

Tío Rojo

By Michael Sarabia

Every Mexican family's got someone who looks exactly like Saddam Hussein. My family's got two - me and my Tío Rojo.

Today my tío turns seventy and his brothers, the old ones Tolú and Chente and the *really* old ones Mundito and Curly (as well as half of East L.A.) are throwing him *un carne asada* today down at *Marrano Beach* in South El Monte. This is my father's side of the family; darker, shorter and poorer than my mother's whiter, supposedly direct-from-Spain bunch, (who wouldn't show up even if they were invited) and I haven't seen any of them since my father's funeral six months ago.

I'm rolling up on the river (it's not really a river, just a dying offshoot of a dying San Gabriel River), and I got my Toyota packed with various contributions for today's *pleito*. Gotta shitload of bud – drinkable as well as smokeable – three slabs of *asada*, toys to keep the kids out of our hair, a fifth of everything for my uncles, and a gallon of Belize rum that hopefully will keep the *tías* out of our hair.

And I brought Uncle Red a book of poems called, *The Civilized Comanche*, because my uncle claims to have Indian blood, insisting his grandmother spoke to him in *manos secretas* – secret hands.

“You can't rhyme Comanche,” he'd say after a few joints, “because warriors spoke only of dream quests,” he'd smile. “Of a place to go after black clouds arrived.”

I get out my car and move carefully to say hello to my uncles. Their massive hugs and scratchy kisses nearly bring me to seizure, and I am suddenly saddened by just how tough the years have been bearing down on *mi familia*. They've lived lives without complaint, at the mercy of things beyond their control, and they've accepted their lives as but minute pieces to one of God's grander, more important designs.

“Don't gripe,” Tío Rojo would say, “the only people who *might* give a shit can't do nothing about it anyways.”

Not a one of my uncles ever got past the sixth grade, nor read anything beyond those bits of Bible the Church portions out at Sunday Mass. Triple digit multiplication's an outright mystery to them, and they often wonder aloud why anyone with any sense would waste time confessing to a priest, letting a doctor cut them, or argue with any woman who ain't got a man around to snake her pipes every now and again. But they love their children and they love their country and each maintains a candle and incense altar in honor of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. They appreciate a good lie, can still talk smack, and while they firmly believe that all *chismosos* are born out of Satan's ass - they would never, at any rate, turn a good one away.

All my uncles fought in Europe, or the South Pacific, and they've worked their lives loading and unloading freight trains at L.A.'s Central Market. And to a man they'll brag that they still have and love their original sweethearts, and that none of their women have ever had to work a day of their lives, nor suffer a beating, nor the rumor of another woman.

Skin heavy, thick and brown mirrors that of my own, and their oak hands of heat and callous reveal fingers stubbed and finely scarred - the scent of this earth permeating their every move. With voices melodic and rich, my uncles are quick to a share a smile

with everyone and everything, their luminous eyes of charcoal and almond betraying just a hint of sadness, given a soft light, or a moody sun.

A Sheriff's car appears across the river, everyone freezes. Cherry lights swirl and a harsh voice displaces the air.

"Okay lissen up. All you goddamn meskins best pack your trash and git. Go on and leave your women, food and booze, but the rest of you chili-chokers best pronto vacate these here, U-nited-States. ¡Y apurarse, cabrónes!"

Everyone relaxes. It's Tío Rojo. He hops out the car and waves to the deputy who throws it in reverse and leaves. Tío Rojo rolls up his pants and walks into the water. The kids rush to bring him down, but he plows straight ahead casting them off as if dusting lint. And he's good at seventy, head up, eyes bright, the man's never walked like a tired duck, nor bitched, or let anyone tear him down. Everyone laughs at the sight, the brothers immediately throwing in their two, three and four cents.

From Tío Tolú comes, "He looks like un turkey *flaquito* with his chicken legs y *todo, que no?*"

Uncle Chente yells as best he can, "*Córrale, baboso*. Some fish gonna jam you in your *cómo se llama* you don't hurry up."

Eighty-three year old Mundito promises, "We're gonna throw you *un* blanket party and beat the shit out of you soon as you get over here," with Tío Curly grabbing his crotch, gesturing, "and I got your *pinche* happy birthdays right here *cabrón*."

Tío Rojo makes it over to our side of the river and his brothers greet him with more lust than should be extended given their age. My cousin's kid Felo gets the fire going and quickly the air turns mesquite, the smell of toasting onion, bell pepper and garlic immersing the afternoon.

Discretely mixing powerhouse cocktails, *mis tías* take a separate table and start their gin game, popping dice every now and then to see who does the refills. My uncles seat themselves in a line descending from eldest to youngest. They kick off their shoes and smile at the river, eyes dancing, sun at their back. Tío Curly offers the first toast.

"Here's to m' baby brother," he says, cup in the air, "congratulations *mijito*, you're now officially, older than shit."

Drinks thrown back, refilled, another toast, this one from Tío Tolú.

"Gotta raise our glasses *también* brothers, to the rest of the *familia* not here; *El Viejo y La Tata*, our brothers Little Neal, Red Bird and Nandito Brown. And our baby sister Nena too."

Drinks disappear, refilled again. Tío Rojo lights a cigarette, sips his drink.

"Did I ever tell youse about the time I saw Little Neal when we was pullin' out of the Canal back in '43? Our unit was getting on the same transport they just got off of. I saw him and waved but I don't think he saw me. I got a place on the starboard bow, you know, sos not to get the seasick and there on the bulkhead I saw where my brother K-barred, '*Lil Neal de Tejas, Con Safos*.'"

My uncles smile at the mention, not so much of Little Neal, but of their beloved Texas. I never met my uncle Neal - I was born right after the war. They said when his platoon got hit, the fire was so intense every last man was vaporized and all they could find later on were tiny pieces of metal, hair and bone matted together like a new animal. They couldn't find his dog tags so they listed him MIA till 1955 when they finally declared the whole unit KIA. The government then sent Tata \$500 and she bought him an empty grave

in the Mexican part of Austin cemetery. She put a marble headstone, but couldn't afford the carving, so all it has to this day is a sticker of two pink angels on a white cloud. Once a year his brothers spend the day there, pouring beer over his grave, cleaning off weeds, telling stories.

"*Y pobre* Red Bird," Chente says, shaking his head. "*Niño* never got out of the fifth grade that fire truck hit him so bad it broke him up like a dirt rock."

Red Bird, nicknamed for his shocking, rumor-drenched hair, freckles and face, died in Ranger, Texas after venturing out to the highway to wave at the hook-n-ladder roaring by. He never saw the second truck as it peaked over the hill and crushed him to death.

My uncles talk a quiet moment about their only sister Nena and how she could drink any Mexican, Indian, or Oakie under any table, day, or night. Nena parlayed her beauty into a life of doing whatever she felt like doing, and in her last years refused all contact with any family. She died at a Tucson V.A., her first husband's G.I. benefits allowing her the small dignity of a clean-sheet deathbed and some morphine and ice water.

A couple of hours pass with the talk ranging from the Dodgers to the price of milk to the death of this friend or that. Finally the food is ready and *mis tías* take a break from their game to help serve. The kids get out of the water complaining they want food.

Bowls of mustard potato salad, *tortillas de mano* and perfect black-brown *frijoles* are passed around and the whole thing is topped off with enough meat to feed half of China. My uncles put down the liquor and pour their favorite soft drink, Big Red Strawberry Soda, into their brightly colored, ice-filled tumblers. The meal raises to a fever pitch then suddenly slows like an engine dropping to second gear.

Tolú and Chente bring out the guitars and lead us in a slow, growling rendition of *Las Mañanitas* followed by an up-tempo, "Happy Birthday to You."

My godson Johnny Boy Montez and his latest girlfriend, *La Chicha de Pacoima* harmonize on Tío Rojo's favorite song of courtship, *Sabor a Mi*. My uncles are on their feet, wives in arms, and they dance very slowly, very close, lips lightly touching ears, hands caressing and stroking in a slow, circular manner. Their song lasts forever but not long enough and everyone claps as they reluctantly break apart and settle back into their seats.

The descent of light and heat comes quickly after that. The sun, in its final minutes, floats behind us now, out of sight, heat dribbling softly away.

Before long, it's only me and my uncles, *mis tías* still at their card game, now guided by several oil lanterns. My uncles move closer to the fire, shoes and jackets back on, hats over ears, blankets covering legs. They pass around a plate of sweet bread and pour steaming coffee from a thermos.

A cloud of blackbirds stagger over our heads, noiselessly streaming for darker sanctuaries along the north river. Mosquitoes spin about – nobody pays them any mind – and a field owl stretches her lungs in anticipation of a night of hunting. The stream, silent all day, kicks up a steady wind, the scent of reed and wild bush passing in and through us. Crickets and frogs begin their sad songs and in the distance the rumble of the Pomona freeway eases off into one steady hum. Tío Rojo moves close, cigarette burning softly, lines on his face glowing from pale orange to blue-red with each breath in, each breath out. He takes my hand into his.

"You know *mijo*, of everyone, I miss Nandito Brown the most."

This is what I feared. Them talking about my dad.

"He was my best-best friend, a good son and a loyal brother."

Tío Rojo stands and pulls his shirt up to show everybody his chest.

“You see this,” he points to his heart. “Nandito Brown gave it to me the night I got back from San Quentin.”

The tattoo, once a daggered blue heart, has since melted into an indecipherable purple splotch. Tío Rojo walks up and down the line, giving everyone a good look, my uncles nodding as if seeing the tattoo and hearing the story for the first time.

“That’s where that bulldagger guard tried to stab me in my heart,” he says, “and when I got back all I wanted was blood. But Nandito Brown told me to forget it, and he covered my scar, turned it into something beautiful.”

Tío Rojo tucks his shirt back in, sat and put his arm around me.

“I know you’re still mad at your dad for the suicide,” he says. “But you gotta understand the man would not live a life where his brain was gone, where you, me, or your mom would have to clean him like a baby, and where people would pity him. When they told him he had that old-timers disease...”

“Alzheimer’s,” I softly inject, “it’s called Alzheimer’s, *tío*.”

Tío Rojo pauses, shakes his head. “Yeah like I said, when they told him he had that whatever disease, I knew he would do what he did.”

Tío Rojo waves his arms at his brothers, who still smiling, are clearly hearing every word. “We all would have done the same thing.”

I look around, loving them, hating these words, realizing their truth.

“But *tío*,” my voice fades into a child’s, “he wouldn’t see me. Didn’t even let me say goodbye, like I was nothing.”

“Hell, he didn’t call none of us,” Tío Rojo smiles. “Look. Your father was a prideful man and he wasn’t about let his only boy witness him at his worst. He died as man *should* die – alone with his sins, his deeds, his God.”

My tears, held since before his death are everywhere now, and I crumble and fold. And my uncles rise to take me, to stand me like a man. And we toast my father, his life, death on his own terms and the conquest of heaven.

And Tío Rojo, the youngest, the strongest, the poet of them all, tells me that if I, “look past the silence of the wind, the rage in my heart,” I will see and be with my father once again.

I drive home with the morning sun, no clouds at my back, and I promise myself to visit my father at his grave, or on the shore, or in the dreams that are sure to come.