# 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

**DECEMBER 24, 2004** 



#### a story by Richard Sleboe

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.

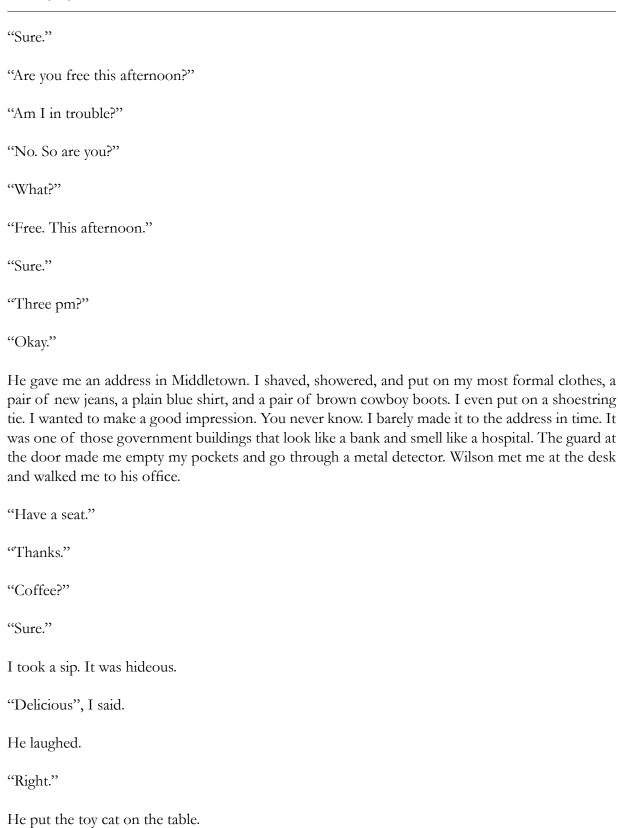
"I think so."

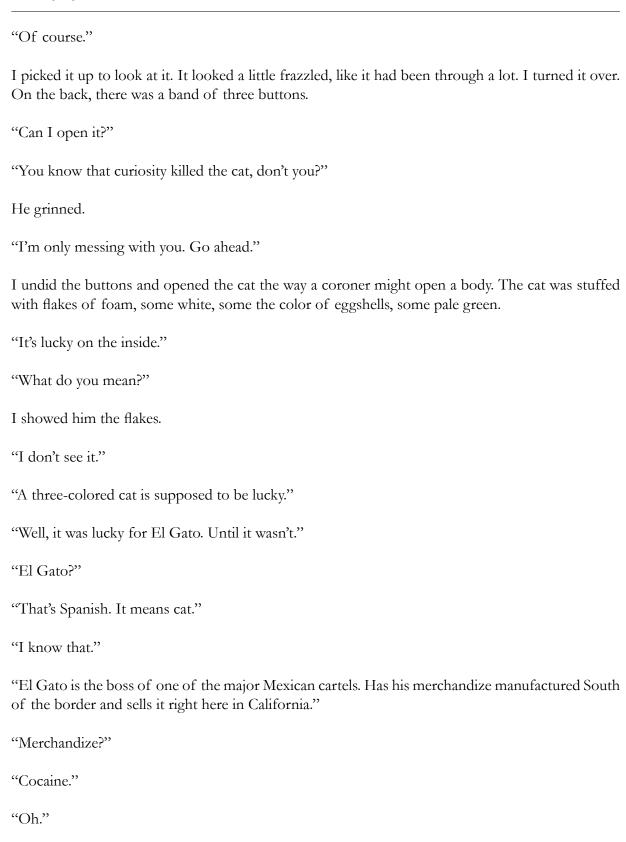
He pointed to the toy cat in my hand.

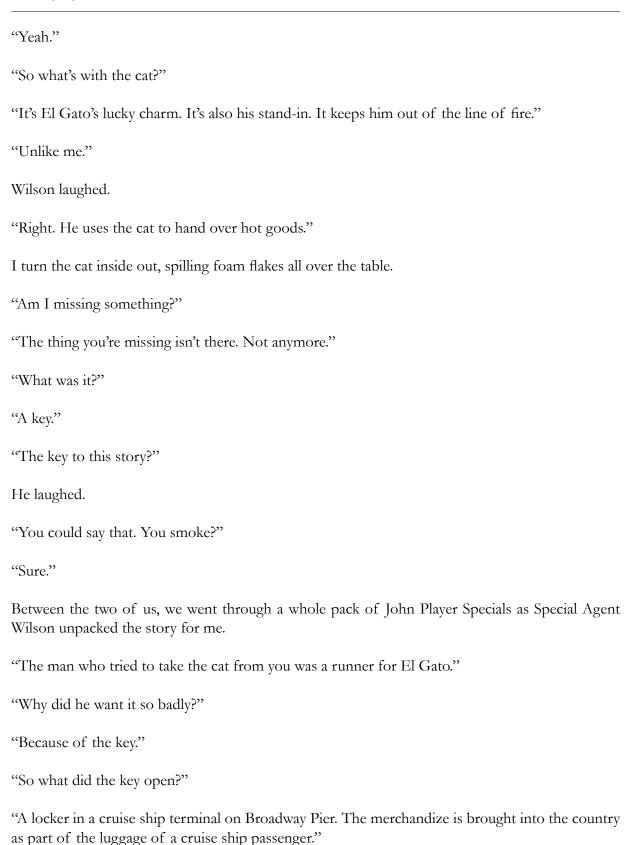


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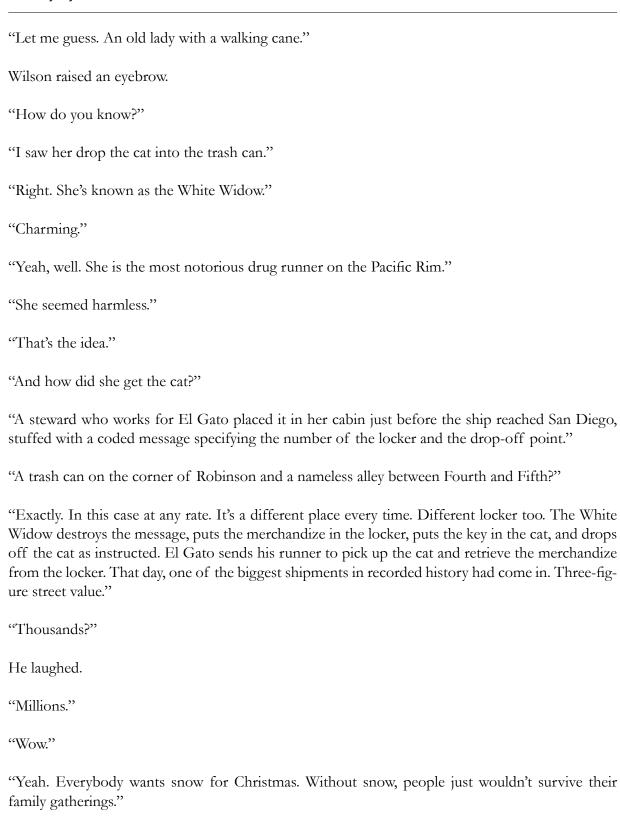
"You remember this?"







#### a story by Richard Sleboe



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."

