

They Called Me Tony Robbins

STEVE CHANG

I GOT HANDED A 40oz. IN MY BOY'S YARD, AND ONE THING LED TO another, and soon I was perched on a stool rolling these itty bitty joints too tight, little pinners, and flicking them past the youngsters crowding my spot—these milk-mustached baby gangsters clapping too slow—so that they flew like white javelins into the weeds, impossible to pick out at night.

“Ping!” I said, as I flicked them. *Ping!*

This was fun for me. This was my idea of fun.

“ACT RIGHT,” I TOLD THE KIDS. “KNOW YOUR ROLE.” I HAD THEM crawling around and shouting, “I think I see something!”

In those days, our whole world was still picking seeds and stems out of dirt-brown stress—four-fifty a pound, up to eight, depending—dry, crackling bricks that put me in mind of brown-bagged fourth grade history books and the buildings of the Pueblo Indians.

You could be the man if you could cop some sticky. That was all it took.

MY BOYS WERE DRINKING ACROSS THE YARD, BY THE COOLERS, PLAYING Spades and following a court case on KTLA 5. A big verdict on shitty cops was about to come down. The harder they slapped a card against the rickety table, the more the TV would rock. Lately, they were always pissed about something or other. They'd glanced my way when the kids had mobbed me, but that was about it.

We hadn't been getting along. When I stepped into a room, they'd look at me sideways and stop talking. It was like getting gravel thrown at me, a handful, clattering at my feet.

Something was changing. Seeing them all together, dressed alike, how I used to—black t-shirts, gray and black flannels, and Raiders gear—it bugged me. “Don't be so obvious,” I told them. “Tuck in your shirt. Get a real belt. Try leather.”

They said I was corny, a swap-meet Tom Vu. They called me Tony Robbins. But what's wrong with trying to live better?

It's like you come up on some money and people just change.

ONLY SPANKY STAYED CLOSE WHILE ALL THE KIDS WERE IN THE WEEDS, so I told him I'd smoke him out. I offered the last pinner, a tiny white toothpick. "Go ahead." He pinched for it, but I flipped my wrist down, so he missed. Like a magician making flowers appear, but in reverse.

"Aw, man," he said. "Come on, Thomas."

"It's right *there*," I said. "Take it." I did this repeatedly, laughing, and he kept falling for it—until I heard my boys yelling and looked over, thinking the sound involved me.

They threw red Solo cups at the TV, smashed bottles in disbelief.

"Not guilty?" they yelled. "Not *guilty*?"

It kind of seemed like they were talking about me.

While I was distracted, Spanky had snatched the pinner. He was trying his best to spark it. I'd rolled it too tight to smoke, but he almost had a cherry flaring in the tip. He finessed it, kissing and blowing, like its spotty glow was the last in the world.

Looking back, this is amazing.

Wouldn't anybody rip that Zig-Zag apart? And pack the herb into a bowl?

I didn't think I had a point to prove, but here he was—proving it.

He stopped only when his Bic had gotten too hot. He rubbed its wheels against his flannel, cooling it.

"Wow," I said. "Have some self-respect."

I KILLED MY 40oz. AND TOSSED THE BOTTLE INTO THE WEEDS WHERE some kid had started swinging a flashlight. Another was saying, "Don't shine it *down*, stupid. Get low and shine it *across*." It landed with barely a thud.

"Spanky," I said, "you want to be like them?" It sounds like I was trying to turn him, but I wasn't. I was trying to help. "If you want to make money, I'll put you on."

"Man," he said. "I'm just trying to get high."

With the TV dark, the courtroom drama forgotten, my boys were right back at it, slamming cards, like, "Why you sandbagging?" and "Who's sandbagging?"

In the weeds, a kid had picked something up. He was yelling, "Hey, check it out!" The others rushed him. The flashlight swung toward his hands. "Oh," he said. "It's just a Q-tip." He flicked it away.

When that TV was turned back on, the day after, the city would be burning, but right then, they were all laughing and shit.

IT WOULD TAKE TEN OR FIFTEEN YEARS FOR THESE THINGS TO HAPPEN, but they would: FI cards all day and gang enhancement sentencing, Three Strikes laws and an FBI sting. It would get bad, but we didn't know how bad it would get.

It doesn't matter. I don't know why I'm telling this story. Most of these people aren't around anymore.

Back then though we had fun. All we had was fun.

"TIMES ARE CHANGING," I TOLD SPANKY. "DON'T GET LEFT BEHIND."

I didn't hear a "Yeah" back or anything, so I looked over.

Did I regret throwing goodies out to the kids? Did I say to anybody, that night or ever, "What a waste?"

He had his face screwed into the pinner, lit orange by his Bic, trying to suck down a squirm of smoke. **M**