The King of Bread
By Luis Alberto Urrea

Papa reached back to grab me in the back seat when that car ran the red light on Wabash and plowed into us. We spun out on two wheels and slammed into a street sign. The old man steered with his left hand and held me with his right as I lifted off. For a moment, I was flying.

Man, that car was his pride. It was a ’49 Ford. An anvil of a machine. We stood in the road and watched as it died, steam flying high, car blood spilling onto the blacktop. The woman who hit us stood like a statue of a woman, with glass in her hair, calling, “I never saw you! I never saw you!” It was the only time I ever saw him cry, even when Mama left us.

The crash was especially hard on him because he was between jobs. How was he supposed to go out and find one now? Or buy a new car? Even a junker, which is how we’d gotten a ’49 Ford to begin with.

You’d never know he was down on his luck unless you watched his moods, which he kept hid like the nudie magazines under his mattress. I’d define his demeanor as jolly rage. But that was no different from all the men I saw around me in the barrio. It was a scramble for everybody.

He had lost his job at the tuna cannery. And he was going to try for a job at the bowling alley in Chula Vista when the car died. So rage hung like a haze in our apartment as his money ran out. It was just the two of us in the apartment. He got madder the more he had to clean it, to wash dishes, to make me do homework. My things he found tossed around were a personal insult to him.

It took me a while to learn to do chores. What did I know? I liked him being home when I didn’t hate it. I was happy he didn’t come home stinking of fish anymore . . .

I missed that Ford, too. But I could walk to school at St. Jude’s by myself now, so I didn’t need rides or anybody with me. Besides, if some of the crazy vatos or bloods from down the street punched me, Pa would expect me to fight back. This way, I could just run.

He’d never know. In those days, his advice was simple: “If they hit you, beat them till they’re in the dirt. And when they’re down, kick them in the pinche head.” I didn’t think I could do that and live. They always got back up.

His problem was that he couldn’t survive without something to drive. He didn’t walk down the street like some peasant. And he hated taking a bus. “Un hombre don’t take a bus,” he said. “I’d rather ride a burro.”

Pa was a driver for sure. A driver and a worker. It didn't take him long to get a job at the big bakery down near the dry docks. He showed me the want ad: "Drivers Needed. Clean driving record required. Bakery Truck. Must have selling skills. Good with people a must! Apply in person."

"What's it mean?" I asked.

"I don't know, Mijito, but I get a truck to drive." He lit one of his Pall Malls. "And I like bread."

"Me too."

"Pues, it's perfect, then."

He did that Mexican one-shoulder-shrug-while-tipping-his head thing. Hung out his lower lip, closed his eyes, raised his eyebrows. As if he was acknowledging the mysteries of the universe and also suggesting that no one with any sense would turn down a shot at a job that included a truck. And bread. People who try to learn Spanish don't know that half of it is silent. They never seem quite right when they speak because they don't use their faces and hands and shoulders and lips enough.

So one day he came home with a two-tone '61 Chevy panel truck, black fenders, creamy body paint, and the bakery's logo on the sides.

They also gave him a uniform and a snappy bread-dude cap he wore like some bomber pilot in those old movies. All tipped down over his right eye.

"I get to keep it here, Mijo!" he called as he turned into the dirt alley. "Our new troka!"

Of course, it seemed gigantic to me, and Pa looked about twenty feet tall in the driver's seat.

Then he confided, as if it was a dirty secret, "It's a loaner." He squinched his nose a little, like the admission had a bit of stink on it. You know what I was saying about Mexican Spanish? Well, he was showing the expression for his favorite old-school word for *stink*. Which is *fuchi*. If you said it with enough verve, you couldn't help but make that monkey-face. So if you made that monkey-face, you really didn't have to say the word out loud at all, but all your paisanos would know exactly what you hadn't just said.

The back of the truck had two doors that opened on wooden drawers he'd fill every morning at the bakery: bread and donuts and cookies and maybe a pie or two. If the moms on his route ordered one in advance, he could bring them a birthday cake. There were paper bags and wax paper sheets back there for picking up the stuff and handing it over.

Pa wore a silver changemaker on his belt with tubes full of pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters, and he'd work a toggle to count them out. He had a zipper pouch for dollar bills, but the ladies on his route didn't

often have paper money. Some wrote checks. Some had welfare chits. Pa actually took IOUs from many moms, which was to be his downfall.

If the bakery really wanted to make money, he liked to say, they should have loaded the trucks with tortillas and pan dulce. “Conchas,” he said. And those gingerbread pig cookies nobody really liked but ate because grandma dunked them in coffee.

“When I buy this troka,” he said, “I’m going to paint our names on the door. Garcia y Garcia. I’ll leave it to you so you will have a business.” Even in fourth grade, I didn’t want to drive a bread truck. I wanted to turn blond and be Steve McQueen. “Me and you, Mijo. It’s just me and you.”

We’d been alone since Mama left us.

It happened when I got the chicken pops. That’s what all us kids called it. We thought it was because you had these red things pop out all over. Made sense to us. We were always decoding the stuff everybody said.

I feel guilty about it to this day. Mama. Like I could have not caught it. I could have not touched whoever was sick playing four-square on the blacktop playground. Most of the homies got the pops, though.

It was going through the school like a flood. Ma kept me home when it turned all polka dot. Pa did not approve of that in any way—un hombre, you know, doesn’t stay in bed. He don’t be sick.

Hey, I didn’t mind. I had my *Mad* magazines and my Batman comics. Ma let me eat strawberry ice cream as if I had the tonsils, even though Pa yelled a lot about me getting fat. I got to stay in the sack as long as I wanted. I could watch game shows and Mike Douglas on our TV. That sounded great to me but nobody told me how the little red pops would itch and break when you scratched them. So it wasn’t that much fun, after all.

Ma’s usual cure for all ills (VapoRub) didn’t work on my pops. So she went out. Walked down the long block to the corner store to get baking soda or something. She was going to soak me in it.

But the immigration guys got her. You think this is a modern thing, a Make America Great Again thing, but they were hunting what they called wetbacks the whole time. I wanted to tell somebody she was my mother, and she didn’t have a wet back. I didn’t even know what a wet back meant. Was it a woman thing? Were these men searching for all women with leaky backs? Or just Mexican mothers? Was it me? Had I made her back wet by being born? I was pretty sure it was that, because Pa’s back was dry and my back was dry.

And I didn't know anything about papers. I would have thought they were something like dog tags. The dogcatchers came to the apartments and dragged away skinny dogs—I hated those days. My mama was not a dog. Did she get put in a big truck by mama catchers? Locked in steel cages with other wet women? All I knew for sure was that something terrible must have happened, and it was my fault.

I was still in bed, terrified, when Pa came home.

I was afraid he'd be mad at me for losing her. I was afraid somebody from the scary end of the block got her. I hid there under my blankets all afternoon, hoping she was just delayed, just talking to a neighbor, maybe in church saying a prayer so I'd get better. But I knew that nothing would keep my mother from me. I'd been crying.

All of us in that barrio lived in fear of Something Bad, this unnamed thing that happened to some Mexicans. This force that snatched families off the block, that took homies out of fourth grade and made the nuns never mention them again. I thought it was something like the monsters on Moona Lisa's science fiction show on Saturdays, something like the giant crab monsters that pinched off people's heads and ate them and then could think and talk like humans. I thought the monsters were eating my mother to learn Spanish so they could hypnotize us into coming outside so they could feed again.

And I promise you, there are kids today that think something like that. They're thinking it tonight. Only they're thinking something even worse is happening to their moms in the dark, because the world has become what it is.

Pa had that fish stink on him when he stormed in. And he was yelling. He was throwing things around as if Ma might be hiding behind the old couch. He grabbed me up by the collar of my pajamas and ordered me to stop crying. He kicked open the back door and I heard him running down the street calling her name and I cried harder because I thought he would be eaten, too. And I would be left forever in that apartment waiting for the monsters to come for me, calling my name in my parents' voices.

But nothing. Happened. At all. It was all . . . silence after that week. Life went on. Ma was back home in Mexico. I did not know this place, Home. Or Mexico. I thought National Avenue was home. And Pa went back to work. He bought me a turtle at Woolworth's.

La Bakery Troka was salvation.

Consignment is what they called the deal they made with Pa. The deal the bakery made with all their drivers. Neither one of us knew exactly what it was. But Papa learned things quick.

That was the secret to life in the U.S.—understanding the rules and the meanings as fast as you can because you're always behind the ball. Playing catch-up. And if they catch you, you get thrown out. Like Ma. Behind the ball, though. What was that? Like *wetback* or *medium rare* or *crew cut*. What were those things? Signals came at me as if sent by spaceships from another world. I spent my boyhood needing a decoder ring.

So Pa went to his bank and took out some of the cannery money he'd stashed away and bought the stuff to fill his truck's drawers. The bakery sold it to him at a fair rate. Cheaper than it would have been in stores. And they had a chart of prices he could charge, which were a little more than the store.

They paid him an added minimum fee for his hours behind the wheel. Though fuel was on him. And he could work as many hours as he needed, but after a full eight hours, his salary ended and the rest was all on the profit margin from the drawers. He was supposed to maintain a bargain drawer for day-olds. But like many drivers, he sometimes kept things that could still pass as fresh in his main drawers. Thirty or forty extra cents per order at every stop could add up after a good week.

He inherited the route of a guy who died of Irish whiskey, Pa said. Pa himself never drank after the Mama catchers took her, aside from his small glass of Thunderbird every night.

He had learned pretty quick that nobody was going to run into the street to buy muffins after dark, not in our neighborhood, anyway, so he always came home in time for Cronkite. Mrs. Cota the babysitter went back across the alley to her house. Pa paid her in bread and cookies. He and I ate TV dinners and watched the news, and he had his one drink and a bowl of Fritos and cashews. It was kind of what we did in place of church.

Every week, he sent an envelope to Mama back Home.

I read somewhere that all fathers are mysteries to their children until they die, and then become greater mysteries because they can never then be solved. You just wonder. Forever.

I think kids fear their fathers. I didn't dare make mine angry. Not because he'd hurt me, but because he'd leave. He got only one letter from Ma in the year after she left. One letter I knew of. He never talked about it, but that night he stayed out until morning. I was afraid he'd gone to that Home place to be with her again.

Once, when the phone rang, I grabbed it. All I could hear were crackles. There seemed to be a distant voice, a small voice I couldn't really hear.

"Mama?" I cried. "Mama? Mama?" The little crackling voice talked on and on and then the line went dead. So I made it my job to be the best no-crying son I could.

Pa went to work every morning, and so did I. I was a bad student, but I never missed class. The kids laughed at me because my dad was the donut guy in the stupid truck, and I was embarrassed by him all of a sudden.

I resolved to be useful and uncomplaining. I never asked again for a comic or a toy. I crept out of my room as silently as possible on Saturdays to sit too close to the almost silent TV and watch Bugs and Daffy and the Stooges as Pa's snores rattled the walls. I had a plan to get a paper route when I was older—maybe old enough so the bad dudes down the block wouldn't hit me. Earn some extra money for Pa. But I'd need a bike. I was trying to figure that part out.

I even helped him with his work. For example: our unit was at the end of the apartment block, one of four, on the bottom floor off the dirt alley that snaked downhill from National. The garage was around the corner, down by Reverend Jones's wild backyard. It had stood empty since the Ford was murdered, so Pa put his bread truck in there every night. It was his Fort Knox of donuts.

He'd call me every afternoon from a pay phone at around 5:00.

"Ready, Mijo?" he'd say.

"Sí, Pa."

"Meet me outside in a half hour."

I'd be standing outside our back door. It was a great place—the sun hit it in the afternoon, and when it rained, the old wood porch was like my boat as the alley turned to a muddy river. I'd never been in a boat.

So anyway, I'd stand there and wait, and I'd hear him before I saw him. If you were around town in those days, you will remember the bread truck's whistle. It was as cool as the ice-cream man's jingly music, how the bread trucks had the train whistle on the roof. Pa would pull his lanyard twice as the bakery's signal: *woot-woot*. Everybody would come running.

He'd pull up in his cloud of cigarette smoke, and I'd step up on the running board. He'd hang his arm out and wrap it around me, pull me tight to the warm metal of the door. The smell of all those bakery goods came out with the smoke. His arm seemed impossible. Huge. Muscle carved of wood. And it was covered in wiry hairs. His bones could have been stone. And he'd roll down the alley slow as a snail, idling, really, but I hooted and hollered as if we were speeding around a racetrack. He'd swing it around the corner and I'd jump off with the key to the padlock in my hand. I'd unlock it and yank up the garage door and Pa would drive in

saying, “That’s m’boy, all right” or even better, “Míralo.” That one-word Mexican exhortation to just take a look at this kid—isn’t he amazing?

My secret knowledge of his great mystery was simple: he wasn’t as tough as he needed the world to think he was.

I knew that inside the brutally efficient driver’s cab, there was a spiderweb under the dash. Right beside the long ratchet of the pull-brake. He would never let me bother that spider. In his customized English, he called it el espider. It was his mascot, he said. It brought him luck. He talked to it as he drove around all day. It never occurred to me that he might be lonely.

And he never missed the ritual we had created. No matter how beat he was. And he was beat, all right. Some days he was gray. He was a hundred years old. His back hurt—I knew he wore some kind of girdle thing to hold it together. He wore copper magnet bracelets because the healer ladies in the barrio told him they pulled bad vibrations out of his body. He sat on a woven mat with springs in it. He ate Tums like candies. He smelled like sweat and yeast.

But he limped to the back of the truck and swung open the doors and pulled out the bottom goody drawer and said, “I wonder if I have any spare stuff I can offer you, Mijo.” I was all about the donuts.

“Glaze donuts are the best donuts,” he’d say. “The gringos invented them.”

“Chocolate.”

“Chocolate’s for girls. Men eat glazed.”

“You told me Aztecs invented chocolate.”

“Yeah but you got to cut out some cabron’s heart to eat Aztec donuts.”

“Dad!”

He’d take up his wax paper square and pick one chocolate and one glazed.

“Dinner first,” he always said.

But most days, we ate them before we even got through the back door.

It was the year after they took Ma that I broke.

I was all the way into fifth grade. I had a two-way crush on redheaded Marlene and her friend Roxanne. I wanted to be Captain Kirk that year. Some of the boys that used to beat me up now had a baseball game going behind the school. We played in a dirt lot. We used broomsticks for bats, and an old mummy of a dead cat was home base.

But I missed my mom so hard it gave me headaches and a sore throat that didn't feel like a cold but like I got punched there. I cried into my pillow at night and imagined Marlene would beam me up and take me on an adventure on a strange planet. Probably Pegasus. I was pretty sure Pegasus lived there. On the anniversary of her taking, I couldn't go to school. I didn't care if he punished me. I couldn't even take off my pajamas.

I was staring at my Frosted Flakes in that nasty little kitchen when he walked in and stopped dead to stare.

He was wearing slacks. Pa, first thing, and he had slacks on. He never even owned a pair of shorts or jeans. Cuffed slacks and a sleeveless T-shirt and slippers, because un hombre never went barefoot.

We had that Woolworths turtle in a plastic bowl that had a little ramp and a plastic palm tree. The turtle was staring at us with great distrust.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Today was the day."

There was a pause.

Pa mussed my hair.

"I know."

I didn't say anything.

"You okay, there, champ?"

"I'm good."

"You don't look good."

"I'm all right."

"Oye, cabron, I know you. It's okay to feel bad."

"Do you feel bad?"

He smacked me on the back of the head.

"I never feel bad."

I looked up. Hair pomade had made his graying crew cut stick up like a small porcupine was sitting on his scalp. He lit a smoke and coughed and adjusted his magical copper bracelet and boiled water in a pan for some of his instant Café Combate.

"Well?" he said.

I hung my head.

"I miss her," I said.

I didn't want to say so. I didn't want to show him how weak I was. But worse, I didn't want to say something that made him show how weak he was.

His spoon in his cup made a meditative *tinka-tinka-tinka* sound as he stirred in his instant.

"Yeah," he said, and walked out of the kitchen.

I thought that was it. I heard him in his room slamming drawers. I heard the shower run. The turtle pulled his head into his shell and refused to look at me. I rinsed out my bowl and stuck it in the drainer and stood at the kitchen window staring at the alley like Ma would show up, and I kept thinking that I wanted to tell Marlene and Roxanne all about it, and that thought made me feel sadder.

When Pa came back to the kitchen, he was all dressed up in his bread-truck uniform. He was even wearing his black ripple-sole work shoes. I knew he hated them—they hurt his feet and turned them paper white, made his toes peel. "You ready?" he said.

"Ready for what, Papa?"

"Work, Mijo. We going to work."

"For reals?"

"Stop talking like a pachuco," he said. "You can't just stay home from school and watch TV all day. I need you on the truck. I'm going to need you to pull the string for the train whistles today."

He winked and opened the back door.

I didn't know the world was so big. It had pretty much been the walk to and from school, the alley, and some car trips to stores like Kresge's down National, which we had been going to that day when the Ford got smashed. Ma, who did take the bus, took me to the zoo one time, took me to downtown, where we walked all day looking at the boats down on the harbor.

One time, Pa took me to a bowling alley, and we went to the Big Sky Drive-In when we had the car. He liked cowboy movies. But today, Pa was like some kind of astronaut in his espider-truck, roaming in and out of neighborhoods I had never seen and never dared imagine.

We rolled down to National City and into Chula Vista, into Pinoy-town and all the way out to Lemon Grove. He had an AM radio in there, and it was all Phil Rizzuto yapping about sports, and "The Old Redhead" Arthur Godfrey mumbling with people about things I didn't care about. There was no way Pa was going to tune it to KCBQ because he was never going to allow the Beatles into his troka.

"Los Beh-At-Less," he called them in his transitional Spanglish. "What kind of men?" he'd mutter if their songs ever came on any radio. "What kind of men?"

I stared out the window at apartments sadder than ours, and little pale houses with hedges and humpbacked cars and bikes. I was counting bikes.

"Sit on the dollar pouch so nobody steals it," he said. Our first stop was in a block of run-down apartments with couches on the dead lawns and a dead car, with its trunk open, left abandoned at the curb. Pa leaned away from the wheel as he braked. "Pull," he said. I leaned across the barrel of his chest and grabbed the dangling lanyard. "Two tugs. Just two." I did it. We were a cartoon choo-choo for one moment: *woot-woot*! He set the parking brake and turned off the engine and said, "Hang on to my dollars." He hopped out.

I got out on my side and found little kids already at the back doors and moms hurrying out of their apartments in shorts and flip-flops and everybody yelling "Donut man!" and "Mr. Garcia!" And Pa stood there and nodded at them all. He was the King of Bread, and his subjects loved him. It almost knocked me out of my shoes.

Block after block, we sounded our whistle, and mothers and grandmothers came out. Some ran. Children everywhere. And they touched my father. I saw the hands. Women touched him carefully, as if he might evaporate if they grabbed too hard.

And children roughed him up, tugged at him, leaned on his hips and craned to see in the sweet drawers and yelled "Gimme a donut, mister! Gimme a cookie! I wan' some pie!" Brown kids and Black kids and white kids all together, like we weren't supposed to stay on our own blocks.

And Pa, this unknown being, this regal creature, laughing and nodding as women made confessions and pointed and often only paid him fifty cents or a few dimes for a loaf or a cake, and some of them gave him scrawled notes of promise that he handed me for the dollar bag, and I saw the phone numbers. Those women had special smiles for him. And he tipped his cap to them as if they were ladies of the royal court. By the end of the day, I was exhausted.

He whistled along to a Bert Kaempfert song on his radio. I hated Bert Kaempfert. I didn't know how I felt about my dad because I didn't know my dad was this particular dad. He would never be that old dad again.

"You did good today, Mijo."

"Thanks, Pa."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah."

"You worked hard. Like un hombre." He pointed to the zipped-up dollar bag. "Take out ten bucks."

"What?"

"A man gets paid for his work."

Beam me up, Marlene.

"What can I spend it on?"

He did the shrug—both shoulders this time. He didn't close his eyes because he was driving. But he hung out his lip and tipped his head.

"Up to you, Big Man," he said.

We got to the alley and he let me out to unlock the garage. "Chocolate or glaze?" he said when he'd parked.

"Chocolate."

He opened the back door and got out two.

"That's a good idea. I like them, too, Mijo."

As we walked up the alley to our back door, he put his hand on my shoulder.

"It's gonna be okay," he said. "Todo bueno."

He got out his key and unlocked the door and stopped me before I went in.

"Tomorrow," he said. "I call you in sick. I think we need to go to the zoo. I never been. I know your Mama took you there one time, yeah? I don't want to get lost. Will you show me the way?"

And we closed the door and locked it and put two turkey-and-gravy dinners in the oven and he gave me a sip of his Thunderbird. All those IOUs? Most of them could never be paid. It would force him out of business in a year. He'd finally get to that bowling alley he wanted to work at, cleaning toilets.

I watched him fall asleep in his chair, and I took the lit cigarette out from between his fingers and sat at his feet, hoping our phone would ring just one more time.