

## The hangover – take two

John opens his eyes, and the scene is blurred. A kid is looking at him while he is lying in a hallway, on some vomit on the ground.

— *Mamá, mamá, ya despertó el gringo*, — the boy exclaims.

— Que vaya a la pieza y ve luego por un balde y limpia la porquería, — a female voice in the distance replies. John still looks disoriented.

— Are you okay, sir? — asks John the kid. — Let me bring you to the room.

The boy draps John's arm around his neck and attempts to pull John up. He is a 12-year-old skinny boy. John is a 6 ft tall, 210 lb man in his mid to late 30s. The kid barely manages to get John to sit on the floor. John observes the hallway and his own vomit on the floor, and the kid offering him help. Camilo is the name of the kid, and he is the landlady's son.

— Sorry, Camilo. I can do it myself, — says John and he proceeds to stand up. John feels a little dizzy and is obviously bothered by the light that comes from the window at the end of the hallway.

John takes a step and seems to fall. He supports himself against the wall, waits a few seconds, and begins to walk. Camilo runs to the second door on the right and opens it. John is walking with a little more confidence, enters the room, and sits on the bed. He takes his boots off and falls back, sitting and looking at the wall.

Camilo walks to the window and starts opening the curtain.

— No, no, no, — says John, — Leave'em shut.

Camilo complies, walks away, and closes the door on his way out.

John stays sitting on the bed, looking at an empty wall for a few more seconds. Then he takes his jacket off, searches and finds a bottle in the pocket, lays the jacket on the floor, and opens the bottle. It is empty. John throws it away and then lets himself fall on the bed, looking at the ceiling.

— *Ya no soporto ese gringo*, — says señora Rosario, the landlady. — *No hace sino llegar borracho a cualquier hora*. — She says with a strong emphasis on the word *borracho*, drunk. — *A este paso va a sacar corriendo a los demás huéspedes*.<sup>1</sup>

John hears the complaint and knows it is about him and his drinking problem. He closes his eyes.

Outside noises from the city, or the yelling of señora Rosario, are still heard.

John attempts to remember.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Rosario: I can't bear with this American any longer. He keeps coming in *drunk* at any time. If this continues he will scare away the other hosts.

His little daughter, about five years old, climbing upon his lap and embracing him giggling. He looks at her, but her face is blurred. John opens his eyes and keeps looking at the ceiling.

John closes his eyes again and tries to go through memories of his daughter. Different scenes, but the voice is always distorted, and the face blurred.

John sits up, looks at the empty bottle on the floor with an evident rage look. He stands up and goes to the window and opens the curtains wide open. It is a sunny day. He is on the second floor overlooking a small but busy street of old colonial houses.

John looks at his wrist as if he were expecting a wristwatch, but none is there. He goes back to his jacket on the floor and looks for a phone. A Nokia 6020, with 10% battery, shows that it is 13:34, half-past one. John looks at the charger connected to the wall and plugs the phone. He then goes to the door and sees Camilo, who has just finished cleaning the floor and is gathering the cleaning stuff.

— Camilo, can you set the boiler on? I want to take a bath, — he asks.

— Yes, sir. Give me five, — Camilo responds as he begins to move away with the cleaning stuff.

— Wait. Is there some lunch? Can you save me something? — John asks. — And can you please get me some aspirin?

Camilo makes an approving gesture with his hand.

John goes to his closet, grabs some clean clothes and a towel, and steps out of the room. He walks down the hallway to the bathroom at the end.

— Hello, Mr. Carlson, — says a young lady who has just come upstairs and walks to her room.

— Hello, Miss..., — John seems to have forgotten her name. — ... André? right?

— Right, Mr. Carlson, — the young lady responds, smiling. — See you around.

The bathroom is empty, so John enters, closes the door with the «busy» sign, and undresses. He sits on the toilet and finally turns on the shower.

When he comes out, clean and dressed in fresh clothes, Camilo is waiting with a glass of water, an aspirin, and an Alka-Seltzer. John takes the aspirin and sips some water.

— I left a plate in the microwave and a glass of juice in the fridge, — says Camilo.

— Thank you, boy, — responds John.

Miss André leaves her room at that time.

John looks at her for a moment, and she notices, looking back with curiosity. Lida André is a 5'9", 115 lb Belgian woman. She is 23 but looks

younger. She is wearing a bandana to control her blond hair, a top, light cargo trousers, and Dr. Martens boots.

— You are a psychologist, right? — John asks. — Sorry if I bother you.

— Ye...es, I studied psychology. — Lida answers. — But I haven't received my title yet.

— I'd like to ask you some questions, — says John. — Professional advice. I'll pay.

— Right now? — asks Lida, intrigued. — I was about to meet some friends at the Chorro.

— Nah, it could be in the evening, if you have some time, — says John. — I'm having lunch right now.

— Here? Seven o'clock?

— Here. Seven.

Lida rushes down the stairs, while John calmly walks down. He goes to the laundry and leaves his dirty clothes and towel in a basket, then heads to the kitchen for his lunch.

"Is Mrs. Rosario upset?" John asks Camilo as they both enter the kitchen. "Of course she is," mentions John, answering his own question, knowing that the answer was obvious.

— Is Mrs. Rosario upset? — John asks Camilo when he also enters the kitchen. — Of course she is, — mentions John, answering his own question, knowing that the answer was obvious.

Camilo doesn't know what to respond. He grabs some flan from the refrigerator, a spoon from the drawer, and sits at the table with John.

"Lida likes you, Mr. Carlson," says Camilo after finishing his flan. "Not like she is in love with you, but she could. She is pretty." Camilo is not looking at John while saying that but at the sink. He steps up and puts the spoon in the sink, the flan dish in the trash can, and sits back. "Forget it," says Camilo again. "I know you are not into that."

— Miss André likes you, Mr. Carlson, — says Camilo after he has finished his flan. — Not like she is in love with you, but she could. She is pretty. — Camilo is not looking at John while saying that but at the sink. He steps up and puts the spoon in the sink, the flan dish in the trash can, and sits back. — Forget it, — says Camilo again. — I know you are not into that.

John wasn't expecting this kind of conversation with a 12-year-old. Or ever. He just looks a little bewildered while finishing his lunch.

Señora Rosario enters the room.

— *Mucho bueno el almuerzo*, — says John to Señora Rosario. — *Gracias*.

Señora Rosario looks at John, then looks at Camilo.

— *¿Se lo anotaste a la cuenta?*<sup>2</sup>

— *Claro, mamá*<sup>3</sup> — answers Camilo.

— *Dile al mister Carlson que esta no es casa para llegar borracho y hacer escándalos.*<sup>4</sup>

— Don't come drunk, Mr. Carlson, — says Camilo to John.

— Did I cause a mess this morning? Was it this morning? — asks John.

— No. You are a calm drunkard, Mr. Carlson. Only the stumbling and falling down in the middle of the hallway and the vomit. You came in around 9 o'clock. The other guests have already left.

— Tell Mrs. Rosario that I am sorry.

— *Deje así,* — says Señora Rosario, who doesn't understand much English and doesn't speak English, but could understand that John was apologizing.

— There is some extra laundry, — says John to Camilo. — Can your mother take care of it, or should I?

— Momma will do it. Or I will. I'll just add it to the bill.

— Thank you, boy.

John finishes his lunch, leaves the plate in the sink, and goes up to his room. He sits at the desk, takes a notebook from the drawer, goes to the next blank page, and is about to write something. He hesitates, then reaches for the phone that is charging and checks the date. Then he writes down.

June 21.

I think I am forgetting what I am doing here. I am even forgetting Lilith's face and her voice. I know it is the booze, but I can't promise myself not to take another drink.

I don't even have an idea where Muller is. The last time I tracked him was over a month ago.

John closes the notebook, puts it back in the drawer, and sits for a while. Then he grabs the phone, looks for a phone number stored as "Muller office," and calls.

When they answer, John attempts to fake his voice.

— Good afternoon. Do you speak English? — he says.

— Right. My name's Peters, and I would like to make an appointment with Mr. Muller for a business proposal, — continues John with a fake voice and a fake Texan accent. — Is Mr. Muller in town?

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<sup>2</sup>Mrs. Rosario: Did you added to the bill?

<sup>3</sup>Camilo: Of course, momma

<sup>4</sup>Mrs. Rosario: Tell Mr. Carlson that this is no place to come drunk or cause any scandals.

— Yes, I'm calling from Bogota right now. — says John after the response.

— Too bad, — continues John the conversation. — I'm back to Dallas this weekend. Do you know if Mr. Muller is back soon?

— Oh, it's a shame. I was really looking forward to meeting Mr. Muller in person. I will email him the proposal. Thank you for your time.

John takes the notebook back again, looks for the last annotation, and adds:

Update: Muller is in New York and Miami but is coming back next Monday.

John puts the notebook back in the drawer, takes off his flip-flops and puts on his boots, and leaves the hostel. Once out, he lights a cigarette and starts walking with no particular destination.

When John realizes he is heading to Chorro de Quevedo, he lets out a small laugh and heads in the opposite direction.

After his fourth cigarette, John walks back to the hostel. Gina is already there, a small brunet in her mid-twenties.

— Hello, Mr. Carlson, — says Gina.

— Hello, Gina, — answers John. He takes a few steps, then turns back to Gina. — Today is Tuesday, right? — John asks, and Gina nods. — Why was Camilo here at noon?

— Ah, Camilo is on school break, and I was running some errands, — says Gina.

John goes to the living room. The TV is on, but nobody is sitting there. John searches for ESPN and crashes on a sofa, pretending to watch.

A couple of other guests join in after a while. Érika and Fabián, both Colombian but out of town. Óscar, Mexican, comes later. At half past six, Gina announces that those who have booked dinner for the first shift are ready. John doesn't normally book dinner, so he stays in the living room with Érika.

Lida arrives soon with some friends. She waves hello to the people present, goes upstairs with her friends, and soon after the friends leave. Lida comes back down, exchanges some words with Érika, they hug, and Érika goes upstairs.

— So, Mr. Carlson. Do you still have some questions? — asks Lida to John. John pans the room and nods. — I guess you need some privacy. Your room? My room? Or do we rather go to some café nearby?

Lida is very fluent, but she still has this small Dutch accent.

— This living room is okay for now. If it becomes crowded again, we can move elsewhere, — says John.

— So, what's on your mind? — asks Lida, while sitting on a couch near the sofa.

— I'm losing focus, and I know it is because of alcohol. This afternoon, I was trying to remember the face of my daughter, and I couldn't.

— Lilith, right? The girl they killed? — Lida paused for a response, but John's silence made her realize this was an insensitive question. — Would you rather stop drinking or remember her?

— I want to focus. I guess if I stop drinking, it's a step in the right direction.

— How about Lilith?

— I have photos of her back home. I can put a face to my memories when I come back. — John pauses. — If I come back.

— Let me see if I understand. You need focus to finish your business here, and then you can come back.

— Right, — answers John with a doubtful tone.

— And why can't you come back right now?

— Because I will just drink myself to death if I simply come back without focus. Here, or in the States, it doesn't matter.

Gina comes in.

— Are you guys having dinner at eight? — asks Gina.

Lida nods. John shakes his head.

— Okay, bye. — Says Gina and leaves.

Lida observes as Gina leaves the room and says:

— May I ask what your mission is, soldier? What is it that you need to accomplish?

John says nothing but stares in the general direction of the TV set.

— I don't have a title yet, — says Lida. — I am not legally bound to any confidentiality, even if you pay me. But I am morally bound, and I can keep your secrets unless you confess to me some actual crime. If you are thinking about killing your boss, that's professional secret, and I won't tell anybody. If you are actually planning it, I'll be an accessory if you tell me and I don't tell anybody. That's an example. I am not implying anything. I don't know anything, and I will not assume anything if you don't want to tell me.

— I want to track down the people responsible for the death of Lilith. And no, I am not planning any crime. Not yet, at least.

— «Yet, at least» is good enough, — mumbles Lida. — And those people are here, in Colombia?

— They have resources. They constantly move. But here is their base, I think. At least for most of them.

— Cartels? Guerrillas? Paramilitaries? Government? — a little fear breaks into Lida's voice.

— Cartels, — says John calmly. — I don't need help with the mission. I need advice on how to keep my mind focused.

Fabián comes in. As far as anybody knows, Fabián can't follow a conversation in English. After observing Fabián's movements, Lida and John look at each other, and John nods.

— Yes, you should stop drinking, — says Lida. — But that's not easy. I can suggest you go to some rehab center or join AA, but that wouldn't help the immediate problem. Make a list of the top five things you want to accomplish. One item is your mission. Another is not to drink. The other three, whatever else, preferably unconnected with the first two items. Just thinking about those items would help. Write them down, and then repeat them from memory every time you have some idle time.

— That easy?

— No, it's never that easy. Just go to a rehab center. Deal with the vice first and then with focus.

— I can't... — begins John to say.

— Of course you can't, — interrupts Lida. — Nothing is easy, Soldier. But train your mind. Weren't you in the special forces or something?

John doesn't remember having talked with Lida about his military past.

— How do you know?

— Everybody here knows, or thinks they know. You're very reserved when you're sober but a little chatty when you're drunk.

John looks at Lida with wide-open eyes.

— Don't worry. As far as I know, you haven't revealed any secrets. But we all know that Schwarzenegger was your favorite actor as a kid and that you joined the special forces inspired by movies like *Commando* and *Rambo*, — continues Lida. — And it's cinco mil pesos for the session.