

PLAYING DOCTOR

Ten minutes after he showed me a picture of a naked woman we were business partners. Four days later I was in jail.

My name is Levi Denim and I've heard jokes about my name since I was seven, so go ahead and snicker. I met Hercules in a dirt-floor hole-in-the-wall joint complete with Confederate Flag mirrors and black velvet Elvis artwork. We were eating boiled peanuts, tossing down beers, and listening to Faith Hill and Tim McGraw profess undying love, when he asked if I was interested seeing a beautiful naked woman and making money seeing naked women.

"Sure." I gulped Budweiser, wiped my wrist across my lips, and flicked soggy shells onto the floor. "Why not."

Hercules A. Gunn III flipped his wallet open and I saw the picture; she was stunning. I didn't want to stare, so I diverted my eyes to the left and read his driver's license. As I did, I imagined a rookie cop's reaction when his eyes roamed from the South Carolina driver's license to the color picture of a beautiful, well built naked blonde straddling a chair. After a polite pause, I looked back again; she was still stunning. The Uncle Sam hat tipped back on her head added something to the picture.

"Can't believe she's married to a guy who looks like me, can ya?"

He had a point. Hercules was pudgy with a misshapen head and uneven buzz cut. His face looked like it had been used to put out campfires. I mean his face was pitted, scarred, and lopsided – one jaw and one eye were higher than the other side. And his ears, well, they were so small that he looked deformed. I shrugged.

He grinned and motioned for two more beers, indicating they were on me. "Name's Hercules Ambrose Gunn the third. Go by Hercules. Yours?"

“Levi Denim.”

He didn't react, just said, “Nice to make your acquaintance Levi,” and pumped my hand three times. “Let's mosey over to a more private area and discuss some business.”

We crunched and smashed peanut shells into the dirt as we weaved to a booth in the back. I slid across the smooth wood bench and landed under an autographed picture of a smiling Strom Thurmond. The booth was clean despite numerous cigarette burns, knife marks, and what looked like blood stains - old blood stains.

Hercules leveled his tired brown eyes with mine. “Levi, my friend, do you remember that movie, *Mr. Destiny*, where James Belushi walks into a bar and Michael Caine changes his life?”

I nodded. “Vaguely”

“Well, I'm about to change yours.”

“Does my life need to be changed?”

Hercules rubbed his nubby scalp and chuckled. “Look at you. It's eleven in the a.m., you are sittin in a bar that redneck bikers consider a dive. It's got a dirt floor, grimy broken windows, and a “C” rated health inspection sticker. Drinkin Bud with an ex-con who got hisself fired from Gas N Grub for callin in sick too many times. Yeah, I'd say your life needs changed for the better.”

I could not argue his logic. “You're going to be my reference at Gas N Grub?”

“That's rich.” He slapped the table twice and shook his head deliberately. “No.” He finished the beer and slowly lowered the bottle to the table. “I'm gonna make you into a doctor and we're gonna make a lot of money. We're gonna get women to pay us to see them naked!”

I spread my hands, palms up. “Okay, Hercules tell me how this is going to unfold.”

“Unfold? I like it partner.” He raised his empty bottle and shook it. “Buy an unemployed buddy a Bud and burger?”

“Beer now. Burger if we reach a deal.”

“Good enough.” He stood and waved at the wiry, white-haired man behind the bar. “Yo Commodore! Two more for me and my business partner!”

“Commodore?”

He snickered. “Poor guy’s name is Lionel Ritchie. Ain’t that a hoot?”

I rubbed my eyes and shook my head. *This place cannot be real.*

My new partner leaned on one fleshy elbow. On his forearm was a tattoo – a smiling donkey under the words “Kiss My”.

“Shenandoah, my bride, is a nurse - LPN to be exact - and she says there ain’t no women’s issue docs around for three counties. Had two, one moved to Raleigh; the other died. I mean died quickly and suddenly. About six months ago, his car got blindsided by a school bus, right in front of his own house. He was backin out of his driveway and got run over by the grade school bus driven by Newt Mooney. I’m telling you it was nasty, Ole Newt crushed his fancy convertible like a Coke can. Kids on that ride had somethin to talk about over dinner!”

I’m sure my mouth dropped wide open.

Hercules kept talking. “Anyway, since there ain’t no women’s problem docs, we need to manufacture one. I’m thinkin you are decent looking man, got brains. We could set you up as a women’s doctor and split the profits.”

“Uh uh.”

He shifted to the other elbow; this one had a raw scab - sickeningly raw and infected. Hercules noticed me staring. “Shenandoah and me was on the carpet the other night.” He grinned, displaying perfectly white, straight teeth. “It was worth a little pain and lost skin.”

I drummed my thumb three times. “Okay Hercules, hypothetically speaking, how could we pull this off?” *Obviously the beer had fogged my senses.*

“Hypothetically speaking! See you talk like a doctor!” His eyes brightened. “Look it, I got a place you could use for your office. Rent’s cheap. And.” He looked around to make sure no one could hear him. “I got a skill that very few have. Very few.” He leaned across the booth and whispered, “I can forge documents.”

“You can *forge* documents? Really?”

“Yes sirree. I can have you a set of doctor credentials in 48 hours tops. Then you and me can begin examinin naked women.”

I was hooked. We spent thirty minutes discussing how to establish my medical practice, while Hercules inhaled two cheeseburger baskets and sucked down more beer.

Two days later my business partner, and new Physician’s Assistant, and I met again in the same booth. As Strom smiled benevolently at us, Hercules opened a weathered, russet leather pouch and extracted several certificates. With an air of dignity, he gently placed them in my hands. According to the certificates and licenses, Levi D. Walker was a graduate of Duke University Medical School and licensed to practice medicine in South Carolina.

“Well Doctor Walker, what do you think?”

“These,” I said as I examined the intricate detail, “Look genuine. They just might work!”

“Thank ya.” Hercules grinned. “I’m good. Been able to do this since I was thirteen, started with fake sick and late notes from parents and graduated to alterin report cards. Eventually did a few drivers’ licenses. Only been incarcerated once and that was pure bad luck. Guy turned state evidence on me after I created a business license for him; did it to keep his butt outta jail. Six months in minimum security wasn’t that hard. Actually gave me time to refine my craft.”

He slid two more documents across the slick surface. These indicated that Robert Joseph Lee was an honors graduate of a Physician Assistants program in West Virginia. “We’ll operate a couple of counties over. Folks around here know I ain’t no doctor’s assistant. They also know my name ain’t Bobby Joe Lee.” He swung his stubby legs over the end of the bench and dropped to the dirt floor. “Let’s hop in the pickup and go check out your new medical office.”

Sixty-five teeth jarring minutes later, Hercules pulled into the gravelly, rutted parking lot of *Clyde’s Storage Facilities & Truck Rental*. What a sight, five rows of freshly painted buildings with gleaming aluminum doors and brand new hasp locks. Parked around the buildings were a variety of well-used trucks.

Hercules shielded his eyes from the sun and squinted. “I’m guessin that you’re thinkin negative thoughts. That this might not be the *ideal* location for your medical practice.” He pointed a stubby, bandaged finger at one of the buildings. “Your office will be in *Suite* 101, right up front. Even so it is still out of the glare of public scrutiny.” He looked at me and grinned. “You probably guessed that what we’re doing might be viewed as a bit *illegal*.”

“That thought had entered my mind.”

“Well don’t spend no more time thinking about it. Every doctor can’t have a fancy office; some gotta use less *elegant* facilities until they are more established.”

The next morning Hercules and I set up the examining room in a cinder block 15 x 15 storage unit. Our clinic consisted of two old Formica cafeteria tables, two vinyl privacy curtains, several folding chairs, and two rickety, walnut end tables. Hercules even remembered to include old magazines: *People*, *Soap Opera Digest*, and an assortment of fishing magazines.

While we were doing that, Shenandoah drove into town and talked to the local women. Around three she returned and announced, “I scheduled six appointments. Y’all will have patients tomorrow.”

The next day Hercules and I examined ten women, the six appointments and four friends who accompanied them, for \$50 each – cash. We were about to close for the day when the sheriff arrived, red lights flashing and gravel flying as he squealed to a stop. After a brief discussion, he closed “the clinic”, then handcuffed and hauled me into a jail that was right out of Mayberry – including the town drunk snoring in the next cell.

Just after four o’clock Hercules arrived and pulled a chair next to my cell. As the drunk snored like a hibernating bear, Hercules stared for a moment, then laughed. “Fella’s loud ain’t he?”

“Constantly.”

“Look, I’m genuinely sorry about this partner. I’ll have an attorney for you right after breakfast.”

“A real one or a paper one?”

Hercules looked wounded and I regretted the remark.

“You want to get out of here or not?”

Early the next morning, a woman, who looked remarkably like Shenandoah in a curly red wig, marched to my cell, smoothed her pinstriped navy jacket, and read from a legal file. “My name is Amber Waves and I am your attorney.” Pause. “Mr. Robert J. Lee has retained me on your behalf.” Longer pause. “He and I will meet with the sheriff directly and I suspect all charges will be dismissed forthwith.” She winked, turned, and sauntered away from the cell, stiletto heels clicking on the cement floor.

Twenty-five minutes later, I know it was 25 minutes, I was watching the clock; you get bored sitting in the slammer listening to an old drunk snore, the deputy unlocked my cell door. “Dr. Walker, you are free to go. All charges have been dropped.”

After I retrieved my personal items, I stepped outside and heard a shrill whistle, followed by “Hey doc, over here.” I crossed the buckled sidewalk to where Hercules and the bewigged Shenandoah leaned against a silver Ford Escort. He was nuzzling her neck; her hand was inside his unbuttoned shirt.

“Thanks for springing me.”

When they finally pulled apart, I hugged Shenandoah and shook Hercules’ hand.

“I have to ask, how did you get the charges dropped?”

Hercules grinned as he kicked at loose stones. “Wasn’t difficult really. The good sheriff used to be married to my sister’s husband’s second cousin. That is until his wife caught him dancin butt naked with a TV anchorman in a gay roadhouse.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah buddy. They was slow dancing to some Shania Twain song when his wife walked in and saw him and Pretty Boy News Reader looking like it was the Gay Boys high school prom. She went Steven Segal on him, punchin and kickin and screamin and callin him everything but masculine. Fortunately him and his date were able to cover their vitals until the other naked girly men came to their rescue.

“My guess is that the sheriff don’t want his *Brokeback Mountain* moment made common knowledge a *whole* lot more than he wants to prosecute you for *allegedly* playin doctor without a license.”

“I’m not complaining but is that blackmail?”

“I prefer to call it negotiating. Sheriff is a lot of things, a sissy for sure, indiscreet maybe, but not stupid.”

Minutes later, as Shenandoah, minus the wig, drove; Hercules leaned over and whispered in her ear. She giggled, then swatted his hand away. Hercules cackled then wrapped his arm around Shenandoah. After a few miles, he looked into the rearview mirror. “Doc, your attorney fee is payable in T-bone steak, Texas toast, and cold Budweiser for your attorney and your benefactor, yours very truly.”

“Sounds like a bargain to me. That drunk’s snoring was like Chinese water torture.”

Hercules lifted his arm from Shenandoah’s shoulder and twisted around, placing both hands on the seat back. “I been thinkin. Maybe we should abandon the clinic idea. Kinda risky you know.” We hit a bump and Hercules bounced but not high enough for his head to hit the roof. Comfortable again, he continued. “Maybe we should make house calls, be a bit more discreet. What do you think, Doc?”

I gazed at the passing tobacco fields for a minute, then smiled. “Sure. Why not?”