

## Absolution

By Peter Palmieri

*Aaron Levy awoke from his usual dream with a rancid taste in his mouth. He dreamt of a man with a cinnamon complexion, black, shiny hair pulled into a pony tail, who sat cradling the limp body of a child. He spoke in an obscure tongue. "Jach Dyos b'o'otik." The man sealed his lips around the greasy muzzle of a revolver as if he were trying to suckle from an oversized straw. A second later, a starburst of blood splattered on the wall behind him.*

The office clamored with the wail of crying infants, the insistent ringing of unanswered phones, the gurgling sound of an outdated CBC machine. "We got one," Dr. Levy said to the prim medical student and led her into an exam room. He closed the door behind her, happy to muffle the incessant din. The patient sat aloof on the exam table, his doughy legs dangling over the edge. The chart said he was six years old, but from his size, the boy looked like he might be eight or nine. He wore Fruit-of-the-loom underwear with cream-lemon stains over the crotch. The boy's initials were printed in block letters on the elastic waistband with black marker.

Dr. Levy eyed the child's bare torso, his gaze settling on the boy's breasts: flabby ice-cream cones slung over a watermelon paunch. The doctor locked eyes with the boy and stretched his lips into a strained smile, said, "Hello. You must be Carlson. I'm Dr. Levy."

The child's mother, a tall blonde with full lips and skin which seemed far too tight for her face got to her feet and locked Levy's hand in a strangulating handshake, grasped his wrist with her free hand the way politicians are apt to do. "It is so very nice to meet you doctor. We've heard many nice things about you. Haven't we, C.J.?" The boy looked at his feet and shrugged. And from the tone of the woman's voice and the smell of her perfume, Aaron Levy knew it would be a long office visit.

Forty minutes later, Aaron Levy and the student retreated to the windowless office whose worn carpet was almost entirely covered by three cluttered desks. They settled in unmatching swivel chairs and Dr. Levy said, "So. What do you think?"

"She seems nice. She really likes you."

Dr. Levy pressed his palms together as if in prayer and exhaled through pursed lips. "That's the worst kind of patient you'll ever encounter. This is a perfect example of the adulatory first visit. These patients come to you, having seen countless other doctors, and try to charm you with flattery. Then on the second or third visit they make a request you can't possibly satisfy. So they make a scene in the waiting room, leave the office fuming and badmouth you all over town. That mother," Levy wagged a finger, "I'll bet you anything she has borderline personality disorder. She's Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction, dead bunny and all."

The medical student narrowed her eyes and smiled a homecoming queen's smile. "Dr. Levy, sometimes I don't know whether you're serious or just being..." she shook her head, "cheeky."

Aaron Levy chuckled. Years ago, he had hatched the theory that medical schools were preferentially granting admission to students who had worked in fast-food joints, who would more easily incorporate the new service mentality of medicine. They would graduate with hollow skulls and pearly smiles and go to work in some Doc-in-the-Box run by a suit with an MBA who'd never taken an upper-level science course in college.

*Welcome to McClinic! Can I take your order? Would you like to try our new chest x-ray and Z-Pak combo?*

To be fair, homecoming queen was a cut above most other med students he precepted: radiant eyes, perfect teeth, nice curves and a faint stirring of neurons pulsing inside her skull. She'd be a star – a cocktail waitress amongst burger flippers.

Levy looked at his watch. "It's already 4:30. There're no more patients. You're free to go."

"Are you walking out?" the student asked.

Levy pointed at a stack of charts on his desk. Camp forms, pre-authorization requests, medication refills, clearances to attend day-care. His profession had become a mere secretarial post in a burgeoning bureaucracy. Patients, parents, administrators, nurses, they all connived to burden him, to hurt him. And if ever they managed to wound him, they hungered to hurt him even more.

The student pulled her purse from the right bottom drawer of a metal desk, strapped it over her shoulder and stood up, her eyes surveying Levy. "Have you always been like this?" she asked.

"Like what?"

"You know, cynical, bitter, untrusting. Always questioning everyone's motives..."

Levy kept his eyes locked on hers, nodded slightly, then swiveled in his chair showing his back to the medical student and said, "See you in the morning, then."

Had he always been this way? Once alone he thought of that night in Houston ten years ago as a third year resident on call in the ICU. A man walked into the unit: the father of a boy who bounced off the bed of a pickup truck and bashed his head on the asphalt leaving him in a persistent vegetative state – the man with the cinnamon complexion, the pony tail and the revolver hidden in the inside pocket of his coat.

"Enough," he had said to Aaron. "Please, no more," as he held the gun pointed at Aaron's chest with a shaky hand.

After removing all the lines and monitor leads and powering down the ventilator, the handgun still pointed at his heart, Aaron placed the soon-to-be lifeless body of the child in his father's arms.

*"Jach Dyos b'o'otik,"* the man uttered.

Aaron had no idea what it meant, but it sure sounded like, "Screw you, buddy!" Then the crimson spray painted the back wall and it was all over. But it was never over.

Aaron's beeper chimed, pulling him back to the present. Forty minutes later he was standing in a patient bay of the Brownsville Medical Center Emergency Room looking at the emaciated form of what should have been a nearly three year old boy. His limbs were gangly branches, the skin dark and scaly, the muscles wasted and stiffened so that his legs look like a

giant pretzel. The boy's chest reminded Aaron of an indigenous drum: a thin leather pelt drawn tightly over spindly ribs. The boy's lips were parched and fissured, flaking in ghostly wafers. His eyes were glazed, empty, void of expression.

A squat man in a stained white guayabera tenderly caressed the child's head with thick, calloused fingers and spoke in a deferential tone while the interpreter, a stern, gray-haired woman with a pink cardigan thrown over her shoulders, repeated his words in an English monotone.

"The child was normal until after his first birthday," the interpreter said. "He talked, he walked... he ran. He was a strong boy." The father smiled exposing a mouthful of silver capped teeth and flexed his biceps. "One day he started crying with a strange cry – like cats do sometimes at night – and the fever started. The village doctor gave him medicine but the fever was too strong. Then came the convulsions. At the city hospital the doctors said he had meningitis."

"How does he feed him?" Levy asked.

"It's very hard. I dip a washcloth in milk and squeeze the drops in his mouth. It's the only way." The father shrugged when the interpreter finished her phrase, his smile waning.

"And they came like this all the way from the Yucatan?"

"Walking, hitchhiking... We stowed away in a freight train from Matchuala to Monterrey. Last night we crossed the river on an inner-tube. And here we are."

*My goddam lucky day!* Aaron nodded and smiled stiffly, his head abuzz with every pitfall and complication he'd stumble into taking care of this kid: intractable seizures, re-feeding syndrome; electrolyte abnormalities, pathologic fractures, kidney failure, aspiration, sepsis... who knows what the hell else. This was a train wreck in a snowstorm under an avalanche: a liability nightmare if he'd ever seen one. It was fourth and long, late in the game and his team was down by a smack-load of touchdowns. The only smart thing for Levy to do was to punt.

"Tell the father," Levy said, "that we want to make sure that his child gets the care he deserves." He paused for the interpreter. "The very best care... For this reason, I'd like to transfer him to Corpus Christi, where they have the resources that Juan-Pablo needs," *and he'll be someone else's problem.* Aaron Levy nodded as the interpreter caught up. "We're just a small hospital here," he said showing the empty palms of his hands. "But I think we can get Juan-Pablo – and father, of course – up to Corpus by this evening via ambulance."

The father grabbed Aaron's hand and shook it vigorously. "Gracias, doctor. Muchas gracias."

"That's quite all right," Levy said looking away.

The man spoke again.

"He says he knew right away when he saw you that you would help his boy, that you were a great man," the interpreter said with a raised eyebrow.

"*Jach Dyos b'o'otik,*" the father said with moist eyes.

Aaron froze. He faced the interpreter and cocked his thumb. "What did he just say?"

"I have no idea. That's not Spanish," the interpreter said, wrinkling her nose.

"Ask him what it means."

The interpreter exchanged words with the father. Finally, she said, "It's a Mayan dialect. Literally it means, 'Very much God pays you.' It's used as a thank-you, God bless you."

Aaron looked at the emaciated boy and for the first time he could see him as a toddler taking his first steps, smiling, saying his first words. He saw him wrapped in a rough blanket in his father's arms in the empty bed of a freight-train car, his father wringing a wet washcloth onto his lips, whispering to him all the while through silver-capped teeth. He pictured the crossing of the Rio Grande, the father clinging to the inner-tube that cradled his child, struggling to paddle through the murky eddies and currents.

He stared at the father who now emitted a familiar aura: the look of relief after an exhausting race, of welcomed sacrifice, of unfathomable love. A vision of the man with the shiny, black pony tail and cinnamon skin surfaced in his mind; a picture of him in that last moment. He recognized the same look, the same serenity, the same resolve.

Aaron felt a tightness gripping his chest. The air of the Emergency Room became a stagnant miasma; stifling, un-breathable. He turned on his heels, shuffled past the nurse's station, through the automatic doors that opened onto the ambulance bay.

He stepped into the oppressive heat of the South Texas sun, hungering for air, his eyes stinging. A dull metallic flavor welled up in his mouth. He recognized it as the taste of deep shame, of bitter remorse. A paramedic with a crew cut and a double chin, his gut hanging over his belt like a hammock waddled by and said, "Hey there doc."

The words felt like an icepick piercing his skull. Aaron looked down at the badge clipped to his lapel. He held out his arms and gaped at the sleeves of his white coat in bewilderment, as though the white coat was not a part of his wardrobe but an old Halloween costume he had somehow forgotten to shed.

He fished in a pocket of the coat, took out his car keys and slipped them in the front pocket of his slacks. Then he removed his coat, leaving the rest of its contents in its starched pockets. He rolled the entire package in a ball, walked to a trash can, and stuffed it inside.

Aaron breathed deeply, the heaviness in his chest finally lifting, oxygen returning to his starved tissues. Able to breathe at last, he walked away.

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