

The Gambit

The plan suddenly made sense. Tony had resisted it from the outset, tried desperately to exaggerate its flaws and convince his daughter to abandon it. But there in the empty alleyway, with Maria squinting up at him through the harsh sunlight, it became suddenly clear that the plan was the best of terrible options.

“You said you’d do it, Dad. You’ve got to do it,” said Maria—his girl, his baby girl, not a baby anymore at 13, all mature expressions and freckles, which stood out more prominently on the bridge of her nose since dialysis, since her face turned sallow. “Or give me the gun and I will.”

“No, Sweet. I have to do it,” Tony said.

Maria folded up the hem of her sweater. On her side, she’d drawn a yellow circle with Sharpie. “Here.” She poked the center of the circle, as though he wouldn’t know where to aim, as though he hadn’t long agonized over the genesis of his daughter’s suffering.

Tony slapped at a bead of sweat that had tickled as it raced down his neck. The handle of the SIG was slick from his nervous grip, and he grasped it tighter to keep it from slipping. In the

moments leading up to this one, he was certain he could never do it, certain some better plan would present itself. That it had come to this caused his stomach to swell with a familiar rage.

“I’ve been through a lot, Dad. What’s one bullet?” Maria said, frowning, stoically working to keep fear from reaching her eyes, for his sake more than hers.

How many times had he counted her freckles that stood out now in the sun? How often had he counted them up as though their sum decoded life’s mysteries? How many more chances would he have to count them, if he didn’t do it?

“Sweet, I’m so, so sorry.”

Tony was embarrassed—as he exerted pressure incrementally on the trigger, as if pulling it slowly would somehow alleviate her pain—by the feeling of pins and needles spiking the hidden spots of his eyeballs. Tears were forming. He blinked against it and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and he noticed Maria brace herself, leaning forward slightly like against a strong wind. Tony held the muzzle close, nearly grazing her skin.

The sound was a corkscrew of a thing, twisting deeper and deeper into him. Cutting through him like he’d taken a bullet, too.

Maria dropped. She was so thin, lanky. She seemed to vanish beneath her blue sweater, in a heap there on the hot concrete.

“Oh, Jesus.” He looked left and right furtively. Had someone seen? He’d forgotten to survey the area before firing, to make sure there were no witnesses. How could he have forgotten something like that? He didn’t see anyone, but he was sure the next person he encountered would read it on him—the act commandeering the lines in his forehead and fashioning them into hideous markings.

MAD FATHER

DAUGHTER KILLER

He chanced a second glance over his shoulder. No one in sight. Turning back, nausea crept into his throat. He leaned forward and rested his hands on his knees, bent from the thing he’d done.

He looked down at the gun, dangling from a finger against his knee, glistening slightly from his sweat. He looked at it as a man regards the dead snake guilty of biting his child. He had to be rid of the thing, so he lofted it into the alleyway’s dumpster. It clanged against the empty metal bottom. Maria turned her head toward the sound.

One of her legs bent awkwardly beneath her. He started toward her, suddenly guilty he hadn't done so before now. He felt desperate as he closed the distance between them—desperate to hold her and find her skin still warm, her lungs still filling. He felt, as he reached toward her, like a man scrabbling around for something important in the dark: He knew what he sought was there, but before he found it he was seized by the possibility that it had vanished.

He hoisted her up. She coughed weakly, gasping in his arms, each exhalation creasing her face.

“Sweetie, oh my God—”

“Dad,” she murmured. “It’s okay.” She inhaled sharply through a clenched jaw.

She took labored breaths as they shuffled toward the alley’s mouth, his arm under hers for support, his hand wrapped and reassuring about her elbow. The sunlight knifed through the leaves and branches of oaks lining the way. The harsh light burned his eyes, which began to take the wide and wild shape of hysteria.

“Let’s just stick to...the plan,” Maria managed to say.

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The bullet was a venom that caused a burning sensation all over. At least she wasn't cold anymore, Maria thought, smiling wildly, thinking better of letting herself laugh. Her insides couldn't handle such jostling now.

Her father's forearm provided critical leverage, without which she would have gone down again. They made it to the sidewalk, across from the emergency room entrance, and waited for a break in the traffic. A driver caught sight of the blood staining her sweater, dyeing its blue black. He hit his brakes, and they dashed across the street, Tony practically dragging her.

They'd discussed triage in the days leading up till now. A bullet wound typically warranted immediate attention, of course, but there was always the chance someone else would stumble in or arrive by ambulance in a direr state, so they'd decided to embellish a bit.

"Help!" her father cried as the automatic doors slid apart and a funnel of cool air met them.

"Somebody help! Help my daughter!"

An intake nurse pirouetted out from behind a high counter. "What's happened?" she asked, abnormally calm, likely desensitized to blood and anguish.

"Shot," her father said. "She's been shot. Oh, Christ." Maria noticed the note of genuine panic creep into his voice. It frightened her.

“How long ago?”

“Almost an hour. Maybe more.” The first lie.

“Geez us.” The nurse, unclipping a walkie talkie from her belt, was moved to immediate action.

“Activate the trauma response code.”

She stepped away from them to retrieve a hospital bed, which she wheeled over to them.

“Teen, underweight, severe-to-moderate blood loss—” placing the walkie on her shoulder—

“Has she lost consciousness?”

Maria and her father nodded together.

“Alert and oriented but threat of lost consciousness.” The nurse gave the bed a stern pat. “Lie down here. What’s your name?”

“Maria Campo.”

She practically fell onto the bed. Her father didn’t leave her side as the nurse wheeled her toward a set of double doors, where the nurse stopped suddenly. “This is as far as you can go,” the nurse told her father.

Maria, pressing against the wound with gauze as the nurse had instructed, started breathing more quickly, almost uncontrollably. “He has to come. I don’t want to be alone,” she said. The nurse shook her head. “I’m sorry. Loved ones must remain here. You’ll. Be. Okay,” the nurse recited to her.

As she was wheeled away, Maria tried to glimpse back behind her, to catch sight one more time of her father, but the pain kept her rooted in place.

“Her kidney is failing!” Her father yelled. “Tell the surgeon about her—”

A set of double doors swung shut behind Maria, blotting out his voice. An abnormal quiet, after the commotion, made her ears ring with the memory of flurried activity. She was more afraid than she’d ever been.

She hardly paid attention to the anesthesiologist plunging a tube down her throat. But just before she went under, she remembered the line she was supposed to say, just in case.

“He...he...didn’t shoo me,” she mumbled before everything went dark.

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Tony joggled his leg until his calf ached. He bit at his fingernails, eyed the vending machine and cursed its unending electric hum. He stole glances at the intake nurse, who had reemerged through the double doors almost four hours before, trying to glean information about his daughter from the set of her face. Finally, as his anxiety mounted to an unendurable level, he got up and strolled toward her.

“Still nothing,” the nurse said, before Tony was even halfway to her. “Trust me, I’ll relay whatever news I hear to you, soon as I hear it.”

He sulked back to his chair, in the far corner, away from the other nervous bodies sitting restlessly about the room.

He figured that, from where he sat, Maria’s nephrologist was less than a quarter-mile away. A week had passed since they’d last seen him, when Tony had begged for Maria’s name to be put on the waiting list.

“I’m almost through the Medicaid paperwork,” Tony had told him. The application process was taking longer than expected.

“And as soon as you are approved, Maria’s name will be added,” the nephrologist said. “There is still time, Mr. Campo.”

“Time? You told us the average wait for a new kidney was almost four years! What happens if hers fails before then?”

“A failure falls under the EMTALA, as I’ve told you. She’ll be treated in the event of an emergency.”

“I damn well know what you’ve said. ‘Wait until she’s not breathing, then they’ll save her.’ What parent in their right mind would find that comforting?”

“Dad—” Maria said.

“Fucking unbelievable,” Tony said.

Tony stood up so quickly, then, that he upended his chair, causing it to clang into a filing cabinet behind them.

The sunny days that followed were overshadowed by dread. Maria steadily declined. The stress from the fallout with the doctor probably contributed, and for that Tony took full responsibility—and felt disgusted for it.

Maria was actually the one to come up with the plan. They were up late watching SNL. He’d bought cheap Chinese takeout, the leftovers of which were congealing in their white

containers. A skit depicting NRA officials privately discussing the dangers of firearms gave them reason to laugh together for the first time in weeks.

“I’m dy-ing!” Maria gasped. SNL went to commercial, and they both smiled as they caught their breath. But suddenly, Maria went rigid, her eyes staring blankly into some middle distance.

“What’s wrong, Sweet?” Tony said.

“I’m dying,” she said absently.

“What do you mean? You feel all right?”

“Fine, fine. I don’t mean I’m dying right now. But what if I were?”

“Don’t talk that way.”

“No, no, not like that. I’m saying if I was dying, like if somehow we knew when my stupid kidney would fail, and we timed it so we were right outside the hospital, then they couldn’t turn us away. And they’d be forced to operate. Right? That’s what the doctor said.”

Shortly after that, after a few Google searches, his only daughter asked him if he could just shoot her in the only kidney she had left.

They'd been alone for three years by that point, just him and her. Every morning as he woke up, the great responsibility of keeping Maria safe hit Tony anew. He'd promised her mother he'd do everything he could. He'd be there for Maria always.

When Maria's eyes swelled nearly shut later that week, and her ankles became the size of tennis balls, and she stopped eating, Maria asked him again if he could just shoot her.

She asked him to become a monster, so he became one.

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Someone tapped on his shoulder. He'd been resting his eyes in the waiting room, and the intake nurse thought he was sleeping.

"Mr. Campo," she said, "your daughter's all right. The surgery was a success."

He sat up straighter, looked down at his shoelaces, and wept.

The nurse patted him tenderly on the shoulder.

"Oh, God," he moaned. "Oh, thank you."

“You can visit her now.” The nurse said. He followed her, holding his breath as she pulled back the curtain concealing his daughter’s bed. Maria’s eyes opened slowly, dreamily. Her smile telegraphed to him that she was not in pain, which sprung more tears.

A white-haired woman in a white coat with three pens nestled in the pocket entered the room. Tony saw her and took the woman’s hand in both of his. “Doctor, how can I ever thank you?” he said.

The surgeon peered at Tony through wire-rimmed glasses. The round lenses caught the waning light filtering in through the window and reflected it back.

“Your daughter is a tough cookie—”

“Did sum-un say cook-ie?” Maria opened her mouth and laughed, then grabbed her abdomen and winced.

“She’s still recovering from the effects of anesthesia,” the surgeon said. “This is completely normal. It will pass in a few hours.”

Maria giggled, relishing a joke apparent only to her.

The surgeon ignored her. “We were forced to operate. The bullet pierced her kidney, and of course with it being her last one, we had no other option than to initiate a transplant.” She paused, glancing down at a binder full of papers. “It’s amazing, really. Her medical records show she’s been suffering from nephrotic syndrome. I never thought I’d say these words, but this gunshot wound may have been the best thing that could have happened to your daughter. Now she has a new, healthy kidney.”

Tony just shook his head, almost unwilling to believe such good news. He was so unaccustomed to it.

“That being said, someone out there is clearly a danger to society,” the surgeon continued. “Do you have any idea who did this to her, Mr. Campo?”

“I wish I did,” Tony said, trying to bring anger into his face.

“Oh Dad, ya big ol’ goof! You know who did it!” Maria said, then her eyes went wide, and she slapped her hands over her mouth, as though trying to trap a secret.

Tony tried to laugh, as though this was only a silly joke, but his stricken lungs could only provide enough air for a low grumble. In all their planning, they hadn’t thought past the surgery, hadn’t discussed the threat of a drug-addled brain exposing them.

“What does she mean, Mr. Campo?” The surgeon’s eyebrows knitted into seriousness, and she removed one of the pens from her pocket and held it at the ready above a pad of paper.

“I’m afraid I have no idea, Doc,” Tony said.

Maria closed her eyes and shook her head, her hair swinging wildly about, veiling her face.

“Sweet, *remember*, I don’t know who did it,” Tony said. “I found you alone across town, in that empty lot by the—”

“Dad, stop lying!” she practically screamed. Her face screwed up, reminding him of Maria as an eight-year-old, pouting, threatening tears. “You shot me. You shot me out there in that alley and the gun went *smack-smack* when you threw it away. In the dumpster! *Remember?* It’s okay though, Dad, I forgive ya and all. It was *our* plan!”

Her head fell back onto her pillow and she closed her eyes, smiling madly up at the ceiling.

Tony turned, horrorstruck, toward the surgeon, who had taken down every one of Maria’s words on her notepad.

“She’s clearly not right in the head,” Tony said. “I don’t know where this is coming from.”

“I don’t know what transpired between you and your daughter, Mr. Campo, but I do know this: Patients out of surgery say the damndest things, but they rarely lie.” She clicked the bumper at the end of her pen and returned it to her pocket. “I have to ask you to leave the room, Mr. Campo. The police are already en route. They’re called in whenever a gunshot victim is admitted here, and I believe they’ll want to have a word with you.”

“But this is crazy! She’s my daughter!”

“The same thoughts are befuddling me, Mr. Campo. But until we can get this sorted out, I have to ask you to leave the room.”

“But I don’t want to leave her,” Tony cried. The surgeon motioned behind him, but Tony ignored her and raced to his daughter’s bedside. “Sweet, I love you. I don’t blame you, okay? Whatever happens, know I’m not mad at you.”

Four large hands were suddenly squeezing Tony’s shoulders, pulling him backward. He noticed their black sleeves and guessed they belonged to uniformed security guards.

He fought wanly against them, allowing the guards to take him away from his Maria. But she suddenly seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation, and she cried out, screaming at the guards to let him go.

Tony reached out and grabbed either side of the doorframe, feeling the strength of the guards as they pulled against his clenching fingers.

“I love you,” he said, clinging defiantly to the doorframe.

At that moment, a police vehicle’s lights began to filter in through the window, its siren wailing in unison with Maria. The lights bathed his daughter. Tony focused on the spinning color: red then blue, red then blue, painting the room the hostile shades of emergency.