

## Right is Right

By Gabriel Cohen

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Down in the basement, it took the repairman ten seconds to figure out what was wrong with the washing machine, and two minutes to make it worse.

A scrap of towel was wrapped around the base of the central agitator. That was the only problem, but the man cocked his head and listened for the lady of the house, who was gabbing away on the phone upstairs. He pulled out a screwdriver, opened the back of the machine, and removed the motor.

Upstairs in the attic, I watched on a surveillance monitor as he stuffed the part into his toolbox. I guessed that he would take it out to his truck, exchange it for a burnt-out one, then sell the woman her own motor back as a replacement. The house was an old brownstone; he'd figure that she could afford it. I grinned as I pantomimed casting a fishing rod, then reeled it in. "*Boom boom boom*," I sang to myself, "*another one bites the dust*."

A couple of minutes later I turned toward the monitor that covered the front hall and watched as the lady of the house, my partner from Consumer Affairs, paid the repairman and got him to sign the bill. The guy was basically autographing his own warrant, but we couldn't bust him now; we didn't want word to get out about our little operation.

A moment later, Elena Vazquez appeared in the doorway of our chilly attic office. "Well, that one was a real dirtbag."

I nodded.

"How'd I do?" she said.

"You were great. A real Meryl Streep."

I watched the woman register my complete lack of enthusiasm. She evidently decided to shrug it off.

The hell with it, I thought. She'd been frosty with me from the get-go. Spending time alone in the house the way we'd had to for the past three days, I could see why she might want to maintain a bit of distance, but I could have reassured her. She wasn't my type.

\* \* \*

Later, after she went home, my boss dropped by. NYPD Detective Sergeant Harry Weinstein glanced at the log: five visits for the day, two dirty repairmen caught on tape.

"Nice job," he said, picking up a copy of the Yellow Pages. "If you can maintain your cover, we'll work this for every appliance guy in here. Maybe we can even move on to plumbers."

"Gee whiz," I replied. "How about chimney sweeps?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You being sarcastic?"

"You got me going after *washing machine repairmen*, Harry. I was making Mob cases."

My boss shrugged. "It's not my fault you got into that mess."  
 "What do you think I should have done?"  
 "I don't know, Frank. I think you should be glad you're still working at all."

I bit my tongue at that, counted to ten like they had taught me in the mandatory anger management class.

\* \* \*

"How long you been with Consumer Affairs?" I asked Vazquez as we sipped our takeout coffee the next morning.

"Three years."

"You ever work a sting before?"

"No. Have you?"

"Plenty. You've never done *one*?"

She just stared at me in her irritatingly patient way.

"So, how'd you get on this job?" I continued. "No offense—I'm sure you're qualified and all"—

She stood up. "I have to go down and reset the towel."

\* \* \*

In the middle of the afternoon we had some downtime between repair visits. The woman read the paper as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. Far more interesting than chewing the fat with ole Frank Monte.

*Suit yourself, babe.* I turned on the radio, cranked up a Jets game, waited to see if she'd have the nerve to ask me to turn it down.

\* \* \*

During the next appointment, I watched on the monitor as she let the repairman in, did her housewife act. She was convincing, I had to give her that.

I bumped up the magnification. Actually, she wasn't a bad looking woman. Nice olive skin, pretty brown hair, though she always wore it up. A cute little nose, its tip shining under the hall light like a pearl onion. Not much in the cleavage department, though—or so I guessed. I had to; she dressed like a nun.

I scoffed at myself: I was supposed to be watching *the repair guy*. This one was a geezer in a belted jumpsuit, a little old *papi*. The Mexicans dominated the streets on the west side of nearby Sunset Park. On the east, it was Chinese.

Brooklyn, a broad flat plain covered with tribes.

\* \* \*

When she returned to the attic, the woman looked troubled.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Nothing. I just felt kind of sorry for that guy."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. He seemed so nice."

I snorted. "Yeah—that was real charming the way he made up that crap about the burnt-out drive shaft."

"Maybe he wouldn't have done this if we didn't give him the opportunity."

I shook my head. "This is not entrapment. All you say is, 'Can you check out the machine?' He goes downstairs. If he's honest, he comes up honest. If he's dirty, he comes up with dirt on his face."

"It's that simple?"

"Right is right. Wrong is wrong. What else can I say?"

\* \* \*

The repairmen kept coming. The dishonest ones had different techniques. One attached a burnt piece of wire to the selector switch, another cut the motor belt. One bold bastard just whacked the motor with a wrench.

Visit No. 27 brought unexpected trouble.

I watched as my partner asked about the problem.

"I already fixed it," the guy replied. Not a big man, but he had the beefy, bloated look of a loser who relied on steroids to impress his buddies at the gym. He took a step forward. "I hope your husband appreciates what a fine-looking woman he's got here."

"What do I owe you?" Vazquez said quickly.

"How about a little kiss?" The repairman moved forward, crowding her against the washing machine.

"Shit," I muttered, hoping I could get to the basement before some real unpleasantness went down.

I found Vazquez standing above the repairman, who knelt on the floor, clutching his groin.

She turned. "This is a repairman, honey. He had a little accident."

After the guy left and we tromped back up to the attic, I gave my partner a new look of appraisal. Not only had she taken care of herself, she'd managed to maintain our cover. I thought of the repairman's stunned face and had to grin.

"They teach you moves like that in Consumer Affairs?"

Vazquez picked up some paperwork, shrugged like nothing much had happened. "They taught me moves like that growing up in East New York."

\* \* \*

I was in a cheery mood the next morning. Why? Who knew? Maybe it was the excellent breakfast special I'd discovered at a diner around the corner.

"Hey, Looocy," I called out as I walked into the attic. "Where's Little Rickie?"

Vazquez scowled up at me. "Is that supposed to be amusing?"

I stopped short.

She shook her head. "You think that's funny, putting down Latin-Americans like that?"

"No," I said, actually blushing. "I didn't mean"—

Elena grinned. "Relax, Frank. I was just kidding."

I blinked, and then I grinned too. "You were kidding? Well, *alright*."

\* \* \*

Near the end of the day, I stood by the window and watched another repairman stroll off down the front walk. I turned as Elena reached the attic.

"Clean as a whistle," she said.

I shrugged. "Whaddaya gonna do?"

She glanced at the clock we had installed above one of the attic beams.

"Looks like that's it for the day." She put some things in her purse, stood up, and took her coat off a chair.

I cleared my throat. "Hey, listen, you wanna get a beer before we head back? I know an okay place over on Fourth Avenue..."

She sighed. "Thanks, but I have to get home."

"Ah, c'mon," I said. "We've had a long day. Don't you need to unwind a little?"

"My husband's expecting me."

My eyes widened a little; I couldn't help it. "Husband? You never said anything about a husband."

"Was I supposed to? What about this?" She held up her left hand and its bright gold ring.

I sat back in my chair. "I dunno. I figured that was part of your cover."

She shook her head. She turned just before she reached the door. "Were you ever married?"

I busied myself turning off the equipment. "Nah. I've come close once or twice, but I don't think it's for me."

\* \* \*

The next morning I made sure the VCR was recording as another mook pried open the back of the washing machine.

I pantomimed palming a basketball at the foul line. "He shoots! He scores! See ya in court, shmucko." I made a note in the incident log.

A moment later, Elena walked in.

"Very well done," I said. "I give it a nine-point-five."

Her mouth turned up a little, despite herself.

Her cell phone rang. She picked up. "Hi, honey, what's up?" She frowned. "I'm sorry. I'll take care of it as soon as I get home." She noticed me eyeing her and turned away, lowering her voice.

The conversation went on for another minute. Elena practically squirmed in her chair. Evidently hubby was not ready to let go of his big complaint. I started to get a mental picture of the guy: some kind of aggressive, macho Latin. Somebody who enjoyed pushing his wife around.

Elena put a hand over her forehead. "Can we talk about this later?" She hung up and groaned.

I busied myself writing in the log, but I was thinking: trouble on the home front?

\* \* \*

The next day Elena looked tired as she walked in. She glanced at her desk. "Weren't you supposed to buy the coffees today?"

I stood. "I been thinking—why don't we just use the kitchen downstairs? I'm sure the people who're renting us this place won't mind. We can save a lot, not havin' to pay for that damn Starbucks, they can't even call a small coffee a 'small'..."

Downstairs, I had to search through all the drawers before I located a filter for the machine.

Elena leaned against the counter. "It feels strange, spending so much time in someone else's house."

I found a couple of mugs in a cabinet. "I like it. They got a nice setup."

After I brewed some java, we sat at a red Formica table in the corner and I pretended to read an old newspaper. I set it down and grinned. "Kinda like being married, huh?"

She scoffed. "Sure—except we have no bills to pay, no laundry, no future to argue about..."

"You argue about your future?"

She gave me a look. "No offense, Frank, but I don't really want to discuss my marriage here..."

"Sure," I said. "No problem."

We sat in silence until she finished her coffee.

I reached into my pocket, took out my wallet.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I drew out a dollar and set it under the box of coffee filters.

"Wow," she said. "You're a real Boy Scout."

I shrugged. "Hey, right is right."

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, she painted her nails while we waited for the next repair visit.

I swung side to side in my office chair. "You mind if I ask you something?"

She shook her head.

"What's with the nail thing? Nail parlors, manicures, all that crap. I mean, what's the point?"

She squinted down at her hand. "The point?"

"Are women doing this to get guys? Cause—I could be wrong, but I don't think there are many guys out there that really give a shit, pardon my French. I think the nails just get in the way."

She looked up, amused. "In the way of what?"

I flushed. "You know...opening cans. Typing..."

"Anything else?"

I turned away. "I better line up some more appointments."

\* \* \*

That night, at home in my little one bedroom in Bay Ridge, I threw my coat over the back of the living room couch. The thing had a big rip in one of the

cushions, but I had never bothered to get it fixed. Nobody was going to see it, or at least nobody whose opinion I cared about.

I peered down into an aquarium over in the corner.

"How ya doin,' ya little turtle bastard?" I had given the creature to my nephew for his birthday, but my sister had given it back; said her son was allergic. The thing sat on a log now, barely blinking. I snorted. "You make a hell of a pet, you know that? You don't do tricks; you don't guard the house... Don't feel bad about it, though. Whaddaya gonna do? You're a turtle."

I went into the kitchen and heated up some frozen enchiladas. I had a couple of beers, watched a little tube. And then I reached into my coat pocket and took out a videotape. Fast-forwarded to a point when Elena was standing in the front hall, waiting for the next repairman. I watched her in that private moment when she wouldn't have expected to be taped. Alone like that, she didn't look so uptight. She looked pretty nice.

After a minute, ashamed, I clicked off the TV.

I turned on a Seventies-style chrome lamp next to the couch and sat there for a while, looking around my dumpy bachelor pad, thinking about the years of accumulating overtime, then watching TV alone.

A vision came into my mind, me and Elena sitting on the back deck of a nice little house, with a garden maybe, barbecuing...

\* \* \*

"So," Elena said as she carried in two mugs of fresh coffee the next morning. "I hear you used to be a real hotshot."

I eyed her warily. "What are you talking about?"

"Harry told me. About your Mob cases and all."

I studied her face to make sure she wasn't busting my chops.

She set my coffee down and then sat at her desk, obviously curious but trying to act casual. "What happened?"

I made a face. "Didn't Harry tell you, when he was dishing up my private business?"

She sipped her coffee. "No, actually. He said it was up to you if you wanted to talk about it. So do you?"

"Do I what?"

She leaned forward. "Come on, Frank. We're partners, right? Tell me what happened."

I stared sourly at the opposite wall. After a moment, I ran a hand across my face and sighed. "For years I was trying to make this one Mob case. You remember Joseph Pollito, out in Mill Basin, that they used to call Joey Pipe? He killed some snitch's whole family."

"What about him?"

"I nailed him for the murders, and then he offered to roll over on some bigger fish. The D.A. wanted the publicity—it was an election year—so he was gonna let him plead it down."

"You didn't like that, I take it."

I made another face. "You don't let a scumbag like that practically *walk*." Elena stared at me. "What did you do?"

"I walked into a meeting of real big shots, NYPD and feds, and I flipped over this table. I told 'em"—

"Let me guess: *Right is right.*"

I smiled sheepishly.

"Good for you," Elena said. "Did they fire you?"

I shook my head. "Nah. I guess they didn't want me to make any kind of public squawk. But they suspended me for three months, made me go to this bullshit anger management class."

"Oh, yeah?" Elena grinned. "How'd that work out?"

\* \* \*

The next morning she walked into the attic sporting a big shiner around her left eye.

"Whoa," I said. "What happened to you?"

"It's nothing."

"Nothing? You look like you went a couple of rounds with Mike Tyson." The thought of someone hitting her made my own fists ball up.

"It was an accident. Stupid. The fridge door was iced up and I gave it a yank."

I leaned forward. "A door, huh? Listen, my cousin used to have a problem with doors. And falling down the stairs, kitchen cabinets... Finally I told her husband that if she had one more 'accident' I was gonna personally take him apart." I pictured Elena's husband again. A macho guy, and big. A wife beater.

Elena gave me a surprisingly soft look. "Thanks for the concern. But it was an accident. Really."

I turned away. Maybe it was none of my business, but I had a powerful urge to give the creep a taste of his own medicine.

\* \* \*

That night, I watched Elena on tape again, only this time I wasn't ashamed.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I walked in and handed her a small box.

"What's this?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Just some chocolates. I was thinking about your eye and all. You know, in case it hurts. These are like homemade; there's this fancy new shop down by the Brooklyn Bridge..."

I was babbling, worried she'd think I was out of line, but she set the box on her desk and gave me a nice smile.

"Thanks."

I felt a pain in my heart, as if some celestial repairman had intentionally stabbed it, and I had to admit to myself that I was falling in love.

\* \* \*

The next week was rough.

I did my best to play it cool, to keep things professional, but I started becoming hyper-aware of every little thing about Elena. How she sat, the way she smiled, the times she wouldn't smile, the way I thought I could detect a lingering trace of her scent when she wasn't in the room. All of that crap.

It bothered me. I was acting like some goofy rookie, some dipshit who didn't know any better. And I did know better, or at least enough not to screw up a good operation for some lame personal reason. I needed to do well on that job, needed it for my career.

Late one afternoon, I listened to Elena and her husband having it out on the phone again. She seemed really upset this time; if she wasn't so tough, I'm sure she would have had herself a good cry. Then I listened as she called up some female pal, asked if she wanted to go and see a movie. I felt jealous, can you believe it?

She left early, because we didn't have any more repair visits. The attic was getting dark fast, one of those gloomy evenings of a seemingly endless winter. I was restless, real restless. After pacing around for a while, too wired to do any work, I got an idea.

\* \* \*

The building was in the South Slope, one of those old warehouses newly converted to condos. The windows were big, but all of the shades were down. I could see into the little foyer, though, with its potted plants and ritzy track lighting. I sat outside in my car. Every few minutes I had to reach out and wipe my icy breath off the side window.

One of my cold hands was wrapped around a little something I usually kept in my trunk: a telescoping steel baton, illegal in New York State, something I had taken off a nightclub bouncer. The more I thought about it, bubbles rising from the hot saucepan of my heart, the better the idea seemed: I would meet Elena's husband out on the sidewalk in front of the building. Forget what they had told me in that course—sometimes a little righteous anger was the proper response. My vision narrowed as I dropped into a full-fledged fantasy: dropping the man with one swing, hearing him plead for the mercy he had not shown his much-smaller wife, swinging the baton and feeling a satisfying connection of metal against teeth, a spray of red...

A yuppie blonde couple came out, all duded up in some kind of fancy running suits, despite the cold. They set off down the sidewalk doing some kind of ridiculous speed-walking thing. What a crock. I turned my attention back to the door: a tall black woman carrying a briefcase. She tucked a cell phone between her ear and her shoulder as she reached into her pocket for her key.

After five minutes, a Chinese takeout delivery guy bicycled up. He wore a very skimpy metallic jacket with epaulets, and I wondered how he did his job all night without freezing to death. Then a slim guy came out, shoulders hunched because of the way both his forearms pressed down on aluminum canes. His body twisted with every step; I figured he had some kind of neurological disease. He was followed by a couple, a stout guy sporting a fancy cashmere coat and a plump Asian woman wearing fluffy white earmuffs.



I scrunched down in my seat, thought about turning on the heater for a few minutes. I hadn't seen anyone who looked remotely like a big Hispanic guy. I knew the address was right, because I had copied it off a utility bill I'd found on Elena's desk.

I was freezing, and I should have gone home, but I stayed on for a while. There was something burrowing inside of me, some bad pain or sadness, and I needed to get it out, to send it into the world as something else.

People came and went, the temperature dropped, my window iced faster. Finally, I realized what a pointless thing I was doing, lurking like some sick skel, and I got out of there before anybody else started to wonder what I was up to.

\* \* \*

The next day, I could hardly look Elena in the face. But that didn't stop me from watching her on the monitors, every chance I got.

\* \* \*

Two days later I was at my desk organizing some paperwork when she suddenly spoke up.

"Oh, look!"

"What is it?" I said.

"It's snowing."

I stood up and joined her at the window. Outside, big downy flakes were falling. The street and the trees were already turning white.

"I love it," she said.

"Looks like our last visit might get cancelled."

"Maybe we should head home before the streets get bad."

"There's no rush," I said. "We're still on the clock, right? We can get paid for watching the snow."

We stood in silence for a couple of minutes. We hadn't turned on any lights, and the room was softly growing dark.

"When I was little," she said, "I came from Puerto Rico. I had never seen snow. I thought it would be warm, like feathers."

"Were you disappointed by the real thing?"

"Who could be disappointed with this?"

After a moment, she sighed.

"What's the matter?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. This is nice."

I nodded. "Yeah."

We were only a couple of feet apart.

I turned to her. Reached out and gently touched her cheek. "Is this okay?"

She closed her eyes, leaned into my hand. I could feel a current running between us, something very strong. We stood like that for another minute.

Until I pulled back. She was *married*. To some loser who hit her, but married nonetheless.

Wrong was wrong.

She opened her eyes. She turned her head. She kissed my palm.

I wanted to put my arms around her something fierce.

"It's okay," she said. "I want to."

I stood there in silence.  
 I stared out at the snow.  
 I walked away and picked up my coat.

\* \* \*

The next two days, aside from the business of the job, we barely exchanged a word.

The day after that, Harry Weinstein showed up, said he thought maybe the operation had run its course. The whole time he was there, Elena wouldn't lift her eyes from her desk.

\* \* \*

There was one final order of business.

The challenge was to find a way to arrest all of the dirty repairmen at once, so they wouldn't have a chance to warn their compatriots. Harry arranged to borrow a big office downtown, and then I called all the bums and told them that I was with the City Department of Finance, said that they had been overcharged \$1,500 on their taxes, that they needed to come in person on a certain Friday to collect their refund. Nineteen repairmen showed up, crowing about their unexpected windfall. One by one Harry led them into a back room, where they were officially charged. Most of them tried to bullshit their way out, at least until I played the tapes. Some cursed, some pleaded, one even cried—and then a couple of uniforms from the local precinct hustled them out back to a waiting NYPD bus.

I went about the job like a robot. Elena's awkwardness around me took away the satisfaction I'd been looking forward to for so damned long.

Late in the day, I overheard her talking to her husband on her cell phone. I gathered that the guy was coming by to pick her up.

I thought of the way her soft lips had felt against my palm. Then I pictured her black eye. My forearms tensed. I thought of that steel baton again, sitting in my trunk.

Harry brought in several more repairman, but I could barely focus on the job. With the last guy, I looked up and realized that the man was the old papi from Sunset Park.

"No, *please,*" the geezer said as we showed him how he had become a star on reality TV. "My son will never forgive me," he said, panicking. I thought for a minute that the old guy was going to have a heart attack.

I looked into his eyes and saw a fellow human being, a man in pain, just like me.

But he was also a criminal.  
 And right was right.

\* \* \*

Later, after the repairman had been led off to the bus with the others, I sat in the corner of the office, sipping a cup of lukewarm coffee, watching the clock. I had stepped out to my car and retrieved the baton, and it sat heavy in my jacket

pocket. I couldn't start anything in the office, obviously, but I could follow Elena's husband back out to the parking lot.

Someone knocked on the door and my fists tightened.

Elena got up and invited the visitor in.

A small guy, about her size. Slim, with thinning hair. His narrow shoulders were hunched because of the way both his forearms pressed down on aluminum canes.

He lurched across the room, smiling a generous, off-kilter smile. "Are you Frank Monte? I'm Hector, 'Lainey's husband. My wife has told me great things about you." He rested one of the canes against a desk and extended a thin, gnarled hand.

It took me a moment to accept the man's shake. I mumbled a vague Hello, then watched as Elena briskly steered him toward the door. Just before they reached it, she turned her head and gave me a quick look that I couldn't begin to figure out.

After they left, I sat slumped in my chair, thinking about how I didn't know much about women, or marriage, or life in general, really.

Then I finished the last sip of my coffee, stood up, and closed the operation down.

END