

One For Your Troubles

First came the heaving and stumbling as the urge took hold, pulling its victim into a dark alleyway and hunching him over as vomit rushed out his mouth. He'd felt it coming, the pit had grown larger by the minute in his chest, not going away no matter how much he held it off, and even with the bile streaked along the side of a building rather than in his stomach, nothing was changing. Not now, anyway. The kid who'd been the unfortunate victim of himself took a step back from the mess, getting up against the wall across from it instead and sliding down as slow as what he'd left opposite him. Small raindrops trickled down from the sky above, making the kid half-consider staying outside to feel clean, but it seemed unnecessary. Thank the Lord above, he thought, since his slick patterned shirt was spotless, the nonsensical but regal shapes shone brightly in the little light the overcast evening offered. He looked back to the opening of the alley, spotting a trench coat-clad man standing and tapping his foot while staring at him.

"Finished in there?" he called, crossing his arms as he noticed he'd been spotted.

"Go to hell!" the kid yelled back, chucking a random can he found on the ground toward the man, not even making it close to him.

The man sighed and started walking closer, "Son, if you don't get your shit together, I-"

"Ain't your goddamn son, don't even use those pretty lil' words on me, cause I ain't hearing it!"

A moment of silence passed between the two of raw tension before the man coughed to clear his throat and scratched his collar.

“My apologies,” he started, passive-aggressively at that, “*Jorge*, if you don’t get your shit together, I’ll have to ask just how dedicated to this you are. Don’t lose motivation now.” Jorge glared at the man as he kneeled down to get at eye level, smiling fakely and putting a hand on his shoulder. This man, Detective Corrigan, had a painful-looking smile indeed, his top set of teeth the only things you could see as they gripped onto his lower lip, while the upper lip folded back leaving his cheekbones bulging out. If it was meant to disturb Jorge, it always worked, but he’d never tell. Corrigan picked up Jorge from under his arms as if lifting a baby, then walked off, beckoning him to follow with a quiet hand gesture.

Both walked around the corner into the building Jorge had graced with his mess: a diner, run by a rotund, yet cheerful-looking man who had nothing better to do right now than watch these two characters darken his doorstep. Corrigan waved to the man, who gave a nod and turned to his coffee machine, already having prepared a pot for the pair.

“Better be the strong stuff, Keith, I ain’t had a wink o’ sleep since yesterday,” Corrigan said as he and Jorge took their seats at the counter.

“Only the strong stuff with me, officer,” Keith assured, pouring both of them a mug. He glanced at Jorge, “You got a better schedule than this turkey?”

“Hm? Oh, I dunno, pry’ not,” Jorge replied, darting his eyes to the floor.

“You’re both some crazy cats, but who am I to judge the man?” Keith gave a knowing look to Corrigan before sauntering off to the back. The radio was the only sound in the diner now, intriguing Corrigan enough to have him turn to acknowledge the machine like it were a person. Jorge didn’t bother listening, just stared blankly into his coffee, too deep into his thoughts for his own good.

“Carter or Ford?” Corrigan asked.

Jorge cocked his head, “Huh?”

“Who’s winning the big chair of ‘76?”

“I don’t care ‘bout that stuff.”

Corrigan sighed even louder than he had in the alley, stood up, and walked across the building to the jukebox nestled nicely in the corner. Fiddling with it for a bit, he finally found what he was looking for, popping his money in and letting his song of choice play. Drum beats and sharp guitar twangs slowly stepped onto the scene, already beginning to phase out the talk of politics on the radio. Jorge would’ve liked it, had it not been for Corrigan’s pathetic attempt at a shuffle back towards his seat.

“Like *Funkadelic*? This is a good one of theirs,” Corrigan grinned, again with that godforsaken smile.

“Never heard of ‘em,” Jorge said.

“Oh, *I’ll bet you have!*” Another second of silence. “Song’s name, kid...Christ you’re a worthless comedic audience, damn putz.”

“You gonna keep actin’ like this? All that’s happened, and you think it’s another *boogie night* down at Studio 54!” Jorge exploded, slamming his hand on the table and shaking some coffee from his mug. Corrigan slumped back into his chair, sipped his coffee, then took a small folded paper from his chest pocket. Jorge opened the note, half-aware of what it was, but wanting to confirm it for himself, and found exactly what he expected: a list of names.

“Tell me whose handwriting that is,” Corrigan directed.

Jorge’s, he knew that.

“And who knew all those folks?”

Jorge again.

“Don’t go yellin’ at me, I’m giving you what you want! Earl Morgan, Jeremy Millcomb, Florian Lee, those men and more are all the people you bumbled like a bitch to me about in the station!”

“Never said I wanted *this!*” Jorge snapped back.

“Oh, but you thought it, never needed to say. Think I’m gonna believe a boy with this big o’ fire under his ass ain’t gonna wanna whack every single bastard who did him wrong?”

“Maybe I should just turn you in, give your friends at the station a wake-up call!” Jorge threatened, taking the paper and holding it close.

Corrigan wagged his finger, “*Tsk, tsk*, what are those there?” he asked, pointing to checkmarks by every name except one now.

“You wrote ‘em,” Jorge mumbled, his confidence evaporated.

“And who made those checks, *really?*” Corrigan’s eyebrow raised, slaughtering any semblance of resistance Jorge had shown up to this point. He was dead quiet now, his nose itched like hell, and sweat pooled under his coat, all while Corrigan looked like he would pounce on this clear display of defeat at any moment.

Yet there he sat, leaning sure, but reluctant to make a full offensive now. He’d set up a maze for Jorge to follow, one only Corrigan knew the route of but pushed Jorge along the way whether he liked it or not. Carrot-and-stick philosophy was long gone by now, only the stick kept things in motion at this detective’s behest.

“Wanna bring me down, try, but you’ll be screwed even more, I guarantee it,” Corrigan warned, taking the paper back effortlessly and putting it back in his pocket, before poking out his police badge unobtrusively.

“Not gonna let us take a break? I got school today,” Jorge reminded, praying this was an excuse worthy enough to push plans back.

“Junior year skirt-chasing, y’ mean? Please, kid, I know y’ only go to see that one broad, what’s her name...” Corrigan paused, looking expectantly at Jorge for an answer.

“We ain’t going back?” Jorge asked.

Corrigan half-grinned, letting this one go. “Not this deep in. Come on, Harlem’s our next stop.”

Without pause, Jorge turned and stood, headed for the door, while Corrigan slipped back to the jukebox before following, just as the current song was fading out. Jorge stopped, waited for him, and once he’d finished his business, followed him outside, hearing *White Room* by *Cream* start up before the door shut and Keith sheepishly reemerged from the back, checking if Corrigan had gone, then breathed a sigh of relief. At least someone could be between the two of them.

Corrigan’s patrol car attracted a lot of attention in this neighborhood, none of it good. An armory’s worth of guns surrounded the pair as they rolled through the street, all invisible till one of them screwed everything up, but with luck, nothing would get *that* bad. Even the homeless in the alleys looked like they’d have the means, and idiotic bravado to take on a police officer, one of them stared right into Jorge’s eyes through the window as the car passed, his own eyes practically bulging out either from anticipation or a sob story too long to hear. There was only one streetlight still working somewhat right on this street, and even then, it flickered like hell, still, there was a spot underneath it, and Corrigan took it.

“Ugh...parallel parking’s a pain, don’t do it unless you have to,” he chuckled, peering behind his seat as he reversed.

“No point in gettin’ a license, bus can get me where I gotta go,” Jorge shrugged.

“Ah, but you’d miss the fun, I still remember speeding down our old backroads back in the country, cars weren’t as fast back then, but hell if it didn’t feel like it. Plus, the wheelmen I’ve arrested looked more alive than the robbers they were chauffeuring, give it a shot.” Just then, a scraping sound came from the back of the car, like sandpaper against the sidewalk, it was terrible on the ears. Corrigan looked annoyed, muttering a swear or two under his breath as he finalized his parking job, turning off the car as soon as he could and getting out to inspect it.

“Fucked that up too, didn’t ya?” Jorge mocked, getting out as well.

“Nah, just take a look at the way this asshole parks, think this is considered ‘good parking’?” Corrigan asked, pointing to the car in front which he’d scratched the rear bumper of. The car in question was perfectly in the lines, the only issue of note was its angle being slightly oblong, but that was only noticeable after a few good seconds of dedicated studying, and certainly not enough to justify Corrigan’s excuse for parking.

“Whatever, not my ride,” Jorge said. He huffed hot air into his palms and clasped them together, the rain was starting to turn to sleet.

Corrigan shrugged, “Not your problem? S’pose not, yours is upstairs.” Both looked up to the brimstone apartments looming over them, left abandoned by any form of city oversight or maintenance likely since their construction in the Roaring Twenties. The only thing roaring about this building now was its horrific masonry from the outside, each brick showed its age in cracks like a tree trunk’s grooves, and this building looked especially old for its age.

“Let’s get this over with.” Jorge walked to the front door and opened it cautiously, whether to do this quietly or to not break the door by sheer thought alone, he couldn’t decide. Corrigan followed close behind, hands in his pockets, but only one packed heat, and you could almost tell which was which by how one arm seemed stiffer. The pair marched up two more floors, stopping right off the stairway as Corrigan took out the paper and examined it.

“Harris Wrobel...room 307, just at the end of the hall, I’d reckon,” Corrigan said before laughing to himself a little. “Pissed off a Pole? Or more accurately, I guess your pops did.”

“Room 307,” Jorge repeated to himself over and over until he reached the very room, hesitating as he raised a fist to knock. He glanced to Corrigan, who’d kept a few feet away, before finally swallowing his fear and knocking three times, firmly. Just then, Corrigan stuffed a gun into Jorge’s back pocket before slinking away and pressing himself against a partially exposed support beam.

“Who is it? If you’re that beggar I got my magnum ready to pay you what you need, asshole!” a voice threatened from the other side. Corrigan’s body snapped almost into a completely different gear from his usual self, taking out his .38 Special and cocking it slowly.

“Not a beggar, promise! Just gotta ask a favor, mister!” Jorge called out, biting his lip half-expecting to get his skull blown out in the next few seconds. A click sounded from the other side, and the door swung open, revealing the colossus of a man that was Harris Wrobel, holding a magnum as promised. The two were locked in a brief, silent standoff, before Harris shoved the gun into his back pocket and loosened his posture, lightening his expression when he realized his assumed nuisance was some street kid.

“Whatcha need, kid? Shouldn’t your ass be in school?” he asked.

“That’s the thing, I need to call my pops, I kinda stayed with my friend upstairs last night and he ain’t got a way for me to call him, you got a landline sir?” Jorge asked.

Harris looked back into his apartment, then back at Jorge, then back again, before backing off from the doorway. “All yours, but be quick.” Jorge gave him a smile and walked inside, hearing the door shut behind him right as he cleared it. Right then, he realized he hadn’t been told where this telephone was.

“Hey, where’s this-” A swinging fist gave him his answer, throwing him into a coffee table and nearly shattering the glass frame.

“Not robbing me this time, prick! Think you’re smart, funny? Here’s some news, little street rat, I ain’t no spaz, and it’s youngblood hotshots like you who think us folks ain’t got brains. There ain’t no kids on the fourth floor ‘cause it’s where we shoved all the old folks at!” Harris ranted, already packing his magnum and pressing it to Jorge’s head when he pulled himself up.

“Ah, shit...” Jorge panted desperately to catch his breath, the threat of an imminent bullet to the skull not registering like it did when he couldn’t even see the damn gun. “...can I ask why you were-”

“No questions, kid!” Harris raised a boot and launched it into Jorge’s jaw, sending him off the table and onto the floor. All he could think about now was where Corrigan had gone, he should’ve been here by now, he thought, guns blazing and bodies falling to the carpet while Jorge watched. The final honor would be his though, but maybe not now. He might earn the bullet instead.

“D-don’t shoot, ain’t gonna rob you, I really did just need to-”

“Shut the hell up!” Another kick, this time to the chest.

No use acting now, time to come clean. “Why’d you cheat my pops?” Jorge managed to gasp between spats of blood and sharp breaths.

“Your pops? I don’t even know who you are, kid, and I *really* don’t know what he was cheated out of, or how some rat like you knows. Dumbass father you got to have his son know his ‘business’,” Harris snickered, backing up but keeping his aim on Jorge’s head.

“Bullshit, I know you were there, and I didn’t see nothin’, I just know things,” Jorge hissed.

“He knows things...” Harris laughed again, tapping the side of his magnum to his head and smiling. “He *knows things!* Good for you, princess, now tell me what the hell is really goin’ on, what’s your daddy’s name?”

“You already know. Aaron de Meyer.”

“Hm...nope, don’t ring a bell, maybe you got the wrong address. Unless you know this other middle-aged failure, I’m afraid this conversation’s over,” Harris said, aiming back at Jorge. Just then, the door flew open, small wooden fragments from the doorframe shot out, and Corrigan rushed in, firing twice from his revolver and striking Harris each time, sending him to join Jorge on the carpet. Jorge climbed to his feet, holding his aching jaw and feeling around his teeth with his tongue for anything loose, finding nothing, to his relief.

“Christ almighty...” Harris groaned, bleeding from the stomach and left leg. He scanned the room again, fixating on Corrigan with shock when he finally registered him. “Speak of the fucking de-”

Another gunshot. Not according to plan. Harris’ body stiffened up, his head bobbing back before locking just above the carpet, the shocked expression frozen on his face, before his skull

planted itself in a pool of its own blood, falling to the side to face Jorge directly. The rest of his body fell limp as well as muffled voices and barking could be heard from around the building.

“What in the hell was that? So much for having me do the work!” Jorge yelled, rushing up to Corrigan, who’d stayed in the same pose since he pulled the trigger.

“Had to be done,” he said without movement. “Was gettin’ too loud.”

“So you fire a gun? What kinda-”

“C’mon, we gotta book it.” Corrigan grabbed Jorge and guided him back downstairs and outside before shoving him in the passenger seat of the patrol car and heading back into the brimstone apartments, gun tucked back in his pocket. Minutes passed, and a crowd started to amass around the building, all while Jorge slinked further and further down to avoid prying eyes, occasionally being spotted briefly by some. More minutes dragged by until the driver-side door opened and Corrigan crawled inside, ruffling his hair and rubbing his temple.

“The ‘police investigation gone wrong’ schtick work this time?” Jorge asked as the car started and sped out of the area. They scratched the car in front of them again on their way out, but neither cared considering the current pressure on them.

“Of course. Half the people in there don’t know how to spell ‘police’ I’d imagine, or they’re too old to make heads or tails of what’s happening. They assume someone’ll be back later to clean up the mess.”

“That’ll have to be you, won’t it?”

“If you consider torching the place a cleaning job, then sure.”

Jorge turned to Corrigan, confused, “Why’s *this* place gotta be burned?”

“Too much happened, too many eyes on it. Better to just have the place burn and have the boys write it up as an accident so that their job, and mine’s, done quicker all the same.” The car

left the block and turned onto a four-lane road, joining the real hustle and bustle of New York's roads. Rush hour had just kicked off, stopping the car dead in the middle of traffic while the police radio buzzed in the background.

"Shit, must've accidentally left her on," Corrigan groaned, reaching for a cord and loosening it, shutting the radio up for good.

"That guy back there 'bout died from seeing your face alone, what was that about?" Jorge questioned.

"Hm? Oh, just another loose end, an old business partner I dealt with a long time ago, small-time thing, really," Corrigan answered candidly.

"And he screwed my dad over?"

"Jorge, he's a petty criminal, of course he was gonna end up finding another one like your dad in due time, s' what happens when rats don't move up in the world, they eat the same bones over and over till its smarter friends come back to make it their new food."

"Sayin' you think you're smarter than him?"

"I'm alive, Jorge, it's objective fact."

The traffic moved again, ever so slightly, before stopping again, something Jorge had grown accustomed to after several straight days of gallivanting across New York. He remembered how annoyed he felt the first time, questioning how the hell people could be so stupid to jam everyone up and not "just go", but now he couldn't bring himself to care. Better to let the city run its course, he thought.

"I ever tell you 'bout my time overseas?" Corrigan asked, breaking the silence.

"No. Should I care?"

“Just a story while we’re waiting for these people to *get their driving skills together!*” he enunciated the last part heavily, even rolling his window down a little to get the message out there.

“What’s it about?” Jorge asked, not caring regardless.

“Well, ‘member how we just got outta ‘Nam? Johnson and his fuckin’ hubris thinking we had to get our shoes muddy over there got us jack, and me even less, y’know.”

Jorge snorted, amused at the images he’d conjured in his head. “*You?* In Vietnam? How’d you not piss off your own squad mates and get left behind?”

Corrigan turned to him, colder than ever before, opening his mouth but stopping just short of speaking. He rephrased his words in his mind before reopening his mouth and trying again. “Wartime comforts,” he answered. “Risky, but kept us warm and pleased all the same. We needed to take an edge off, and some women needed debt collectors off *them*. Fair trade, especially for bachelors who could leave guilt in the jungle with the ‘Cong.”

Jorge thought of a few witty remarks, but kept quiet.

Corrigan kept going. “Glad you asked, though, almost like you’ve heard this before. We had this one village where we were restin’. Kicked back drinks, had some fun, and ignored radio calls askin’ where we were, paradise, I tell you. If God had Heaven down here, we were there in all its jungle-infested, disease-ridden glory. But one day, we hear this one old man talk about something all hush-hush, but he didn’t know we got handed one of the few sorry bastards forced through Vietnamese language lessons, so he knew damn well what they were sayin’.”

He stopped and reached over into the glovebox, taking out a canteen and gulping down its contents for several seconds, before continuing.

“He tells us they’re talking about the ‘clean up’ they’ll be doing, just routine for them, apparently, and our translator boy, oh he was scared shitless. Boy knew them bastards were on the way and wanted outta there, but our C.O. stops us, says he’s got a better idea, one that’d show Americans weren’t no pushovers. That night, we went in and found the village elder, so to speak, and told him if he didn’t tell the welcome wagon coming for us to turn around that we’d give ‘em a pile of ash to find instead. And he cried and cried realizing we weren’t so dumb and said he’d do it, but then my C.O. stops everyone again, saying we had to be more forceful.”

Corrigan stopped again to focus on the road, lighting a cigarette as the ocean of cars settled again, taking some drags for his intermission.

“Said this elder went and tried to screw us, so we had to get back at him as we left. So that night when the old man did his end, we left, but I got told to light a bushfire just outside the old coot’s house, so we’d have a ring of fire, and I did my job. Got scared of doin’ it at first, but then remembered how deep underground I’d be by then if we didn’t do something, this old fuck wouldn’t’ve batted an eye.”

“What’s your point here?” Jorge interrupted.

“When people screw you over, don’t ask questions, don’t give ‘em benefits of the doubt, just deal with them as per your right as a player of the game. They play the game, they’ll play it till the end.” Corrigan took a long breath, flicked his cigarette out the window and turned off the main road into a quieter street. “I’m tired of waiting on these people.”

The car stopped in front of a house over an hour later, Jorge getting out as quickly as he could to get his legs moving and awake. Corrigan was slower to exit, calmer now more than ever after all this time on edge and ready to go at top speed.

“Last one, kid. This’ll be one Ira Spears, a lot slower than Wrobel if the precinct gave me the right documents,” Corrigan briefed, showing Jorge a peek at the file in question.

“Not the documents I’m concerned about, it’s your excuse of a response when I get made, I almost got my head blown off last time and you didn’t bother helpin’ till the last minute!” Jorge said.

“Won’t be like that this time, I promise, gonna be right there with you this time, but I won’t steal your thunder.”

“Just don’t let me get beaten up again, yeah? You’re lucky I still got all my teeth.” Jorge popped his collar and walked onto the porch to the door, Corrigan close behind him and looking down at the ground sheepishly. Knocking like he had each time before, he came up with a whole story in his head about why he was here and why he needed to get inside, but Corrigan being right at his back made him question whether an act was even worth putting up. For all Jorge knew, Corrigan was planning to take his pristine script and shoot it full of holes to deal with their target.

The door opened, and immediately Jorge was greeted by a rifle muzzle pushing past him and right to Corrigan’s shoulder. It fired. The detective practically flew off the front porch, while Jorge’s eyes darted around, undecided on what to focus on.

“Knew this prick would try something!” the shooter inside barked, trying to shut the door before Jorge jammed his foot in its way and pulled his own gun, firing five shots through the front door. He heard a couple of yelps and took it as his cue to enter, finding an old man lying on the ground next to a rifle just out of reach. Still, Jorge knew better and kicked the gun further away as he aimed his own piece at his target’s head.

“A *kid*, he got a kid doin’ his dirty work now?” the old man huffed, gripping his torso and grimacing. This was Ira Spears, no doubt.

“This kid’s got some questions ‘fore you leave, first, why’d you kill my dad? Over some goddamn drugs no less, that worth killing a dad over?” Jorge asked.

“Corrigan! What the...utter hell have you cooked up for him?”

“He ain’t who you’re talking to! *I’m* who you focus on.”

“Kid, you’re playing a dangerous game here, I don’t know who you are or what chip’s on your shoulder, but that fraud out there’s got you hook, line, and sinker,” Ira coughed, spitting out some blood.

“Hell you on about?”

“Thought I heard about Jeremy last night, knew you’d be here for sure when the radio said Earl’s name, too! Real class act, Corrigan!” Ira tried sitting up, but the combination of his old bones and bullet wounds forced him back to the floor, and his own blood. A shadow darkened the doorway behind Jorge: Corrigan’s, and he was more uncomfortable than ever.

“Kid, ignore him,” he said, notably quieter now as well.

“What’s he on about?” Jorge asked.

“He’s tying up loose ends, son. Gonna make police chief with us gone, he thinks. No more blackmail, huh?” Ira answered for Corrigan.

Jorge paused and lowered his gun, turning to Corrigan not sure whether to feel angry, betrayed, or what, he just knew he wanted real answers.

“Whoever killed your daddy...” Ira tried sitting up again, mustering enough to at least face Jorge. “...he sure as hell don’t know. But he knows opportunity, and once you’re done with me, he’ll tie up one more loose end, ain’t I right?”

“Figures the last one would use these manipulation tactics, deal with him so we can go, we’ve been loud enough as is!” Corrigan ordered.

“Your gun’s gonna be traced back to you, put’s you in the frame better. You’ll rot in Sing-Sing in no time,” Ira fired back.

Jorge looked at the empty floor between Corrigan and Ira, the pit growing in his stomach again. He wanted to vomit, but it could wait, it had to. This was enough for him, regardless of what happened, someone screwed him over, and if he’d learned one thing...

Outside, a cold breeze swept through the once-quiet neighborhood as a man stepped from his house to investigate the commotion. He approached his neighbor’s house carefully, seeing the door wide open, and took his time navigating the front lawn of dead grass and rusted sprinklers.

“Mr. Spears? You okay in there?” the man called out. Just then, another loud bang, and before the man could jolt back in fear, a young boy stumbled out of the house, lurching over the wooden rail of the porch and vomiting. He spent another few moments there coughing, spitting, and hyperventilating, before pushing himself off and staggering towards the man.

“What’s going on in there, kid? You hurt?” he asked, grabbing the boy by the shoulders.

“I’ll manage,” the boy grumbled, pushing the man away and walking down the street, coughing more as he went. The man was about to chase the boy but heard a sound from inside the house, a voice that reminded him of his still-missing neighbor, but at the same time, sounded unfamiliar and broken.

“Made the right choice, you did,” it said.