

## THE IRONMAN

The billboards tallied my descent:

Mercedes-Benz

Comerica Bank

The Bottle Shop Fine Wines and Gourmet Foods

I kept driving.

Porsche and Audi

The wealthy made a fortune selling American cars but now drove foreign.

On the right I passed my old hospital.

Protestant Cemetery

The Black Leather Shop

Catholic Cemetery

McDonald's

Jewish Cemetery

Popeye's

With six miles to go, I noticed the prostitutes shuffling home in the early morning.

Abandoned cemetery

Check cashing

Beauty Salon

Church of Zion

Blood Donation Center

Burned-out, boarded-up storefronts

Salvation Army Woman's Shelter

The Metropolitan Dialysis Center. No Narcotics Kept on the Premises.

I entered the dialysis clinic. It smelled of Clorox bleach, indicating a high incidence of HIV. Patients slept in the warm lobby, waiting their turn on the kidney machine.

An obese African-American woman sat behind a glass partition. I talked into a metal speaker. "I'm David Larco, the new medical director."

She looked up at me and announced into the intercom, "Star to the lobby; Star to the lobby."

An obese nurse came to the front. "Buzz our new director in, Virginia. Bring him in from the swamp."

The metal lock vibrated and the door clicked open.

Another alarm went off. I jumped back.

"It's just the metal detector," the nurse said. Then she extended her hand and said, "I'm Star; I'm the head nurse. You packing?"

"Packing?"

"You know, carrying a gun?"

"No."

"You'll start."

"I've never been in a dialysis unit that had a metal detector."

“Welcome to the Metropolitan Dialysis Center. The dialysis chain put it in after one of the docs was shot.”

“Shot?”

“Yeah, a patient knocked him down with buckshot, then shot him with a slug. Didn’t kill him. Just paralyzed from the waist down. The doc was screwing the patient’s wife. We sided with the patient. The detector’s here for legal reasons. Not because they give a damn about what happens here. Even the board of health skips us.”

We walked into the unit. Twelve patients were on the dialysis machines. Red coils of blood snaked into the machines for processing. Once cleaned and the excess fluid removed, the blood was returned to the patient.

“You’re not foreign. What did you do to get assigned down here?”

“I said the wrong thing to the wrong person. This is the only place that would hire me.”

“And you feel sorry for yourself, getting stuck here, correct?”

“Well, working in a place like this isn’t what I had in mind.”

“Too bad you had to come on a Monday. Monday is seizure day. The winos are filled with alcohol from the weekend and the machine removes it from their blood and they go into DTs or have a seizure or both. They’ll start popping off in about an hour.”

Star scanned the dialysis unit. She noticed something was wrong with the patient on the second machine. She took his blood pressure.

“Jerome’s pressure is low. Give him some fluids.” She lowered the head of the dialysis chair, turned toward me, and said, “Let’s get some coffee.”

“Sure.”

I looked at the patients. All were asleep except for one. The man stared. His face started to twitch.

I pointed to the man and said, “Star, we better hold on the coffee; that guy’s going to seize.”

“Mr. Ellis. He’s different, he never...he sure as shit is.” She called to another nurse who was filling syringes. “Lucille, get the Valium.”

The man started shaking. Bit his tongue. Blood trickled from his mouth. One of the needles jerked out. Blood sprayed the walls.

“Clamp his lines so he doesn’t suck in air.”

“Already done, Doc,” Lucille said.

“Get the Valium.”

“Already done, Doc. We’re used to seizure day. I hate Mondays. They’re so messy. Virginia, get the mop and the bleach.”

Star came over and shook her head. “That’s Mr. Ellis. He’s not a drinker. He never seizes.”

Lucille injected the Valium. His twitching stopped, his seizure in abeyance.

“That should do it,” Star said. “Doesn’t take much to stop an alcohol seizure. And, Doc, always make sure you put on goggles and gloves first. There is HIV all over. This is not like the suburbs.”

“We practiced universal precautions to protect the patients’ identities,” I said.

“Universal precaution’s bullshit. It’s for places that don’t see HIV. We know who has the virus and we’re more careful. It just makes sense to treat the disease like a disease.”

“Does that patient have the virus?”

“No. That’s why I let you tend to him. Now let’s get the coffee before something else happens. When you quit us make sure your replacement comes on any day but Monday.”

“You sure I’m going to quit?”

“Yes.”

She took me back to the staff lounge. A nurse and an aide had their heads on the table, sleeping.

“Wake up, you two; the doctor and I have to talk.”

They rolled up in slow motion, wrapped their blankets around themselves, and walked out.

She poured two mugs of coffee. I wished they used Styrofoam.

“So what did you do? Drugs?”

“No. I talked too much, I guess.”

“What did you say?”

“I complained to the hospital about one of the doctors. He was killing people. I had all the statistics. Turns out the guy was the director’s brother-in-law.”

“Then it was bye to your sorry ass. It must have made them feel good to throw you out. Show they had the power.”

“They probably feel safer.”

Star shook her head, took a bite of a doughnut, then washed it down with coffee. She asked, “Were you afraid to come down here?”

“Yes.”

“These patients aren’t as bad as they look. They are not as dangerous as the people running your old hospital. I get to know all the patients well. Now Mr. Ellis, he never gives us any trouble. He’s not a drinker. For him to seize isn’t right. Something’s up.”

The intercom announced, “Star, Dr. Larco, to the dialysis unit stat.”

“Mondays suck,” Star said.

Mr. Ellis was seizing again.

“Give him another dose of Valium.”

“We already gave him two doses.”

“This is a bad seizure. Call EMS.”

“Done.”

Star gently placed blankets around Mr. Ellis to buffer his next seizure.

EMS showed up. Placed him on the stretcher.

“Where are you taking him?”

“He has no insurance. We’ll take him to the county.”

“The general’s closer.”

“They’ll reroute us. The general won’t take the garbage.”

Star threw a chart at the EMS guy and told him, “Don’t you call that man garbage. Now you take him out of here, and he better be at the general.”

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I ran to my car and followed the ambulance. They sped past the general and turned into the county hospital.

The drivers hurried out and opened the back of the ambulance. Mr. Ellis was seizing again. He was admitted, placed on a ventilator, and loaded up with medication halting his seizures.

They put him on a stretcher and pulled a curtain around us. His vital signs were stable. He was alert.

“Mr. Ellis, I’m Dr. Larco. I came here from the dialysis unit.”

“Doc, if I don’t make it, you tell Star to give me my name back. Tell her it’s safe now. It’s very important. She’ll understand.”

“What?”

“Do you think Tom Ellis is my real name?”

“Why not?”

“Cause it’s not. I changed it.”

“Why did you change it?”

“Had to.”

“What did you have to lose?” I didn’t mean to say it like that. It came out wrong.

“I wasn’t always garbage.”

“Did you hear the EMS guys say that?”

“Yes.”

“What did you lose?”

“I was an ironworker.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re the guys that work on the steel beams. We walk the rails and build the skyscrapers. I was young and good and not afraid of heights or anything. We were a tough bunch; American Indians and hillbillies. I was elected the union steward; the youngest ever.”

“Then what happened?”

“I lost both jobs, my family, my name, everything.”

He became agitated, his breathing rapid.

“Mr. Ellis, slow your breathing down. Take deep breaths.” If he hyperventilated, he would seize again.

He stared. I called for the doctor.

Mr. Ellis shouted, “Don’t throw the bomb. Can’t you see the little girl? Can’t you? She had nothing to do with this.”

His eyes rolled back and his body became rigid. His eyes moves to the right, staring.

The ER doctor looked at him and said, “Shit, he’s going down again.” He got a syringe and injected medication in the line. He fell back, the seizure aborted. But he was now in a drug-induced coma.

They took him to the intensive care unit. I was told they would keep him in a coma through the night.

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I returned to the Metropolitan Dialysis Unit the next day. Virginia was behind the glass. She buzzed me in.

“Star’s in her office; you better go see her.”

I walked into her office.

Her eyes were red.

“What’s the matter?”

“I told you to take Mr. Ellis to the general.”

“The EMS took him to the county. There was nothing I could do.”

“You should have insisted. If I was in that ambulance, he would have been at the general.

The care is better there. It doesn’t matter now; he’s dead.”

“Dead from a seizure? Nobody dies from a seizure.”

“They do at the county. There is only one doctor there at night. It wasn’t alcohol withdrawal. The CAT scan showed he had a brain tumor. That’s why he kept seizing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We need some money to bury him.”

“Are you taking a collection?”

“We’ve got about three hundred dollars.”

“That’s not enough.”

“That’s right.”

“How much more do you need?”

“Two thousand.”

“Where are you going to get it?”

“You.”

“Me? Why?”

“You two had a lot in common.”

“Like what?”

“You tried to change things for the better. You both got burned.”

“We were both young and dumb. The old guys tricked us.”

“You were brave.”

“Like I said, I should have kept my mouth shut. Looked the other way like everyone else did. It would have been bravery had I known the risks.”

“Mr. Ellis did.”

“You knew him as Mr. Ellis. That wasn’t his real name. He used to be head of some union forty years ago. Then got into trouble. Did you know that?” I asked.

“Yes. I know all about him. He’s been a patient here for over five years. Even the ones who have secrets start to talk.”

“Well, he must have done something real bad. He kept talking about a bomb and a little girl.”

Star stood up and pulled a folder from the shelf. She opened it up and removed a photograph.

“This is Mr. Ellis forty years ago. His family.”

“His wife looks like a movie star.”

“Resembled Marilyn Monroe; and the little girl’s adorable.”

“He lost all that?”

Star nodded her head.

“Mr. Ellis was the head of the local ironworkers union. He tried to reform it. I guess they were more corrupt back then than now. Anyway, he gets elected and starts to clean things up. He

meets with the FBI, and they fly him out to Washington to meet with Bobby Kennedy. At the last minute they refuse to meet with him. They tell him they're going after Hoffa and the Teamsters."

"I remember what happened to Hoffa. At least Mr. Ellis didn't end up like him."

"Worse maybe. He comes home from Washington, and he and his wife and daughter are watching television. It's night and the TV lights the three of them up. They could see his wife and daughter. They usually don't kill the women and children. That's what ruined him. Made him not want to fight back. They threw the bomb."

"They died."

Star shook her head.

"They survived and entered a federal witness protection program. His wife couldn't take it. She left him and took their daughter. He never saw them again. Didn't want to get them in danger. She had him declared dead."

"Dead?"

"So she could get on with her life. The little girl too."

"He told me that if he didn't make it, he wanted his real name back. He never told me his real name."

"Well, I got it and I'll give it back to him," Star said.

Star put the picture in the shredder. The shredder whined.

"I don't want to see that picture again."

"I understand, Star."

I wrote her a check.

"Dr. Larco, thank you."

\* \* \*

Virginia, Lucille, Star, and I went to his funeral. I paid for his headstone:

Johnny Hightower  
Native American  
Ironworker  
Reformer