

Gunslingers

I loved going with my Dad to the Sunday sports car slaloms he organized in department store parking lots across the San Fernando Valley.

One day a hungover friend of his puked all over the asphalt and he asked my Dad if he wanted to race his MGB around the pylons.

"Yeah," said my Dad, "but someone's gotta look after Moose."

That was me. I was Moose.

The hungover man stuck his pointer fingers in the corners of his mouth and shrieked a whistle. I decided to ask him later how he did that.

"Sasha! Over here!" he called.

This guy in a red-and-green Pendleton ambled over. I saw myself reflected in his mirrored shades.

"Yeah?"

"Gaynor's gonna run a few laps in my MGB. Can you watch Moose here?"

The guy in the red-and-green Pendleton said to my Dad, "Cool with you, Gaynor?"

"Sure thing, Sasha. I'll be right back, cradling the gold."

The guy called Sasha extended his hand for a manly shake. Three fingers were missing. I stared at the shriveled eraser pink stumps.

Crawling up his forearm was a snaky tattoo that read "*Yo No Soy Tu Pendejo.*"

"C'mon, Moose," said my Dad. "Not polite to stare."

I gripped Sasha's thumb and pumped it.

"Thanks, Sash," said my Dad. He looked down at me. "You mind Sasha, see? He's an old high school buddy. You'll be fine. Hey, Sash, throw some steaks on the hibachi."

I watched as the hungover guy and my Dad strode over to the British racing green convertible with the roll bar. My Dad lifted a chipped helmet from the front seat and slid it over his ears.

"Hey, Moose," said Sasha, holding out a blue and white bag, "help me with these briquets." I took the bag and shook out some briquets into the hibachi. "Make a pyramid," he said, and I built a cone.

"Now for my favorite part," said Sasha as he tipped the lighter fluid can over the briquets and drenched them in the clear firestarter.

I turned away as my Dad gunned the MGB's engine and eased the clutch. As my Dad rolled toward the starting line, Sasha tapped my elbow. He held out a silver lighter and casually flipped it open.

"Light the coals."

I knew an important test was in play. That's what these older men always conducted. Tests. I'd used a cigarette lighter before, last winter when I set fire to the Christmas tree.

I took the lighter from Sasha, knelt over the hibachi, and rolled the spiky metal wheel against the flint with my thumb. Butane flared into flame, and I carefully applied the fire to the base of the pyramid, the way Jack London described lighting kindling in "To Build a Fire," which my Dad had read to me three years ago, when I was six. From the bottom, because fire burns upward.

"Hey," said Sasha, "you're Gaynor's kid alright. Reminds me of that time we were in Tijuana, buying a duffel bag's worth of Roman candles. Your Dad insisted we ride straight to Rosarita Beach to set some off. I wanted to see the donkey show--"

"The donkey show?"

"Never mind. But we ended up at Rosarita Beach, low tide, no moon. I guzzled a six-pack of Dos Equis while your Dad lit the heavens with those Roman candles. He handled his lighter like a

gunslinger. One candle after another. The smell of gunpowder hung over us and reminded me of my Dad's stories of D-Day."

I heard a starter's pistol snap, and watched the MGB lurch forward, my Dad running through the gears as he approached the first pylons. As his brakes screeched, Sasha tapped my elbow.

When I turned away from my Dad's distant maneuverings, I saw Sasha's sunglasses in his left hand. In the palm of his right hand, an eyeball.

When I steadied my breathing, I covertly studied Sasha's eye socket. Scar tissue formed a perfect Silly Putty crater. Sasha was breathing on me.

I backed up. "What happened?"

"I challenged your Dad to a shootout." Sasha popped the eye back in and slid on the mirrored shades. "At twenty paces, we shot our Roman candles at each other. One of his fireballs took out my eye. I was so pissed off I lit the fuse of a new one, and it exploded, taking my fingers with it."

Sasha seemed weirdly proud. While I was pondering this mystery, Sasha said, "Hey, let's bar-b-que these steaks, eh?"

Sasha reached past me for the meat. His armpits smelled something awful, like acrid gunpowder.

Sasha flipped two steaks onto the grill. As they sizzled, I said, "Shouldn't we cook one for my Dad?"

"No room on this li'l baby," said Sasha. There was room.

Sasha said, "So we're down at Rosarita Beach. Your Dad drove the Plymouth to the Mexican hospital. At least until he blew up the engine."

"Blew up the engine?"

"Guy revved it so high the crankshaft split the oil pan. Melted the pistons, too. But his Daddy

owned a hardware store. 'No problem,' said your Dad. The way guys talk whose old men always bail 'em out. No problem? Not for him, maybe.”

I cocked my ears toward the track. My Dad sure had that MGB screaming.

“Hear that?” said Sasha. “Now all we have to do is wait for the crash of metal and the black cloud.”

We stood there, silent. I wondered if this is how men are friends.

Sasha said, “Hey, you gonna want ketchup on that steak?”

“No, sir. I'm not hungry.”