

Grocery Deliveries

by jake fuchs

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I was shooting baskets in the driveway when the Mexican kid delivered the groceries. He drove in fast and loud in the old panel truck the market guy, Panaritos, used for deliveries, so I grabbed the ball and skipped off to the side. I briefly considered slamming it against the front of the truck and claiming it was an accident if pressed, but I didn't want to mess with him. He was older than me or he wouldn't be driving, and the way he'd roared down our driveway was pretty crazy. Then when he got out of the truck, I saw he was a Mexican.

I'd never seen him before that day. An odd hire for Panaritos, who had always employed nice white kids who wouldn't grate on the sensibilities of the refined folks in our community. He wasn't white, he wasn't nice. Bottom line: I didn't want to mess with him.

My mother came out the back door and waved to him to start bringing in the groceries she'd ordered. He was already holding her box of stuff. When she turned around to go back into the kitchen, he smirked at me and gave me the finger before following her in. All I could do was stand there with the ball under my arm. When they came back outside together, I couldn't flip him off back, because my mother would have seen it. Instead, I had to listen to him chatting

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agreeably with her, angling for a tip. She fished a bill from the rolled up sleeve of her shirt and gave it to him. Smiled. So he'd got me three times. Spooking me with the truck, giving me the finger, which was the worst thing, and getting my mother to smile at him.

He backed sedately down our driveway. I clanked a jump shot off the rim. My mother was still hanging around outside. I hoped she wasn't going to say what a nice boy he was, this Manuel or José or whatever. She didn't, but what she did say was worse. She asked me what I was upset about.

"I'm not."

"Then why do you have an upset face?"

Why did she not know how annoying this question was? Sometimes it was angry face or sad face.

I was upset because I knew I was a coward. That my mother would have been upset with me if I'd shot a return finger to Manuel or José was just an excuse. I tried telling it to myself, and it was true, she would have been, but it didn't work for me. If she hadn't been there, I still wouldn't have flipped him off. I was scared, that was the truth of it, even though he was a little guy, littler than me, though older..

But he was a Mexican, okay? A beaner. And that meant he came from Sawtelle, the barrio next to the old veterans' hospital about five miles west of us. Their gang was famous, "Falcons de Sotel," their spelling. You saw the graffito all over the West Side. When did they apply it? Mexican kids were rarely seen, day or night, not in our neighborhood, so they might be anywhere in their numbers, hiding in the alleys, up in the palm trees, crouched inside our beautiful, shiny Beverly Hills garbage cans. Mess with one and they'd all swarm you, stomp you with the shiny black stomping shoes they all

wore. Oh, I offered myself that excuse, too, the legend of the Falcons.

But the grocery kid had on a white apron, not exactly gang attire, and was wearing tennis shoes. He was alone. If he was a Falcon, he was a lone Falcon, in our territory, not his. When he crashed down my driveway and flipped me off and then sweet-talked my mother, I didn't do anything because I was scared of *him*, just him. One guy. Around my friends, I passed for a tough guy and usually at the top of my mind I believed it. Then something like this would happen and show me the truth about myself, that I was a coward.

The following week I wasn't at home on grocery delivery day, but I was there, with basketball, on the week after that. Maybe he would do something worse than last time, something so outrageous that I'd have to act or at least speak. I'd be forced to, whatever the consequences. Or he'd ignore me, as if I were a piece of dogshit on the sidewalk. Or, perhaps worst of all, he'd smile at me and bullshit me the way he had with my mother, me knowing that he thought—he *knew*—I was a coward, me knowing it too. And I'd have to be nice back to my pretend amigo, which would be horrible. But not being there, hiding someplace twice in a row, was unthinkable, even for a chicken like me.

Same weary old truck, enters driveway slowly, stops well short of where I'm pretending to practice my fadeaway jumper. Cab door opens. Out steps a middle-aged Asian man of no interest to me, nor I to him. He hustles in the groceries and leaves.

A little later my mother asked, "Did you notice who came from the market?"

I nodded. I had a bad feeling.

"A new one," she said. "I complained to Mr. Panaritos about the old one. He won't be back."

She smiled. I turned from her, threw the ball hard against the garage door, not even trying to aim at the hoop. Why had she done this? Maybe she was just biased against chatty, tip-angling Mexicans, or she'd noticed how he flogged the truck down our driveway and considered it disrespectful or perilous. These possibilities are present to me now, but they weren't then, and I still believe, anyway, that she got Panaritos to fire him because she knew he'd dissed me. While she hadn't seen him flip me off, she knew he'd done something and that I'd done nothing. She knew it from my face, my traitor face, that always told her everything about me.

She continued to smile. I wanted to yell at her, but didn't know what words would burst out of my mouth. She might never forgive me and then where would I be? Instead, I picked up the basketball and threw it over the garage into the Petersons' yard, next door. She put her hand over her mouth.

I started climbing the wall between their yard and ours but stopped halfway up. Clinging to the top of the wall, I turned my head and stared at my mother. Neither of us spoke. I pulled myself up and over.

