

Box Score

*I just sit here on this bank of sand
and watch the river flow.*

-Bob Dylan

With spotted putty skin covering his face, the old man sits at the café table and sips beer from a pilsner glass. A warm breeze blows in off the wide Ahmik River which flows beside the café. The sun is full, and the afternoon is heating into the nineties. The old man is not there to be fashionable — fashionable patrons come for lunch, or the sunset, or a late evening dinner, not the scorching afternoon.

The old man does not expect much from Juan, but he does enjoy making him earn his pay. No such thing as a free ride and all that. The old man is aware that afternoon patrons get in the way — are a bother, a pain. He has overheard Juan talking about how they ought to close the café after lunch and reopen later for the dinner crowd. The old man does not believe in tipping, and if he is a nuisance, it is to build character in others. The old man prefers the café in the afternoon because it is mostly empty. A mostly empty café decreases the chances that he will end up seated next to a table of gabbing twenty-something girls and their obtuse insights, or homosexuals hoping to get married in some state that permits such things, and of course, god-forbid, he find himself seated next to a table of blacks with their *It be this* and *It be that* talk. No, the sparse afternoon crowd is much more pleasant and worth enduring the heat of the day.

“Otra,” he says to Juan.

The waiter takes the empty glass. "I speak English, and you know it," Juan says.

"One can never tell these days." The old man makes his fingers into a pistol and fake-shoots Juan between the eyes.

Juan — tall, thin, closely shaved, slicked back hair — looks like a movie star or an exotic fashion model. The old man watches him glide to the bar and return with a pale yellow beer. Juan places it on the table as if setting a pilsner glass is as natural to him as a curtsy or a pli . “Will that be all?”

The old man sips the freshly drawn beer. “Muy sabrosa.”

Juan rolls his eyes. “Will that be all?”

“For ten years, I always read the obituaries ... you know las obituarios.” The old man points at the folded newspaper he holds in his left hand. “Now I don’t read them. I only read the sports page, solo deportes, and even then, mostly just the box scores.” The old man laughs. “Funny thing is, I don’t give a damn about baseball though. You know, no me gusta b isbol.”

The old man is the only person Juan knows who actually reads a paper and ink copy of anything, let alone a newspaper. Why not just go online? Instant news on any topic. But Juan knows old people get stuck in their ways — their habits — are a product of their generation. At least today’s old people are like this. Of course, Juan is certain that his generation will not end up stuck; no, they will be forever young, forever embracing change, always remaining current. Generation gaps will be a thing to laugh about.

Juan pulls a pen from his apron pocket and writes out the bill. “I speak English, sir.” Juan inhales deeply, holds his breath for a moment and sighs his exhale. “If there’s nothing else.” Using a salt shaker as a paper weight, Juan places the bill face up on the table. The old man notices the handwriting on the bill is cursive and loopy. It reminds him of a girl’s.

“You’re tall, muy alta, eh!”

“Alto.”

“What’s that?”

“Not *alta*, it’s *alto*, I’m a man, alta is for women.”

"Oh! You mean the señoritas, the hot tamales! Well, you're not interested in that though, are you Juan?" The old man winks and looks at Juan from head to toe.

"¿Cuántos años tienes?" I'll bet you're twenty-three."

Juan turns as if to brace against an approaching storm and walks away without speaking. The old man flaps his wrist at Juan's back and chuckles. Then he removes his sweat-stained Panama hat, wipes his perspired forehead with a handkerchief he carries in his trousers pocket and resets the hat down lower on his brow.

Unfolding the newspaper, he reads about the White Sox and the Tigers. Bobby Jones, the ace for the Sox, had thrown a no-hitter into the eighth before Julio Martín launched a two run bomb that sent the lefty to the showers.

The old man lowers the paper and looks for Juan so as to tell him about the game, but the server is not at his station. Juan and another server who the old man knows as Marcus are standing by the patio rail smoking all white cigarettes and looking down at the river. Marcus is wearing a tight-fitting black tuxedo vest that matches his skin color. Marcus is also trim and stylish like a figure skater or a dancer. His head is shaved, and it glistens in the sun. The old man wonders if people like Marcus ever suffer a sunburn. He figures they do not and that is why Marcus's bald head can take the direct sun while he himself has to slather on gobs of greasy sunscreen lotion and wear wide brimmed hats. The old man wishes he too could resist the effects of the sun that he assumes Marcus is oblivious to.

Casually, Juan points at something down off the patio by the Ahmik's rocky bank. Marcus notices what Juan is pointing to and smiles. The old man turns his chair, but he can not see anything unusual until he walks to the rail and stands beside the servers.

The café patio is a deck hanging out twenty feet over the Ahmik River and braced ten feet above the surface. The rocky shore climbs steeply from the water up to the main section of the café which is built as close to the top edge as possible. From

the patio rail, the old man sees three teenagers — two black and one brown — who, ignoring the many danger signs posted above the bank, have climbed down on the rocks and are wading into the water a hundred yards upriver from the café. The old man watches as the darkest one of the three takes off his jeans and, in his purple boxers, carefully walks out into the water until he stands thigh deep. The greenish water splashes against his legs. The teen turns and looks at his friends — a lanky black teen who probably plays basketball and a stocky brown-skinned teen who the old man assumes is Mexican. The two teens follow the lead of their friend. When all three are standing thigh deep in the river, the brown-skinned teen walks farther out until his waist is submerged. He, now in the lead, turns and motions for his friends to join him. The two servers laugh as the lanky black teen stumbles and falls, soaking his oversized T-shirt. Soon, all three teens stand chest deep in the river. As they venture farther from shore, their voices carry across the water. The old man can hear their crude teasing of each other. They splash and shout until all three are completely wet.

The old man turns to Marcus and Juan. "Ahmik is Indian for beaver, but no woman wanted to live by a river called the *Beaver River*, so they kept the Indian name." The old man sniggers. Marcus and Juan finish their cigarettes, flick the butts over the rail and go back to their stations.

The old man stands alone at the rail and watches the horseplaying teens. The brown-skinned kid climbs onto the back of his lanky black friend and twists around him until he forces his friend's head under water. The other black teen pulls his brown-skinned friend off and places him in a full nelson. He begins rapidly dunking him several times before releasing him. The old man notices that their play is carrying them out farther into the current. He guesses that the brown-skinned teen is well over his head which is why he is grabbing for the lanky black teen. The lanky black teen playfully pushes his brown-skinned friend farther out into the current. The current catches the teen and drags him along with it. The old man watches. The two black

teens call for their friend to stop fucking around and, when they realize their friend is actually in danger, begin yelling for help. They both look up at the old man as they yell.

"Quit your gawkin this is on the real," the lanky black teen yells as he notices the old man is watching but showing no signs of taking any action. The old man shrugs and the other black teen calls him a rusty cracker jack.

When they hear teens yelling at the old man, Marcus and Juan return to the rail and see the situation. Marcus pulls out his cell and dials 911. Juan turns and looks at the old man. "Why didn't you do anything?"

"Las cosas pasan. Nothing can be done about that." The old man walks over to his table and picks up his beer. When he returns to the rail, he sees that the drifting teen has managed to latch onto a warning buoy. He hugs it while the water rushes over his shoulders and head. Occasionally he pulls himself up high enough for air, but the river always forces him back down. He looks like a child trying to climb a greased pole at the county fair. The old man has not thought about that greased pole or the county fair of his youth for sometime. He smiles and grows nostalgic for those simpler carefree days.

"Why didn't you call 911? Don't you even have a phone?" Juan's caustic question snaps the old man back into the present.

"No reason to call anyone. The current's too strong, muy fuerte." The old man says.

"What's wrong with you? That boy might die out there."

"People die all the time." The old man looks out over the Ahmik, sets his half-empty glass on top of the rail and adjusts his hat. "Why don't you jump off the deck and save the kid? He's probably illegal but go on, ándale, ándale."

"You're sick ... sick and disgusting."

"You shouldn't talk to me that way, I'm a cliente. I may never come back if you continue to criticize my reputación."

The interval between the teen's head rising above water and going back under grows greater with each cycle. Marcus returns his cell to his back pocket. "The operator didn't know who to call. There's no water rescue operations in the city. I told her to call the fire department. Then she thought I was pranking her. Finally the bitch said she'd try to send someone."

Juan covers his eyes. "I can't watch this. That boy's going to die out there. Someone's got to help him."

The old man watches.

The teen's grip gives way, and he again begins down stream. The current is strong enough to hold him up when he doesn't fight, but when he tries to break free, he quickly is hurled under water and spit farther out into the middle of the river.

"He's dead for sure." Juan begins to cry. Marcus places a hand on Juan's back.

Marcus points toward a small motor boat, bow high in the air, speeding down the river. They watch as the boat powers down and circles the teen. One man from the boat tosses an orange floating ring into the water several yards ahead of the teen, but the kid can not reach it. The man pulls it in and tosses it out again. This time he nearly hits the kid on the head with the toss. The teen grabs it before it drifts away. The current is strong, and the driver of the boat continues maneuvering the small craft to keep it from turning and spinning. The other man pulls the kid toward the side of the boat and, after considerable effort, hoists him aboard.

The brown-skinned teen sits in the open bow of the boat with a blue towel wrapped around him as the driver negotiates against the current to where the kid's two friends are standing knee deep in the river. As the boat approaches, the old man sees the brown-skinned teen shivering under the towel. "The nini got lucky, suerte."

"How can you say that?" Juan, using his sleeve, wipes the tears from his face. The old man hands Juan his half-empty glass and places both hands on the rail. "Fortune and misfortune are matters of pure chance, pura suerte."

Juan throws the glass over the rail. It shatters against the rocks. He points his finger at the old man's face. He trembles. "That was not chance. Marcus called the thing in, and that boat showed up. The boy would have died if left up to you."

"Un hombre is not enough to change a person's fortune — fortuna." The old man looks out over the Ahmik. "Are you going to fetch me another cerveza?"

Juan glares at the old man for a moment before walking away. The few other customers, many of whom did not bother to watch the situation on the river, are also in need of service. Marcus leaves the rail and waits on them.

The old man stands alone. He can hear the driver of the boat yelling at the kid's friends. "This here ain't no swimming pool. Get your asses back up that incline and swim at the fucking public pool you idiots." The old man watches the two black kids climb onto the rocks along the bank. "You're lucky your buddy here didn't drown."

The driver maneuvers the boat into the shallow water. The other man tilts the motor up, then throws a yellow nylon rope toward the boys. The old man watches the teens on the bank pull the boat in. The boat runs aground a few feet from the rocks, and the rescued kid climbs out. He gathers the rope, hands it to the driver and pushes the boat back off the bottom of the river bank and out into deeper water. When the boat drifts far enough out from shore, the man who had tossed the rope manually tilts the motor back into place. Before firing it, the driver yells back at the boys. "Go on, get on out of here before someone gets killed."

"Whoa, you ain't no coast guard. Why you gotta go putting us on blast?" The old man hears the lanky black teen yell. The driver guns the engine, shakes his head, and pulls the boat back out into the current. The old man watches as the boat grows smaller and smaller until it is no longer distinguishable.

Juan returns with a fresh glass of beer. He places it on the rail. "Will that be all?"

"You know, I used to love going to the movies — las películas —

but one gets tired of watching people act all the time. ¿Comprende?”

Juan spins and walks away.

Before carrying his beer back to his table, the old man yells down at the teens. "Serves you right. Can't you read the signs. This area is dangerous — peligroso."

The teens looked up at the old man leaning over the patio rail. The brown-skinned teen cups his hands around his mouth. “Chinga tu madre, ruco!" The other two laugh.

The old man's newspaper has blown onto the deck in the breeze. He sets his glass on the table and gathers the paper together. He sits down and reads about the Cubs and the Dodgers. The Cubs have been pounded twelve to two in an afternoon game. The old man smiles. The Cubs! Baseball's perennial red headed stepchild. Well, there's always next year, he thinks.