Spare Change

By Marcos Escobar

 Somewhere in southern California, North of somewhere and on the corner of nowhere, there is a place where life happens. On the Northeast corner, there is an apartment complex, where all sorts of people live their lives and experience the world. West of that is the beginning of a small neighborhood, consisting of old houses that can barely stand and are in desperate need of renovation. South of that is a small plaza of shops, restaurants, a pawn store and an old arcade, where people try to make something out of nothing. And East of that is where our story takes place. A Bodega, a small family run store that has stood tall for over twenty years.

 This small shelter from the heat and rain of the outside world is almost like a second home to those that frequent it. And those who run it are more than happy to welcome anyone into their business with a friendly greeting and a smile. The family that runs the store, the Gonzales, have one rule about their service. We are not just a store, we are a family and our customers are our family.

 Now let us really start our story, North in the small neighborhood, in small house in small room rest Johnny. The eldest son of the Gonzales’, Johnny is sleeping, having spent the entire night watching old movies and playing videogames on his only day off during the week. With two fans running at full blast in his room, the heat of the outside world was nowhere to be seen. Leaving the room nice and chilly, which let Johnny cover himself up in blanket and block out the sunlight that tried poking its way into his room and let him stay asleep for a few more minutes. But it had to come to an end. It felt like the entire room shook as a heavy hand knocked against the door, making Johnny nearly leap out of his bed.

“Huh! What?!” Johnny nearly shouted as he tried to tried to collect himself from his half-asleep confusion.

“Johnny? Mijo you need to get up, day it is?” She said loudly in hopes of fully waking up Johnny, as well as making herself perfectly clear.

Johnny sat up in his bed, his mind a flood of thoughts trying to pick up where it had left off from the night before. A short conversation with his father from a week before, reentered his mind. His foggy memory reminded him that his father had received a letter saying their liquor license was expiring in a week. However, his father had just recently renewed the license and was justifiably furious about the letter. So, the day of its expiration it he would be going to talk to a judge about it.

His mother called again from the other side of the door. “I need to take your sister to her soccer match, so you need to go open up the bodega. So please get dressed and I’ll go drop you off.”

He stood up from his bed pulling off the old gray t-shirt and kicked off the gym shorts he had worn to sleep. Johnny stood a little under six feet tall, he had a slender body, with a slightly muscular build. His skin was light brown, his hair was short, black and shaggy, and his eyes were a deep blue.

“Ok mama, just give me a second.” Johnny said rubbing his eyes and began getting out of bed finally.

“Do you want some food, I made chorizo and eggs, I can make a few burritos while you get ready.”

“Yes please.”

His room was clean, mostly because there was barely a thing inside it. He had a single bed, two fans in opposite corners of the room, a thick sheet covering the window beside his bed. He walked over to a dresser beside the door with an old television sitting atop of it. Opening the top drawer, he snatched up a pair of socks and slipped them on.

 Johnny picked up the clothes on the floor and opened the closet to the left of his bed. There was a small basket of clothes inside, Johnny tossed the clothes into the basket and turned his attention to the clothes hanging inside. He picked out a pair of jeans and a clean t-shirt. He quickly put on the new attire and looked down in the closet and grabbed a pair of black sneakers, slipping them on before heading for the door. But as he is about to reach the knob he quickly turned around.

“Oh shit.” Johnny walked back to the closet a grabbed a gray hoodie from out of the basket. “I’d feel naked.”

He slipped it on and zipped it up, before walking out of the room. The hallway outside his room was small, barely enough room for two people at a time, across from his room was his brother and sister's room. He could hear their tv and slipped into the room to see what was on. His brother Gabriel, a small kid with buzzcut hair and wearing gym shorts, was sitting on the floor of his room eating cereal and watching cartons on an old fuzzy television sitting on the floor across from him.

“What are you watching Gabriel?” Johnny asked trying to his best to recognize the show.

“Flintstones.” He said trying his best to talk clearly with a mouth full of frosted flakes.

“Yeah, what Fred do this time?”

“Don’t know something about aliens.” He said trying to readjust himself as the television got fuzzier.

“Here, let me get that for you.” Johnny walked in and gave the television a good slap and a kick. The television liked it, because the image became crystal clear. “Good, that’s much better. Now finish up, we are going to be going in a few minutes, ok?”

“Ok.”

Johnny walked back out into the hallway and down to the front of the house. In the living room, he saw his sister, Mariah sitting on the couch ready to go in her soccer gear and writing in one of her notebooks. She noticed Johnny walk in and lowered her notebook.

“Hey Johnny, how far did you get through all those movies, Chino gave you.”

“Just about all of them, most of the were garbage, but a few of them were real good, feel free to watch them. Just ask mom if you can watch them first ok.”

“Ok.”

He began to make his way across the room to the kitchen when he paused and turned to her once more.

“I mean it, I don’t want you watching something you aren’t supposed to and have mom come into my room in the middle of the night and beat my ass because you had another nightmare.”

“That was months ago,” She quickly rebutted.

“It was two weeks ago, and I’m still sore.” He replied rubbing his back. “Oh, also I finished playing Contra so you and Gabriel can play it now.”

“Ok, thank you.” She said as she returned to her book.

Johnny walked through the living room and made his way over to the kitchen. On the table was a stack of burritos rolled in napkins. He picked up one, unwrapped it and quickly scarfed it down. He hadn’t notice how hungry he was a until he started eating. He grabbed another and took his time with the second one. Let the flavors soak in as he tasted the spices, meat and eggs mix with the flavors of the homemade tortillas his mom made the week before.

When he finished the second one. he then walked over to a group of cabinets against the wall across from him. He opened one of the doors and grabbed a small bag filled with shopping bags. Picking out one of the shopping bags and put the rest back into the cabinet. Then walked back over to the table and picked the burritos off the table and put into the bag. Tied the bag shut and tied the excess around the burritos.

He walked over to the fridge and opened the door, he looked inside and tried to find what he was looking for. In the back of the fridge behind the milk, last night’s leftovers and orange juice was a fresh bottle of Coca-Cola. He snatched it and put it in his pocket.

“Mama! I’m ready to go.”

“Ok mijo.”

She walked in with a bowl in her hands and Gabriel walking behind her. She was shorter women just a few inches above five feet. Her hair was tied up into a big bun that hanged from the base of the back of her neck. She was wearing a pair of shorts, a t-shirt, sport shoes and a pair of sunglasses. The shirt was from Mariah’s team which featured a black panther and read “the black river panthers”. She had a lighter complexion and had a round face with a couple wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She placed the bowl in the sink, filled it with water and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Ok let’s go.”

Everyone walked out of the house and after locking up the place got into her old brown Cadillac. It only took a few minutes to make their way out of the neighborhood and make it to the bodega. The store was dark from the outside, the only light coming from the inside was a small neon-sign saying closed. Johnny got out of the car and gave his mom a kiss on the cheek, before taking the bodega keys from the glove box.

“Have a good day mijo. Love you.” She said as Johnny closed the door.

“Love you to mama.” He said through the open car door window. He looked to the back of the car. “Hey you to behave for mom ok.”

“Ok Johnny see you later.” Gabriel replied.

Johnny waved them off as they drove away. He walked to the front door and unlocked the first metal door, the unlocked the main door. As he walked in he could hear a soft beeping coming from behind the counter on his left. He walked around the counter and look under the counter where the security box was sitting. He punched in the code and turned the system off. He sighed as he placed his food and drink onto the counter, before walking back to the front door, switching the lights on the dark store transformed as the lights revealed the various details of the store.

From the chip displays, refrigerators with all sorts of drinks and cold snacks and the rows of shelves that fill most of the floor space. Before Johnny could eat, he grabbed a roll of a red tape from under the counter. He walked over the refrigerator that held all the liquor. He stretched the tape across the doors into big X’s.

“Not today.”

He walked back over to the counter and put the tape back. He opened the bag and placed the rest of the burritos onto the counter and popped open his drink. He scarfed down two more of the burritos and chug about half the coke. Hanging from the ceiling across from the counter was a television, Johnny looked around the counter before finding a remote and flipped on the television. The television was on Telemundo when it turned on, his dad’s favorite channel, that and TV land. He switched over to Fox, Power Rangers was on. He turned up the volume and tried to get relaxed in the big leather chair behind the counter.

“Man, I can never get enough of this show.”

Just then the front door rang as a man walked in Johnny turned his eyes over to see who it was.

“Oh, hey Frank.”

Walking through the door was a skinny middle-aged man with shaggy dirty blonde hair and a full beard. He was about the same height as Johnny. And was wearing a t-short shirt and jeans with work boots.

“Hey Johnny”, he said waving as he walked over to the small hand baskets, “was waiting for you guys to open up today, didn’t feel like driving over to Kmart.”

“Yeah, well sorry,” Johnny replied as he took a bite from another burrito, “my dad had to go to the courthouse today.”

Frank began to make his way over to the chip aisle, eyeing the back wall where the “Pan Dulce”, Mexican donuts, were. The floor had been washed and waxed the previous night, so his boots were making an audible squeaking noise. Unsure where the sound was coming from Johnny looked around him, until he realized it was Frank.

“Why did he have to go?”

Frank was looking over all the chips that were available, which ranged from big family bags, to small snack sized versions.

“Liquor license expired, got real pissed since he just got it renewed awhile back. He always gets worked up with this stuff, thought he was going to have a heart attack.”

Johnny, began to flip through the channels as his show ended and wasn’t in the mood to watch fox news.

“Really, that sounds weird. Hope he gets it settled.” He picked out his choices and tossed them into the basket. Then proceeded over to the soda isle.

Johnny finished off his soda, tossed into a trashcan that was at the other end of the counter. Then grabbed another burrito and bit in half, only needing a couple of chews before it went straight down.

“So, what has you up so early, isn’t this usually your day off?” Johnny asked as he continued through the small selection of channels.

“I was going to go shopping yesterday, but I was working late last night, Angel’s oven broke down again, piece of shit needed a new set of heating elements.”

“Didn’t just break down like a month ago,”

“Yeah, but this time it took twice as long to fix. Got free meal out of it though, Angel asked if he could use mine, so fair trade.” He was holding one of the two liters in his hand and was trying to make up his mind. “First home cooked meal I’ve had in years so it was nice change in pace for me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, never really learned how to cook before, never really needed to. Might have to or else I might get cancer from all the microwave dinners I eat.”

“Hey of you need a teacher, I know how to make tamales, rice and chicken, beef stew, steaks, tortillas and my specialty burgers.”

Frank had made his way to the back were the Pan Dulce was. He started looking over all the small containers. He grabbed a plastic bag from a nearby box as well as a sheet of parchment paper and began picking his selection.

“That sounds nice, just name a time and a place and I’ll grab whatever we need.”

“Great, how does next Friday sound. We can even use the kitchen in the back room.”

Frank was finished grabbing his choices, tossing the parchment paper into a nearby bin and tied up the small bag with a twist tie from a small cup sitting beside the bags and parchment paper.

“Sounds good, got next Friday off, and Thursday I get paid. I’ll get the stuff and come over when you open.”

Frank walked over to the counter and place the basket in front of Johnny. Johnny got up out of his seat and began ringing up all the items. A a few dozen keystrokes and a couple double takes, Johnny finally had the price set.

“That will be twelve eighty-two.” Johnny said biting down on another burrito.

Frank fumbled around in his pocket, before taking out his wallet. He shuffled through the mess of business cards, old credit cards and coupons, before finally finding his cash. He handed over a twenty to Johnny. Johnny popped open the register did pull out the bills and change, then handed it over to Frank. Then put all his items into a bag and handing it over as well.

“Thanks Johnny.” He said pulling out the five from his hand and dropping it into the tip jar beside the register.

“Oh, thanks Frank!”

“No problem, see you later.” He said as he walked out the door.

Johnny sat behind the counter for a few more hours without anything else notable happening. Just a few regulars who weren’t very social. Walking in to grab their little bags of treats, then leaving without a word. A homeless guy walked in to ask to use the restroom, Johnny could say no. About an hour later Johnny went in to use the restroom as well. But found it strange the bathroom not only looked cleaner than usual, but also smelled like pine sol. But paid it no mind and continued with his day.

Around, twelve the store phone began to ring. Johnny picked it up and did his best to remember the answering phrase, which he rarely had to use.

“Hello this is the Oasis Bodega, my name is Johnny, how may I help you.”

“Johnny, it’s me.” A rough voice said from the other side.

“Hi dad, how’s the courthouse?” He said as he began to fidget with the phone cord, trying his best to untangle it.

“Terrible, I’ve been for hours and this place is packed to the brim.”

“Sorry to hear that, hopefully things will kick up soon.”

“They better or I might go on a rampage. Fucking bastards, I do everything by the book and they still do this shit to me.”

“Calm down dad, it was probably just an error with the clerks. Just stay calm and things will be fine.” Johnny could hear an audible sigh from the other end.

“I know, I know. But this license is what helps keeps us afloat. Its why we can keep everything else so cheap in the shop.”

“I know, just relax and everything will be fine.”

“Ok. Well I just wanted to call and make sure everything was ok.”

“Yeah everything is fine, done this long enough one day by myself will be fine.”

“Ok, I’ll call a little later once all this is settled. Love you mijo, bye.” Johnny heard the click as his father hanged up.

Johnny looked outside the window beside him and was just about ready to head across the stream to get some real food, when a couple of kids walked in. They were no stranger to Johnny, the boys were named Marcel and Jerome, their mother, Mia and their late father Andre, who owned a restaurant across the street that Johnny frequented. And as well they were regulars to the bodega and friends in Johnny’s opinion, have shopped at the bodega since the day it opened, at least that was what his father had told him.

The Two boys were wearing gym shorts and were wearing the jerseys from their little league basketball team. Jerome was about a half foot taller than marcel, standing about four foot eleven, with a short afro, his brother had dreads, which he told Johnny he liked having, because he thought they made him look cool and made it easier for people to tell them apart.

Jerome was holding his younger brother's hand as they walked into the store. He was about fourteen, while his brother was ten. He walked up to the counter and greeted Johnny as he placed a bag on the table with a few food containers inside.

“Hey Johnny.” Jerome said as he pushed the bag to the other side of the counter. “Momma said to bring this to you. She wanted to thank you for watching us last week.

Johnny had offered to watch the kids, after listening to their frustrated mother talk with him the week prior. She had to meet with the insurance company that was holding out on her late husband’s life insurance. She new it would get emotional and didn’t want the kids to be there. But no one was available to watch the kids. So, Johnny offered to watch them for the day, having known her since he was a kid himself.

“Really, thanks, that’s really nice of her. I was about ready to head over there right now actually.”

“Momma said you probably would, but she wasn’t going to open up today. She wants to go say hi to dad today, so she’s getting our church clothes ready for us to go. She also wanted us to get some snacks for a quick lunch at the park nearby. Some chips and soda.”

Johnny looked over to Marcel, but realized he was gone, grabbing chips and sodas and putting them in a basket, struggling a little to hold it. He would go over and help, but he knew the kid could handle and last time he tried Marcel looked a little sad. After picking out their items, Marcel walked back over to the counter, handing it over to Jerome, who put it on the counter.

“Let me ring that up for you guys.” After a few clicks the price popped up, “Eight seventy-nine.” Jerome, handed over a ten and Johnny started taking out the change when he heard the kids talking.

“We can’t Marcel, momma only gave us enough for the snacks. Momma might get flowers on the way.”

The two were referring to the flower stand behind the counter. They came wit ha full set of flowers and vase, guaranteed to last about a month. At least that’s what the advertisement said.

“Here’s your change.” Johnny said handing the meager change over to Jerome.

“Thanks Johnny see you later.”

As the kids turned around and began to get walk out the door. Johnny pulled the five out of the tip jar and placed it on the table, as well as knock down the price sign for th flowers.

“Hey wait.” The two boys turned to him. “Looks like someone forgot a five right here. I think that’s enough to get someone a vase full of flowers.” He said snatching a vase and putting on the counter.

“Really?”

“Yeah, take it, for your old man.”

“Thank you, Johnny.” Jerome said as he picked up the vase from the counter

“You’re welcome, be safe out there ok.”

“We will, thank you again.” He called out as the two walked out the store.

After that it was another few hours of absolute boredom, with nothing else happening, beside the few regulars with nothing to say and the kids with spare change for soda and ice-cream. Bringing in sand from a nearby park that Johnny had to sweep up.

A stoner walked in and was staring at the chips for a good fifteen minutes, He reeked of weed and Johnny just wanted him to leave, so he told him to buy something or leave, which knocked him out of his haze. He grabbed what he wanted, paid and left without another word. Johnny sprayed the air to get rid of the aroma.

Johnny was a few minutes from closing for the night, when another Regular walked in. He was on old man, wearing green military fatigues and an old army cap on his head. He had a long thick gray beard, thick eyebrows scratched at his neck, causing the dog tags wrapped around his net to jangle a bit. His vest was open showing a white t-shirt underneath, as well as the sweet stain around the neck.

“Hey old man.” Johnny said, more as a sign of respect than anything else.

“Hey kid,” he replied with a thick gruff voice. “Where’s your old man?”

“Court house.”

“Ugh,” he replied with a thick sense of disgust in his voice. ‘Fucking hate that place, marble lies and well-dressed buzzards. Something stupid I imagine.”

“Liquor license.”

“Like I said something stupid.” He paused for a minute as realized something and turned around. “God dammit, I came in here to grab a bottle of whiskey. And you can’t sell it right, now can you?”

“Not without opening myself for arrest.”

“Goddammit.”

Johnny glanced under the table and eyed an unopened pack of whiskey bottles. He bent down and grabbed one.

“Hey, it’s your birthday, right?”

“No, my birthday is in October.”

“Really, because I went out and bought you this bottle of whiskey as a gift.” Johnny said putting emphasis on the gift part.

“Wow, you sure kid?” He said as Johnny handed him the bottle.

“Yeah man, you guys are what keep this place running, one bottle isn’t going to hurt us.”

“Thanks kid. Hey before I go can I use you can, insides aren’t behaving and I don’t want to risk a walk back on a full bladder.”

“Sure.” Johnny answered as the old man made his way to the bathroom.

As the door closed another customer walked in. We were wearing a white undershirt and jean. He was a skinny little guy, that shook just a little with each step he took. His eyes darted across the room as he made his way to the counter.

“Hey man, how can I help you.”

“You can start by emptying the register.”

The man pulled a gun out of the front of his pants and pointed it directly at Johnny’s face.

“Fuck me.” Johnny replied raising his hands into the air, a sign of compliance.

“Hurry up empty the fucking register.” He said slamming his hand onto the counter. The man looked like he was having seizure, every part of his body shaking.

Johnny began to lower his hands over to the register and began to try and open it. But it wouldn’t open, it needed a purchase before it could open.

“Let me us grab something to open it.” He said trying to stay calm.

“Just hurry the fuck up man.”

Johnny looked over a gum stand and grabbed a pack. As he looked back up at the robber he spotted the old man sneaking up behind him. Johnny diverted his eyes not wanting to rouse suspicion. He looked back over to the register and scanned the gum. When the register opened that’s when the old man made his move.

He moved up beside the robber and asked in the most unconcerned voice. “Hey buddy do you got some spare change.”

“Who the fuck, are you, he asked.” Looking over to the old man.

“You got any spare change, I could really use some weed right now.”

“Motherfucker you better get out of my face before I- “As he talked he began to turn around and try and point his gun at the old man. Just like the old man had wanted.

As he turned the old man grabbed the robber’s wrist, pointing the gun away from him and Johnny. The robber was shock for a moment, enough time for a quick strike to his throat. The hit caused him to fire the gun, shattering one of the vases behind the counter. The robber reached for his throat with his other hand. The old man twisted the robber’s wrist, forcing him to drop the gun. Then proceed to punch the left side of his face, knocking him into the counter. Johnny finally finished him off, by grabbing his head raising it up slightly and smashing it into the counter.

The robbers nose, broke instantly, leaving a small pool of blood on the counter and slumped onto the floor unconscious. The old man, removed the clip and emptied the chamber, putting the gun on the counter and putting the clip in his pocket. Johnny, called the police as the old man tied the robber up to the doors of liquor fridge. And walked back over to Johnny.

“You good kid?”

“Yeah, just shaken, that hasn’t happened in a while.”

“You did good kid, just relax and breath.” Johnny took a deep breath before breathing out.

“Good?” The old man asked.

“Good.”

“Good, because now I could really go for some weed right now.”

Then the store phone began to ring again, Johnny was quick to pick up.

“Hello!” Johnny said trying to still calm down.

“Johnny? Is everything ok, why are you breathing so hard.” Johnny’s father asked from the other end of the phone.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m ok. We just had a robber come in. The old man helped deal with him, the cops are already on their way.”

“What! Are you ok!”

“Yeah, I’m fine, this isn’t the first time remember. So how was the courthouse.”

“Well, if think you’re ok then fine. I spoke to the judge and we spent an hour taking about the expiration, next thing I know a clerk runs in with some paper work. It seemed there was an error in the mailing list. It was meant to go to a strip club up north. So, everything is good now.”

“Good, that’s good.”

“Look, I’m going to pick you up and after everything is cleared with the cops we can go get some food.”

“Ok dad, see you then.” Then Johnny hanged up the phone.

Turning to the old man, he had popped the bottle of whiskey and started downing a swig of it. Looking down at the robber Johnny couldn’t help but say.

“He could have asked for some spare change.”