

## Two Ways to Tuesday

2435 words

He might not have picked up the phone. Law school was tough, so he preferred to honor weekends. Then he recognized the Vegas number.

“Kick-Hey, you like take little vacation near Seattle.” The Hungarian was fluent in English in her own special way.

“Sure, Aunt Vanda.” She wasn’t his aunt. She was related to his cousin’s fiancé, but who kept track? “When do I want to go, and how long do I want to stay?”

“We’re prepared for you to stay a week,” said Uncle Terry, who was also not his uncle, but Vanda’s companion.

“It’s serious then.”

“Three thousand isn’t so much, but why not take a break from the Tucson summer?” asked Uncle Terry.

“So I was right about Evan.”

“How you know?” Aunt Vanda asked.

It was a matter of intuition, but he’d noticed the manager lingering in the Latin Lounge office after the rest of the staff went home.

“I didn’t know, not for sure. But that guy gave me the creeps. Always slinking around.”

“Good enough,” said Uncle Terry. “Will you go after him?”

“Given expenses, you might not break even.”

“Is okay,” Aunt Vanda said. “Is teach lesson.”

He did indeed consider himself a teacher. “When should I go?”

Terry tapped on a keyboard. “Tomorrow afternoon suit you?”

Kique—short for Enrique, which was his real name—nodded.

He was back in business.

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Kique watched the torrent from inside the rental car, which was parked outside Evan’s apartment complex at the south end of Capitol Hill. After a month of Arizona heat, he appreciated the variety, but he wouldn’t have chosen to drive through this heavy a rain. The few drivers who passed by didn’t seem to notice. They knew how to handle bathed streets.

He didn’t mind the wait. Who would have thought that Evan Mulhouse would be stupid enough to drive his Hyundai Sonata from Vegas to Puget Sound without changing the plates? To obtain a home address, Uncle Terry reached out to a friend of a friend. All Kique needed to do was show up.

A woman fought her way out of the complex and into the downpour. She hugged a small child to her chest and held the hand of another. A large backpack was strapped to her shoulders. Who went out in such a mess? His instinct was to help, but he feared he might scare her instead.

Then the toddler broke loose and ran.

“Stop!” the mother cried.

Kique sprinted across the parking lot as the little girl lost her footing and landed in a puddle.

“Let me help,” Kique shouted. He swooped up the girl and carried her to her mother.

“Where’s your car?”

“Here!” The woman used a fob to unlock the doors. She bundled the baby into the back of a Toyota Camry, which was parked next to the Hyundai. Kique helped her bundle the squirming toddler into the other car seat. She unloaded her backpack between the children.

“Get in!” she shouted.

Kique popped into the passenger seat while she slipped behind the wheel. Water dripped off their chins.

“Thanks so much!”

“It’s just water.”

“I guess we won’t melt,” the woman laughed.

Kique enjoyed the woman’s laugh even though it was high-pitched. “Probably not.”

He pointed to the Hyundai. “Know who owns that car?”

“My boyfriend! Is there a problem?”

“Not at all. I’ve been wanting to buy a Sonata myself, but the factory is behind schedule. He wouldn’t like to sell?”

“Oh, no. Evan loves the car. You could ask, but he’s about to leave for work.”

“Let me guess. Microsoft?”

“That’s a good guess around here! But he works at Entertainment World. It’s a lounge downtown.”

A venue similar to the one Evan had robbed in Vegas.

Kique put his hand on the car handle. “Nice running into you.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“It’s none of my business, but I wouldn’t drive right now if I were you.”

She indicated the second-story window before them. “My apartment is right there.”

She pointed across the parking lot to the far end of the complex. “I’m only going as far as the laundry room.”

“In this weather?”

The woman nodded at the toddler. “Guess who isn’t potty trained yet?”

“Real life doesn’t wait for a sunny day.”

“It sure doesn’t!”

Kique sprinted back to his rental. He watched as the woman moved her car two hundred feet.

Ten minutes later, Evan dashed to his Hyundai, shielding his head from the down-pour with his hand. Kique followed him to Entertainment World, dodging cascades along the way.

Kique sat back by the bar. The singer had a sweet face, but even Kique, who was not musical, could tell she had no ear. The customers didn’t seem to notice. While couples flirted, men talked business in low tones. Evan barked orders at the underaged servers before retreating to a back room.

Kique had only met the man once. While Aunt Vanda and Uncle Terry cruised the Pacific, Kique monitored the Latin Lounge accounts. Within days, something was off with the sums. The lounge was full, but cash didn’t flow. Evan swore the business expenses were legitimate and showed Kique a list of the supplies he’d bought.

Kique congratulated Evan on his fine work. Then he texted Aunt Vanda and Uncle Terry that their business was at risk. They flew home from the nearest port, grilled Evan over the books, and fired him.

Entertainment World offered the same opportunities as the Latin Lounge. The venue was big enough to make money and small enough to stay out of the local headlines. Smart.

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Kique picked the flimsy door lock in record time. As soon as he found a spare key to the Hyundai, he called Entertainment World from a burner phone. Even when it went against his better judgment, he gave everyone a chance.

“Sweet blue couch, Evan.” He fingered the multi-colored blanket that protected it. “Not many people crochet these days.”

“What? Who are you?”

“Let’s say I’m friends with Vanda and Terry. I need a few things. Let’s say three thousand of them.”

“Who in the hell do you think you are?”

“Bellevue is a nice change, but I’m out of dry clothes. What’s it going to be, cash or jail?”

“Who are you?”

“Call me a fixer.”

“You’re that Mexican guy. Vanda’s relative. Always nosing around.”

“And you’re a thief. What’s it going to be?”

“You’re at my house, for God’s sake.”

“Took you this long to be concerned about your woman and your kids?”

“She’s a good lay, but probably neither kid is mine.”

“What’s it going to be?”

A long silence. Evan’s mind was a hamster in an exercise wheel.

“I’ll give you the money,” Evan said. “Go to my bedroom.”

“All right.”

“In the second shoe box from the left . . . .”

Women’s shoes. Same with the first box, third box, and fourth box.

“You want to try that again?”

“Oh! My mistake. I meant the right side—”

Faintly, because Kique had excellent hearing, he detected a siren. “Okay. I’m checking those boxes now.”

But he wasn’t. He’d already left the premises. He was at the streetlight by the time the squad car arrived.

Some vacation.

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The assistant opened the door to an office cave crowded with chairs, boxes, and a big desk. Behind it sat a massive man in a striped shirt. A neon bulb swung on a cord overhead.

“Reddy, he says he’s got to talk to you,” said the assistant.

“Why didn’t you handle it yourself?”

“He insisted.”

Reddy waved Kique inside. “Who the hell are you, and what do you think you want?”

“I’m a businessman.”

“Me too.”

“We can help each other.”

“Do I look like I need help?”

Place was always a crucial factor. Know a place, know how it works. Find the little crooks, follow the trail to bigger ones.

Kique settled into the chair. “You’ve got a problem.”

“Is that so?”

“You own five local music lounges.”

“You own a computer. So what?”

“Lost money at Entertainment World lately?”

“Maybe.”

“Your new manager is a problem.”

“You don’t say.”

“I suspect profits have sunk.”

A crack of thunder blinked the lights. The neon bulb swung a couple of inches.

“Maybe you’re a thief, too. Why don’t I call Max back in and have you kicked three ways to Sunday?”

Kique had never heard the expression, but he liked it. He wanted to kick Evan himself, but for the moment he made a mental note of the phrase.

“What in the hell are you grinning about?”

Kique leaned forward. “If I prove he’s stealing money, what would you do?”

“Have him arrested, of course. Why?”

Kique handed over a business card he’d had made the day before. It read “Felipe Ontiveros, Private Investigator.” It listed his address as a P.O. box in Tucson.

“I’m working for a client in Vegas, the last place Evan worked.”

“I’ve got all that on file. He came with references.”

“Ones he wrote himself. Call the Latin Lounge. Ask for Vanda or Terry. They’re the owners. Anyway, he ripped them off, too.”

“Why are you telling me this? What’s in it for you?”

“I’m protecting Vanda. Thought you might help me put Evan out of business permanently.”

“Why not do it yourself?”

Kique spread his arms. “It’s like you said. I don’t know the area. But there’s one thing I like.”

“What’s that?”

“Lot of places to go swimming.”

“You want to try out for the Olympics.”

Kique half-smiled. It was a technique he’d perfected. People were never sure if he were serious. “Evan is the sports lover.”

“And you’re blowing smoke up my ass.”

Hard to light a fire in a thunderstorm, yet people still tried. “You’ll be in tomorrow?”

“I’m always in. Outside it rains all the fucking time, so where else am I going to be?”

Kique rose. “I’ll be back.”



“I doubt it. But let’s see.”

Kique waved on his way out, but all he got from Max was a frown.

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Kique was seated on the blue sofa when the woman stepped inside with her baby and the toddler and sacks of groceries. When she finally spotted Kique, she staggered backwards.

“Y--you!”

“I’m not here to hurt you, but what I’m going to say might hurt.”

“I don’t have any money!”

“This is a courtesy call. I’m here to warn you. Have any relatives nearby?”

“No!”

“Friends?”

“No.” She rummaged in her purse. She wouldn’t be looking for lipstick or her wallet or a Kleenex but for a gun. It was always the same with shysters. They’d warn their partners to be wary, but not what to do in a real emergency.

By the time the woman pulled out her pistol, Kique had flicked open his pocketknife.

“Before you’re quick enough to shoot me, I’ll fling this blade through your stomach.”

She quivered, unsure. Then she nestled the Sig Sauer back into her purse.

“If I had more time, I’d show you how to shoot, but I’m on a schedule.” He waved the Opinel as he spoke. Once he flicked a knife open, he kept it ready. Even rational people went berserk imitating heroes from time to time.

“Like I said, I’m here to warn you. You didn’t think it’s strange that you’ve been moving around every few months?”

“Evan said that—” She picked a corn flake off the ground and set it on the coffee table.

“You believed him.”

“He’s always so sure of things that I don’t like to cross him.”

Con men practiced constantly, including on their partners.

“He owes the wrong people a lot of money. Don’t cross him. Just leave.”

“Leave?”

“I don’t know if you’re in love with him, but—”

“I don’t know either!”

He’d often seen people hurt by lying lovers, which was one reason he studied law. Plenty of decent people needed help. Of course, sometimes he stepped outside the law to help them get it.

The woman set down her purse. “I should have been suspicious when we went to visit my mother, and he wasn’t even nice to her. She’d prepared a nice dinner, but he spent the night making digs about the wallpaper and the paper plates.”

Kique nodded. Listening was one of his best skills.

“You think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“I think you’re a good mother, which means you need to do what’s best for your kids.”

“Leave?”

“You can always say your mother’s sick.”

“She lives in Kansas.”

“Fill the gas tank before you start. Don’t look back.”

Neither did Kique.

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Reddy glanced over the edge of his iPad. “You came back.”

“Mutual interests.”

“You’re gutsy. I’ll give you that much.” He set down the device. “What’s this great proof you’ve got?”

Kique checked his Chronographe Suisse, which he’d inherited from his father. The face was so big that people could read the time from several feet away, which was why he often set it wrong on purpose.

“I told Evan I’d call on the hour.” He took out his cell phone and dialed.

Evan answered mid-ring. “Where the hell is my car? Tell me now or I’ll kick your ass.”

“You can’t kick my ass two ways to Tuesday.”

“What does that have to do with my Sonata?”

“I’m its new owner.”

“You are not! Come back here now or —”

“You owe my boss 5k. The car is collateral.”

“You can’t count! I only took three thousand!”

“Call it interest.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Speaking of which, slick job over there at Entertainment World. You must have skimmed 15k by now”

“Not a dime over ten and that idiot Reddy doesn’t know the difference. What’s it to you?”

Kique held his hand over the receiver and looked at Reddy. “Enough?”

The man nodded.

Kique ended the call. “Told you.”

Reddy pounded the desk with his fist. “Didn’t want to believe it.”

“Nobody does.”

“You say he likes to swim?”

“Loves it. Complains he never has the time.”

“Now he’ll have plenty.”

He certainly would.

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By the time Kique called the Latin Lounge, fat rains poured off the windshield.

“You all right?” Terry asked. “Need something?”

Kique cranked the wipers from medium to high. “I need a drier climate. You need new plates and a fake registration.”

“Bringing me a car?”

“Not exactly.”

Terry laughed. “What, then?”

“Interest.”

Kique sped up as he headed east on I-90. By now, he was getting the hang of driving in a storm.