

SO, IT'S ABOUT GRAPES, GAMBLING PAYCHECKS, DEATH & BASKETBALL

1971 Delano, California

It looked out of place, my Toyota Corolla. I parked it on the curb sandwiched between long lines of muscle cars. At the time, no one knew what a Toyota Corolla was until I drove by in a canary yellow two door cracker box that buzzed instead of rumbled.

About an hour ago, I was about 10 miles away, near the town of Earlimart, part of a crew that opened one side of the vines to prepare grapes for harvest; the last of a series of tasks before picking season, called "sompai."

The guys made fun by asking "Does anybody want sompai?" We'd ask, "Is it an apple?" And the manongs would bare their toothless grins.

It was one of a hundred reasons why I hated working in the fields. It was dirty, and the dusty chemicals that the crops needed to enhance growth and prevent mildew lingered on my clothes. I wasn't allergic to sulfur, but inhaling it made me wheeze.

Imagine breathing it every fucking day?

Normally, I'd shower and down an ice-cold beer, but today, I came to play basketball.

George left early to take his mom to the doc's and said he'd meet us later. That son-of-a-bitch. He'd better show. He was aggressive and needed and was a major part of our team who kicked ass with strength, elbows, and shoulders. Finesse? That was another team's problem.

At work, we talked about how we were going to take control, fake dribbles, and pass. We'd pantomime fade away's with globe trotter jukes and jives.

Even Felix contributed some sorry-assed moves.

I liked Felix. He was crazy, funny, and stupid and hung around and needed our support. Despite being a trained killer and dangerous from the stories he told, it wasn't who he was. But then again, he fought in Vietnam. There's a saying. "There were wars...and then there was Vietnam."

I'd ask, "You really offed people?" And he'd say, "Yeah. Pretty fucked up. I used a knife most of the time."

Then he'd tell the stories of his being a "tunnel rat" where he'd go alone in a hole hunting for "cong's". Being Filipino, he looked Vietnamese, and was able to get close enough to stab "the shit out of them, till they were good and dead." He said if he didn't, they'd end him right there and then, and no one would know where he was to bleed and die underneath an already made grave. I'm sure the verities of jungle warfare took its toll and made him a different person.

"Forget it," Johnny said. "You're not going to touch the ball."

"Then why the hell am I playing?" He asked.

"I don't know. Why?" George replied from another row of grapes.

"You'll see," Felix said as he went back to work. "I'll make the game winning shot."

Felix, the 'Nam vet, shell shocked and the poster boy for PTSD, was a lot of things. You can count on your one hand the reasons why, but basketball was not one of them. He was the worst player in the world.

"When pigs fly," George said before going back to slapping canes across his row.

When I parked the car, I was drenched in sweat. The opened windows provided no relief. It was stupid hot, and I promised myself that the next car I'd own would have air condition, and I didn't give a shit what it'd cost.

I grabbed the basketball from the back seat. It was old, sad, and sorry as the boots I wore. I don't remember who told us, but when we heard that the high school janitor, Joe Brumley, was throwing away used basketballs, a bunch of us rushed to his office. Expecting us, he told us to take what we wanted. Far from new, the ball I selected was symmetrically round and bounced fine when fully aired. Best yet, it was free.

I slapped it with the palm of my hand and dribbled. It printed small circles on the dirt that created puffs of dust. The heated surface felt like playing on top of a stove, and I could tell that it wasn't going to let up, but then again, it was no better than throwing cane at Lucich ranch.

It was a sport I took up when I was around nine, the same age as when I got my social security card, strong enough to lob a ball over a ten-foot rim and work in the fields. Dad built a backboard from old plywood and attached a rim to it with strong nails. It hung on a long 4x6 next to the house where we lived off Road 192. Since I was a short shit then, the rim was considerably lower than the regulation 10 feet, but it allowed me to practice and pursue a dream of being as good as the pros, if not just good enough to kick ass on days like today.

The twenty-footer I shot ripped the steel linked net. When the rubber ball spun a zillion RPMs and made contact, I swear I saw flames created by the friction. "That's what I'm talking about," I said, taunting competition and inciting many crooked middle fingers in response.

Tuesday, the day when about 30 or so "camp boys" showed up at Fremont Elementary, something we started about a year ago. It was a winter sport, and we played it in the middle of summer, after work, wearing work boots and clothes that smelled like sulfur, mildew and sweat. Some wore "tsanilas" or flip-flops. I don't know who exactly suggested or started it. I heard that one of the camp boys talked shit to others from another camp, probably a bet. It's always about betting and gambling. Sometimes, these encounters ended up with someone getting stabbed or shot, and as a suggestion, one of the elders said it would be best to settle our differences on a volleyball court. I heard that it worked out for about a couple of weeks, but then someone mentioned basketball. It didn't take long before all the labor camps in the area got word of it and made it a thing to do. I love basketball. It's one of my things, but damn. It was summer. Delano summer which meant the heat could kill you, like the heat couldn't kill us while we worked in the stinking fields.

We were in California's Central San Joaquin Valley and, in the summer, it was crazy and insanely hot. Despite my better judgement, I joined the gang of crazies. I guess it was still better than playing cards

underneath a swamp cooler or watching the news on a 19" black and white T.V. But then again, there was nothing wrong with staying home or hanging out at the bowling alley with the air conditioner set to about 60 degrees. I'll talk about the bowling alley later, but I have to admit, that son-of-a-bitch was colder than a witch's tit (like I know how cold that is, but the Okies would say it all the time in their "Okie-fied" accent) and, if you weren't careful, you'd catch a cold. I mean, serious.

I went to school at Fremont Elementary, home of the West Side Warriors. It was old and sturdy, rectangular stucco boxes planted on slabs of concrete, holding up despite the verities of teaching children whose parents made a living working in the fields. The box structures were basic, rooms basic, chalk boards basic, bathrooms basic. It wasn't something you'd find anywhere else, with classroom buildings in neat rows east to west, patched grass, dry and brown, weeds surviving and defying nature; or maybe, that's what weeds were supposed to do -- live when everything else died.

Traffic from Ellington Street and Highway 99 travelled north and south. The sky above was a translucent brown layer consisting of smog, agriculture dust and Valley Fever. Dogs, cats, birds and insects hid underneath protected shade till it cooled down. Only us brown-skinned Filipinos ignored the heat and played on dirt courts, under rusted backboards and chain linked nets till it got so dark that blood sucking mosquitos attacked our sun burnt and sweat drenched skin.

It was after work, around four or five o'clock. Names like Rizal, Ate, Bolodoi, Jun-Jun rumbled in their muscle cars: GTO's, Challengers, Barracudas, Cobra Mustangs, and Camaros lined the streets like appendages on a centipede, starting from one end of the block to the other and populating the school with farm labor basketball players that spoke Ilocano, Tagalog and Visaya.

Most of us prepared grapes for "picking" and some were able to harvest early crops like "pearlets", or "red malaga". I saw a crew cover five acres of "Italian Muscats" that (to me) tasted like shit. They were

twisted and gnarly not like the Thompson seedless that towered straight up with overhanging vines.

Several months earlier, many of the workers followed the harvest from Coachella to Arvin. Several of us decided to stay in Delano. I didn't like the labor camp thing, sleeping on cots and sharing rooms with who knows who. For that, I'd earn a couple of dollars more per day, and it wasn't worth it. Couple more weeks and the real "picking season" started when acres upon acres of "Thompson seedless" found their way into the zillions of grocery stores throughout the United States. Hard to believe, this particular fruit came from one spec on the map. And here we were to make sure they got harvested.

The day I got my social security card I became an official farm laborer. I was nine-years-old. Laws weren't like they are now. It didn't matter how old you were, as long as you had a social security number and the ability to do the work, you had a place in the fields. I had a sister, but she stayed home. I'll tell you the story about bringing her and her godsister to work and how worthless those times were, but I'll lose focus. So, when I worked in the fields, I noticed others in my age group joining me. More family members meant more income saved for lean months. That's how it was in 1962.

I remember my first paycheck. Aside from picking grapes in the fields, the farmer, a Czechoslovakian, who spoke with a thick accent, paid me \$.75 an hour to clean his yard and wash his cars. Gratified, the total was like \$27 plus change, a lot money: I stashed a third in the bank, gave some to mom for lean months, and kept the rest to buy comic books, bags of candy and soft drinks from the Fernandez store in Richgrove. For a nine-year-old, that was a lot of money.

Years passed and it was like this, going to school during the week and working in the weekends. It wasn't bad. I got to play sports, learn a musical instrument and got educated. Compared to what I saw on television and read, it was a good life.

Then that weird day came when Filipinos walked out of the farms and made a statement.

That's a story in itself, and there's still lots more to explain about our Filipino Community.

Not far from Delano about ten miles away, was a hamlet on Hwy 99 called Earlimart. It was the home of a group of Filipinos from San Esteban, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur and Cagayan with names like Gabriel, Apilado, Ascuncion, Ayson, Roque, Magno, Baltazar and Christobal. George had the hots for one of the Apilados. Luci, when she first arrived from where Army families come from, dressed in chiffon and lace that put Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac to shame. She didn't grow up with us, so it was difficult to bring her into our clan, especially when she had this new look. I had her in several of my classes and I treated her as I did any of my friends. When I was a senior in high school, I was class assistant in one of the biology classes and met her younger brother who happened to be one of the shortest kids in school. He wasn't a midget, or heck, maybe he was. At the time, I knew him on the roster as John, but I heard Luci call him Tex, which meant nothing to me. In school, we had nicknames like Sugar Bear, Wizard, Chango, Ma and so forth. They meant something too. Chris picked up the name "Sugar Bear" since he was a big guy, Chango, which meant monkey, for a fellow who looked like one, Ma being the first letters of Melba Alipio. Tex was like something you'd give a redneck, but John was born in Texas, so I guess it made sense. I was born in Delano, and my name is Dominador, so I was known as "Dommie". Go figure.

George asked me one day to go to the pool after track practice one day so I can join him in ogling Luci in her skintight bathing suit. He asked her out on dates; I got to meet her father, "Domingo," a hardcore military type with a stern disposition. "Fernanda," Luci's mother, was a nice Filipina lady with expressive eyes and features, while the rest of the clan included Tex, Paula and Les. Though I grew up with many families, it was later on in life when this family (Danny Dulay, Ed Macaba, and Frank Azevedo included) became mine, when George married Luci. When they had their son, Gregorio Narcisso

Donato, III, I became his godfather.

John, aka Tex, finally found a way to reach a normal height and even played in a basketball team.

Delano was famous because it was the place where you could get “grapes.” When I was a kid living somewhere between Delano and Richgrove, my whole world revolved around grapes. The house I lived in was built around miles and miles of it, smothering, suffocating, and stifling. It was that kind of thing, working in the dusty fields, little pay, surviving: It was our life, their lives, my life in 1971 when drugs and sex were safe. This was also the time when Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos ran not only the Philippines, but the entire Pacific Rim, wined and dined big shot dignitaries with lavish parties while squatters in Tondo Manila sold dried fish to help eke out a living. Delano Filipinos were either vocal or quiet about their Philippines. Being half-way across the world and with problems of their own here, it was a “who cared” attitude and life went on. I, on the other hand, experienced life that will never be replicated. Delano no longer had a Chinatown, or those who supported it as it flourished, when the old timers were alive. Replacing them were families, many of them not knowing the history, where the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country had come and passed.

I heard from my cousin, Jimmy “Bug House” Valendria that Chinatown, a long time ago, between “eighteen quako and nineteen quako”, was the place where the Chinamen lived when they built the railroad that now runs straight through the city. It ran parallel with Glenwood and Fremont streets. Through the years, Chinatown became the watering hole and dispatch center for laborers to congregate during the Great Depression. As Filipino labor became an important force, it became part of its community.

If you were a bird and flew over, you’d see, starting on 9th Street, a small dirt parking lot that faced Yonaki’s garage. What followed was a row of businesses: Takaki’s pharmacy/soda shop, Ben Gaines

watch repair (that sold “shew-pao”), Old HB Market, Pagoda Café, Ted and Ira’s (top floor), Bernido’s Barbershop (bottom floor), Sanchez and Buddy’s Filipino Restaurant, Andrew and Joe Escalona’s Bataan Inn, Speedy’s Barbershop, Christino Dulay’s restaurant and bakery, George Kimpo’s Club Inn, Feldman’s Dry Goods Store, Danny’s Place, and Arroyo’s Barbershop. Found on the following street were: the Monte Carlo Inn, El Morrocco, Guadalajara Theater, Lucky Club (that was formerly owned by my uncle and dad), Davina’s Club, and Kichi Club.

Andrew Escalona and Frank Sarmiento owned Ace Liquor Store. Barcus and Bobby Soriano owned the Cuckoo Inn. Next to our home was a dry cleaner that dad and Uncle Tomas owned, but I think was lost on a bad bet. And finally, a half-mile down the road was the Filipino Community Building. From what I understood, all of them: dad, Uncle Tomas, George and Frank Kimpo, Joe and Andrew Escalona, Barcus, Bobby, Dulay, and Arroyo, everyone who had a business at Chinatown, put monies aside to build the center that still stands to this day.

One more tidbit was a church that I found odd while growing up. It was right across the street from where my cousins lived on 13th street and Glenwood. At night, when Marilyn and Judy would baby-sit my sister and me, we’d hear this ruckus. I mean loud screaming and yelling. Later, I came to learn that this was a church, a Filipino Evangelical Christian Church, and the first, I understood of its kind, in the United States. In the midst of all of this gambling and vice, a house of God was erected for Filipinos to congregate and worship.

Chris Bernido’s dad would give me these five-minute haircuts that would last me a month. It was halfway up the ear variety that showed my ears. Barcus, however, cut it Elvis style that allowed me to do something with a comb. Unfortunately, I had straight hair that didn’t do well with a pompadour. The best I could do was flop it like the Beatles and keep it short enough to prevent me from looking like

a girl. Chris's dad had one clear advantage. Aside from being next door to the Old HB Market and Pagoda restaurant, Chris's dad would oftentimes pull out his guitar and play some melodies. At times, Speedy would bring his guitar and make up a jam squad of Filipino musicians that livened up the shop.

Small and quaint, it showed the wear of years of abuse. Several Cassius Clay and Flash Elorde boxing posters were tacked to a wall next to the placard showing wood carved drawings of typical haircut styles. None would ever look good on me, except for a flattop or butch crew cut.

On many occasions you could see the group tapping their toes in unison, strumming guitars, rapping bongos and singing songs.

Like I said, Chinatown was a happening place, especially on payday with Manongs winning and losing on Pai Quo and Palalasi tables only to head back to the labor camps and repeat the process over, and over again.

At the labor camp where I worked, I knew of one Manong, Alejandro. He was one of four or five who shared the same name, 62 years old, a bachelor, unmarried since arriving to America, in the late 1920's. What made him unique was his stories of romance.

Each day, he would strike up a conversation with the question, "Young boy, do you know the words to that song?"

We'd have our talks during work breaks, mostly when we shared a snack, a staple needed to get us through the day.

Work in the fields was hard, steady and long; and, it required a reservoir of energy. I admired him, along with the rest of the elders in the camp. Farm labor was nothing less than back breaking; however, he knew the techniques and had the skill to work fast, efficient, and with the least amount of effort. I was in my early 20's, and he outpaced me despite my youth and vigor.

After we'd chew down a Zinger, cookie or cinnamon roll, Manong Alejandro would light up a smoke, a reliable Toscani, a foul-smelling cigar that resembled a dark twisted rope. He clenched it between his teeth and puffed, saying it kept the flies and mosquitos away.

He shared stories about the loves he had and should have had, both in the Philippines and in the States, how women were to be treated with respect and tender loving care, smothered with poetry, song and flowers.

George told me that when my auntie Tusay worked in one of the crews, he would serenade her with the words from Besame Mucho.

Besame, Besame mucho

Each time I cling to your kiss I hear music divine

Ah, so besame, besame mucho

I love you my darling, say that you'll always be mine

Oh dearest one; if you should leave me

my little heart would take flight and this life would

be through

Ah, a-basame, a-besame mucho I love you darling,

say that you'll always be mine

This love is something knew

my arms enfolding you

never knew this love before

Who ever thought I'd ever be holding you close to

me "It's you I adore"

*Dearest one; if you should leave me,
my little heart would take flight and this life would
be through
Besame, a-besame mucho
I love you my darling, say that you'll always be
mine!*

His delivery was far from stellar, voice cracking and rasping, sometimes in tune, sometimes not, a soulful acapella, underneath the shade of vines, carried far, wide and echoing in the fields. No one talking, as if listening to a great tenor, like Mario Lanza, with murmurs of approval from his fellow brothers, who shared a culmination of years of wanting and needing, and how the tides of fate, laws, and racism denied them the decency of a relationship.

Time stood still and even the birds perched in reverence. I was touched by his performance, sanguine and melodious, an act that demonstrated aspirations and dreams, that were to have been rewarded earlier in his life, so many years ago, when a prized future that was promised and never came to be.

The first time I heard him sing, I was sad, and depressed, because I came to learn that Manongs like him had their fate sealed and set in stone. With no way out, he sang his song, as if the music, a painful testament, a metaphor of what he and his brothers endured.

His story was one of many. My father, unlike him, was afforded the opportunity of meeting mom when he was stationed in the Philippines. Those, who were not, returned to lonely bunk houses, where the basics of eat, sleep and work were all but guaranteed. In return for this convenience, segregation left them emotionally destitute, emptied, and void.

Several days after one of our talks, I noticed Manong Alejandro missing from work. I learned, sad to say, that he passed away the night before, apparently from years of an auto immune disease that finally progressed to his heart. Never had I known that his body rebelled, ached and burned his joints, torturing him to unbearable and unspeakable pain.

And not once did he tell of it, not a small word of complaint, showing up every day, in work boots, khaki's, long sleeve shirt, bandana around his neck and a floppy hat over his head, ready to earn an honest day's pay.

I could still hear his words, in his thick Filipino accent, asking me, "Young boy, do you know the words to that song?"

I didn't, and respectfully, asked him to sing "the words to that song." The lyrics, reminding me of the tormented soul that he and others shared; all kept within themselves; those heroes, who hoped for a better life, compelling stories, all and every one of them, never to be told, blown away in the wind; forgotten, forever.

A medical diagnosed disease might have taken down Manong Alejandro; but I knew what killed him was something else. Not as cut and dry as what was written on his death certificate, but subtle, and deadly and most certainly final.

What took him away was that of broken heart, a small part of his physical self. He couldn't bear it anymore. Not one more day of loneliness. It made me sad just thinking about it, because I knew as true and pure as the wind that blew across the valley, he played his hand the best he could, despite the lousy cards that were shuffled to him. And as I stretched my eyes across the sky, I wondered what Manong Alejandro's last thoughts were, before he closed his eyes for the very last time, after contributing so much of himself to this land of opportunity.

So, it's about grapes, gambling paychecks, death and basketball.

That's right, worked kicked my ass, and I'd be kidding myself if this was fun, in any stretch of imagination. Old men live and died, so God invented basketball and regardless of the circumstances, it was time to toss testosterone in the wind, and have fun, in the hottest time of the day, to fight the good fight and find something else to do instead of work and die in the fields.

George, Johnny, and Felix were already at a far end court, practicing, bullshitting, getting ready. A ball rolled to my feet that I kicked up with my boot and passed onto Johnny, who spun and made a layup, palm up. George, with his straw hat practiced bounce passes with Felix, who at best fumbled and stumbled. The final team member, Bobby Brake, was a light skinned, talented, Mestizo from Los Angeles. He had both moves and a sweet fade away. He lived with his sister about a couple of blocks away from George but rode with Johnny straight from the camp.

Felix pulled off to the side and searched for a cigarette. He was four years older. I met him years ago, when he hung out with a family friend from Richgrove and graduated in 1967 and reported to Viet Nam after an unkind draft. A close friend, Paula, wrote beautiful letters, encouraging him to make it back alive and well. He wrote back detailing disturbing accounts, graphic and terrible, the realities of combat in a strange land and time.

He returned alive, not well, not even close.

"Smoke time!" He said; a term we used during break time in the fields, us, lighting up cigarettes.

I bulleted a pass to him, forcing him to drop his lighter. Uncoordinated, he lifted his hands a tenth of a second too late and the ball smacked him on the chest.

"It didn't hurt," he said as he chased after the ball.

"Where's Eddie?" I asked. Eddie was Johnny's younger brother and the best athlete of us all.

“Home,” Johnny said. “He’s doing something.”

“Like what?” Felix asked.

“Does it matter?” he said.

“Why?” Felix asked.

“He’s not here,” he said.

“Oh, smart,” Felix said. “It’s freaking hot out here!”

Bobby and George fired long distance jump shots, each finding their marks.

Johnny said, “We’re here to play basketball, not bitch. Bitch.”

George was half Ilocano, half Okie from Muskogee Mestizo. I met him at church when I was five years old after getting kicked out by Father Alibart for being disrespectful at mass. He was my best friend and the worst influence of my life with a bond stronger than gorilla glue. I wondered how we lived so long with all the crap we did.

Johnny, on the other hand, was an F.B.I. “Fure Blooded Ilocano” or G.I. “Genuine Ilocano.” He was as tall as me, squat and heavier, not typical. I was 5’10” tall about 130 lbs, skinny as a rail, skin like a white man but with slanted eyes. Bobby was also light skinned with slanted blue eyes. He had blond hair and girls swooned over him. Though he knew he was God’s gift, on the court, he was part of the team. What mattered was that we represented not by how we looked but how we played.

We just finished about seven games, the last exhausting because we were tired, daylight all but gone, mosquitos attacking and biting, but we were hell bent on being “King of the Hill.” Our last opponents were from Caratan Two: Alfredo, Fernie, Chris and several other FOB’s I didn’t recognize. Fred, Fernie and Chris played ball with me in high school and I knew them pretty much all my life. Other players hung around to watch, drinking beers and cokes from ice-filled chests. Up to that point,

both teams were undefeated. Bobby sprained an ankle but continued playing. I was tearing up from chasing a ball out of bounds and eating a lot of dirt. The only person unscathed was Felix, pretty much because we kept the ball away from him.

I took my shirt off. It was drenched in sweat and the sulfur irritated my skin. Temperatures dropped considerably, somewhere around the mid-80's. The sun sunk below the horizon, and the ensuing darkness made seeing difficult. Within 15 minutes of play, we were down by six and they needed only one basket to win. It was a defensive game, and because of the heat and fatigue, I couldn't get the body to drive down the lane. Bobby couldn't shoot because of the ankle but he held his position underneath. Because of the injury, Alfredo's team agreed to half court. We were zapped, dead dogged tired and they were about as injured and tired as us.

During the early part of the match, Fernie made back-to back "sapo" luck shots he wasn't supposed to make (nor anybody from this earth). Matter of fact, he strung five shots in a row that was unheard of. We all have our days, he just had his.

Chris said, "Just call it good. Game over."

"Hell no," Geoge said. "You want it. Earn it."

Chris passed to Fredo who attempted a bank shot. It was a good percentage shot, but the ball bounced off the rim and Johnny was in good position to rebound, passing off to George in the clear zone, who shot and made the basket.

Winner takes out, and I grabbed the ball, bounced passed to Johnny who already jogged to the half court mark.

"Defense," Chris barked.

"Ain't gonna be enough," I said.

"I'll make you eat it if you try," he challenged.

I eyed Johnny who saw the sign and passed the ball.

My back was to the basket and Fernie and Chris converged. I stepped right and then shifted to my left, swinging a right hook shot away from their hands. They were both taller than me and had I jumped shot, the ball would've been blocked; instead it sailed away, freely away, about as ugly as it got, a beeline that rifled a high-speed bullet to the backboard. Because it didn't spin out of my hand, it knuckle-balled, hit the board flat, and fell through the rim.

"Shit," Fernie said.

"Skill," I said, "what can I say?"

Bobby grabbed the ball and sent it back to Johnny who began by bouncing the ball from half court.

Fernie yelled to Johnny, "Hey Johnny, I'll give you a quarter if you can make it from there." A low percentage challenge, nearly impossible shot; and, if he missed, would mean clawing hands ripping air and skin fighting for the rebound. Gauntlet thrown, Johnny fired without aiming.

I swear the ball floated about ten seconds in the air, reminding me of a football punt, an arc that curved high in the sky. From my vantage point, it looked way off, clearly a miss.

"Boogada, boogada," Felix said, a feeble attempt to cast a magic spell

"Off!" Chris barked. "Hit the boards!"

Instead the ball banked against the steel backboard and dove in like an Olympic swimmer.

A roar of appreciation came from a crowd of players who stayed to wait for the final outcome, some of them busting out laughing. One of them passed cash money to others apparently losing a bet.

"18 to 18 boys," I said. "Next bucket takes all the marbles. Losers go home losers."

"Eat ta-ee," Fernie said. "Game's ours."

“And you owe me a quarter,” Johnny said.

Fernie flipped him off.

The last basket wins, and with the rest of what we had left, we decided to do or die. I did my best not to show it, but I was done, gas all out of the tank. Chris grabbed the ball, slapped it hard, scanned at his team to dig deep and passed it to Johnny who was at the edge of the half court line. Fredo and one of the FOB's pressed him within a split second. I didn't know where they had the energy, but Johnny was pigeon holed. He managed to slip a pass to George who was attacked by piranhas. I knew the routine. We learned a strategy in high school. Filipinos being quick and small were best at it, forcing mistakes; something we knew was imminent if we passed wrong. A bounce pass and I got the ball. I saw Bobby underneath and I fired a bullet. Unfortunately, Chris sent it off by a degree sending it to Alfredo who had a clear shot.

What happened next was somewhat surreal. Felix leaped into view and caught the ball. He dribbled slowly and awkwardly.

“Felix! Hoy! Over here!” Johnny yelled.

In his attempt to steal the ball, Ferni slipped and fell, slamming a shoulder on Felix, square on the back. Instinctively, Felix grabbed the ball with two hands and threw the ball straight up in the air like a rocket to the moon.

“What the?” I said as I attempted to follow the ball.

Everybody followed suit, necks straining, focusing on darkness, searching.

It was dark. I mean serious dark. No moon. No stars, planets...nothing.

Then we heard this whistling sound, like a missile heading straight for us.

“Incoming!” Felix yelled, and flew like a flying squirrel landing flat on his face, covering his head.

For a second, we all looked at him, then craned our heads back to the sky.

Then suddenly, we heard this big “clang”.

Sure as the color on my skin, the ball cleared the rim.

Five seconds passed.

Ten seconds.

“Game, you sons of bitches! We freaking won!” George screamed.

Felix, from a push up position, raised his previously covered head, blinked his eyes and said, “We did?”

Home and an hour later after sharing a quick pizza and beer at Tony’s Pizza, I just wanted to crash.

Mom, dad, and my sisters, Theresa and Rosalie were already in their bedrooms. I brushed my teeth, shuffled and hit the light switch. I reached over and yanked open the window. It slid and made this swoosh, click, and “bam” sound. I heard my sister open her door, like me shuffling as she walked to the hallway and hit the switch to the swamp cooler before sauntering back to her bed. She never went straight to sleep. I expected, like all other nights, a library book waited to be read. Normally, Donna would be in with her, talking about nothing for hours on end, but tonight, it was just her and Rosalie. Within seconds, the motor spun to a halt, a faint residual hum faded into silence, and it was then that I could hear the outside world: dogs barking, cars whizzing by; the locomotive and its long cargo lumbering steel wheels against a set of over used rails clacking, echoing an eerie but somewhat comforting melody that lulled the town to sleep. I imagined how many swamp coolers were still on, straining slightly, and was surprised to find a drone of units still engaged.

Through my window, I felt a pleasant coolness not sensed in some time.

Days were long and the heat unbearable. I needed rest, at least six hours sleep, preferably eight.

Yeah, like I'm one to paint the kettle black as I averaged about two. The grapes, an exotic fruit, that put Delano on the map, gave us a way to exist and in a month or so, grapes would be ripe and ready to be clipped, packed, and shipped straight to grocery stores. George asked if I wanted to go bowling. I told him "hell no." I was done. Kaput. Toasted. Fried. Case close, end of story...whatever. And after working all day in the fields and about two to three hours of ball busting basketball, where the hell was there energy to go freaking bowling. Besides, my allergies bothered me and it was bad especially in the past weeks, head pounding, the result of an inflamed sinus. The games triggered asthma attacks which was another pain-in-the-ass thing I had to deal with. And it was all because of allergies.

The house dad built in 1966 moved us away from our Road 192 home. It wasn't cement based but raised above the ground with original wood floors. It was something I thought was cool because, with a dust mop, they were easy to clean. Delano was a dusty town with farms constantly stirring up dirt, fine particles settling everywhere, the floor bearing witness every day. We took turns every other day with the dust mop, and feather duster, our allergies triggered if we didn't, a psychological benefit, no doubt. This obsession continued outside where I'd sweep the garage, driveway and sidewalks. I feared if I didn't, I'd end up with clods of dirt in my nose and be swollen like a balloon.

I was relaxed, and ready to call it a night. I knew I was not the sharpest pencil in the cup, but when my head hit the pillow, I stared upwards at the ceiling, my mind awake, thinking, deeply about shit. This time it was about the Viet Nam War; how it affected and changed the way I thought and believed as a country. Fortunately, it wasn't a major worry, an important worry; it was a concern, and I was a teenager with no idea of how to solve it. One thing for sure, was that our community was not immune to the tragedies of war. Several Filipino families lost their sons in battle, both times I watched the somber ceremonies complete with 21-gun-salute, mothers and sisters wailing, a bugle playing "Taps"

and long-haired hippie veterans saluting to their fallen brother. Both families had sons my age, went to school and played sports, took similar classes, shared interest and watched football games together. I didn't have a brother shot dead in a land with nothing to show for it except a nicely folded flag and a picture of him in full military dress, alive and proud. I could not imagine the painful suffering of losing a brother; first, because I didn't have one, second, because I've never experienced a family member passing. Only friends died and with my limited experience on funerals, it was bad enough to share their grief.

Picking season was just around the corner, an opportunity to make more than \$1.15 an hour plus bonus, an additional \$.15 a box. I needed the extra cash for college, regardless how small. Families used their monies to get them through winter months, so saving was a priority. It wasn't ideal, but reasonable and workable, and the families budgeted as a means for survival. I budgeted enough for college incidentals as classes and books were taken care of by Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (BEOG). It wasn't a lot, but enough to get me through, and I was grateful for the help. If the monies weren't there, tell you the truth, I don't know what I would've done; probably joined the army and chance not ending up in the front lines. One of those big "what ifs" that I won't have to worry about since I got Financial Aid and a "One H" classification that basically said, I didn't have to go due to my being the only son in the family. Kern County had this high incidence of war fatalities that the selection board were granted veto authority to qualified registries. Guess I fit in one of those neat piles. Though had I been called I would've gone, not without mental anguish or protest. I would've reported and ended up a good soldier realizing my duties were part of a plan far bigger than me to argue at my young age. So, I knew that if I were asked to fight a battle, war, combat where I was asked to take a life, deep inside, though intellectually and spiritually against it, I would do it, not once but as many times

needed to get the job done, no matter how screwed up I'd end up if I returned back alive.

To help me sleep, I turned the radio on and heard Neil Young in his signature nasal voice sing the short history of American soldiers mowing down college students in a major university in Ohio.

Tin soldiers and Nixon coming,

We're finally on our own.

This summer I hear the drumming,

Four dead in Ohio.

Gotta get down to it

Soldiers are cutting us down

Should have been done long ago.

What if you knew her

And found her dead on the ground

How can you run when you know?

Gotta get down to it

Soldiers are cutting us down

Should have been done long ago.

What if you knew her

And found her dead on the ground

How can you run when you know?

Tin soldiers and Nixon coming,

We're finally on our own.

This summer I hear the drumming, Four dead in Ohio.

Funny how music and songs triggered memories as if they happened, yesterday.

I was in high school studying for the final tests of the year and getting ready for my sister's graduation. It ended my junior year and I was ready to head out to the fields and earn money for college.

Vietnam, civil unrest, Black Power and the United Farmworkers movement topped the news, while we attempted to live simple lives with hopes of a better future.

I remembered talking to some of my classmates and how some of them, prone to depression, refused to read the news.

I agreed, to some extent, but the newspaper had the sports page, and I liked the comics. Tell you the truth, my comprehension and retention weren't up to snuff with everyone else, a reading disability of sorts. Reading comics and the sports page provided me with useless information that I may or may not need. Without extrapolating needed information from school material, I was doomed to fail and not move on. That was not an option despite my inability to comprehend and retain the words that I read.

Despite this self-diagnosis, I had no problems, in this unique and horrific instance, picking up the paper and being glued to what was being covered of National Guardsmen with M1 rifles firing 67 rounds directly at Kent State students protesting the bombings in Cambodia.

I stared at the ceiling and remembered the first time witnessing, on television, this tragedy right before my eyes, and reading the lengthy news article that made absolutely no sense. I shot guns in the camps and understood the results of high velocity bullets speeding through the air. I thought of them, instead of hitting cans or bottles, making contact on flesh, muscle, and bone, ripping apart and invading, blood oozing from torn skin, screams from impact, eyes rolling back in shock, bodies falling

limp relaxed but grotesque on an unforgiving earth, and others escaping in disbelief and horror.

Bang. Bang...you're dead.

I had a hard time wrapping my head around this bullshit, how civil disobedience, the core of who and what we were as Americans, was destroyed by fellow Americans killing their own. I could still see, fresh in my mind, the haunting picture of a 14-year-old runaway, on her knees, arms out crying over the dead body of her friend.

Though it was a picture, I can hear her crying out the word, "why?"

The ceiling, in darkness, provided me with more questions than answers, making me wonder where civilization will be tomorrow, the next day and the many more to come, expecting us to grow, move forward or fall backwards.

Moments later and somehow, I found a way to sleep, knowing well, it wasn't a good way to end the night.

But I had to go to work, like many Filipinos did in Delano, and hope that, I, personally, would do something more, different and positive, no matter how small and insignificant.