

Bobby

By: Jack LaValley

Many of us knew Bobby since he was a little guy. He always seemed to be around the restaurant somewhere. Often, he'd be sitting on the floor just inside the door hunched over his dog Chucky, stroking his wavy red coat. Pretty dog. Friendly face. Gentle, like Bobby. Just a mutt off the street. Followed a customer and the scent of a hamburger through the door one day and Bobby fed him. Car chaser though. Old Ned had muttered over his coffee, "We'll be helpin' him scrape Chucky off the pavement out there one of these days. Hope th' hell t' ain't me 'at hits him". Even his old man liked Chucky. Probably better than Bobby, most of us thought.

We were regulars. Mostly single laborers. Ate every meal there and then came back after the bars closed. We saw that kid grow up. Never saw him play much though. Don't know how he had time for it. We knew him as a worker from the day he was old enough to fill ketchup bottles. His old man never had better help than Bobby even when he was only ten, not that he knew it. Took Bobby for granted but the kid never seemed to resent it, and you couldn't distract him for long. And polite. He'd never just grab a creamer or the sugar from in front of you while you were eating. He'd say something like, "Bill can I give you a fresh one?" and I'd shove it his way so he could reach it. He wasn't a runt but he'd never be a big man either. Just average, but thin. When his old man come near one of us, he'd never look us in the eye. You sensed he resented us. I didn't know anyone who liked him, but the food was good and the coffee was only five cents a mug. A big attraction.

No one could figure out how that boy come out like that, the way his father treated him. He did a man's work long before he even had a say in what kind of haircut he got. And he was strong for his age and size. He had to be. Not many big kids could carry two of them wooden cases of pop at a time. He kept the coolers filled and I know he brung them up from the cellar. I remember the day his old man told him he should carry two at a time. "Hey!" he yells. "C'mere with that." And Bobby headed back to the kitchen from halfway to the cooler carrying a case of Orange Crush. "Try two next time." Knowing Bobby, he took it as a compliment thinking his dad was seeing him as more of a man. But he never saw him as nothing but a slave and everybody knew it but Bobby.

Harry delivered coal to that place. Dropped it through a window on a chute he run in there from the driveway. Sometimes he delivered in the morning before light, and sometimes he didn't get there 'til the last run, and in the winter that'd be past dark. Didn't matter. Bobby'd be there to guide the cellar end of the chute to where he wanted it dumped. Harry said Bobby was heaving shovels full up into the stoker before the truck was even empty. That was a big stoker. Big enough to heat both sides of that restaurant and the two apartments upstairs. Says there was just one bulb in that filthy hole that gave just enough light to see his arms go back and forth from the pile to the furnace and that was about it. He done that twice a day seven days a week for eight years that I knew of.

Sometimes Bobby'd have something to show his father. Something he'd done. Some kid thing like a whittling or a pinwheel he'd made. He'd take it up to him where he sat over a mug of coffee at the end of the counter dabbing a butt in the ashtray, hold it up and smile proudly for his dad to see. You could tell, by the frown in his old man's face, that he knew the boy wanted to show him something. Wouldn't so much as glance at him though. Just stand up slowly, pretending not to see him, still jamming that butt into the ashtray. Then he'd turn away, and walk back into the kitchen with half a mug still left. Men were watching. You'd see them tilt back, look at nothing on the ceiling, and pick their teeth with their tongues. Others would just cock their heads a little and seem to be looking for something in their coffee or just take a breath, slow and deep like he was counting to ten. Eventually, we'd find ourselves just staring at each other.

Never saw no friend of Bobby's. Best I could tell, we were his friends. By the time he was seventeen, he was often the only one there. Never saw much of his mom. Little woman. Silent. Darted around like a mouse. She done the big cooking. Roasts, turkeys, pies. That stuff. No one knew much about her except for the occasional bruises that fed rumors of beatings. Bobby was out front all the time cooking on the grill, making sandwiches, shakes, changing coffee filters, and bringing in more customers. You couldn't help but like him. He made you feel like he was so glad to see you though he hardly ever stopped moving. Six in the morning til nine or ten at night and sometimes the wee hours when the drunks come in, like his old man.

One hot summer night, Bobby was alone and dealing with a league of bowlers around eleven o'clock. We'd seen his old man at the alley earlier dumping a shot of whiskey into his beer, then downing it in one long gulp. You could hear him bellowing for another round over the roar of the balls and exploding pins. From there, he'd hit some other joint but eventually he wound up back at the restaurant looking for trouble. We dreaded the sight of him. The place would be humming with favorite stories, and raucous laughter, but when his father staggered in, you'd a thought it was someone in the doorway waving a gun back and forth and no one dared move or say a word. His forehead hung over his eyes so you couldn't see them and his mouth turned down in disgust. Like something from a nightmare. But inside he was a ticking bomb with an attitude and Bobby's name on it. He'd head behind the counter and start slamming things around to show Bobby he didn't like where he was putting stuff. Bobby would speed up, topping off mugs, wiping the spotless counter and sandwich board, his eyes big and stealing frightened glances at his father. On a good night, the old man would get himself something to eat and fall asleep at the end of the counter. On a bad night, we'd hear Bobby's body slam into something in the kitchen. It was out of sight though, so no one knew just what happened. Sometimes Bobby wouldn't show up for days though.

As he got older, his movements behind the counter became swift, efficient, and smooth as silk so it looked almost natural and effortless. And the better he got, the more his father took to openly criticizing him in front of the customers. The place would be packed at lunchtime and nobody could've served more of us faster than Bobby did but his old man would get up off the stool and standing there with his hands on his hips,

come out with something like, "You gonna change the grease in that frier today or you gonna keep serving these people burned potatoes?" and you could see the muscles in Bobby's jaw bulge and harden and in an instant he would change into a silent, faceless robot.

One night, Olley was running late and had parked the garbage truck out front. Walked back behind the restaurant to see if the dumpster needed emptying instead of backing down the narrow driveway, maybe for nothing. He come around the corner and saw the yellow eyes of the rats lined up at the back of the box and Bobby struggling toward it with a trash can on each shoulder. He was about to set one down so he could empty the other one on the pile when his old man, standing there with his arms folded on his chest, must've got impatient with him. Just as Bobby's lowering one can, his father comes up behind him and heaves both cans up from the bottoms. But Bobby's looking right at the can and the top edge of it catches him on the jaw bone before he can turn away completely. Olley hears it break and sees Bobby diving after the other can into the garbage bin because he can't let go of the handle. The rats scramble and Bobby rolls off onto the ground. His father says, "What's the matter. You still scared o' them little rats?" Bobby got up slowly and turned on his father with a look that Olley thought was going to get him killed. His old man weighed 225 and Bobby maybe 150. That's when Olley steps in and says, "everything all right?" Bobby can't open his mouth but he says through clinched teeth, still glaring at his old man, "No. Peese take me to da hospita." Cheryl, a nurse in the emergency room says Bobby told them he'd fallen coming up out of the cellar and Olley didn't say nothing different til later. Only one reason Bobby'd tell a lie like that and Olley knew what it was. The kid had his jaws wired shut next time we saw him peeling potatoes and he couldn't eat nothing but soup.

And that's the way Bobby grew up. How his old man got away with keeping him out of school so much, no one knew. Bobby was always at the restaurant, still hustling, still making sure every customer knew that he knew who they were, and still taking on more responsibilities. But his old man treated him worse than ever, goading him now that he was man size but smaller than him.

His father sold brown bags of eggs over the counter at a discount. He got them free from the farm because they were tiny and Abe Sandler wanted to get rid of them. One day, Bobby dropped a whole bag when he grabbed one by the top edges and a piece of the paper tore away. It hit the floor with a sickening sound and six full grown men at the counter stopped eating and stiffened. Bobby himself seemed paralyzed for an instant with his arms stuck out in front of him and his fingers pressed together where there was no longer a paper bag. Then he was on his knees, trying to scoop the whole mess up with both hands before the bottom fell through. But his old man was coming, and he heard him, or felt him through the floor.

It was way overdue, but nobody saw it coming. Bobby's head snapped up and he knew, as did several of us at the counter by his father's hurried step, that his old man was going to kick that bag out of his hands. Three of us rose from our stools but we were too late. Bobby come up off that floor like a pit bull in a dogfight and caught his

father off balance by the shirt, about collar-high. His old man was big and solid but he was no match for what exploded into his face from that floor. In a split second, Bobby had him in the air and was driving him backward like a pile of garbage in front of a dozer blade. His old man fell and the kid was on him like a wildcat, his hands around his throat, still driving with his legs and skidding him across the floor until he'd jammed his head under the steam table. His father had his fingers in Bobby's eyes, gouging them and growling, "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" when Bobby wedged his feet against the base of the counter and started pressing. His hands sank into his father's throat and suddenly there wasn't a sound except his old man's feet scrabbling and the creaking of the counter under the hydraulic force of Bobby's fury.

Olley moved first, jumping on and over the counter. That jarred me and Harry out of the spell and we followed quickly. At his side in a flash, Olley got his arms under Bobby and tore him loose. Harry and I held his old man down and locked onto his eyes so's he could read our thoughts. Olley yelled for someone to call the cops. Bobby's father spit and cursed but we had him and it'd taken a lot more man than he was to get off that floor.

Olley hustled Bobby out to his car and told him to get the hell out of here and we'd take care of things. He said Bobby's hands and legs were shaking so much he didn't know how he could drive and still he got off an "I'm sorry Olley. I didn't mean to get you guys into this." Then the tires squealed and he heard that little 289 roar. Olley said the car never touched the pavement for about twenty feet when it come off that railroad crossing.

None of us every seen Bobby again but word was he'd made it to the city and found work at a White Tower grill in the middle of downtown where it was good and busy. We were glad. We knew he'd make friends quick there and it would keep his mind off things he was better off leaving in the past.