, I'm an old tecato. I seen it all and the chotas know it. They're out to get me for years. They got snitches all over the projects, watching me, trying to get me to do some really funny shit. Out of nowhere, they come up to me and try to sell me shit man, shit like I ain't seen for years, shit that even the goddamned Mayor can't get, and they want to sell it to *me*, man, me." He thumped his chest with the palm of his hand and Gonzalez jumped at the hollow sound. "Why, ese, why to me all of a sudden? Because they got me labeled a career criminal. Shit, I ain't no career criminal, man. I ain't got no money like a career criminal should have. If I did would I be talkin' to legal aid? Hell no. I'd be talkin' to some fancy defense lawyer, but my jacket says career criminal, m-a-a-an."

Gonzalez needed help. The bad feeling had festered and burst into a melancholy hysteria. He saw drunken Pauline standing shakily in the courthouse hall, leaning on him, grabbing at his coat, thanking him with words that reached into his throat and gagged him.

An odor of a thousand other clients mixed with that of Pauline and Chuck and filled his nostrils. He smelled despair, fear, weakness. He was suffocating. His fingers scratched for fresh air.

Chuck rambled on about white devils and cockroaches.

Sweat popped out on the skin beneath the lawyer's moustache. He started to laugh; tears rolled down his face.

He stood up.

Chuck stopped in mid-sentence, open-mouthed, outcrazied by his own lawyer.

Gonzalez watched himself grab the larger man by the head and ram his face into the wall. Blood spurted from the skull and flowed onto yellow sheets of paper and manila folders. Chuck slumped to the floor and Gonzalez was free.

He ran out of the office and into the coffee room. His hands shook as he poured a cup of the day old, bitter liquid. He took a long drink. He talked to himself to try to gain control. His breath escaped in heavy, rushing surges, and chills crawled up his spine.

Gonzalez knew he would go back to his dreary office and listen to Crazy Chuck for as long as the man could talk and at the end he would treat him like a real client, offer advice on dealing with the killer cockroach spray, and shake his hand goodbye. And he would do the same for the client after Chuck, for the next Pauline, and for all the

others.

Gonzalez made a living representing crazies, weirdos, misfits, losers and plain folks who got taken. Sometimes it was hard to distinguish between client and lawyer, sanity and craziness. But each morning he reminded himself he was not a burned out liberal who took up space on legal aid's payroll. He was ace attorney for the underdog.

