

Shoot 'em Up to the Moon

Stephen Collins

Bang, bang, shoot 'em up, destiny. Bang, bang, shoot 'em up, to the moon. Bang, bang, shoot 'em up, one two three.* If I could only sing, I'd be a singer, singing to pretty Moccasin, with a guitar, under the moon in the breezy warm summer night, if I could only play the guit—

“Daniel, you gonna shoot already?” Pedro says.

“Hey man, I'm concentrating. OK, this is for the win.” I set up at the free-throw line, Pedro and Vinnie under the basket. A cool dampness surrounds us like black water, we three cutting through it like sharks playing our last game of the night. “Vinnie's ass is grass.” I laugh and sink the shot, and Vinnie slaps the side of his head. “Bingo!” I say. “Bend over, son.” Pedro and I smash the basketball into Vinnie's ass, then take a break smoking the last three out of my pack.

“It's always your ass,” Pedro says, pointing to Vinnie.

“I'm short, you know.” Vinnie giggles to himself, just like his sister always does, pretty Moccasin with her starry blue eyes, Moccasin with that dark hair, those lips. I dream of her, of us together, and it's always here at the school. Imagine it, holding, touching, loving her here, laying her in the middle of the yard, the Old Beverly Apartments towering in the distance, many windows open, lighted, a few with fans whirling. Spanish graffiti covers all the walls, blue, red, black spray-painted art. I could get lost in those criss-crossed dull colored lines.

In the dimming orange twilight of August a sliver of moon is just visible, watching. If Moccasin were looking in the sky right now, we'd both be seeing the same thing, we'd both be joined, reflecting our thoughts to each other off the moon. Maybe she'll come into the school yard now, right while I'm thinking of her. I watch the gate as if I expect her to walk in, staring at the neon lights beyond it, red and blue, flashing “Vacancy” and “Donuts.”

Swiftly, as if he could be swift, someone does come in the gate, breathing hard.

“Hey Fish,” Pedro calls to him, “how's your stinky Kimchi?”

(*“Space Man,” Harry Nilsson, RCA Records)

We laugh as our fat Korean friend trots in. His cheeks, thick and doughy, surround his flat nose and suck in two little eyes.

"Knock it off, man," Fish says. "You guys gotta get out o' here."

"What are you talking about, get out o' here?" Pedro says. "I'm not going anywhere."

"No, you got to, man. It's the Diamond Park guys."

"Serious?" I say.

"What are you guys talking about?" Vinnie asks.

"Diamond Park," I say, "they're a gang. You know, always looking for a fight, or kids to bother, steal their mon—"

"They're punks," says Pedro.

"Yeah," says Fish, "Punks with knives and chains and —"

"Fuck 'em," says Pedro. "They're not gonna come in here. There's too many of us; they're cowards. They only come down on you when you're alone."

"I don't care," says Fish. "Let's go anyway."

"You're such a fucking pussy."

"I don't care what you call me, man. They scare me."

"Everything scares you. Your mother scares you, your dog scares you, your —"

"Mirror scares you," I say, and we all laugh. Pedro takes the last drag of his cigarette and twists the butt into the ground with his tennis shoe.

"They come in here and we'll just kick their asses, huh Dan?" he says.

"Fuck yeah. Easy."

"You guys don't know them," says Fish.

"Fuck if I don't," says Pedro. "Just like any other pussy gang. You gotta be a pussy to be in a gang. They'll never fight one on one, always gotta have back-ups."

"You talk big, like you know how to fight."

"Kick your ass. Kick it right now if you want." Pedro stands right in front of Fish breathing down in his face. Fish backs away.

"Give it a rest, you guys," I say.

"Yeah," says Pedro, "I'll give it a rest." Vinnie over by the basket starts laughing. "What's so funny?" Pedro moves closer to him. "What's so fun— Shit! You farted, you asshole. Stinks like hell over here." We are all laughing, staggering around. "What you eat last night, smells like . . . like . . . it's those beans, man. You're always eating those beans." I begin to smell it.

"Oh man," I say, "smells like you're sitting in it." Fish is choking on his laughter, then he stops suddenly. "Smells like diarrhea," I go on. "Smells like refried diar— What? What's the matter, Fish? What's—" At the far gate hopping the fence are five Mexican compadres, cholos as we call them. They have red bandanas wrapped around their foreheads, all except one;

he has a black hairnet taut over his perfectly combed thick dark hair. Their pants are baggy, t-shirts dark and tight.

"It's them, man," Fish says. "Let's run."

"No," says Pedro, "don't be a fucking wuss."

"I'm running."

"No," I say. "They'll just chase you down, then it'll be worse."

So we all stand silent like ice statues slowly melting looking at them walk towards us; the only sound is their laughter and a Mexican TV station blaring from one of the Old Beverly Apartment windows; a Spanish lover sings to his amante bellowing and strumming a guitar . . . then laughter, she is laughing at him . . . quickly angry voices back and forth . . . whimpering, sobs . . . a scream . . . then suddenly many voices, a crowd scene with spics yelling and jeering and—

"It's party time!" yells out the one with the hairnet. A step in front of the others he struts, hips thrust forward, leading them across the asphalt school yard. He is the shortest but has the thickest arms; a red bandana bounces from his back pocket.

The twilight has disappeared completely now as they are almost upon us. The flashing red lights from across the street glare through the dark in our faces, our eyes.

"You boys playing some ball," he says. The other four cholos are standing behind him grinning. "Huh? Cat got your tongues?" He snatches the ball from Vinnie's hands. "Nice ball," he says showing it to his compadres. "Is this not a nice ball?" They laugh.

"It's a nice ball, Santos," says one of the cholos.

"It's a pretty ball," says Santos, then he kicks it away, high into the distance, and it bounces far into the corner of the yard. One of the cholos, the tallest one, steps up to me, puts his face in front of mine, a knife glimmering on his belt. His breath smells like rot mixed with Thunderbird. This cholo, who is chewing gum, stops chewing; he lowers his eyes at me, a minute elapses, then slowly his jaws begin to move again working the gum not up and down, but circular, like a bull chewing its cud.

"Me molesta," he says. I hold my breath, stand perfectly still; he shoves my shoulder forcing me back one step. "Me molesta," he says again louder.

"Hey, white boy," Santos says, "do you know what he says to you? He says, you bother him. What are you going to do about it? Huh? Huh, white boy?" Santos looks back at the others. "White boy's chicken. Check his pockets; white boys always got money. Rich bastards." The tall cholo feels my pockets; there is nothing. "Fucking white boy. Where's your money?"

He's about to approach me.

"Hey, Santos, look at that one," one cholo says pointing at

Fish as he inches from the group. "The fat boy's sneaking away!" Suddenly Fish makes a break towards the back gate hobbling in slow motion on stubby legs.

"Go catch him, man," Santos says. "Hurry." Two of them fly after him catching up quickly, one kicking at his heels knocking his feet out from under him. Fish falls down skidding on his stomach; then as he tries to scramble to his feet flip-flopping on the asphalt, the cholo steps on his back, pressing him stiff. "Alright!" Santos says. "Busted! Fat boy's busted."

Twisting his arms behind him, they lead Fish back to Santos, his yellow cheeks scuffed black. "We caught you, fuck face. Not a smart thing to do." Santos smiles showing all his chipped teeth; I exhale faintly; Pedro stands, almost perfectly still.

"Gordo," Santos says baiting him, "what's shaking. Ha, Ha. It's funny, no?" He steps up an inch in front of Fish, Fish looking away from his eyes. "Getting a little set o' titties, fat boy."

"Please, man. Please leave me alone," Fish whimpers, sweating hard.

"Leave you alone? He wants me to leave him alone. Maricon. Chupa mi verga. You don't understand, chink. Fucking faggot." He pushes him back. "You don't talk 'til I tell you, chink."

"Kick his ass, Santos," says a cholo.

"They want me to kick your ass, fat boy. What do you think? . . . What do you think!"

"No, man, please. Just let me go."

"Just let you go! Just let you go, what?" Fish looks up at him, doesn't understand. "What happened to the 'Sir?'"

"Just let me go, sir."

"Good, fat boy. You're learning." He looks to his cholos. "Well?"

"Kick his ass anyway." They are laughing, enjoying it all.

"They still want me to kick your ass, fuck face." Santos steps back and waits; Fish's lips, quivering with drops of bubbling spit, are dark red like overripe tomatoes. His nose is running. "I got an idea." Santos reaches down and pulls out a switchblade slicing the wind as it pops open. It sparkles neon red.

"Shit," Pedro whispers to me.

"Don't move," I say, as if I have to.

Santos puts the knife under Fish's chin touching the hanging rolled flesh of his neck. Fish swallows as all the cholos smile, waiting.

"How 'bout I cut you a little, maybe leave a little scar on your neck. Would you like that, fat boy?"

"No sir."

"No, I didn't think you would. Then what should I do? Huh? Should I cut your ear off so I can show it to my lady?"

"No sir."

"No sir, no sir, so many no sirs. I got to do something, fat boy. I'm getting restless, you know. What should I do? Huh?"

"Kill him," says a cholo.

"Should I kill you?"

"No."

"No What!"

"No, sir. No sir, Mr. Santos. No sir, please don't, sir."

"Good, fat boy. Maybe I won't kill you. But . . . I don't know. Maybe something else. Maybe there's something else I can do for you." He puts the blade between Fish's legs, pushes up slightly. Fish snuffles, tears forming in his eyes, one slowly gliding down his doughy cheek. He stands very still. "You prob'ly don't use this much anyway."

"Cut it off, Santos," says a cholo.

"How 'bout I cut your dick off? Huh, fat boy?"

"No," Fish whispers.

"No what!" Santos screams with his lips pointed into Fish's ear.

"No, sir."

"I can't hear you!"

"No sir!" Fish is crying as tears roll into his lips and down his nose. Everybody watches him silently as he sobs; then Santos pushes the blade up a little harder.

"Shut up! You fucking wimp." Faintly becoming visible first around the zipper of his pants and then down one leg, a blotch of piss soaks to his knee gradually getting darker. Santos looks down at what Fish has done. "Look at that, man," Santos says. "He's pissing in his pants." He is laughing, laughing hard. All the cholos laugh and scream out their joy; we don't move, look down to the ground. "Fat boy got my fucking knife wet with piss." He wipes his blade on Fish's shoulders, both sides, then staggers back laughing as they all turn heading out. "Oh man, can't top that, can't ever top that again. Did you see that? Gordo needs a diaper."

"Fat boy pissed in his pants," they are all saying to each other as they walk away, satisfied with themselves, leaving us to ourselves. They bust up and stagger around as they go, slapping each other on the back. Then they hop the fence and are gone.

We stand, none of us speak.

The Mexican TV station still blares in the background, the fans still whirl. Car headlights sweep through the yard as the traffic rolls by, turning the far corner. The sliver of moon is higher now, glowing bright among the stars. And bent like a hook.

I leave my friends and walk over to the corner of the yard to retrieve the basketball. I imagine Moccasin next to me,

touching my cheek gently with her fingertips. She says, "It's OK, Danny. It's OK. None of it matters because I love you. None of it is important.

"I love you," she says. "I love you."