

Holding Pattern by Steven Popkes

Steven Popkes's previous contributions to our pages include "Tom Kelley's Ghost" and "The Great Caruso." Like many of his stories, his latest is deceptively quiet--it doesn't have loud car chases or big-budget special effects, but it's very effective nonetheless.

Tomas Coban looked over his cup of coffee, out his kitchen window, past the alleyway and toward the river, to watch the drones hovering outside his window watching him. A single Russian EX400, looking like nothing more than a lumbering blimp, suggested the Kremlin felt comfortable with the world today. America wanted some attention since he could see at least a dozen wasp-sized 1200s, each a meticulous clockwork of pinhead sensors and cameras. Behind them all, hovering narrow and lethal, were four Israeli Darts. Jerusalem was feeling insecure. Beyond that, it was more or less a standard mix. He recognized about twenty different models. There were a few new unidentifiable workhorses obviously purchased from one of the standard suppliers and included in his entourage for the sake of prestige.

He watched them and, like always, felt a faint shiver at the amount of deadly force arrayed outside his window. Remember, he told himself, they're like a pack of wild dogs: don't attack and don't run. They'll kill you if you run.

One more day, he thought. You have to count them one at a time. One more day to be alive.

His room was austere: a room to sleep in, a couch in front of the feed and a kitchenette off to one side. He could eat, sleep, and watch the world without walking more than five steps. From the outside, his building was unremarkable: a beige apartment building, slant shadows in the Albuquerque sun. Its chief distinguishing feature was the cloud of small aircraft, none larger than crows, hovering near his third-floor window.

It was still February and the predawn weather was crisp when he stepped outside in his running suit. Tomas kept himself nondescript. He had shaved off his trademark mustache and let his hair grow. He purchased clothing that imitated the styles of those he saw around him so he could blend in. Tomas even went so far as to lighten his normally dark skin so that he no longer looked like a *mestizo* but more like an upper class Mexican or an Italian. His only distinguishing mark was the cloud of drones that followed him everywhere he went.

Ah, he thought. Who knows? Someday things could change.

He looked around and rubbed his hands, then started jogging. Some of the drones liked to stay eye level with him, watching his face--this was a particular feature of the American devices. Americans liked media and it bled through even into their automated surveillance systems. Other countries didn't care as long as they were within a specific striking distance from him. He turned off Central Avenue and started on the trail that led up to San Gabriel Park.

Dawn cracked over the horizon and turned the twilight into sharp-edged day. The sandstone glittered along the trail and the scrub pine looked as if it had been edged in black.

Coban liked to rest briefly on a particular bench looking down over the Rio Grande. As he rounded a bend in the trail, he stopped. Someone else was sitting on his habitual bench. Someone with his own cloud of drones.

He slowed to a walk as he approached the bench. The man on the bench was sitting, fiddling with a cane and drawing his jacket close around himself. He looked up at Coban. Coban could see the contours and shapes of his own face looking back at him. Not the same, of course. Their faces had been created nearly twenty years ago and the mileage on each had been different. This man had never pursued anonymity with Coban's intensity. But the resemblance was still close enough to see.

"Tomas Tikal," said the man on the bench. He fiddled with his cane again.

"Tomas Coban," Coban replied.

"I know. I've been expecting you." Tikal smiled briefly.

Coban shrugged and sat next to him. He looked up and watched the drones circle each other, each executing intricate handshake maneuvers to determine the other's authenticity. A brief flash and one of Tikal's drones flared and fell to the ground.

"I was wondering about that one," Tikal said dryly. "I suppose its signature didn't match up."

"What are you doing here?" Coban asked. "We're not supposed to seek each other out."

"That's not exactly true." Tikal crossed his arms against the cold and Coban wondered where he had been living for the last twenty years. "We're allowed to interact under precisely controlled conditions and when we're thoroughly monitored." He waved to the drones. "I think we're being monitored sufficiently."

"What do you want?"

Tikal didn't answer. Instead, he watched the drones fly over them. "Things would have been completely different if it had been the French that had taken us down. They would have picked one of us at random, declared him the right one and executed him."

Coban stared at him. What was going on here? "If it had been the Russians, we would all be dead the moment a glorious victory was declared. A quick mock trial and then on to the next. So what? Our own people wouldn't have needed a trial or proof. You know that. Only the Americans were interested. And then only because we slaughtered some American nuns." Coban glanced away. It wouldn't do to let Tikal watch his face too closely. They were alike enough Tikal might be able to detect what he was thinking. "They should have killed us and been done with it. That's what I would have done."

Tikal laughed. "Me, also. A peculiarity of the American psychology, do you think? The messianic determination to blame a single human face for a crime. Hitler, Pol Pot, Hussein, Ho Chi Minh. Now, Tomas. That could be why they have kept us in custody."

"Perhaps." He thought about his so-called brothers. There were seven of them: each changed to resemble Tomas. All of them had the same plastic surgery scars on face, hands, and feet. At first they were thought to be clones, but DNA comparisons dispelled that immediately. It would have been easier if they had been clones. Tomas, the original Tomas who must have been hiding among them, had mixed samples of his own DNA with the others in all of the places where he had been known to reside. A bed where Tomas had been known to sleep had skin and hair from all seven of them. A razor with which he had cut his face was stained with multiple samples of blood. Bloody Tomas, without kin, without family, without even a surname, had disappeared in plain sight.

After several years of investigation, the Americans gave up and decided they could not determine which of the seven was the real Tomas. Each was given a surname according to where they had been found: Tulate, Tikal, Coban, Dolores, Pasion, San Jose, and Livingston.

Coban ached for a cigarette. As far as he knew, it had been six years since he'd had one--if he, in fact, had ever smoked at all. Perhaps, Tomas had smoked and bequeathed the addiction to him without tobacco ever staining his lips.

Coban looked back at Tikal. He had not aged well. He was heavier and his cheeks sank from his face as if the skin were disconnected from the tissue beneath. Maybe he had been older than the rest of them.

This could be the result of mere aging.

"So this is what you are doing now? Crossing the country to speak with old friends?"

Tikal blew through his teeth and said nothing for a moment. "Tulate is dead. Heart attack. Dolores would only speak with me if I bought him dinner and then he didn't say much. Pasion wouldn't speak to me at all. I spent an hour shouting through his closed door. San Jose was in the hospital for a gallstone operation. He had trouble speaking but he had no difficulty making it clear to me I was to leave him alone. Livingston was the only one glad to see me. He wanted to borrow money. So, no. I can't say I've been a popular visitor." He glanced furtively at Coban, then returned to watching the drones.

"Cheer up." Coban smiled. "I'm not displeased to see you."

"Such an enthusiastic greeting for your brother."

Coban shrugged. "Take what you can get."

Tikal said in a low whisper. "Did you remember anything?"

"Nothing," Coban replied in a normal voice. He gestured toward the drone. "They hear everything whether you want them to or not. I remember nothing more than I did the day I was captured."

The boundaries of Coban's memory were precise. They began when he took power and ended just before he altered them himself. Memories of his childhood, his country of origin, his original ethnic heritage, were absent. Only the method of the alteration could be determined. Any record of additional manipulation, any pirate changes or traps, had been removed. When he awoke, he knew only that he was Tomas, had turned Guatemala into a bloody police state for fifteen years only to be deposed by the Americans. His last memory was his own face, shining down on him from a mirror over the table, his smile rigid, his jowls heavy, his mustache narrow and dark, his head shaved and shrouded in a nest of cables. Then, his face had dissolved into a formless brown mist, eyes, ears, cables, and finally that smile. The memory was obviously contrived: a signature to the changes in his mind and a defiant insult thrown at the Americans who would inevitably be able to retrieve it.

"Maybe you're right," Tikal said. "Maybe they should have killed us. Or kept us in prison."

"Even genocidal tyrants suffer changes in fashion," snapped Coban. "For God's sake, Tikal. It's been six years since we were released and you're sniffing around me *now*? What do you want?"

"I've come to apologize."

"Apologize?" Coban shook his head. "What for?"

"I am the real Tomas," he said matter-of-factly. "I can say it now. I am *allowing* myself to say it now."

Coban stared at him. *This* he had not expected.

"I have come to each of you," Tikal continued. "To apologize for taking away your faces, your memories, and your lives."

"No apology to the thousands of people we killed? Surely we can spare a tear for them. Or the three hundred American soldiers we slaughtered? I wouldn't cry for them, but I suppose we could manage to toss them a couple of bucks--"

"Stop it!"

Coban tilted his head and watched Tikal for a moment. "Did I struggle?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Did I resist? Or did I volunteer?"

"It doesn't matter--"

"You are wrong," Coban said, interrupting him. "If I volunteered, then you have nothing for which to apologize."

"I took your face--"

"--which I may have freely given." Coban turned aside and let it go. "Where have you been?"

"To all of you, one at a time."

"No doubt. But I meant where have you been all this time? Where did they station you?"

Tikal didn't say anything for a moment. "Washington."

"Ah," Coban said dryly and fell silent.

"What do you mean?"

Coban spread his hands. "I meant nothing by it."

"It sounded ... critical."

Coban watched the drones. They had settled into a figure eight pattern over their heads, each group chasing the other. "We have the same memories. It seems more than coincidental that the one who determines himself to be the original has all this time been quartered in the capital of those who deposed us."

"None of the others questioned me like this."

Coban shrugged. "We began with different brains even though we had the same memories and motivations. Some differences were bound to show up. What happens now?"

Tikal looked uncertain. "I want absolution. I sent thousands to their death in the weapons breeding camps at Playa Grande. I struck down the Americans with parasites at the battle of Campur. I forced my own people to march on the Americans and then detonated the toxins in their bodies as soon as the battle was engaged. *I did terrible things.*"

Coban patted him on the arm. "Yes. Yes. I know. I have the same memories. But who is to say it was you? The Americans? It could have been any of us. Truth be told, it could have been *all* of us. We were all there. We were all present at these places at one time or another. Perhaps we all gave some of the orders. Would that make you feel better?"

"All of us?" Tikal said faintly.

Coban let his gaze wander over the river. How curious the same river that borders Texas is also here, so many hundreds of miles away. "I think Tomas emasculated us at the end. He took from us the memories that made him what he was. Could you have truly done what we remember doing?"

Tikal shook his head.

"Nor I." Coban stared at the water. "Tomas was a sociopath, obviously. Perhaps I am--perhaps *we* are--as well. But to express your pathology on such a grand scale." Coban sighed. "I am not capable of that."

Tikal stared at him, horrified. He stamped his cane on the ground. "You feel no remorse for what he did?"

"What difference would it make if I did? Would one village remain unslaughtered if I managed to feel bad about it?" Coban held up his hands. "Besides, Tomas changed our memories and altered our minds. Can we truly be considered the same person? Have we not been absolved by that alteration?"

Tikal shrank back against the bench.

"Who am I, anyway?" continued Coban, leaning forward. "A timid professor? A coerced peasant? A rabid volunteer? I can never know. Or am I the man who attempted, however misguided, to modernize my home country? To bring them electricity, water, roads? At the expense of some of their lives, I grant you. Which would you rather be? Tomas or what you were, knowing that what you were is forever gone? The alternative to being Tomas is to be nothing."

Tikal seemed to huddle into himself. "What I did was wrong."

"You sound like a little boy crying to his father. Is *that* what they did to you in Washington?" Coban looked at him speculatively. "Maybe you are the original. Perhaps repentance for the act can only come from someone in whose brain still resides those deeper synapses and circuits." He leaned toward him. "I can only remember from when I took power to seeing my own face before I went into the machine. Can you remember beyond that? Think, man."

Tikal shook his head. "No. But what I did in power, I remember. And what I remember, I repent. I have thought on it for years. I sit on the patio outside my house--"

"A house? You have a house?" Coban stood and paced. "It becomes clear. You must have been suspected from the very beginning. Do you remember meeting any of us before we were captured? I only remember meeting you, and the rest, when they brought us to Leonard Wood. The seven of us, copies all, sitting in that room staring at each other. One by one they took us and I never saw any of the others again until today. After all the questioning and the testing, you were the one they picked to work on. I was sent here to sit on my ass and wait for judgment, or so I thought. All the time, I was a *spare*. A *control*. Something against which they measured you. Oh, the skill! Oh, the pure deviousness of it! Tomas would have been proud."

Tikal relaxed slowly. "I am the original, then. I wasn't sure. They told me I was and I wanted to believe them--to feel remorse, I told myself. Someone should feel remorse. I shouldn't be here working my garden, petting my cat. Eating in a restaurant."

"A garden," Coban repeated dryly as he sat down. "I have a tiny apartment over an alley."

"But I wanted it to be my garden. My cat."

"So it is," pronounced Coban. "It is all yours."

"Yes. I am the original."

Coban watched Tikal speculatively for a long time. "Certainly, somebody has to be. If we are all

unmanned, certainly you are more emasculated than the rest of us. It is only right you should be proclaimed the original."

Tikal looked at him. "'Proclaimed'?"

"Tomas escaped. That has to be it. We are *all* copies. You were the one most likely to serve as his sacrificial lamb."

Tikal stared at him anxiously. "He couldn't have escaped. They looked everywhere and they found us. There were all the clues: the DNA, the faces. He couldn't have escaped."

Coban laughed. "Tomas was a genius. He staged us all to make it seem as if he were hiding among us. But think: such an arrogant egomaniac as Tomas, which you and I can clearly see for ourselves better than anyone, would never erase himself merely to survive. He made us up to be him and then disguised himself and left. After all this time, the Americans have never found him. Then, the time comes and *you* repent and somebody in Washington says, 'Maybe we were wrong. Maybe Tomas did hide a pearl among pearls. At long last, he repents of his crimes. Could he be the real Tomas?' And another, more powerful and wiser man says, 'Even if Tomas escaped, he is old and surely near death and cannot hurt us.' And perhaps an even more powerful and still wiser man says, 'It does not matter for this is the Tomas we have. Let us release him to seek his fellows and watch what he does.' So, *Tomas*. You've seen us all. What shall you do?"

"I am the real Tomas," Tikal said.

Tikal jumped up from the bench and ran down along the river. For a moment, the drones stilled their flight. More than half of them shot after Tikal.

Tikal stopped then, perhaps a hundred feet away. Coban could tell from his movements, Tikal had planned this for some time. Good for you, he thought.

Tikal fiddled with his cane for a moment, then rushed the drones, leaping up at them and beating at them with his cane. Tikal would never have hit any of them but several fell. He must have a device in the cane, thought Coban. For a moment, Coban thought he might actually manage it.

The drones hesitated, then two of the Israeli Darts shot forward. With a strangled cry, Tikal collapsed. Coban grinned sourly. It fit that the Americans would make sure to keep their own hands clean.

Coban watched for a moment. The police would be here soon. One could always trust to American ingenuity and thoroughness. He left the park and jogged back toward his apartment.

As he ran, one by one, his own entourage of drones detached themselves and left him. The Israelis were already gone. Coban watched them: first the unidentified insects, then one country after another, as they were no doubt informed by the Americans that Tomas was dead. Finally, the Russian blimp lumbered away. By the time Coban reached Central Avenue, only the American drones remained. He was as close to alone as he had ever been in fifteen years.

Coban stepped into his building. The wasps followed him outside, following his heat signature as faithfully as wives. That was all right. He could deal with a few of them.

The time had come, he thought. When he never thought it would come at all. He remembered his own face, Tomas's face, staring back at him. In hindsight, it did seem to him, that Tomas did resemble Tikal somewhat more than he did. Perhaps Tikal was the original after all.

But it did not matter to Coban any more than it mattered to Tomas. Tomas was an idealist. He had

wanted to create a vision of the world. Whether he accomplished it biologically or through a creature imprinted with his personality made no difference to him.

Tomas Coban spread his arms in the windowed sun. It was good to be alive.