

BROKEN PROMISED LAND

a short story by

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Davey James lit his third unfiltered Marlboro. He squinted at Luis DeCastro, sizing up the middle-aged Mexican who had just asked Davey to kill a woman.

This was clearly something dark and new for Luis, so it didn't take much imagination on Davey's part to envision how this dodgy proposition could go south in fast and ugly fashion.

Davey chewed his lip, took another hit from his cigarette, and then shotgunned his tequila. He waved at the barkeep and tapped the empty shot glass and the bigger empty beer glass next to it.

For his part, Luis DeCastro sipped his Bud Ice and fidgeted with a cardboard coaster emblazoned with an ad for "Poppers" — some kind of deep-fried/jalapeno/cream cheese appetizer.

Davey James had been touted to Luis DeCastro through channels: a ricochet recommendation via a friend who knew someone who knew somebody who knew this guy named Grapelli who did some business with this other guy named Davey James.

Davey blew smoke and smiled at the waitress as she handed him his tequila and a fresh pint of Tecate. When she was gone, he said, "Those were too fucking real, yeah?"

DeCastro swallowed and said, "Yeah."

Davey James snorted to himself and took a drink of his beer. “Yeah. So, Luis, you were saying, you’ve insured her?”

“Yeah. Some, here and there. I don’t have a lot of money to invest in insurance, on account of…” Luis’ voice trailed off.

“On account of she’s in the workforce,” Davey said, “and you’re on the dole.” He raised his thick dark eyebrows. “Right?”

Luis DeCastro stared at his hands. “Yes. That’s it, pretty much.”

“You insured just her?”

“No. It was cheaper just to go for a family deal.”

“Better hope she doesn’t have schemes on you then, my friend,” Davey said.

Luis hesitated and then nodded. He didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t like Davey James. And, yes, he was *scared* of Davey. But Luis had come this far and couldn’t imagine conducting another search like this one, so he had to swallow hard and see this negotiation through. *Get it done.*

“Okay,” Davey said. “Some hypotheticals, just to be sure you can hang in on your end ’cause I so cherish my own fat ass. Right?”

Luis DeCastro licked his lips and nodded. He took another sip of Bud. “Okay. Go ahead.”

Davey crossed his arms on the table and leaned in. “The cops come to you, or maybe a private investigator, because the insurance companies sometimes employ them to snoop around a claim they think is…suspicious. Yeah? You with me?”

“Sure.”

“They say, ‘Hey, Luis, *mi amigo*, your wife just got her sad-ass self killed. You started buying insurance for her, what, six months before her life took this last bloody turn? *Sí?* Why

shouldn't we think maybe there is a connection?" Davey James downed his fresh shot of tequila. "How do you answer a puzzler like that, *hombre*?"

DeCastro looked around. "My son used to work here. Right here at La Fiesta. And his friend, too. Both were shot to death about six months ago. We barely had the money to give my son a decent burial. Or his friend, Tommy, who didn't have a green card."

Davey grunted. "Old Tommy was an illegal?" He had visions of these two spic teens dying in hail of bullets because of some drug deal gone south. Some *Narcotraficante* bullshit transplanted up north.

"Yes," Luis DeCastro said. "Tommy came across about six months before. Anyway, when it happened, we talked — my wife, Alexis, and me. It made us think. We both agreed to get our affairs in order. Both wrote our wills and had them notarized."

"That was very forward thinking of you, Luis. Very responsible. But mostly very visionary."

DeCastro smiled faintly. He hated this fat, greasy Italian.

"Well, okay. That's good news," Davey said. "That's very good news. I'm warming to your ability to hang in there. To tough it out." Davey James stroked his chin with a big hand. "Alexis' — that don't sound too Mex' to me."

Luis DeCastro shook his head. "She's Dutch. Her father was first-generation American."

"Oh." Davey James squeezed the bridge of his nose with two big fingers. A white woman. *Hm*. Davey James shook loose another cigarette from his pack and dipped his hand into the right pocket of his sports jacket. He felt around — ignored the black plastic comb and the switchblade. He wrapped his big fingers around the old silver Zippo and fired up another. "When

this is done, the cops will come to you to tell you that your wife has been found murdered. Can you look surprised when they do that? Can you look distraught?”

“I can. I’m sure I can,” Luis said.

“I’m sure you can think about it and be ready to play the role,” Davey said. “But can you do it and look convincing? Maybe fall down where you stand and look around, holding your hands up helplessly? Can you cry and shake and sob from the bottoms of your feet? Can you curl up and say nothing, just shaking and staring? I’m looking for a promise here. Can you truly play the part?”

“I can do these things.”

“And then they’re going to put you in a cruiser and take you to the morgue to identify her, probably. Unless there is someone else you can foist that dirty duty on.”

“There’s only us, now, since the boy...”

“Christ, that’s too bad. Okay, Luis, you’re going to have to look at your wife’s body in the morgue and confirm it is her. You can do this thing?”

DeCastro swallowed hard. He took his first drink of Bud Ice that wasn’t a half-assed sip. “How will you do it...do it...to her?”

“Good question,” Davey said with a wink. “You want to know what you’ll be looking at before you answer my question, right? That’s fair.”

Davey sipped his Tecate beer. He dipped a hand into the bowl of tortilla chips between them and scooped up some salsa. “That’s fair. You’ll give me a photo of her. And descriptions of the family cars with their license plate numbers. Anything that could help me be sure I’m making the right choice. Don’t want to get the wrong broad here, am I right? I’ll pick the moment and the place. It’ll obviously be somewhere secluded. Maybe get her in a parking lot at night. I’ll

take her purse...maybe rip her blouse to make it look like some robbery and spontaneous sex thing. I could shoot her, but that might make it harder for cops to I.D. her with her purse gone. So I'll probably come up behind her. One hand over her mouth, and then I drag a knife across her neck. Slit her jugular and let her bleed out fast. Kinder that way, really. And it leaves less work for the undertaker so it may save you some bucks on that end." Davey winked. "See, I read you as a thrifty guy, Luis."

Davey James dipped his head low, watching Luis DeCastro. "You sure you can handle this?"

"I can." Luis DeCastro stared back into Davey James' searching eyes.

Davey turned his mouth down. "I believe you probably can. You got a picture of her?"

"I was told you might want one now," DeCastro said. He pulled out his raggedy, hand-tooled wallet and flipped through some acetate panels. He slid out a photo and handed it over. It was a picture of DeCastro, in sunglasses, standing with a boy in a mortar board — probably the dead son, photographed at the boy's high school graduation — and this blond woman with a sad smile and bruise on her cheek. She was thin and wore no sunglasses. Blue eyes; a generous but sad mouth. Good bone structure. Those haunted eyes.

"How did your boy die, exactly, Luis?"

"He and Tommy were robbing a house. They didn't clear the house properly. Some teenage boy got hold of a gun and 'went Rambo on them,' as the cops who told us put it."

Holy Christ, Davey thought, *so much for seeking the American dream*. Fucking family of beaner grifters. But he looked again at the photo. Luis DeCastro was staring at the camera with this death's head grin. His wife, Alexis, and their dead boy were beaming at one another, hugging. Luis stood apart.

Davey scowled. “I notice you don’t use your boy’s name much. But I’ve heard ‘Tommy’ tossed around several times. You and your son weren’t tight, I take it?”

“Not so close.”

“But you liked Tommy?”

“I did. He was still...he reminded me of home.”

“By that you mean he reminded you of yourself.”

“He didn’t try to be American,” Luis said.

“Didn’t assimilate, huh?” Davey shook his head. “Christ. Do I look like a ‘Davey James’? Last name, before my folks changed it when they came over, was ‘Canaletto.’ My middle name is James. I’m really ‘Giulio.’ You’re fucking supposed to blend in, Luis.” He gestured with a big hand at the restaurant’s faux-Mexican trappings and at his own bottle of Tecate. “When in Rome, *amigo*.”

The old Latino shrugged. “Tommy was better company.”

“Than your own son?” Davey’s own deadbeat old man had always favored Davey’s friend, Angelo.

Luis was listening to the jukebox now. Harry Dean Stanton was singing “Canción Mixteca”. “*Y al verme tan solo y triste cual hoja al viento/ quisiera llorar, quisiera mori/ de sentimiento.*”

Davey said, “You like that song?”

Luis shrugged. “It’s about Mexico: ‘*How far I am from the land where I was born/ Immense sadness fills my thoughts/ I see myself so alone and so sad/ Like a leaf in the wind.*’”

The big man grunted. “You miss Mexico so goddamned much, why don’t you go back?”

The Mexican's fingernail scratched with little result at the label on his bottle of Bud Ice.
“Because there's even less for me there than there is for me here.”

Davey thought maybe that remained to be seen. But he said, “Who planned the heist that went bad? Tommy? Your boy? You and Tommy? Or maybe just you?”

“I helped them plan some,” Luis DeCastro said.

Davey winked. “Still got a hand in that game?”

Luis shrugged — probably thought he was bonding with Davey by sharing criminal histories. “A bit here and there. I offer some tips to some young guys coming up. They pay me a bit on the other end toward future advice.” Davey smiled and shook his head: *Jesus H., I'm seated across from the Fagin of the barrios.*

He looked again at Alexis DeCastro. Hell, a hundred-and-fifty pounds ago, he might have had a shot at a woman like that. Hell, if she was living with a sorry piece of work like Luis, Davey thought he might still have a shot. “What's with this bruise on her cheek?” Davey tried to sound nonchalant. “She spout off and you have to cuff the bitch?”

DeCastro smiled faintly.

Aha. Davey decided to press a little — figured he deserved it if he was going to take money to kill this poor beaten-on woman. “Why do you want to murder your wife, Luis? Strictly a money thing?”

“Mostly.”

“Don't you love her — even a little — anymore?”

“What do you care?”

“Just curious. Figure I'm entitled as I'm shutting off her lights. Do you love her any?”

“No. Not at all. Never did, really. If she would have had the abortion?” He shrugged.

Davey said, “She brings home a paycheck, yeah? She cook for you, too?”

“She makes dinner and breakfast every day. Not much variety, either.”

“Leaves you to fend for yourself for lunch, yeah? That’s shitty.” Davey smiled. “Me, I eat on the run. Fast food and shit. Why I look like I do. Don’t remember my last home-cooked meal. What’s her best dinner? What’s her specialty?”

“What is this?”

Davey leaned in again: “Hey, Pancho, I’m gonna punch your old lady’s ticket for you, and on the cheap at that, ’cause I’m being keistered by some Warren loanshark and need the jack, you know. So I figure I get a few questions, jerk-off.”

“You’ve had them,” DeCastro said. He tried to come across as a hard case: “Two thousand now; two thousand more when I get the insurance check. Take it or leave it, David.”

“Oh, I’ll take it,” Davey said. He pulled out a small notepad and ballpoint pen and tossed them at Luis DeCastro. “Makes and models of your cars and license plates there, *amigo*...assuming you can write in English.”

Luis scribbled away. He handed the notebook back to Davey James: better than Davey’s own penmanship.

DeCastro, an edge in his voice, “How many women have you killed, David?”

The big man shrugged. Why lie? Davey said, “Your wife would be my first.”

“Why? Why none before this?”

“Guess I never needed the money bad enough. Think you’ll miss her later, Luis? Have regrets?”

Luis DeCastro sneered. “I dunno. You sure you can do this thing for me? Sure you won’t disappoint me?”

Davey moved fast, gripping the back of Luis DeCastro's neck in his big hand. "One more word, and I'll make you a part of this table top. Yeah?" His grip tightened.

Luis winced and grimaced. He said in a hoarse voice, "Yes..."

"Don't ever put a question like that to me again, Luis. That could be something worse than a deal-breaker." Then Davey smiled and released Luis DeCastro's neck. Davey picked up the notepad and shoved it back into the interior breast pocket of his sports jacket. He suddenly swatted the pocket and dipped his hand back in. "Christ," he said. "Damned phone." He reached in and plucked out his cell. He held it up and it was flashing and vibrating. "Gotta get this. Be right back." Opening the cell phone, he rose and walked out into the parking lot.

When he was outside, Davey flipped closed the cell phone and dropped it back in his pocket. He looked again at the photo, studying Alexis DeCastro's face. He studied her eyes and smile. He tried to imagine putting out her fragile light.

Davey pulled out the notebook he had handed Luis — the notebook he had thrust into the same jacket pocket as his phone in order to press the button that would make it vibrate. He checked the license plate number written there and found Luis DeCastro's wheels — a dented Ford Aerostar mini-van. Davey's hand dipped into his right hand pocket and wrapped around the switchblade. He settled on the rear driver's side tire.

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When he got back inside, it was obvious to Davey that Luis DeCastro had found some reservoir of courage. Maybe Luis found his balls in his bottle of Bud Ice. Luis said, "You gonna do this thing, or not? I need an answer, now, David."

If not Davey, it would be another. Davey sat back down and drained the dregs of his Tecate. “Oh, I’m gonna take good care of her. Promise.”

Davey held out his hand, and Luis passed him a wrinkled bank envelope — the first two thousand. Davey opened the end of the envelope, rifled through twenty and hundred dollar bills with a thumbnail, then re-sealed the envelope and slipped it into the pocket of his sports jacket.

Luis raised his eyebrow. “You’re not going to count it?”

“No. ’Cause I know where to find you, Luis.” He slapped Luis’ flabby arm. “C’mon, *amigo*, I’ll walk you out,” Davey said.

They settled up and threaded their way through the bar back to the parking lot. It was dusk now and bugs flew in the cones cast by the too-few parking lot lights.

Davey looked around. Nobody was coming or going.

The two men had arrived separately. Luis DeCastro had no way of knowing what kind of car Davey James drove or where it was parked, so it didn’t bother Luis that Davey stayed right at his heels.

As they neared the Aerostar, now listing to one side, Luis DeCastro cursed. He moved around to the back of his van and squatted, inspecting the wheel. “Fucking tire is flat.”

Davey James clucked his tongue and moved around behind Luis to inspect the wheel. “That’s flat all right, Luis. Tortilla flat, even. Spare is in the back?” His hand dipped into his right pocket. “C’mon, back here,” Davey said to Luis DeCastro. “I’ll help you fix her up.”

THE END