
Double Six: The Box of Teeth

5 Ebarito liked to hold six dominoes in his left hand. And he wished his hands were larger so that he might span all seven at once. But even Paco with his large hands could not hold seven dominoes.

He tapped the single domino he held in his right hand once on the board. It was a signal that meant he passed. It was irritating to pass at his first turn in the first game.

Paco, sitting to Ebarito's right, laughed a simple "ha," and said nothing.

10 Tito, the next player, played his domino at a right angle to the double six that Paco had led with. And he also kept another domino spinning at his right hand by periodically snapping his index finger and his thumb.

Wilson, the fourth player, liked to lay his dominoes on their sides in one semicircle. He took one and placed it on the board, then tightened the semicircle.

15 Paco laughed two loud "ha's," and slapped his domino down on the board. When he took his hand away Ebarito could see he would have to pass again since the game was at sixes at both ends.

"*No voy*," he said in Spanish, without tapping his domino.

Paco laughed one "ha."

20 Tito, playing one and spinning one, said, "Remember, many of one, few of another."

Ebarito took a long drink from his can of beer.

Wilson looked at his little round wall and played a domino. Then he said, "only three of those."

25 Paco played and said, "You know how to count, but the game was invented by a mute."

Another round had gone by and Ebarito saw that he was controlling the threes. But it was too late in this game. He had passed twice and might have to pass once more. There was no doubt about it—Paco had the luck and the skill. It was very hard to beat

him in a game of dominoes. And especially when he teamed up with Tito—or even worse when he teamed up with Wilson. Luckily today Wilson was Ebarito’s partner and so Ebarito had expectations of making a decent showing—perhaps even coming in under the one hundred point handicap that Paco had offered. If Paco had teamed with
5 Wilson, Ebarito could have gotten a handicap of 200 points—but so what nobody could beat Paco and Wilson, not even with a 250 point handicap. And with a handicap that large there was no purpose to the game. A handicap only meant something if it was the element that wobbled the wheel of fortune.

Ebarito finished his beer. Decided he would not drink another one. None of them
10 drank, why should he? Or maybe they just didn’t drink with him.

Double Five

Alma leaned on the ledge of her second floor window. With a cushion under her elbows she could sit like this for hours, enjoying the street life. The boys were not yet playing stoopball. But by the bodega, near the empty yard, she could see her uncle
15 Paco playing dominoes with, of all people, Ebarito. Most of the men disliked Ebarito. And even though he had a reputation as a good barber, the men avoided him. And as he also had a reputation as a lousy domino player it was strange to see him sitting there teamed up with Wilson. Her uncle Paco had told her once, “Ebarito is nothing but a barber and a pretty boy. He can’t play dominoes and he’s always trying. In the
20 merchant marine we were all barbers.”

She had learned the game out of curiosity—she couldn’t see what was in it that kept the men sitting there day and night playing and playing. In the summer in the street and in the winter in her kitchen.

She had begged uncle Paco to teach her the game and one Saturday evening, when
25 her old boyfriend Sammy had stood her up, he took the dominoes out and said, “Sit down.” He was a man like that—couldn’t express too many things and yet he was smart. For twenty years he sailed around the world visiting many interesting places, reading when he was not playing. But he just didn’t talk very much.

Dominoes seemed to Alma a ridiculous game. Whoever got the double six played first
30 if you were just starting. Once you played the first game, whoever won started the next game. Then it was just a matter of following the numbers. Your opponent put down a six, you played a six. Your opponent put down a two, you put down a two. If you didn’t have something you passed. But her uncle said it wasn’t like that at all. He said there was strategy. If you had a two-five and a four-five and you could play a
35 five, which one would you play? Well that was strategy. You looked over the board, you counted all the fours, you counted all the twos, you looked at your own hand, and

you decided which one to play. That wasn't luck, that was skill. That was how you controlled the game.

5 But Alma didn't like the game-if she wanted to kill time, she preferred looking out the window, and in the winter she liked cards now and then-especially a game called "Casino." For the moment she was more interested in her new boyfriend PeeWee. She was hoping he would come over from 112th Street, where he lived near Third Avenue. And perhaps he would invite her for a walk in Central Park or, better still, to a movie. She hadn't been to a movie in a few weeks, and the Star Theatre on 107th and Lexington was playing two good films. But PeeWee did not come around the
10 corner.

Double Four

Paco shifted his weight on the milk crate he was sitting on.

Ebarito played one of his threes.

Tito knocked on the board, close to where his domino was spinning.

15 "Oh-oh, somebody's got no threes or sixes," said Wilson.

Ebarito said, "I believe Paco said this was a game invented by a mute."

Paco slapped down his domino with great force, and when he removed his ham-sized hand he said, "*lo tranque*. I locked it at sixes-let's go, count up."

20 Tito took everyone's dominoes and counted forty-two points, then turned them all face down.

Paco mixed the dominoes driving his left hand clockwise, and his right hand counterclockwise, slightly out of synchronization. Tito said, "I like a hand where I have four of something and they don't come out until the second or third play."

25 "Take your dominoes," said Paco, leaving his hands at the side of the board. This meant he would take last-take whatever remained. It was like a boxer dropping his gloves to his sides and daring his opponent to hit him.

30 Ebarito took his seven, skipping around hoping to get a better selection. But he was feeling worse and worse. He had no business in this foursome. This was strictly a losing proposition for him. His game was women; the barbershop. His hand was terrible, three doubles. "*La caja de muerto*," the dead man's box, meaning the double blank, and "*La caja de dientes*," meaning the box of teeth, or the double six, and the

double three. This was going to be another painful and embarrassing loss. He could see that he would lose by 250 points-the 100 point handicap would be just another humiliation.

“*No voy*,” said Tito, furiously spinning his domino.

5 “Already?” said Wilson.

By the next play Ebarito had to pass and he struck his domino down with a hard sharp blow-like an angry gavel. And he wished it were a nail that he could drive through the board and into the ground. He knew he was going to lose, knew he had but one recourse now-to lose gracefully, be a good sport; offer to buy everyone a beer, a cigar
10 or a drink; say the obvious out loud-“You are too good for me”-but Goddammit he couldn’t do it. It stuck in his craw like a thing he could not swallow, could not spit.

Double Three

Of all the sounds on the street the sharp blow of a domino on a wooden board caught Alma’s attention. It was a sound she had heard many times before, and which she
15 disliked. When she looked over at the game, Ebarito looked angry, but she still couldn’t see Paco’s face. She could see Wilson, whom she didn’t like although she had known him all her life. He was her uncle’s best friend. A master domino player and a very hard man. He believed in fate. “Men who are real men can live their lives
20 anyway they like-because their destiny is clear. To be a macho is the destiny. The trouble for you Alma is that you fool around with men who are not machos,” he had told her once in her kitchen. “And for a woman, Wilson, what is the fate for a woman?”

“I don’t know,” he had answered, “I don’t know anything about women. For women I recommend the *espiritista* and the Church. One will tell you the future and the
25 other will console you about it. But I’m not sure which does what.”

After that pronouncement both Wilson and Paco had broken into very heavy prolonged laughter. Tito was not like that. He was kinder and he talked more, but he was not as strong as they were. They could make him do the opposite of what he believed. But they genuinely liked him-not because they influenced him, but because
30 they seemed to enjoy his company-he was what they were not-social and friendly, fun loving and relaxed. But he had not left Puerto Rico to join the merchant marine when he was sixteen-like Wilson or Paco. They were just *jibaro* kids, country boys suddenly with mean men and dangerous work and thirty years at sea always looking to see who was standing behind you. Tito had steady legs, like a man used to walking
35 on the earth. Wilson and Paco had a strange gait, always waiting for the sea to pitch!

Double Two

5 Tito played and was talking. "You know my father used to say when we were watching the baseball games- 'The ball is round, son. The game is not over until the last out.' But in dominoes, especially in double-six, the game is over as soon as you get your hand. Isn't it?"

Paco grimaced. He believed in skill.

"I know, I know. The game was invented by a mute. But I can't be like you Paco. I can't sit through a whole game and not say a word- to me, part of this game is talking- about this and that."

10 "Oh yeah- some people even say that that is your strategy as a team. You yak-yak to distract them while Paco . . ." Ebarito let his voice trail off.

"While Paco what?" asked Tito and Wilson at the same time.

"Yeah, while Paco what, little barber?" asked Paco.

15 "Something the matter with being a barber?" asked Ebarito while playing his double six.

Paco stared at the board.

"Apparently barbers can't count," said Paco.

"Right," said Tito, the domino perfectly still under his right index finger. "You passed on six before- it's called reneging."

20 "You calling me a cheater?" asked Ebarito standing up.

"No," said Paco, "but then you better admit you can't count."

"Perhaps your mother can't count," said Ebarito. And in the moment his words were being formed in his mouth he bent over, picked up the metal milk crate he had been sitting on and swung it at Paco's head.

25 Paco was already rising, his straightening legs upending the board, the dominoes scattering, and with his left arm he grabbed the milk crate and pushed it back into Ebarito's chest. And Ebarito went backward, losing his balance, down. And Paco was on top of him, both massive hands tightly around Ebarito's throat.

Tito went to break it up, but Wilson pulled him by the arm, and hissed, “Fuck the pretty boy barber,” and Tito just stopped, as if Wilson’s venom had paralyzed him.

5 Then Paco started to lift Ebarito’s head and strike it against the sidewalk at the same time that he tightened his hands ever more around his neck. Ebarito reached into his jacket and pulled out the long thin trimming scissor with the loop that cradles the pinky and adds balance and control to the tool. He began to drive the scissors into Paco’s rib cage with a circular motion from the elbow, for the rest of his arm was immobilized by Paco’s knee.

“They are killing each other,” gasped Tito to Wilson who was still holding him.

10 Double One

Alma broke out of a reverie to see PeeWee across the street calling her and yelling and pointing over to the vacant lot. When Alma looked she let go a scream and yelled, “Paco, Paco! Stop it, stop it! Wilson, stop them! Tito, for God’s sake do something! PeeWee, call the police!” And she screamed again. But no one moved.

15 She screamed again, her hands covering her ears as if she could not tolerate her own penetrating wail. And then she turned into the apartment. When she was no longer visible in the window, PeeWee came to life again, for he had been more startled by the screaming than by the fight. The screaming turned the fight into something more serious than he had at first thought.

20 He looked in two directions, trying to remember where the nearest phone was. And then he headed for the corner drugstore before he could see Alma come screaming out of her hallway like a train out of a tunnel onto the street.

Wilson still held Tito’s arm in a vice-like grip. “They are *machos*,” said Wilson, seeming to speak through clenched teeth, “they know what they want.”

25 But at the sight of Alma pulling at Paco, Tito broke loose and kicked the scissor from Ebarito’s hand and pulled at Paco too.

Paco stood up, thinking Ebarito was dead. He took a few staggering steps and then found his balance, and began walking off in no particular direction. But his left rib cage looked like a colander with blood pouring out of twelve scissor holes, some spurring, some just trickling down over the already forming clots. And when he
30 reached the fire hydrant, Paco crumbled down into a pile like a pneumatic tire that had a blowout.

He was dead.

He was dead before he fell.

He was dead even before he stood up and walked.

The body had its habits and in a man who spoke very little, his body had spoken last. It had refused to die where Fate had ordained. He didn't want to be near Ebarito.

5 Death wanted him there, but he would go here.

Alma, in tears, in terror, and hysteria, was on her knees crying and screaming next to the body of the wrong man, for it was inconceivable to her that Ebarito could be alive and her uncle dead. She screamed over the bloody head, face and body of Ebarito. "You killed him! You let him be killed, you killers!" She screamed at
10 everyone. She screamed at no one.

Double Blank: The Dead Man's Box

Ebarito awoke. Pain played over his body, head to throat to arm. And he realized he had his eyes closed.

He tried to open his eyes and found it difficult to do. He could not turn his head and
15 his neck seemed very stiff. As he tried to feel his body beyond the pain he discovered that he could not lift his head, and while he did not seem to be tied down, he couldn't shift his weight at all. He could curl his fingers and wiggle his toes. His tongue felt huge in his mouth, as if he had a washcloth stuffed there rather than a tongue. His left arm was more mobile, but he could only raise it somewhat. He tried to open his eyes
20 again.

And when he opened them, everything seemed beclouded and out of focus. There was nothing but white to see, but there was the unmistakable smell of hospital-like there was the unmistakable smell of barbershop, of dentist, of laundry.

Then he heard a squeaky wheel, footsteps, and someone speaking. The doctor was
25 asking, "Do you understand English? Do you speak English? English?"

Painfully he tried to shake his head yes, as he could not find his voice. He could not move the washrag in his mouth, nor spit it out. And he could not shake his head either.

The doctor was saying, "Lucky boy you are to be alive-your skull was cracked-do you
30 remember?"

"No," said the doctor, "you can't speak-he wrecked your trachea, larynx-you know-voice box? Adam's apple? With a little oxygen deprivation-maybe aphasia. Drove

your cricoid up against the 7th in the neck-you understand? You have cracks in your trachea. Severe damage to the vocal cords from bone and cartilage pushing up against them, tearing through them. You may never be able to speak-maybe growl. I did some marvelous work in there-you understand- *vida?*-life? Serious concussion, on
5 your *cabeza*-you know-head, *cabeza*? One eye is fine-a matter of a few days, maybe two weeks, and we will know the whole story on the eyes. There is a little infection there now-*infección*, you know?"

Ebarito tried to point to his mouth, but his left arm was manacled to the bed.