

# Blind Spot

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He looked a bit disoriented and nervous. "Come in, Jack." Jack nodded and, as he entered, jerked a beer from the six pack binder and put the other five in the refrigerator. At first he declined the invitation to have supper, but then acquiesced. He apologized several times for not calling before coming and seeming like he waited until supper time to arrive, but he didn't have a phone. Assurances of his welcome did not prevent the stream of apologies.

Through the entire supper his conversation was polite and subdued. Between bites he rubbed his left arm, his left jaw and his forehead.

After supper, my wife excused herself and left us alone at the kitchen table. Jack went to the refrigerator, got another beer and returned to the table. "I may be a redneck," he said, pouring the beer in a glass, "but I always drink beer from a glass." Jack smiled crookedly and chuckled. He placed the glass on the table and rubbed his left wrist and raised his bushy eyebrows. His face was not symmetrical and his mustache looked more crooked than usual.

"How's Betty, Jack?"

"Not well -- weak lungs. She had stopped smoking for a few months, but she's smoking again." Jack shrugged his massive shoulders and leaned forward. "What can I say. She

has lost a lot of weight, but not because of dieting. There are physical reasons, which I'm not responsible for and then there are mental ones for which I'm responsible. Only God knows what I've done to her." Jack chuckled and suddenly sat erect and started rubbing his temples. He looked redder than usual, almost like a deep tan. It was late in November and it looked like he had just returned from the beach.

Jack opened a fresh pack of cigarettes, took out a cigarette and threw the pack on the table. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No, let me get you an ashtray." I stood up and got an ashtray from the kitchen and placed it in front of Jack. "Have you heard from Lockheed?"

"Yes, and it doesn't look good." Jack rubbed his jaw. "I called Thursday and they told me the offer was in the mail and that I should get it Monday or Tuesday. When I didn't receive it, I called again. Apparently Don Miller, who now heads a department of two hundred and sixty people, remembered me as a guy who doesn't wear a tie and he fell in love with a guy in a suit and tie from out of state and sent the offer to him. If he turns it down then the offer comes to me."

Jack shook his head slowly. "This is a bad time to look for a job with the holidays and all that. Even if they wanted me, it'll be January before I could get a pay check and I'll starve by then."

Jack closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with both hands. "I put all my eggs in one basket," he said, then chuckled. "Puse todos los huevos en una..." Jack frowned in concentration. "How do you say basket in Spanish?"

"Canasta."

"That's right, 'Puse todos los huevos en una canasta.' Did I pronounce that right. Could you understand me?" Jack rubbed his left forearm.

"Yes, you pronounce Spanish very well. Are you okay, Jack?"

"I'm not drunk. In fact this is my first beer today. If I seem to be disoriented, it's because of the stroke and heart attack I had today." Jack opened and closed his left hand as he rubbed his wrist.

"You had a stroke and heart attack today! And you're here! What did the doctor say?"

"I didn't see one. I probably should have. I've had several in the last few months, but this was the biggest. It was about three this afternoon. I was walking over to Jerry's to meet Bob who was going to lend me some money. Bob has fallen out favor with Dave and Gary, but he's not really a bad sort." Jack took a deep breath, then nervously took a small puff of his cigarette. "I'm still not sure if he is really a racist or it's just part of his humor. Well, just as I got to Jerry's it hit me. My left arm constricted and my heart was jumping out of my chest and I could feel my face become distorted. Is my face still crooked? I must look grotesque." Jack rubbed his left jaw.

"Yes, it is crooked."

"Well, it's always been crooked, but is it worse? Too bad it wasn't the other side, then I'd have a straight face, but it doesn't happen that way. Nature goes the way it's leaning. I hope I don't have too much brain damage. I have to go to Freeport for an interview."

"Jack, you look very red. I can call nine one one and get help."

"I don't want them coming here, to your home." Jack shook his head. "If it doesn't get better, I'll tell you and I'll wait out in the street so they don't come in here."

"Jack, they are not going to break in. I'll open the door! They are not going to mess up the house."

"No," Jack shook his head. "I have some pills for high blood pressure." He took out a small vial from his right pocket, removed two pills and washed them down with beer.

"The doctor gave me some of these last time. If I saw him again, he'd probably tell me to take four instead of one."

Jack smiled and chuckled. "When Bob saw me, he wanted to call nine one one. Even without insurance, they have to treat you when you call nine one one. Perhaps I should have, but there were things I had to do. I had to get milk for my wife and food for the dogs. Bob saw that I was not in shape to go grocery shopping so he did it for me while I stayed in the car."

"When we got back to the house Bob forced me to admit that the reason I didn't go to the hospital was not because I had to get food for my wife--it was for the dogs. I admitted it." Jack leaned forward and erupted with a sound between a chuckle and a laugh. "I wanted to make sure the dogs got fed on time. They're not dogs, by the way," Jack pointed his finger like a baton. "Dogs are smelly. They're woofers and woofers are lovable!" Jack laughed again.

"But that's not why I came," he said. "I know that you write short stories based on true life. And I remember one that you wrote, which by the way, I think is your best work, 'Chicken Thief.' Now I will give you the basis for another and you can call it, 'The Paranoid Cigarette Thief.'" Jack snapped his head back and laughed then leaned forward, stretched his neck and smiled crookedly. "That's right, 'The Paranoid Cigarette Thief.'"

Jack got up and walked to the bathroom in exaggerated steps, a modified Groucho Marx walk. "You can always tell when a redneck goes to the bathroom," Jack said, as he came out of the bathroom. "You hear the flush, but not the faucet running. Rednecks never wash their hands."

Jack pulled out another beer from the refrigerator before returning to the table. "That's right, 'The Paranoid Cigarette Thief,'" Jack repeated as he sat down.

"At Fiesta they have a lounge for the employees to use during their break. They don't want the employees to be roaming around. They have to take their break in the lounge with the boxes and equipment noise. During lunch time, when I was working there, I

bought a beer and went outside and drank it in the parking lot. When I returned from my break, my manager told me that the employees were not allowed to drink beer in the parking lot and if it happened again, I'd get fired. I asked how he knew I had been drinking beer. He told me it was on video tape." Jack chuckled and rubbed his left wrist. "Now that's big time. That's quite a system!

"Well Food King is not that sophisticated, all they have are mirrors and I found a blind spot in front of the refrigerated beer, a place I frequent often. There is no mirror there! It was perfect! I'm not proud of this, but sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. I go into the store, pull out a cart and as I pass by the cigarette stand I get a pack of cigarettes and put them in the cart then I go about my normal shopping. The last thing I pick up is the beer. I get the six pack and as I place it in the cart I put the cigarettes in my left pant pocket. I'm not proud of this, but I've done this more than once."

"This afternoon, on the way over here, I stopped at Food King for the beer and the cigarettes. I did the same routine and at the beer stall--I put the cigarettes in my left pant pocket. I came to the express checkout counter and instead of the regular cashiers, Joe, the manager and whom I have known for ten years was manning the register. I wasn't sure if it just happened that they were busy and he took the cashier post temporarily or if something was about to happen. He kept looking at my pant pocket. I made small conversation and paid for the beer, but I had doubts. I had to make sure so before I left I turned back and asked Joe if I could use his phone. 'Chure,'" Jack imitated Joe's Spanish accent. "I tried to call you, but I had forgotten your number. I thanked Joe and told him

I'll see him later. 'Chure will,' he said and I still wasn't sure. Maybe they have a video tape system and he knows. I went to the door and then returned. 'What did you say, Joe?' I asked. Joe squinted his eyes and said, 'Chure.'

"I got in my car and came over here, but I was still worried. I stopped in front of your house and thought about it. I didn't want the police to come here and pick me up, not in your home, so I went back to the store. I knew that I couldn't enjoy the conversation with you with that hanging over my head. That's why you saw me get here then leave and then return for supper." Jack gave a short burst of laughter.

"I went back and Joe was in the office. I went to him, took out the pack of cigarettes and put them on the desk. 'Joe,' I told him, 'I've known you for ten years and I can't steal from you. I stole that pack of cigarettes and I'm bringing them back.' Joe was completely surprised. He didn't know a thing about it! He hadn't been looking at my pant pocket! He was looking at the legs of the girl behind me! 'Oh, man, don't do that any more.'" Jack rubbed his forearm, stretched his neck and chuckled.

"Was it conscience or was it fear? I think it was ninety nine percent fear." Jack bared his teeth and laughed. "He didn't know a thing about it and I ruined a perfect setup. Now I don't have a supply of cigarettes."