

That Boy Could Run

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Uncle Bobby showed up barefoot on my grandmother's doorstep one night in late July.

The kitchen door was open so the balmy air could circulate through the screen and she saw him standing there beneath the yellow porch light in a halo of madly fluttering moths.

Grandma Fina sat in a rocking chair. When she noticed the lanky silhouette looming behind her screen door, she reached for the shotgun propped up in the corner. But as he remained motionless, gazing placidly through the wire mesh, enveloped in that hazy amber radiance, a calm washed over her. Slowly, she rose in her faded flower-print nightgown and coolly assessed the interloper.

He was gaunt and drawn, sporting a full moustache and beard, clad in a powder-blue polyester suit. Shiny white shoes would have made the perfect finishing touch, but instead her eyes landed on two bare feet. She knew it was him from the scars that pocked their surfaces since that fateful football game.

Bobby Rocket.

She threw the door open, flung her arms around him, and cooked breakfast at midnight.

Uncle Nick and Cousin David bumped into each other as they emerged from the bedrooms Grandma had surrendered to them. Yelps of joy resounded through the rafters, thundering slaps on the back, a sheepish smile from Bobby, shuffling back and forth on his barren feet, his crystalline eyes wobbling beneath the bright light.

He averted their expectant gazes, casting his eyes downward at those pitted feet squirming on the hardwood floor, at the faded patch before the stove where Grandma presided like the captain of a ship.

Beaming, Uncle Nick reached for the banana-colored phone hanging on the wall and raised it like a welcome torch. He yanked at the rotary dial impatiently. The tiny kitchen would soon teem with Lopez men hovering around Bobby, just like the moths.

* * *

The phone rang once, startling me from sleep.

“Can’t it wait until morning?” My mother groaned as my father strode out the front door, raising his Stetson towards his head.

I tiptoed into the living room and spied from the corner, saw him shoot a glowering look from those dark eyes of his which could sing with joy just as easily as they could seethe with rage. Then the shadow of his hat fell over his face.

I scooted back to bed. My mother could be tyrannical when she was in a bad mood. Tomorrow would be terrible. Or so I thought, until she announced the news at breakfast.

“Bobby’s back.” Her tone reminded me of when adults lamented someone’s cancer coming out of remission.

My younger brother Rene’s eyes betrayed no flicker of recognition. At age three he was developing slowly. He struggled to keep his balance so he sat in a high chair to avoid tumbling to the floor. Cerebral palsy, the doctors had explained to my parents as they made the rounds seeking an elusive panacea. The medical bills had nearly bankrupted my father. It had always been tough surviving on the earnings from his tire shop. But rather than flatten him, Rene’s condition had driven him to: “*Diversify!*” He wielded the word like a beaming toddler enchanted by a new toy. When speaking in Spanish, he shifted excitedly into English just to drop the D-bomb.

To me, on the way to school: “Ramón, todo va ser major, when we *Diversify!*”

To my anxious mom, as she served rice and beans to stretch the budget: “Marisol, el secreto al éxito es: *Diversify!*”

I wasn't sure where he gleaned this secret to success, but it sounded plausible. I knew from my experience selling powdered chile packets at school that when you offered only one product, it was pretty easy to be run out of business.

In his quest to take my brother to expensive specialists, he diversified by acquiring a gas station uptown. The owner was eager to retire and my father happened to be *At The Right Place At The Right Time*, arranging monthly payments to take over the business.

The station was an ARCO. Its gleaming sign – a rectangular blue background, modern white letters and a red “diamond spark” – soared majestically over the intersection. It seemed more dignified than the hand-painted “Joe’s Tire Shop” sign dangling from a rusty chain by the weed-choked train tracks.

His hours were longer than ever as he shuttled back and forth between the tire plant, the station, and our house in Southmost. But it felt like we were making progress.

“It’s never easy for immigrants to get ahead,” he reminded me. “But each generation can go a little further.”

At one point, Uncle Bobby had given the family hope he might just accelerate the process, hurdle the labor of generations. He had even made it look easy.

Bobby “The Rocket” Lopez.

He was taller than the other brothers. Stronger. And so much faster. They would shake their heads and remember: that boy could run.

Bobby Rocket cuts right. He scrambles to the sideline. The crowd’s on its feet. He breaks a tackle. He’s flying down the field. The 30. The 20. Touchdown! Bobby Rocket.

There had been calls from college scouts on that banana-yellow telephone in Grandma’s kitchen. Talk of athletic scholarships. He’d be the first in the family to earn a degree. The first to escape our border town for a reason other than getting shot at on foreign soil.

Glorious. Tragic. Wrapped in a puzzling package.

Uncle Bobby was home. The Lopez brothers had been convening since the wee hours of the morning. It was never too late for Bobby to turn the corner. He was magic. Quicksilver. Anything was possible. He just needed time and some good blocking by his stalwart brothers.

* * *

A break in the summer monotony was cherished. Since we couldn't afford vacations, even funerals provided a welcome opportunity to reunite with visiting family.

"When can I see Uncle Bobby, Mom?" I asked, helping her pick up the dishes from the breakfast table.

"When your dad comes for you," she sighed.

"Should I hurry and get dressed?"

"Sure. Go on." She yawned, staring at the pile of plates in the sink.

Her brothers never showed up barefoot anywhere, much less at their mother's house in the middle of the night. She muttered something about how those crazy Lopez brothers would never learn.

"They think Bobby's magic, but he's nothing but trouble," she vented to my other grandma, Abuelita Carmela. "They can't let go of their childhood dreams."

* * *

A black-and-white photo of Uncle Bobby graced the hallway that bisected Grandma Fina's house. In the picture, he wore his football uniform, the number 7 emblazoned on it. He knelt on one knee and his helmet sat on the grass. His smooth face turned dreamily towards a distant horizon, his dark hair slick and shiny like glistening tar. In that cobwebbed hall of fame, the photo hung heavy between the Virgen de Guadalupe and an array of military portraits. Nick had fought in Korea. Fernando and Bobby in Nam. David was in the Marines. Only my dad had not attained a place on the wall, due to a medical exemption, a ruptured ulcer. The shame haunted him eternally. Maybe it was why he would always try so hard to save his brothers.

* * *

The Lopez men clamored about the kitchen, satellites swinging clumsily around their prodigal sun.

“Hey, Big Money!” Uncle Bobby roared as he his powerful arms crushed me. “You’re growing!” Adults always seemed astonished and dismayed by that incontrovertible fact.

“Why Big Money, Uncle Bobby?”

“Your dad told me about your entrepreneurial ways, selling chile, earning enough money to buy your own bike. Impressive.”

My cheeks flushed. I liked this nickname. I hoped it would stick.

After a pile of bacon and egg tacos, a pot of coffee, a shower, and a clean set of clothes, Uncle Bobby was feeling good.

“You gonna shave, Bobby?” My dad asked, stirring his coffee giddily.

“You’ll look just like back in the day, Bobby,” Uncle Fernando assured. “Those mamacitas will come after you just like in high school.”

“Now, now, boys,” Grandma Fina clucked, stirring her arroz con pollo, the scent of garlic, onion and oil permeating the kitchen. “That’s the last thing your brother needs.”

“No more ladies for me! And I’m definitely gonna shave,” Uncle Bobby grinned, tousling my hair.

“What happened to your new wife, Uncle Bobby?” asked Cousin David.

“Number Three, right Bobby? But whose counting?” Uncle Nick joked.

“Well, everything was going just fine until she tried to run me over with her daddy’s Cadillac.”

The Lopez brothers laughed and shook their heads. Somehow, Uncle Bobby – ever nimble and slippery – could turn a sorrowful tale into an outlandish joke, a near-death experience into a spectacular escape.

“So, is that it? You done with Florida?” My dad asked.

“You couldn’t drag me back to Florida. Better suited for Anglos. Not very friendly to Mexicans.”

I wasn’t sure if they were talking about the wife or the state.

“Why did Florida nearly kill you?” Cousin David asked.

“Boy, I’m gonna call you ‘Pop Quiz.’”

“Why ‘Pop Quiz?’”

“Yeah. Why?” I prodded.

“‘Cuz you’re full of questions!”

The room erupted into laughter as a football came flying through the open window into Uncle Bobby’s hands. The unexpected missile would have probably knocked out a normal person’s tooth, but this was Uncle Bobby. His reflexes were still as sharp as they’d been back on the field, back in Nam, back in the parking lot of that country club in Boca Raton where his estranged wife Florida had nearly repaved the porte cochère with him.

“Hey vatos! Y’all hiding from the law? Or you gonna come outta that kitchen?”

“Dad!” Cousin David scrambled to the porch.

The party followed him onto the lawn, where it continued the rest of the day. Grandma Fina enlisted my cousin and me as servers ferrying food to the table beneath the oak tree. Uncle Bobby and Uncle David tossed the pigskin around until a pair of neighborhood girls walked by and started chatting them up. At the table, the elder brothers conspired, stealing sideways glances at Uncle Bobby.

“There’s still time,” my dad insisted.

Nick sighed. “Not much I can do, Joe. I’m dead broke.”

“That’s obvious. You said you were moving in with mom for a few weeks while your divorce got settled and it’s been three years,” Fernando quipped.

“You’re one to talk,” Nick replied. “It’s bad enough to be broke and divorced. But broke and married to two women at the same time? Now that’s disturbed.”

“Touché,” Fernando smiled, lighting up a cigarette and blowing circles at his older brother’s face.

My dad shook his head and curled his hand into a fist, furrowing his brow. “We can’t let him end up like you two. Not Bobby.”

Dusk was falling. Across the street, in a shadowy park surrounded by a moat of stagnant river water, fires flickered in barbecue pits. Sable palms towered. Cicadas serenaded us as the stars poked through the inky sky.

“It’s good to be home!” Uncle Bobby called from the curb, where the women twisted their long hair into makeshift braids and leaned towards him, hairbrushes jutting from back pockets.

Nick and Fernando gave him the thumbs-up, smiling wistfully while my dad hunched over a notebook scribbling numbers in the dark.

* * *

The next day, the Channel 4 anchorman declared a Luby’s Cafeteria had been robbed at gunpoint two days earlier. A \$5000 reward was offered for tips leading to an arrest. A police sketch flashed across the screen. I almost choked on my breakfast taco. It looked like Uncle Bobby with the beard and moustache. A phone number crawled across the screen. The segment concluded with a geezer proclaiming, “I wooda chased that Mezcun’ and wrassled him to the ground, but he wuz faster than Speedy Gonzalez. That boy could run.”

* * *

Running wasn’t Uncle Bobby’s only specialty. It turned out he also knew a thing or two about cars. So during the day Bobby worked at the ARCO and at night he attended community college.

There wasn’t enough room at Grandma’s house, so Dad set up a cot in a room at the gas station. I posited that it was meant to serve as the restroom, on account of the urinals clinging to the grimy tile wall. But Uncle Bobby waved me off, claiming he’d slept in worse places. I asked

him where, Nam? He answered with a long list of towns scattered through Texas and the South, ending with a ditch outside the Florida country club where his eponymously named wife had almost turned him into a hood ornament. He said his roommate that night had been a gator. If he could survive that, this wouldn't kill him either.

The filling station reeked of gasoline, tire rubber, and cleaning fluids. When drivers rolled over the hose stretched across the carport, a bell rang. In a flash, Uncle Bobby was at their window. Sometimes, his speed startled the customers. But now clean-shaven, he quickly charmed them.

“Where'd *you* come from? Did you fall outta the sky?” A blonde lady cooed in her convertible, staring at his sinuous arms.

Uncle Bobby chuckled and gave her the Full Service. Or so he later recounted to his brothers, who all laughed except for my dad.

“Bobby, you've got to be serious. Respect the customers.”

“Okay, Joe. I get it,” said Uncle Bobby. “Don't worry. Your customers love me.”

Based on the station's increased profits, my dad couldn't argue.

“You run the place, Bobby.” He said one night as they closed the station. “I need to spend more time at home. Remember to make the monthly payments and we'll split the profits.

Uncle Bobby looked up at the ceiling, doing numbers in his head. “Why not? Thanks, bro.” He winked. “I'm gonna make you rich. You wait and see.”

Bobby Rocket scores again.

He made it sound easy.

* * *

One weekend after school resumed, Uncle Bobby asked my dad for permission to take Cousin David and me to visit his son.

“C’mon, Joe, it’ll help me break the ice with the boy. The boys will have a blast with Little Bobby. We’ll head out to the beach. I can show them that Marine Biology I’m studying. It’ll be educational.”

He sure knew how to work my dad, who sacrificed to send me to Catholic school so I could have my own desk and books. David and I jumped up and down when my dad agreed.

Cousin David proudly piped up, “My dad was a Marine!”

“This is different, Pop Quiz,” Uncle Bobby smiled, winking at David in the rearview mirror.

Aunt Irma couldn’t tolerate the sight of her ex-husband, so we found Little Bobby sitting on the curb as we pulled up to his modest wooden house.

Our first stop was a corner store. The elderly man at the register smiled as we entered. “I remember you,” his cloudy eyes twinkled as he wagged a finger at my uncle.

Bobby Rocket strikes again.

Uncle Bobby flashed his pearly whites and shook his finger back at the man.

“Some things you don’t forget,” the old man rambled as Uncle Bobby pulled a tall boy from the fridge, swept up three pairs of sunglasses resembling his black wayfarers, and collected three bags of Hershey’s Kisses. “Don’t ask me to tell ya what I dun yesterday, but I remember that game between Brownsville and Mac Memorial like it wuz yesterday.”

Uncle Bobby extracted a wad of cash as the man punched keys on his antique machine. “Everyone thought McAllen wuz gonna steamroll ya boys. They wuz huge. And here you were, a bunch of scrawny Mezcuns marching into their big ol’ stadium with 15,000 fans screaming their heads off.”

And Number Seven takes the field, Bobby “The Rocket” Lopez. He’s shattered every rushing record in the state, but how will he fare against this championship-caliber defense?

The register chimed. Uncle Bobby lay down a crisp twenty. As the cashier made change he let out a sudden whoop, like he’d just caught an instant replay on the TV flickering inside his

head. “You ran by ‘em and around ‘em and through ‘em. They wuz chasing the wind. I talked to one of ‘em boys years later and he said he reached out for your jersey, but all he came away with was a cool mist through this fingers. The Galloping Ghost! That’s what you were like. Didn’t they call you that too?”

Uncle Bobby slipped his sunglasses back on and nudged the bill closer to the man’s age-spotted hands. “I’ve been called a lot of names over the years,” he said, sounding like a gunslinger in a Western.

The man counted out the change, picking up his pace. “Well, thanks for the memories. You boys have a great day.”

Uncle Bobby brandished a pistol-like gesture with his right hand and smiled slyly, “No. Thank *you* for the memories, sir.”

Outside, he distributed the goods. Piling into the white ’66 Mustang he’d borrowed from the gas station garage, we’d never felt so cool.

And Bobby Rocket scores again! Brownsville beats Mac Memorial. What an upset!

He cracked open his beer, rolled down his window, turned the radio up, and gunned the engine as we shot towards the Laguna Madre.

* * *

I’d never snorkeled before. Or seen a grown man naked. I guess those kinds of things make an impression on you.

After traversing the causeway, Uncle Bobby drove to a cinderblock building at the tip of Padre Island. He jingled a set of keys and we waltzed right into the vacant place. It smelled like fish as we drifted silently through a cold laboratory into a locker room where he instructed us to change into our swimming trunks and handed us snorkels and masks.

We shuffled barefoot over the sandy parking lot, through knee-high reeds to a tranquil beach. The waves lapped gently onto the sand, furrowing undulating grooves that echoed the outline of the bay. A cluster of sandpipers stood stiffly in the shallows, cocking their heads in

jerky movements, staring at us impassively with flat round eyes. Seagulls hovered overhead, cawing mournfully. The water cool on our feet as we waded in behind him.

“Wrap your lips tight around the snorkel,” he demonstrated, his voice turning nasal as the mask covered his face. “Then let yourself float in the water. Hold the snorkel so it points towards the sky.”

At first, all I could discern were swirls of sand churning like miniature, underwater dust devils. But as the particles settled, Uncle Bobby pointed out curiosities. Crabs scurrying sideways. Fish darting between us. Streaks of silver light chasing each other through fields of oscillating seagrass. As my breathing relaxed, I noticed tiny colorless granules moving in unison, like rivulets of sand winding through underwater dunes. I opened my eyes wide and inched closer. They weren't particles of sand at all, but impossibly small creatures, like underwater ants. I became so immersed in watching their movements I completely lost track of time, drifting in absolute peace.

Startled by a firm tap on the shoulder, I jumped out of the water.

“Big Money,” Uncle Bobby smiled. “You like that sea life?”

“Incredible!”

“We better get back inside, your shoulders are getting red and I don't want the fishermen to think you're a lobster and haul you in for dinner.”

As we walked back to the lab, I couldn't stop talking about what I'd seen: “It's like a different universe down there.”

Little Bobby and David ran ahead.

“Yeah,” he said, “that's what I enjoy about it. It's... What's that word my second wife loved to use? Therapeutic.”

“It's like this other world, and you can watch its inhabitants, and they don't even know you exist.”

“Yeah, they don’t expect anything from you.” Uncle Bobby agreed, sounding jealous.
“Going with the flow. Living as nature intended.”

Inside, Uncle Bobby led us to the showers. He stripped off his trunks and turned the faucets. Snickering, we lingered at the entrance. He was rinsing the saltwater out of his hair when he noticed us.

“Don’t be shy boys. Ain’t nothing here you haven’t already seen.”

Giggling, we undressed and ran into the steaming water.

“Uncle Bobby, you look like a wet caveman!” Cousin David laughed.

“You will too someday, Pop Quiz. You wait and see.”

Glancing at Uncle Bobby, it wasn’t his hair or his private parts that caught my attention. It was his scars. Similar to the ones on his feet, but larger. One on his right thigh. One on his stomach. Yet another on his left flank.

Sensing my stare, he looked down at his body. “You have a sharp eye, Big Money. You noticed my souvenirs.”

“Souvenirs?” I answered, reaching for a towel.

“Parting gifts from Vietnam.” He pointed at his lean belly. “This one nearly sent me home in a box.”

We all gaped. I imagined blood instead of water pooling around his feet, a stunned caveman punctured by incomprehensible steel projectiles.

“Tell us war stories, Uncle Bobby!” David implored.

“Yeah, Dad!” Bobby pleaded, wriggling into his tattered jeans. “Tell us.”

“Nah, boys. All I can say about war is that you’d best avoid it. Don’t believe what anyone says about how great it is to be a hero. Let’s not ruin a fine day. Let’s enjoy some more Marine Biology.”

From the lab we walked to a nearby pavilion overlooking the jetties where the Gulf of Mexico met the bay. Waves crashed, spraying white jets over along pier of rocks crowned by fishermen, surfers and pelicans.

Families huddled at picnic tables beneath a corrugated metal roof. At the concession stand, Uncle Bobby bought us chocolate ice cream cones and got himself a beer. Then we followed him to a bench overlooking the beach. We sat there and stared at the sea as the breeze bit into our sunbaked skin.

“There it is. Marine Biology. My favorite kind.” Uncle Bobby smiled mischievously, taking a long swig of his beer as he gazed ahead.

We followed his sightline to a bikini-clad woman emerging from the sea, water dripping from her long hair.

“Marine Biology, boys. I found my calling a long time ago. I just didn’t know its name.”

“I thought you were *off that juice*,” David recalled verbatim.

“Pop Quiz, some things never change.”

* * *

With business booming at the gas station my dad took a gamble. He placed a bid on a lot of used tractor-tailor tires being auctioned by the State.

“I haven’t won anything since third place in the potato sack race in high school,” he remarked, staring at the official notice bearing the seal of the great State of Texas. “It’s my lucky day!”

My mom hugged him joyfully. What she didn’t realize was that to amass the funds to fulfill the bargain, my dad would have to skip the house payments. As he later explained to me: *No Risk, No Reward*. I added this latest teaching to the growing list in my notebook:

Diversify!

At The Right Place At The Right Time.

No Risk, No Reward.

“The dates line up like dominos,” my dad pointed at the calendar in his soot-streaked office. It would take three months to raise the capital required for the bid. That coincided with the ninety days the great State of Texas decreed available to collect his bounty. The mortgage installment for that month, which happened to be December, was due five days after his tire deadline. And he already had a buyer for a load of used tires to be culled from the first load. My dad clapped his hands triumphantly: “As soon as I have that cash, I catch up on the house payments and we’re in business.”

“What if the timing goes wrong?”

He shot me one of his silencing glares.

After a month, the school principal called me into her office.

“Ramón, can you remind your father about the tuition,” she asked in her Irish accent.

“He’s several months behind.”

My gaze dropped to my scuffed shoes, which had developed a hole exposing my big toe.

“Yes, Sister. I’ll remind him.”

“Will he get upset? Does he hit you?” She asked, her moonlike face expressing concern.

“No, Sister. My father doesn’t hit me.”

“Good. Then tell him for me please.”

I recalled how the nuns had banned my chile business and it angered me. I could be paying my own tuition. Instead I felt humiliated.

When I relayed the message at dinner, my dad fumed, setting down his fork and furrowing his brow. “Jesus wouldn’t hound people for money.”

My mother boldly differed. “Yes, but Jesus wasn’t running a school. Think of all the bills those poor women must pay.”

Before my father could reply, my brother spilled his milk.

“Ay no,” my mother scrambled for paper towels to sop up the mess.

“I’ll call that sister and tell her to stop bothering my son. I’m good for it. I always pay my bills, eventually.”

My dad adhered to his own warped perception of the American financial system. He believed as long as the bill was paid then the debtor’s honor was preserved. The timeline for such payment was irrelevant. I wasn’t convinced this pillar of his philosophy should be added to my evolving mantra for success.

* * *

The first orange envelope arrived on a Friday. I was home alone because on Fridays my mother took Rene to visit Abuelita Carmela across the border. Sitting at the kitchen table, I eyed the ominous notice. It reminded me of a ticking time bomb.

I called my dad.

“What does it say?” He hollered over the hissing steam of the tire shop. I envisioned his foreman, Pedro, rolling around like a pinball in his machine, bouncing from mold to mold checking gauges and adjusting knobs as he cooked tractor-tailor tires for the eighteen-wheelers lined up at the bridge to Mexico.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, ándale, open it!”

I read the contents slowly, stumbling over the legalese.

“What does it mean?”

“If you don’t make the house payment soon they’re going to take the house away.”

A string of colorful expletives followed in Spanish. “Don’t worry. I’ll call the bank, tell them I’m good for it. Just throw that letter away before your mom sees it. She’s got enough on her hands.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hung up and deposited the orange letter in the kitchen trashcan. Just as I sat back down, the phone rang.

“Put it in the garbage can in the alleyway. And lay something on top of it.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * *

The second and third notices also came on Fridays. Both times I read them to my dad and disposed of them in the alleyway.

The house would be seized if payment was not delivered in full by December 15th. The deadline for picking up the tractor-trailer tires at the State’s lot in Kingsville was December 10th. As the day drew near, my dad had nearly accumulated the total. The piles of cash were stashed in his safe at the tire shop. His plan remained clear as dominoes lined up and ready to fall. When I read him the third notice, he picked me up and we visited Uncle Bobby at the ARCO.

“We’ve got a couple days left, Bobby,” my dad said. The veins on his forehead throbbed in sync with his heartbeat. “How much do you have?”

Uncle Bobby produced a crumpled brown bag that looked like it should contain stale popcorn. Instead, he extricated wads of cash.

“Between this and what I have at the tire shop, it’s almost the \$5000 we need to make good on the bid,” my dad said.

“There’s some folks that owe us some money,” Uncle Bobby added. “All I’ve gotta do is go collect and we’ll make it.”

“Owe us? I told you to never sell on credit,” my dad complained.

“Well you should’ve seen these ladies, Joe. Any single man in his right mind would give them credit just to see them again when they come back to pay.”

“I’m not single. And technically, neither are you. When are you going to grow up, Bobby? C’mon. It’s now or never.” My dad’s eyes bulged. His face flushed red.

“Let’s not scare the boy,” Uncle Bobby glanced at me like I was the only thing standing between him and his brother’s fury. “I have their addresses here. Let me go out and do some collections.”

“And who’s gonna watch the station while you’re doing that?”

Uncle Bobby’s gaze fell on me. “How about Big Money?”

“Yeah, Dad! Let me.”

“Fine. It’s the weekend. You’ll work here while your uncle does the rounds.” My dad agreed. I couldn’t believe my luck.

“By Monday we’ll have the mula, bro. You’ll be home free.”

Bobby Rocket scores.

* * *

Everything was going smoothly. I knew how to pump gas, wipe windshields, make change. Then up prowled a sheriff’s cruiser.

The officer stepped out slowly. He wore a Stetson, Ray Bans and a shiny star over his heart. My eyes drifted to the gun at his hip as he approached.

“Howdy, son. Where’s the manager?”

I could hear my heart drumming in my ears. “You’re looking at him, sir. My dad owns the place.”

“Is that right?” The deputy grinned. “Well, whomever said them Mezcuns are lazy wasn’t talking about you wuz they?”

“No sir, they weren’t.”

“You speak good English too.” He seemed surprised.

“I study with the nuns.”

“I see. Well that explains it then.”

He reached into his shirt pocket and fished out a piece of paper. “Have you seen this man?”

It was the police sketch from Channel 4.

And he’s scrambling right. The defense penetrates into the backfield.

For a moment all I could think of was the \$5000 cash reward. All my dad's problems could be solved with the sale of Uncle Bobby.

I froze, the sketch blurring.

"Son? Have you seen this man?" The officer repeated.

I shook my head, swallowing hard. "No, sir."

He cuts back the other way and picks up a blocker.

"We got a tip from some lady that she'd seen someone 'round these parts resembling this man. You sure ya ain't seen him?"

I hesitated, wondering what my mom would have me do. Save my uncle or save our house? But how could I betray my father's brother?

"Yes, sir. I'm sure," I heard myself answer.

He eyed the station suspiciously. "Mind if I look around?"

"Go ahead."

I followed him as he sauntered through the garage, the small office with the cash register. Stood behind him as he peered into the room where Uncle Bobby slept. My heart raced as I prayed there were no clues lingering there. But as the officer stepped out of the way and I stuck my head in I was surprised to find the cot gone and the room completely empty.

The officer strolled back to his tan-colored patrol vehicle. He reached in for a poster, which he handed me. "You mind asking your dad to put this up?"

"Yes, sir."

"You do mind?"

"I mean no, sir. I don't mind." I fumbled, struggling to conceal my fraying nerves.

"Alright, muchacho. As you were. Don't grow up too fast, now, ya' here?" The deputy climbed back into his cruiser and drove off, flashing his lights as cars swerved out of the way.

I took the poster inside and placed it on the counter for Uncle Bobby to see. I supposed it was important for him to know the law might be onto him, if that was really him, which I truly

hoped it wasn't. I didn't want to be an accessory to a crime. But I also didn't want to be a liar or – worse even – a traitor to my own kin. Yearning to drive the confusing thoughts from my mind, I shook my head like a wet dog drying himself and carried on with my duties.

By Monday the funds were gathered. Dad and Uncle Bobby drove me to school. “From here Uncle Bobby’s leaving me at the gas station so I can cover for today. Then he’s driving up to Kingsville to make good on the bid. He’ll bring back the receipt and we’ll head up tomorrow for the first shipment of tires.”

“Too bad, I can’t take some of that money to the nuns right now,” I eyed the bag full of cash on the floor.

“Don’t worry, son,” my dad smiled. “Soon we’ll be caught up on the house and the school. The nuns will sing to the heavens.”

Uncle Bobby stared at me pensively as I got down. “Don’t let those nuns or anyone else ruffle you, Big Money. Stay cool, like that day floating in the bay.”

“You got it, Uncle Bobby. Go with the flow,” I smiled and waved goodbye.

* * *

That afternoon nobody picked me up after school. When the other kids had all left, I walked to the gas station. Standing in the doorway, my dad appeared unusually disheveled. His sky blue guayabera was stained with soot from servicing the cars. His usually slick hair hung sloppily over his eyes.

As I approached I asked, “Where’s Uncle Bobby?”

He frowned, “I don’t know.” He sat behind the cash register and lowered his forehead onto the keys, exhaling slowly.

I scanned the surroundings, which appeared oddly barren. The posters bearing the ARCO brand were gone. I peered into Uncle Bobby’s bedroom; it was as empty as the day the sheriff had visited. Inside the garage, all the tires and air filters and fan belts were missing. That’s when I noticed the pumps were garnished with hand-written “Out of Service” signs.

“What’s going on here?”

“Son, you don’t want to know,” he answered without lifting his head.

“But I do want to know.” I thought of the journal sitting under my bed, wondered what sage learnings I might be jotting into it that night. “What happened?”

“The man I bought the gas station from came by today.”

“Why?”

“Because your Uncle Bobby never made the monthly payments to him as we had agreed. He also never sent the checks to ARCO for the franchise fee, like he was supposed to.”

“And?”

“ARCO canceled the franchise and the man repossessed his gas station. He doesn’t know if he’s going to close it or sell it to someone else. But he took everything that was here.”

I looked about mournfully, my eyes ascending to the glorious ARCO sign high above, the colors of the flag flying in the clear blue sky.

“The only reason I’m still here is because I don’t have a way to get home,” my dad confessed, finally raising his head. The keys from the register had creased grooves into his face. He looked like he was suffering from the mumps.

“Maybe there was an accident,” I said, my voice catching. “Uncle Bobby wouldn’t just run.”

“Son, running’s what your Uncle Bobby does best.”

* * *

“But you’re a hero. Everybody’s waiting for you,” She panted as he worked his hand up her skirt. Her lips parted, moist hot breath clinging to his cheeks.

“I don’t want to be a hero,” he huffed, grinding up against her in the backseat of her daddy’s Buick. “All I want is you, Irma.”

“Oh, Bobby,” she quivered.

Steam on the windows. The car rocking like a boat lost at sea. Up the pitch-black road behind the school, the stadium lights shone down on the anxious crowd waiting in the bleachers. Emerald green, freshly cut field. Cheerleaders jumping up and down on the track emblazoned with white lines. The home team pacing the sidelines in crisp red and white uniforms. The coach searched frantically, finding Fina in the stands.

“Where’s your son, Mrs. Lopez?”

Her eyes stared back blank and terrified, the way cows did as they were herded into the slaughterhouse.

The national anthem passed and the refs could delay the kickoff no longer. Despite the fact it was a pivotal playoff game. Despite the college scouts up in the bleachers with their binoculars, all there to see the only missing player. Despite the legend of Bobby Rocket.

The visitors kicked. Instead of Bobby receiving, his backup fumbled and the other team scored. They kicked again and the backup caught it and kneeled. Right as his offense took the field for the first time, Bobby emerged from the locker room at full sprint, helmet and cleats in hand. The coach rejoiced by throwing his clipboard into the air.

The crowd goes wild.

In his haste, though, Bobby did a piss-poor job of tying his shoes. And on the first play from scrimmage it happened.

Bobby Rocket gets the ball. He finds a hole in the line and punches through. He spins. One of his shoes flies off as he bolts up the middle of the field. Defenders collide as he zooms through them like a gust of wind. He kicks off the other shoe and hits the jets. He’s at the 50. The 40. I’ve never seen anything like it. The crowd is on its feet! The 30. The 20. He’s gonna go...all...the...Wait a minute, Bobby hits a slick patch and slips! He fumbles. Bobby’s crushed beneath a dog pile battling for the loose ball. The refs pull the players apart. Bobby Rocket lies motionless face down on the field, right at the goal line. His white pants are splattered red, his feet are mangled and bloody. The crowd gasps. The college scouts drop their binoculars and

shake their heads. Bobby Rocket's feet have been trampled and punctured by the other players' spikes. He's carried off the field. Brownsville loses 52-0.

Bobby never played football again. He dropped out before graduation. Married Irma in a shotgun wedding. Shipped off to Nam before the baby was born.

* * *

Right before five o'clock, my dad called the great State of Texas' used tire depot. A lady informed him his bid was cancelled. Nobody had showed up with the payment. Grandma Fina gave us a ride home in her VW Beetle.

Five days later, the sheriff came to our house. It was the same deputy who'd come sniffing around the gas station. He recognized me and shook his head.

"Sometimes, no matter how hard you work, you just can't catch a break," he grimaced as he nailed a notice to our front door.

"What's this?" My mom asked.

"I'm sorry, señora. This is your eviction notice. The bank has foreclosed on your house."

My mom steadied herself against the doorframe. Rene crawled over the officer's boots and plunged off the porch into the bushes, crying.

Neighbors poked their heads out windows, stood at sagging chainlink fences pointing in our direction.

My dad pulled up in his delivery van, a decrepit bakery truck he had repurposed to ferry tires. Once painted white, it was now smeared with soot and grease and stank of sweat, rubber and exhaust fumes. It was a monstrous machine with only the driver's seat, springs jutting from the torn cushion.

Gloomily, he signed a document the sheriff held for him. He then carried out our belongings and loaded them into the van. Along with the rubbernecking neighbors, the sheriff watched indifferently, leaning on the hood of his cruiser. Silently, I helped my dad convey our

meager possessions across the yard to the truck as my mom sat on the withered grass removing thorns and splinters from my brother's tender skin.

The last item we hoisted into the truck was my Evel Knieval bike. For some reason, I felt sorry for it, as if it were a cherished friend who had come to visit from faraway only to find disillusionment, strife and homelessness.

When we finished loading, we rattled slowly away from the only house my brother and I had ever known. The muffler let out a single shot ringing defiantly through the falling night. I could see the neighbors laughing at our misfortune. A pair of figures skulked away with the scrawny Christmas tree my dad had tossed on the curb, tinsel still clinging to its branches like forgotten tears.

Driving along the levee, my dad muttered that maybe we would have all been better off if his parents had never crossed the river to America. His smoldering eyes burrowed holes through the windshield as the rest of us jostled about on the floor.

My mom wept in hushed tones, cradling my sleeping brother in her arms. About halfway to Grandma Fina's house, she whispered hoarsely, "Why? Why did you have to trust him?"

My dad waited until Grandma's house materialized out of the shadows to reply, "Because he's my brother."

I eyed Rene, dozing serenely amid the chaos. What would I write about brothers in my journal? One thing was certain. I would tear my dad's business teachings into shreds.

The van rattled onto the front lawn, its squealing brakes announcing our arrival as the roof scraped against the oak's limbs, scattering severed branches and leaves like confetti at a parade.

When we stood on her porch beneath the yellow light, enveloped by frenzied moths in mute rebellion, Grandma Fina saw us from her rocking chair in the kitchen. She didn't reach for the rifle. She didn't bother standing up. She just murmured, "Come in. I'm glad you've got shoes on."