Bloody Knuckles

by Jared Ward

It was the winter I first grew hair down there, the winter of the squeaking voice.

"Ay, mijo, you're becoming a man," Granny Lupe said when we arrived at five a.m., having driven straight through to Bakersfield.

We were visiting her, my mother and I, though to say we were visiting is not the whole of the truth. Seeking asylum would be closer, on temporary leave even closer, but that's not what was said.

We were visiting.

I was still a boy, though, and three days later I was a boy on the front steps of her two-bedroom house with my cousin Ramon, who had been making fun of my fat and my voice and my too-white skin since I got there.

"Hey, gabacho," he said the first day he saw me, "Ain't there no sun in Seattle?"

I told him to blow me, and received the first of many gifts from his fist.

On the porch that day, it was all about fists. "Sit down," he said, "Gonna teach you a game."

I did because I knew that I had to.

He held his hand in front of me, balled tight so the skin stretched thin over knuckles. Scars criss-crossed in x's like lines drawn in sun-hardened dirt.

"Now yours," he said, and I lifted my own, the grooves of our fingers linking. My fist was half of his, like my arms and legs and everything else.

"How do you play?" I asked.

He reached back, then slammed his bones into mine. My hand lit inside as I snapped it away.

He laughed.

"Jesus, Ramon," I said, rubbing invisible flames.

When he offered his hand, the laugh disappeared and his eyes went narrow.

“Your turn.”

I started to slide from the steps and he clamped my wrist, squeezed hard. My fingers curled, and he pulled until they bumped his.

Letting go, he said, “My turn. Hold it out.”

The yard was empty, except for our Duster parked a good sprint away.

“How do you win?” I asked.

“Last one to quit.”

Even if I'd wanted to, I knew I couldn't beat him. But there were lots of ways to lose.

I held my fist out and turned away until the fire flared again.

“Your turn,” he said, and through my tears I knew he was watching.

His hand came in position. I reared back and hit him with all I had. His fist didn't move, but when mine fell, I saw speckles of blood.

My cheeks were moist. I held my hand up before he could ask, making the tightest fist I still could.

His gaze felt like the ladies' in Sears who would size me for clothes. I could feel it unrolling like the thin ribbon of plastic over my inseam, waist, and collar.

One last time he swung, and my combustible hand erupted, trickling into the crevices of my palm.

I wanted to be strong. Tough.

I clutched my hand to my stomach and closed my eyes when I cried.

I heard later that Mom tried to smack him. Granny Lupe wouldn't let her. She took him into the kitchen and said something quiet. It was the first time since he was a boy Ramon cried.

I remember him touching my shoulder, stopping for a moment on his way to the door. Then he left.

Two days later we did the same.

We talked often, Granny Lupe and me. At Christmas and birthdays, Easter and wet Seattle nights when my mother needed home. But money and time were tough to come by, so the years slipped past.

Then, in the spring of my sophomore year at Beacon Hill High School, everything changed.

I had third lunch with my best friend Gary. We always sat at the edge of the courtyard, with a good view of the fine girls. There were four main tables: white girls, black girls, latinas, and Vietnamese. There wasn't much mingling, either between the ethnicities or between the good and the not-so-good looking. The only thing they all had in common was a complete disinterest in Gary and me.

Earlier that day, Gary had bumped into some brothers while scoping out a bubble-assed latina. Hadn't been much of an incident, mostly just the walk of shame when they laughed and taunted his back as he headed to biology.

But he'd caught their attention.

We were sitting on our usual table, counting out syllables on our fingers, trying to finish my sonnet for English.

“How about ‘Vanessa Colber's gangsta boy runs fast / So I run faster just to save my ass',” he said.

I squinted at him. “You just come up with that?”

“On the spot,” he said, chewing a full bite of cafeteria goulash. “Pretty good, huh?”

“Terrible,” I said, copying it down in my notebook.

“Look at you stealing my shit,” he said. “I'm thinking about going Ice Cube on you, flying solo.”

“More like Vanilla Ice,” I said, and we were both laughing when they came walking past.

“Look, it's the white boy who don't watch where he's going,” said the one Gary had bumped two hours before. “What's so funny, white boy?”

We forgot our joke in an instant, finding the bench under our feet to be fascinating.

“Nothing,” Gary said.

He eyed Gary, me, moved closer. “Who's your girlfriend?”

Without thinking, I laughed. Not a full-out laugh, more of a smirk and a snort, but it was enough.

“I see,” he said, squaring his shoulders my way, forgetting all about Gary. “You laughing at me now?”

“No, man,” I said, still staring down, trying to figure out the last thirty seconds of my life.

In my peripheral, I saw him throw his hands out, could tell he was looking around by the ebb and flow of his voice when he said, “Ain't no one else said nothing, white boy.”

It was his tone that did it. I could have bored holes through the bench, but he wasn't going anywhere. I looked up, saw his two boys nudging each other and nodding, tugging at the crotches of baggy shorts threatening to slide off their hips. The courtyard sounded like a swing before a landed punch, and I guessed the girls were starting to notice me.

I looked at him, and his eyes flashed in recognition of the moment. Some part of me knew it was about to hurt.

Sighing, I stood up. “Ain't no white boy,” I said, and threw a haymaker for his chin.

As beatings go, it wasn't so bad. The lunch monitor started shouting right away, and the whole thing was over in seconds. Gary told me later my first swing was so far off, the entire courtyard groaned. I was right, I'd been noticed and probably wouldn't date until college.

Sitting outside the principal's office while my mother's angry voice slipped under the door, I stared at my arms. In summer, no one would've called me a white boy, but in early April I still clung to my winter pale, my father's skin, soon to brown into my mother's. I'd been wrong before, I *was* a white boy.

When my mother came out of the office, the blood rode high in her cheeks. I got up and she reached for my chin, tilting my throbbing right eye towards the light.

“Did you really swing first?” she asked.

I nodded.

She let go of me and put her hands on her hips. “Hit him?”

I started smiling, couldn't help it, and shook my head. “Missed by a mile.”

The smile was contagious, and she gave me a light pop in the back of the head to suppress it. “Let's go,” she said, and we made it all the way to the car before we both started laughing.

They suspended me for five days, which was the least they could do. I needed time for things to die down or move on, preferably for somebody else to get his ass kicked. Mom threatened to make a list of chores every day, but I knew she was bluffing.

She did call Granny Lupe that night, though. Told her I got in a fight because someone called me a white boy. Wasn't exactly how I'd put it, but once it was out, there was no stuffing that cat back in the bag.

“Ay, mijo, how's your face?” she asked when Mom put me on.

“Fine, Granny,” I said. “Just bruised.”

“I heard that boy gave you a beating,” she said. I shot my best black-eyed withering glance at my mother. She smiled, shrugged, and headed for the kitchen. “Why you messing with boys like that?” Granny asked.

“Didn't want to, Granny,” I said. “Had no choice.”

“Ay, mijo,” she said, and the quiet on the other end sounded a lot like disappointment. Finally she said, “There's always a choice.”

Five months later I was living in central Kansas, in an old railroad town surrounded by wheat on all sides. That one fight triggered a chain of events my mother and I never saw coming. The

school contacted my father from twelve states away. He contacted his lawyer, and my bags were almost packed for me.

I never even landed a punch.

My father's town was different, and even though I'd visited, I wasn't prepared to live there. Flat, small-time, with no tourist traps at all, except something about the world's largest ball of twine. Still, the sky was huge and it didn't rain all the time.

A week into my junior year, I was pining for home. There was more than a difference in landscape. The latinos in town were very close-knit, having lived their entire lives together. Same with the white kids, and there were only about twenty black kids in the whole school.

My tongue kept me from fitting in with the latinos. I understood little Spanish and spoke even less. No one really believed I was Mexican, and they kept me at a distance.

Or maybe I kept them at a distance. Living with my father, I had my first opportunity to be more than another poor kid on food stamps.

It was the third day of school when it happened. I was sitting by myself in the break between classes. A couple of boys were talking by their lockers.

"What do you call a Mexican in a restaurant?" asked the tall one, Dave, who would become my new best friend in the years to come.

The other boy stuffed his books in his locker and slammed it shut.

"What?"

I already knew this one and a hundred others. *Why do Mexican cars have tiny steering wheels?* So they can drive with their handcuffs. *What do you call it when a Mexican falls overboard?* An oil slick. *Why does the Mexican Olympic team suck?* Because everyone who can run, jump, or swim is already here. They were old and worn, but funny if the right person told them.

Looking at Dave, whose name I still didn't know, in his collared polo and designer jeans, with his short-cropped hair, freckled cheeks, and smooth white skin, I wasn't sure he was the right person.

“Busboy,” he said, and both of them laughed.

In an automatic response, I stood up with my fist balled and looked around. No one even noticed. The clean row of lockers and carpeted hallways looked something like a choice.

A choice.

“We got that market cornered for sure,” I said.

They both noticed me then, looking confused until Dave backed up a step, scanned the hallway. “Didn't mean nothing,” he said, and I could see his confusion as he studied my features. “You Mexican or something?”

I walked towards them, surprised as they were when the hand I extended was outstretched, open.

“I'm Matt,” I said.

That evening the phone rang after supper. By my dad's clipped response, I knew who it was.

“For you,” he said.

He went to the living room, like he always did when she called. I picked up the phone. “Hey, mom.”

There was silence on the other end, then a deep breath and a jagged, whispering exhale. “Mijo,” she said, “Granny Lupe's dead.”

There were over a hundred people at her funeral. All the family. The seven aunties, their kids, and their kids. Everyone laughed. Everyone cried. Then everyone laughed again.

After the burial, we went back to her house where the aunties made tamales and menudo. I was eating a piece of cake when a hand fell on my shoulder.

“Hey, gabacho, good to see you.”

Ramon stood next to me, smiling. He was heavier than I remembered.

I stood up and he gave me a bear hug before I could shake hands. “You too, Ramon. Good to see you, too.”

He pointed out his wife, Patricia, and little girl, named Guadalupe after our grandmother. He was working as a FedEx driver, had bought a house a few blocks down the street to look after Granny Lupe, and was saving to get Little Lupe into private school.

“You ought to come by,” he said. “Patricia would love to cook for you.” He lowered his voice and leaned in close. “She's not as good as the aunties, but she tries,” he said, laughing.

I looked closer at Patricia. She was tan, but not Mexican.

“Ramon,” I said, “You married a white girl?”

He grinned.

I laughed and we clasped hands, pulling together in a semi-embrace. As I backed away, he held onto my hand.

His brow furrowed and he sighed. “You know what she told me that day?”

“No,” I said.

No one did.

He looked at me, into me the way only family can, then smiled and pulled me close again. “It's really good to see you, Matthew. Glad you could make it.” His left arm clung tight to my neck for a moment, then he let go.

“Dinner, my place,” he said as he walked off. “Just promise to say the tamales are good.”

“I will,” I said, waving, fingers still tingling from the warmth of his grip.