

# The Lookout

*by* Trace Sheridan

Slipping past the jars of bubblegum and jaw breakers, I walked to the back of the store to the coolers for a soda.

The wet swimming trunks under my tough-skin jeans had made a damp half moon on my rear end. I stuck my hand deep in my pockets. I was trying to decide whether to grab a moon pie and a Coke, a moon pie and a Yoo-hoo, or a bag of Cheetos and a Country-Time pink lemon-aid, when they came in.

"Hey, you kids," Gus said, "get what you're going to buy and get out of my store." He grunted then scratched his temple. Gus ran and owned the only 'grocery store' in the neighborhood. We called it a grocery store, but it hardly qualified. It was an old run down storefront with an empty store on either side of it. He was the last hold out in the shopping center. All the other merchants had moved out long ago.

Gus took another bite of his sandwich, chewing slowly. He trained his eyes on Kenny, who was wearing pants that appeared to be three sizes too large. Three boys in a convenience store all at one time dressed in baggy clothes had to be up to no good.

"Whatever old man," Tommy said.

"You just get what you came for and leave my store," Gus replied.

"This is a free country old man," Tommy said, walking toward the counter.

I peered around the corner and quietly walked to the candy aisle.

"Yeah," Kenny said. He and Howard followed Tommy toward the front of the store.

"I can shop here and you can't make me leave. We know about your kind," Tommy said.

"What! My kind?" Gus stood up, wiping the white bread crumbs sprinkled in his moustache.

"Yeah, your kind. You think you better than us?" Tommy asked.

"You disrespectful hooligan! You don't know what you're talking about," Gus said, his face red behind black horn-rimmed glasses.

"Listen kid, you got five seconds to leave this store or it won't be good for you. That goes for all of you." Gus pulled a baseball bat from under the counter.

By this time, I was on the chip aisle. I watched as the three boys fanned out across the small store. It would have been easy for me to leave, to just slip out.

"You want us to get out, make us," Tommy was laughing as he spoke. A wicked grin flashed across his face. He was on the aisle with corned beef and tuna fish. Using his arm like a shovel, Tommy knocked the cans off the shelves. When the other boys heard the cans hit the floor they followed Tommy's lead and started knocking everything—food, diapers, cans of motor oil, bottles of Pepto Bismol, and loaves of bread—off the shelves.

"Get out of my store!"

"Make us!" They taunted filling the floors with precious commodities, Chap Stick, candy, and gum.

Gus couldn't run them down. He stood at the front of the store and tried to grab them as they ran past him. But this made the game more fun. Each boy ran towards Gus then stutter-stepped, mimicking a receiver on Monday night football, faked left, right, turned, and Gus missed each of them.

I watched in horror as Gus tried to stop the perpetrators from destroying the entire store. Why didn't he just call the police? Afraid to move or leave, I crouched down leaning into the magazine rack until the shelf above my head hid me. Gus walked back slowly to the exit, dragging the bat behind him.

"Where you going old man?" Tommy said.

"There's only one way out of this store—you'll have to come through me."

The expression on Tommy's face changed. I had seen the face before—it was the look my step-dad had right before he punched one of us, my mother, my brother or me, he didn't care. This wasn't good.

The three boys stood facing Gus, who was barely standing, his back against the glass doors.

"Tommy!" Howard said. "What are we gonna do?"

"Chill H, we're leaving this store."

"Over my dead body," Gus said.

I had to do something. "He called the cops," I shouted.

"I knew it!" Howard screamed.

Tommy grabbed a can of green beans from the floor and held it in his tightly clenched hand. "Let us by or we'll make you let us by," he said, walking toward Gus.

"Wait," I said, leaving my place of safety, "can't you see he's sick?"

I ran to Gus, pulled his dangling arm, and draped it across my shoulder. Gus leaned toward me and I helped him away from the front door. The bat hit the ground and rolled toward the magazine rack.

"Go, go, go fools!" Tommy yelled as the three boys ran from the store laughing.

I helped Gus sit down on the floor. "My heart pills," he said in a raspy voice, pointing to the shelf behind the register. I ran to the shelf. There were three bottles.

"Which one?" I screamed.

"The small one."

I grabbed the bottle and ran to his side. Push down and twist. I tried to open the bottle. Push down and twist.

"Hurry," he said.

"I'm trying," The bottle opened, but my nervous hands sprayed the tiny white pills across the floor. "How many?" I asked. He held up one finger. I scrambled and picked one up from the floor and handed it to Gus. He put it in his mouth with a shaking hand.

"I'm calling 911," I said, leaning over him. But, before I could leave his side, he grabbed my hand, his hand strong and determined.

"I wanna tell you something Ronnie."

He was holding my hand so tightly I could hardly feel my fingers.

"Back when I was your age, I ran with a bad crowd. There was this kid; we called him Scooter because he had a dog that would

drag his rear around the yard. Scooter was the dog, but we called him Scooter—to be mean, just to be mean. Listen, I did bad things and before I knew it, it was too late, too late to go back. No way to say sorry.” He swallowed hard and coughed. “You’re not like those other boys, Ronnie.”

“Lemme call 911,” I said, trying to pull my hand from his.

He pulled me back. “Listen to me. Listen!” His voice became clear, “You’re not like those boys. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir. I hear you.” He released me and I stood up rubbing my hand. I grabbed the phone and dialed 911.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m at Gus’s Grocery Store on Post Street and he needs a doctor, now! Yeah! That’s right! Come now, lady, please!” I hung up the phone and ran back to where Gus was.

He was mumbling, “I never told him I was sorry.” Then he started speaking another language.

I had never seen anyone die. For first time in my life, I was afraid, even more than when my step-dad got drunk and roughed me up. When Dale Franklin got shot last year standing on the corner outside the laundry-mat it took the ambulance forty-five minutes to get there. I didn’t think Gus could make it for forty-five minutes. Gus started getting quiet and I thought I should keep him talking—I’d seen this from watching re-runs of CHIPS. “Gus,” I said, “you wanna hear a story?”

His eyes fluttered open and he seemed to nod his head.

But my mind was blank. The only story I could think of was “*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.” I started anyway, “Once upon a time...”

I had reached the part where Goldilocks was sitting in Papa Bear’s chair, when outside the store I heard the loud whirl of a fire truck. That was quick. “You’re the kid who called?” The paramedic said walking through the double glass doors.

I nodded and pointed to behind the counter.

He went straight to Gus. I watched as he rolled up Gus’s sleeve, revealing a row of numbers tattooed on his pale forearm. He ripped Gus’s shirt open and put a mask on his face.

Gus was mumbling, "The boy...the boy," and pushing the mask from his face.

"The boy's fine. Gus? What's your full name Gus?"

"Cohen, Gus Cohen. The boy..."

"All right Mr. Cohen, don't worry about the boy. He's fine."

"I need to ask you a couple of questions," the paramedic standing in front of me said, blocking my view so that I couldn't see Gus.

Everything seemed to slow down and the entire store went quiet: the paramedic kneeling over Gus and the other one standing in front of me became silent. He moved his lips making shapes with his mouth, but I couldn't hear or understand what he was saying. Outside became quiet too: the cars passing by the store, the kids playing ball in the street, the city dump truck rolling to a stop as a man jumped from each side of the back of the truck, retrieving a can from either side of the street. I couldn't speak or move. My legs were stuck in the spot where I stood.

"Kid!" the paramedic said, loudly. "Are you okay?" He asked, shining a small bright light in my face from one eye to the next. "Are you hurt?"

I leaned around him, until I could see Gus on the floor. Slowly, I backed away. I dug my hand deep in my pocket and pulled out the wet balled up five dollar bill that my grandmother had given me before she left for work that morning. I cupped it and let the ball fall from my hand to the floor.

"Hey wait! Kid—you dropped your money—a fiver. Hey kid, wait!" I ran out the door before he could stop me.

I ran. I could have kept running, but Tommy stopped me.

"Whoa! Hold up speed racer!" Tommy said, grabbing me.

"Man, we showed that racist, didn't we?" Howard said, giving Tommy a high five.

"Right!" Tommy said. "What took you so long, Speedy Gonzalez? Give up the goods!"

"Goods?"

"The goods!" Tommy said, pushing me into Kenny.

"Don't play dumb," Kenny said.

They bounced me around between them. I felt dizzy.

"Give it up!" Howard said, grabbing me by the shirt.

"Alright, alright, jeeze," I said, yanking my shirt away. From my pockets, I pulled a moon pie, a can of Coke, a Butterfinger, a Snickers bar, and a bag of Cheetos and handed it to Tommy.

"That's it?" Tommy said. "After all that? This is it?"

I raised my shoulders defiantly, "I guess."

Tommy paused for a second, glanced at me and then at the food. Kenny and Howard looked at me and then to Tommy, waiting for his signal to pound me to a pulp. I held my breath and waited for the first punch, but Tommy's stone face broke into a smile and he said, "You alright, Ronnie. Not bad for your first time."

Howard and Kenny burst into laughter.

"You was scared!" Kenny said.

Tommy put his arm around me, "I told your brother I'd look after you while he was away with your mom. We're going to the pool, you coming with us?"

"Naw," I said, "I'm done with that. Besides, my grandmother is probably looking for me."

"Gotta go home to Nana!" Howard shrieked.

"Go home big baby," Kenny joined in.

"It's cool," Tommy said. He opened the Coke took a gulp and passed it to one of the other boys. "Catch you later."

I stood on the corner and watched them walk away—it was over. I wasn't afraid any more. I knew then that no matter what happened from that day forward I wouldn't be the same; I understood I was different.

