

THE THINGS I HAVE FOUND

LOST THINGS AND THEIR STORIES

EL GATO

a story by Richard Sleboe, New Orleans

FOUND AT: SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

32°74'79° N, 117°16'47° W

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a photographic project by Robert Götzfried and friends

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This is a true story. It happened almost twenty years ago in San Diego, California. I was walking home from work when I saw an old lady with a cane drop the cat into a trash can on the corner of Robinson Avenue and one of those nameless alleys between the numbered avenues. As soon as the deed was done, the old lady hailed a cab. The driver pulled up to the curb, got out of the car, walked around the back, opened the door for the old lady, helped her into the back seat, took her cane, carefully closed the door, and put the cane in the trunk. The driver didn't look much younger than the passenger. Perhaps he was angling for a big tip. Or perhaps he was just a gentleman. It's a dying breed, but back then, you still met one from time to time. He walked around the car again, got into the driver's seat, and pulled the door shut. He made a U-turn and headed West, in the direction of I5.

I peered into the trash can. The cat didn't look like much. It looked like it had been made from a washcloth. It might have been a dog's toy. I've heard it said that three-colored cats are lucky. This one had two colors, greenish blue and dirty white. One color short of lucky. I picked it up anyway. I thought Rosa might like it. She was two at the time, and back then, I didn't have any money to buy her fancy presents. I thought the cat might put a smile on her face. That's what you do for the people you love. You try to make them smile, even when times are tough. Especially when times are tough.

Before I knew what was happening, I was on the ground, with the cold barrel of a gun pressed to my temple. This is the end, I thought. I felt oddly serene about it. I haven't had a bad life, I thought. I'd like it to go on for a little bit, see Rosa grow up, see one of my stories get published, see the sun rise over Waimea Bay, things like that. But if this is the end, so be it, I told myself. At least I'll go out with a bang. Well, it wasn't the end. If it had been, I wouldn't be here to tell the tale. It was only the beginning, the beginning of one hell of a crazy Christmas story.

Just as I thought the guy with the gun would pull the trigger, I saw the door of a black van parked across the street slide open. Two figures in black nylon jackets and combat boots jumped out, bounded across the street, pulled the guy off me, kicked away his gun, cuffed him, and dragged him across the street towards the van. Now I could see the big, bold yellow lettering on the backs of their jackets. DEA. Drug Enforcement Administration. Narcs. As an occasional smoker of weed for recreational purposes, I'm not the world's biggest fan of the DEA, but that day, that moment, I was grateful these guys were there, doing their jobs.

I watched the van drive off East, towards the 163. Someone helped me to my feet. A guy in a suit. A black suit. At the time, nobody wore suits, let alone black ones, in Hillcrest. Today, Hillcrest may be hipster territory. But back then, it was a hippie reservation, and everybody was wearing harem pants, tie-dye tops, and Navajo headbands.

"You're okay?", the suit asked.

"I think so."

He pointed to the toy cat in my hand.

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“I’ll need that.”

“This?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“It’s evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“I can’t tell you. Also, I’ll need to see some ID.”

I handed him my driver’s license. He wrote down my name on a notepad.

“How can I reach you?”

I gave him my number. And that was that. He was gone before I could ask him anything. Also, once again, I was without a gift for Rosa. On my way home, I popped into Bluestocking Books on Fifth Avenue. I found a small picture book about an old man and his cat. Rosa loved it. Over the years, I read it to her so many times that it eventually fell apart. I tried to find a new copy, but it seems to have gone out of print.

I had almost forgotten the whole thing when I got a call. It was Three Kings Day.

“This is Wilson.”

“How can I help you?”

“This is about the cat.”

“I think you’ve got the wrong number.”

“I don’t think so. You gave it to me.”

“I did?”

“Hillcrest? The day before Christmas?”

“Oh yeah. You’re that agent.”

“Special Agent.”

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“Sure.”

“Are you free this afternoon?”

“Am I in trouble?”

“No. So are you?”

“What?”

“Free. This afternoon.”

“Sure.”

“Three pm?”

“Okay.”

He gave me an address in Middletown. I shaved, showered, and put on my most formal clothes, a pair of new jeans, a plain blue shirt, and a pair of brown cowboy boots. I even put on a shoestring tie. I wanted to make a good impression. You never know. I barely made it to the address in time. It was one of those government buildings that look like a bank and smell like a hospital. The guard at the door made me empty my pockets and go through a metal detector. Wilson met me at the desk and walked me to his office.

“Have a seat.”

“Thanks.”

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

I took a sip. It was hideous.

“Delicious”, I said.

He laughed.

“Right.”

He put the toy cat on the table.

“You remember this?”

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“Of course.”

I picked it up to look at it. It looked a little frazzled, like it had been through a lot. I turned it over. On the back, there was a band of three buttons.

“Can I open it?”

“You know that curiosity killed the cat, don’t you?”

He grinned.

“I’m only messing with you. Go ahead.”

I undid the buttons and opened the cat the way a coroner might open a body. The cat was stuffed with flakes of foam, some white, some the color of eggshells, some pale green.

“It’s lucky on the inside.”

“What do you mean?”

I showed him the flakes.

“I don’t see it.”

“A three-colored cat is supposed to be lucky.”

“Well, it was lucky for El Gato. Until it wasn’t.”

“El Gato?”

“That’s Spanish. It means cat.”

“I know that.”

“El Gato is the boss of one of the major Mexican cartels. Has his merchandize manufactured South of the border and sells it right here in California.”

“Merchandize?”

“Cocaine.”

“Oh.”

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“Yeah.”

“So what’s with the cat?”

“It’s El Gato’s lucky charm. It’s also his stand-in. It keeps him out of the line of fire.”

“Unlike me.”

Wilson laughed.

“Right. He uses the cat to hand over hot goods.”

I turn the cat inside out, spilling foam flakes all over the table.

“Am I missing something?”

“The thing you’re missing isn’t there. Not anymore.”

“What was it?”

“A key.”

“The key to this story?”

He laughed.

“You could say that. You smoke?”

“Sure.”

Between the two of us, we went through a whole pack of John Player Specials as Special Agent Wilson unpacked the story for me.

“The man who tried to take the cat from you was a runner for El Gato.”

“Why did he want it so badly?”

“Because of the key.”

“So what did the key open?”

“A locker in a cruise ship terminal on Broadway Pier. The merchandize is brought into the country as part of the luggage of a cruise ship passenger.”

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“Let me guess. An old lady with a walking cane.”

Wilson raised an eyebrow.

“How do you know?”

“I saw her drop the cat into the trash can.”

“Right. She’s known as the White Widow.”

“Charming.”

“Yeah, well. She is the most notorious drug runner on the Pacific Rim.”

“She seemed harmless.”

“That’s the idea.”

“And how did she get the cat?”

“A steward who works for El Gato placed it in her cabin just before the ship reached San Diego, stuffed with a coded message specifying the number of the locker and the drop-off point.”

“A trash can on the corner of Robinson and a nameless alley between Fourth and Fifth?”

“Exactly. In this case at any rate. It’s a different place every time. Different locker too. The White Widow destroys the message, puts the merchandize in the locker, puts the key in the cat, and drops off the cat as instructed. El Gato sends his runner to pick up the cat and retrieve the merchandize from the locker. That day, one of the biggest shipments in recorded history had come in. Three-figure street value.”

“Thousands?”

He laughed.

“Millions.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Everybody wants snow for Christmas. Without snow, people just wouldn’t survive their family gatherings.”

Wilson laughed. He laughed a lot. A little too much for my taste. Like he was a one-man sitcom.

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“How did you know about the drop-off point?”

“We had a mole on the ship. We’ve been planning this for months. We were hoping the runner would lead us to El Gato.”

“But he didn’t.”

“He might have if we had let him kill you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you. I guess.”

He laughed.

“Relax. You’re safe now.”

“Did you find the drugs?”

“Not that day. By the time we got to the locker, it was empty. All we found was a Christmas card that said BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME. We think that they must have been watching the locker, and when the runner didn’t show up, they cleared it out. Maybe they picked the lock. Maybe they paid off the terminal supervisor, or put a gun to his head. Maybe they had the key copied, just in case. I’m not surprised. With a shipment this size, you want all the bases covered.”

“So you’ve got nothing.”

“Wait for it. We put the runner back on the street, and we tailed him 24/7. I took the New Year’s shift myself. The runner was careful, but he got sloppy. They all do sooner or later. You just have to stick with it, and we did. This morning, it finally paid off. We caught the cat. The runner was delivering king cake from one of those fancy pastry shops in the Gaslamp Quarter to El Gato’s mansion on Point Loma. Turns out the big cat has a sweet tooth. Even answered the door himself. That’s how greedy he was, and that’s how we got him.”

“I guess he hadn’t heard that sugar is bad for you.”

Wilson laughed.

“That’s a good one. I’ll have to remember that.”

He stubbed out his cigarette.

“The best part is that he still had the bulk of the Christmas shipping at his house. After the Hillcrest incident, he didn’t have the guts to put it on the market.”

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“Why wasn’t this on the news?”

“It just happened this morning.”

Wilson checked his watch.

“I’m holding a press conference in an hour. It will be all over the news tonight. We’ve got enough to put him away for life.”

“Do I get a reward?”

He laughed.

“For what? Compromising a DEA operation?”

“I had no idea.”

“You can keep the cat.”

And that was that. I considered giving the cat to Rosa, but I didn’t. I didn’t want her to play with a drug lord’s lucky charm. But I kept it, and this morning Rosa found it while she was boxing up her stuff. She’s all grown up now. She’s going to go away to college after the holidays.

“This is cute”, she said.

“I thought you might like it.”

“Can I have it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Will you tell me?”

“I’m not sure I even remember it all.”

“Come on.”

“I’ll write it down for you.”

So there you have it, Rosa. If you still want it, it’s yours.