

I HAD gone to the Parker courthouse to take care of a ticket and try to get my car back. I saw the cop parked up ahead at the corner and I was extra careful at the stop sign. But I had no sooner crossed the intersection and started down the next block when he came after me. I stopped as soon as he put on his red light. I couldn't afford another ticket. I knew enough to stay in the car and wait for him to come up to me. I rolled down my window, and when he was next to me, I said, "Why did you stop me, Officer?"

"You don't know?"

"No, I don't. I was being extra careful."

"Well, you shouldn't even be driving this thing to begin with. It's a complete mess, an accident waiting to happen. I can probably cite you for ten different things."

"Yeah, but it's the only car I have, the only one I can afford."

He stepped back and looked at my car again and then at me again and then past me at the torn seats and the hanging pieces of roof cover. "Let me see your driver's license."

I gave him my expired driver's license.

"Sit tight. I'll be right back."

I watched in my rearview mirror as he went back to his car and radioed in. I thought of running but in the next breath realized how ridiculous that was, how much more trouble that would bring me.

He came back to the car and said, "Step out of the car."

"Why?"

"Because I said so, that's why.... You know, I've got half a mind to take you in. You've got a bunch of moving violations and parking violations that you haven't taken care of. But I'm going to give you one last chance. I'm going to impound your car and write you up for driving without a license and a faulty muffler. And if you

don't show up in court this time, I'm going to get an arrest warrant out for you. Do I make myself clear?"

I nodded.

"I don't know what you're going to tell the judge but you brought this on yourself."

That's what brought me to the courthouse two weeks later.

As I was standing in the hallway trying to find my name on all the posted court calendars, someone standing next to me said, "How ya doing, Raymond?"

"Raymond" not Ray, grabbed my attention. I turned, and there stood Danny Bencomo, a cop I had gone to school with. He and his partner were in jeans and T-shirts, undercover cops now. Before I could say anything, he said, "Raymond, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to give your cousin Billy a message for me. Can you do that?"

"Sure, Danny, sure." The last thing I wanted to do was to be dealing with an undercover narc. And the next-to-last thing I wanted to do was to turn an undercover cop down. "Sure."

"You tell Billy for me that we know he's dealing and been dealing for a long time. Tell him we know he's a big-time dealer now. But sooner or later we're gonna catch him. Sooner or later somebody's gonna rat him out. That always happens. But for right now I want you to tell him that a lot of people on the street are OD'ing on stuff we know he's putting out there. It's bad shit. We've had two people die in the past week. Tell him he'd better clean his shit up because if somebody else croaks on us, we're gonna haul his ass in and charge him with homicide. Whether we can prove it or not doesn't matter. At least that will give cousin Billy another taste of what the rest of his life is gonna be like, sooner or later. Can you do me that favor, Raymond, and give your cousin Billy that message for us?"

Wide-eyed and scared I said, "Danny, I don't know anything about what you're talking about. Believe me."

"You may or may not. Right now we're not interested in you,

Raymond. It's your cousin Billy we're focusing on. I know how tight the two of you have been since grade school. So give him that message for us, will you?"

"Sure, Danny. But you've got to believe me, Danny, I don't know..."

"We're not interested in you, Raymond. At least not yet. It's Billy we want. It's Billy who's killing people."

Then they gave me two big glares and left.

I was terrified. I started to leave the courthouse to get to Billy. He was living just a few blocks away, but I remembered the cop saying, "If you don't show up this time, I'm going to get an arrest warrant out for you." That stopped me and I thought: *If I leave now, if I don't take care of this ticket now, they for sure will arrest me.* But Danny Bencomo had said they *might* be interested in me later. The cop was for sure and Danny was only for maybe. *I'd better stay*, I thought.

I went back to the court calendars. There were five sheets posted for the courtroom I was in, and my name was at the bottom of the last page. But I went in. The courtroom was packed, standing room only at the back and that's where I stood. The judge was already listening to people or rather pissed off at people. He was an old, cranky, bald-headed bastard. Mean enough looking and sounding that I was sure he was going to lock me up. But I didn't leave. Leaving was for sure.

Two and a half hours later with three of us left in the courtroom, he called my case. He had already put quite a few guys in jail and my chances of walking out of that courtroom didn't look too good. I was sitting but then I got up and went and stood where everybody had been standing.

He looked down at me and gave me a mean look and said, "Are you Raymond Lopez?"

"Yes, sir."

Then he read whatever was on his desk that told him about me. That took him a while. Then he looked down at me again, still mean-like. But now he was rubbing his chin. "You know, Mr. Lopez, there's a whole list of violations here that you haven't taken

care of, haven't come to court for. Some of these I could put you in jail for for a long time. Why haven't you taken care of any of these?"

I didn't know what to answer or how to answer, and I just stood there staring down at the floor.

He waited and then said, "Mr. Lopez, I asked you a question. Why haven't you taken care of any of these violations?"

I could feel him getting not just mean but pissed off, but I didn't know what to say or how to say it.

"Mr. Lopez, I'm going to..."

"I've been sick."

"Sick? What have you been sick with?"

"Sick enough to be in the hospital for two months."

"What hospital?"

"Valley Medical Center."

"The county hospital here in Parker?"

"Yes."

"What were you sick with...? Mr. Lopez, look at me. What were you sick with?"

I hated talking about it. "They have a big, old, long name for it that I can't even say."

"Two months is a long time. What part of the hospital did they have you in?"

"I don't know the name of that department."

"What kind of illnesses were they dealing with there?"

"Mental."

"Were the doctors psychiatrists and psychologists?"

"Yes."

"Had you been there before?"

"No, sir, that was the first time, the only time I've been in the hospital."

"When were you released?"

"Three months ago."

"Are you taking any medication?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Zyprexa."

"Do you take it every day?"

"Yes, I have to."

For a while he just looked at me. It wasn't a mean look now. And now I wasn't so sure that he was going to put me in jail.

"Are you working Mr. Lopez?"

"No. I can't get a job. They always want to know why I haven't been working and when I tell them I've been sick, and when they find out that it's been mental, they won't hire me."

"How do you support yourself?"

"I get disability and that's enough to pay for a room in this old lady's house and I eat a lot at McDonald's and Taco Bell."

He just looked at me again, nodding little nods to himself until he said, "What I'd like to do today, Mr. Lopez, is resolve all these matters before me so that you can walk out of here with a clean slate. Would you like to do that?"

"Sure, if you're not going to put me in jail."

"But in order to do that you're first going to have to admit your guilt to all the violations before me. In other words, you're going to have to plead guilty to all these violations. Are you willing to do that?"

"Sure, if you're not going to put me in jail."

"I will not put you in jail and you will walk out of here a free man. Are you ready to admit all these violations?"

"Yes."

"So how do you plead to all these violations? Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty. I did them all."

"Good. I'm going to order that the impounded vehicle be sold and that all the proceeds from that sale be applied to the moving and parking violations that were charged against you. In referring the disposition of these violations to the Department of Motor Vehicles, I am required by law to inform that Department that you are suffering from schizophrenia and taking medication for it.

That could mean that you'll have a difficult time getting another driver's license."

"Fine by me," I said elated.

I HADN'T even gotten to the courtroom door when the fear from Danny Bencomo's words returned. I had to get to Billy. I had to tell Billy before they arrested him and found out about me. But as I hurried down the courthouse steps on my way to Billy's, someone said, *We told you, you should never have gotten involved with Billy in Malaga*. "What?" I said and stopped and turned to whoever might have said that. But there was no one there. I panicked fearing who it might have been. "What?" I said again, hoping there would be no answer. But there was. Plain, clear, and loud. *We told you you should never have gotten involved with Billy in Malaga*. It was one of the voices and I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't go to Billy. I couldn't let anyone see me like this. I had to take care of the voices. Now. But I didn't know how.

I sat down on the courthouse steps and thought. I was positive I had taken my meds that morning and still I had heard a voice. The meds weren't working. What to do? Go back to the hospital and tell them the meds aren't working? They would want to know exactly what I had heard and what it meant. There was no way I could tell them about Billy and me. And I couldn't lie about what I had heard either because then, not knowing what the truth was, they could never really help me. My thing with Billy had triggered it. Did that mean that every time I thought about Billy and me, that might trigger it again? And I couldn't tell anyone about my thing with Billy, especially after what Danny Bencomo had said. I couldn't live like this. I had to do something.

Then I thought of the old *curandero* Padre Ibarra had brought with him on his last visit with me at the hospital, telling me that the old man had helped many people with mental illness. The *curandero* didn't make much of an impression on me that day. No doubt it was because on that visit Padre Ibarra had given me the keys to the church in Malaga and I was all excited about that. The

curandero didn't stay long that day but he did say that he would come again, and a few days later he did.

HE WAS a small, dark man who spoke and moved quietly. His dry brown skin lay in pleats of wrinkles on his neck and hands. He wore a starched and neatly ironed gray work shirt and pants that were a size too big for him.

"Padre asked me to look in on you and I thought that was a good idea. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, no, thank you for coming." Aside from Padre Ibarra, he was the only visitor I had had.

"I came because I wanted to talk to you about mental illness hoping that some of the things I have to say will help you when you leave here. Would that be alright with you?"

"Sure." I would have welcomed anyone coming to visit with me and wanting to talk to me.

"For many years, I lived in the mountains of Chiapas in southern Mexico. I was a *curandero* there. There were no doctors or pharmacies in those mountains. I treated people with herbs and plants and advice that came from treating similar illnesses. There was mental illness in those mountains too, and I treated many of those people well enough, I suppose, so that after a while people with mental illnesses were brought to me or came to see me from great distances.

"But I want to be clear. I said I treated people with mental illness. I did not say that I cured people with mental illness. Because there is no cure for mental illness. That's right. No cure. It's a lifelong illness that can only be treated when it returns and return it does. They say that today the illness can be kept under control by having a patient take medication. But once a patient stops taking medication or won't take medication, the illness will take over whenever it wants. It is a lifelong illness.

"There were no medications in those mountains, and after a while I became convinced that the best thing I could do for anyone suffering from this illness was to try to make that person aware

of the mind's workings. No one really knows what the mind is or where it is or how it works. We do see its workings, its products, all the time. We see its fears and worries, its joys and happiness all the time. It is with us and in us twenty-four hours a day, every day. It's always working, always producing new ideas, old memories, things to be avoided, things to strive for. It is working even when we sleep. It dreams. Because people suffering from this illness were always besieged with great fear and worry, I tried to make them aware that of all the things they feared and worried over, only a very few of those fears and worries ever happened. For all of us, sick or not, the multitude of fears and worries we carry with us seldom come to pass. That was the first thing I tried to do with a person suffering from mental illness. Then I tried to convince them to deal head-on with whatever fear or worry was seriously tormenting them. To say to that fear or worry, 'Happen! Go on happen!' Let all that fear and worry happen just as the mind is presenting it! Let it happen now! Because very little of those fears and worries ever happen and the ones that do are seldom insurmountable.

"Something as simple as that seemed to help. Help. Not cure. What it seemed to do was to stop at least some of the fears and worries before they reached a stage that they were out of control... What do you make of all that, Ramón?"

"I don't know what to make of it. Because before I got sick, before I knew what was coming, I got sick, real sick, until the medication pulled me out of it."

He wasn't satisfied with my answer and he said that he wanted to show me an exercise he taught people so they could focus on the workings of their minds. He said it would only take five minutes. Did I want to learn how to do it? I really wasn't interested. The medication was working. But he had been kind enough to visit me, the only one besides Padre Ibarra, and I said OK.

He asked me to close my eyes for five minutes and watch how my mind moved from thing to thing. During those five minutes, he wanted me to concentrate and concentrate on how my mind

moved from subject to subject. I closed my eyes and he repeated, "Concentrate! Concentrate!" I did, but all I saw was a big, flat, blank screen. When I told him that, he was clearly disappointed and he stopped talking about mental illness and the mind. Instead we talked about where he had lived and who he had lived with, about when and why he had come to the United States, and what kind of work he did or had done. Then he rose and shook my hand and wished me luck and said that if I ever needed help to contact him and he gave me an address and left. I was sure that I would never see the *curandero* again.

But he returned three days later, a week before I left the hospital. He said he had been thinking of me and felt it was very important that he try to teach me his coping skill again. By then, I was counting the minutes until I could leave the hospital and get back to my life out on the streets, and I would do anything to keep from counting. So I said "OK," and closed my eyes for five minutes to his "Concentrate! Concentrate!" This time I did see the mind creating thought after thought, each thought different and taking me to different things, times, and places. When I told the *curandero* what I had seen, he was elated and asked if I would try it one more time. Yes, it had stopped me from counting.

This time he said that he wanted me to label thoughts that were positive and thoughts that were negative. By negative, he said he meant any thought that could lead to fear or worry. I said I'd try. But new and different thoughts were rising so quickly that in the time it took me to try to label one thought, three more thoughts had passed, disrupting my labeling. When I told him what had happened, he said he understood and explained that what he wanted me to see with the labeling was that negative thoughts in the mind usually far outnumber positive thoughts. This interested me, and I tried labeling again, but with the same result. He said he understood, and after a repeat of the small talk of three days before, he left. I liked the *curandero* and I appreciated his thinking of me. Still I had no reason to try or even think about his exercises again. The medication was working.

BUT NOW, sitting on the courthouse steps, it made more sense to go to the *curandero*, rather than the hospital, to ask for help. When he saw me he said, "The voices have come again?"

I nodded. That was all I could say.

"Sit, sit," taking me by the arm to a couch. "Try to calm yourself."

I sat and nodded some more.

"When did this happen? Where?"

"I was..." and then the words left me.

"Just sit and try to relax. You're safe here. Nothing will happen to you here. Speak when you want, but only if you're ready."

It was late afternoon and outside, daylight was still strong, but the little front room was almost dark. Curtains heavy with dust and years of living blocked out much of the light at the rooms two windows. The old *curandero* was sitting across from me, saying nothing. I did feel safe, and gradually the terror ebbed away until I was able to speak. I don't know how much time passed before I spoke again, but it was a good while. Then I said, "I was walking down the courthouse steps when the voices came. I had gone there to take care of a ticket when all of a sudden a voice said that they had warned me about going into business with my cousin Billy."

"What kind of business is your cousin in?"

"Oh, he...helps people buy and sell things."

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, you know, mostly used things, secondhand things."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm kind of like an errand boy. I pick up and deliver things."

"What exactly did the voices say?"

"They were kind of like scolding me for being in business with Billy."

"Are you still taking medication?"

"Yes."

"Other than today, has anything like this happened since you've been taking medication?"

"No."

"Have you been to the hospital?"

"No."

"Why did you come to me instead of the hospital?"

"I guess I was thinking that if this could happen to me while I'm taking medication, then maybe I could use your system too, for fuller protection."

"That could be good thinking except for the fact that I have never treated anyone who's already on medication. My understanding is that once this happens to someone on medication, then the medication should be changed or the dosage should be increased. I think that's the best way for you to proceed right now. If after you've tried that and that doesn't work, then we can talk again."

"So what are you telling me?"

"That you should return to the hospital and report what's happened and ask for additional treatment."

"But it's late now."

"No, not that late. You've been here a little more than two hours. But you're calm now and I'm sure there are doctors on duty at the hospital twenty-four hours a day, every day."

I LIVED just a few blocks from the *curandero* and I made my way home without incident. The hospital was still not an option. I knew the people at the hospital had to report some things to the police, and they just might guess what Billy was doing and that I was connected to him. I was no longer living in Mrs. Ortega's house but rather, with the money that Billy was paying me, I had rented the two-room, spindly apartment that had been tacked on to the roof of her old garage in the backyard. It was just after eight when I walked up the driveway toward the garage. The front house was dark. Mrs. Ortega was already in bed and maybe asleep. Either way, she wouldn't be much help if the voices returned. I quietly went up the apartment stairs and immediately turned on the lights in the two rooms. Then I checked out the closet and the bathroom. No one there. I hadn't eaten since morning but I wasn't hungry, and I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I had to tell Billy about Danny Bencomo, but I couldn't let Billy see me in this condition.