

Personal Power

By Sandra Ramos O'Briant

A black Ford Ranger pressed into the shadows behind the garage, its motor a soft hum in the night. Eighteen-speed and almost new, the bicycles were shoved against an old cabinet.

“Come on, grab ‘em and let’s get the hell outta here,” Felix said, fast and quiet. He stood guard and looked both ways down the alley while his cousin went inside the garage. A hulking presence in the dark, Ramundo held a penlight and stepped gingerly over a stack of paint cans. There were cobwebs everywhere.

He moved the cans so he could get to the bikes. “Jesus Christ, there’s black widows in here!” He hopped back, upsetting a bucket of files and index cards. “This place is a mess. Some people don’t take care of nothing.” He pulled a pack of tissues out of his pocket and swatted at the cobwebs with one. Dust swirled around him. He blew his nose on a clean tissue.

“Shut up, man,” Felix said. “Y’always gotta honk your nose like that? And don’t start cleanin’ up like you usually do.” He looked up and down the alley again. No sounds.

Ramundo pushed the files aside with his foot. “What’s this?” He picked up a rectangular box covered with peeling paper embossed to look like leather. Inside were 8-track tapes. “There’s some good stuff in here, cuz. Santana. Creedence Clearwater. Classics. Your sister still have that 8-track?”

“Rrra-moon-doh,” Felix said, growling out each syllable, so his cousin would hurry. He looked heavenward for patience, gave up. “Hand it over.” He tossed it into the cab.

Ramundo, the stronger of the two even with his asthma, hoisted the bikes up one at a

time and set them gently in the bed of the truck. He dusted himself down, slapping at his hair. “Man, I hate spiders,” he said, and sneezed.

Felix hunched his shoulders and gave the alley a once over again. All was still. He reached for the truck door.

“Hold on,” Ramundo said. “I think that cabinet is art deco.”

“Fuck art deco, man. You crazy. Come on!” But Ramundo had returned to the dark garage.

“It’s an old radio cabinet,” Ramundo said. He squatted and pointed the penlight at it. “The guts are gone. They’re using it for storage.”

Felix could see the pinpoint of light spreading over a stack of rectangular boxes the size of a videotape. “More 8-tracks?” he asked.

“Nah. Cassettes. Self-help tapes.” Ramundo read the cover. “A Program for Getting What You Want Out of Life.” He shifted the penlight to his mouth and opened the box. Inside were two cassettes

“Help yourself, and let’s get outta here,” Felix said.

Ramundo read the titles, opening box after box, his voice trembling with excitement, like it still did on Christmas morning. “How to Release the Creative Genius Within You. Stop Emotional Self-destruction. The Force that Drives Your Life.” A dog began to bark in the street behind them, setting off a chorus of answering dogs.

“I’m taking the cabinet,” Ramundo said. He repacked the cassettes, wrapped his arms around the piece of furniture and heaved it onto the truck bed, laying it on its back. The Ranger’s

well-oiled springs did the right thing – nothing. He covered the bikes and cabinet with a tarp and secured it.

“Cuz, can we leave now?” Felix asked.

Ramundo blew his nose again, and got into the truck, closing the door with a soft click. Felix remembered to shut the garage door. Ramundo would get out and do it if he didn’t, and might decide to rummage around some more. He’d get all dreamy and philosophical and wonder out loud about other people’s lives. He was no good as a thief, but strong-as-hell.

Felix put the truck in gear, giving the slightest pressure to the pedal. They rolled out of the alley, and cruised quiet residential streets before easing onto the 10 East. He hugged the middle lane, not too fast, not too slow. Just a couple of guys heading home from their late-night work on the Westside.

“What’re you gonna do with the tapes?” Felix asked. “Is this gonna be like that yoga video you swiped?” He laughed and lit a cigarette, checked out his reflection in the side mirror. “Downward dog. Your ass in the air all the time.” He shook his head, still smiling. Looked at himself again. White teeth in a brown face dash lit, the cigarette-coal a friendly firefly. Tinkerbell. He smiled to himself, embarrassed. He had a soft spot for her, but not even his cousin knew that secret.

“It helps me relax,” Ramundo said. “Improves my concentration. You should try it. It might change your life.”

“Like it’s changed your life. Nothin’ ain’t gonna change, cuz. This is it. This is what we got, and there ain’t nothin’ more.” Felix took another drag of his cigarette and flicked it out the

window. Through the side mirror he watched the orange sparks flash and then fade like a shooting star gone but not forgotten.

He caught his cousin staring at him. “What?”

“I signed up for that computer course at Tech,” Ramundo said.

“You credit your ass-in-the-air yoga for that? Shit, cuz, you was always good in school.”

“Then why didn’t I stick with it?”

“I can give you a hundred reasons why the Gallegos and the Gomez clans don’t stick with nothin’. It’s our way, man. Point of honor.” Felix raised his hand for a palm slap with his cousin, but let it drop when Ramundo didn’t return the salute. “Jeez, there was your mom. You did right by Aunty Louise.”

“There was that,” Ramundo said. “It made me grow up.” They were quiet together, each grateful for the dark and solid presence of the other. When he finally spoke, Ramundo’s voice was acapella over the drone of the engine, like he was an altar boy all over again. “Mom said this was a new country and I was a new man.”

Felix leaned toward his cousin, not quite hearing each word, but knowing his aunt and his cousin well enough to put it together. “Aunty Louise,” he said, shaking his head. “She told me to stick with what I knew, fixing cars. She said to keep my sticky fingers off other people’s stuff.”

“Good advice,” Ramundo said.

“She shoulda made one of those self-help tapes.”

“We could do one,” Ramundo said. “Things I’ve Learned About Life While Robbing Garages.”

“A bestseller, cuz, only I ain’t learned nothin’.” Felix shrugged. “Okay, maybe I’ve got an eye for what will sell at the swap meet. But you keep half the oddball shit we take. Why do you do it?”

“Keep the stuff?”

“No, man,” Felix said. “Commit the crime. Play the bad guy. And yeah, keep the shit.”

“I do it for old times sake, cuz, to keep the childhood bond.” This time Ramundo raised his hand.

Felix slapped it half-heartedly. “That’s cool, except now I’m feeling guilty about Aunty Louise and how bad it would be if I got you in trouble. Again.” He glanced at his cousin.

Ramundo accepted the confession, his silence absolution. He turned his head this way and that, staring out at the passing scenery on the 10 East. They passed factory stores, a megawattage cineplex with a marquee listing movies they’d never see, a refurbished fire-engine red hotel with yellow fire escapes zigzagging down the side and a banner advertising a \$40 a night special if you paid a week in advance, and a garishly lit Tyrannosaurus Rex floating above an auto mall. Gray dawn seeped up from the freeway. Being on the road this time of morning always made Ramundo sad.

“People look, but they don’t really see,” he said.

“Maybe they look, but they don’t understand,” Felix said.

Ramundo nodded. “Then, after a while, they just stop looking,” he said. He took out a clean tissue, unfolded it, blew his nose, refolded it, and put it in the trash bag Felix kept on the passenger side just for him. “When Mom cleaned a house, she paid attention. Seeing another

way to live gave her hope.” Ramundo laughed. “Breaking into houses was so I could see for myself. Looking at other people’s stuff, even the shit they don’t wanna look at no more, is like, it’s like –“

“Yeah?”

“Sometimes it’s like visiting another country. Like I’m a tourist.”

“Bringing home the souvenirs,” Felix said, but the cousins didn’t smile or look at each other. He exited the freeway, and at the light lit another cigarette, leaning to the left to see the firefly again, its trailing sparks. He blew the smoke out the window and it hung in a low white cloud like an idea bubble. It faded to nothing. The light changed and he floored the accelerator making the tires squeal.

Ramundo stared out the window on his side. “Souvenirs are memories,” he said.

“But that other life ain’t yours, cuz,” he said. “You just lookin’. They was born into their way, just like we were born into ours.”

Ramundo shook his head. “Take those people back there. They like Creedence. We like Creedence.”

Felix sighed. “Maybe they liked Creedence once.”

A wheezy intake of breath made Felix slow down and look at his cousin. Ramundo sat rock still, his mouth open, staring into space. Felix pulled over to the curb. “Hey, man,” Felix said. He reached across him to the glove compartment where they kept Ramundo’s inhaler in a baggie. He handed it to him without a word, but his cousin didn’t move.

“Don’t you see, Felix,” Ramundo said, sipping air like he was drowning. Flashing lights

behind the truck startled them both into silence.

“Shit!” Felix said.

The officer got out of the patrol car and approached the truck slow. He flashed a light on Felix’s squinting face. “What’s the problem?” the officer asked.

“My cousin’s asthmatic. He started to breathe funny, so I pulled over,” Felix said. The officer shined his light on Ramundo, who was sweating, each breath a gurgling struggle.

Felix held up the baggie with the inhaler. “I was just gonna give him his inhaler.”

The officer moved the light to the baggie, and nodded.

Felix gave the inhaler to Ramundo while the officer waited, his expression impossible to read.

My shit is clean, Felix thought. *All except for the bikes and the art deco.* The officer shifted his eyes to the back of the truck as if he’d heard Felix’s last thought.

“It’s not that they don’t like Creedence,” Ramundo said, on the exhale, picking up where they left off as if the CHP and the stolen booty in the truckbed were nothing.

“Creedence?” Felix said, and slapped his forehead.

The officer tapped the car making Felix jump. “Everything okay here or do you need medical assistance?” he asked.

Ramundo leaned forward. “I’m okay now, Officer. Thanks.”

The CHP responded to babble from the radio mike on his shoulder, tapped the car again and strode off to his vehicle.

Felix put on his blinkers and pulled out slow. “That was a close call,” he said.

“Those people back there - they probably got stuck with lousy 8-tracks and no player like a lot of people,” Ramundo said, single-minded like always. His breathing still had a rough edge to it.

“Un-believ-able,” Felix said, shaking his head. “They probably had a Betamax, too.” He watched the CHP in the rearview mirror. It followed them for a few blocks and then turned in the opposite direction. Nothing made sense, not close calls like this, yoga, or Betamax.

“You had a Betamax,” Ramundo said, implacable, his breathing softer.

“You’re saying we’re the same?” Felix’s voice squeaked. He only did this around his cousin. “Hopeless jackasses buying 8-tracks and Betamaxes. Jeez, if Edsels were still on the market they’d probably have one in the garage.”

“And you’d be stealing it for parts for your Edsel.”

“You mean the imaginary one up on blocks on my imaginary front yard?” He held his hand up and Ramundo slapped it.

Ramundo smiled dreamily at his cousin. “We’re the same as them.” He held one of the boxes up to read the title before opening it. “The Force that Drives Your Life,” he said. He pushed the cassette into the deck.

“You ain’t gonna see me doing yoga,” Felix said. Then he shut up and listened.