

Beautiful Loser

By Michael Mullins

My dad grabbed Uncle Bobby's throat and pushed him against the work bench. Wrenches, screwdrivers, and pliers scattered across the concrete floor. Bobby's foot slipped on a torque wrench, and his head slammed into a vice. Blood gushed from the cut above his left eye.

Despite Bobby's injuries, Dad kept hitting him. Left. Right. Another left. Dad beat uncle Bobby from every angle.

My mother grabbed a shop broom. The aluminum handle struck my father's back. The broom's straw scratched Bobby's cheek. As she jerked the broom behind her shoulder to take a swing, Mom smashed the side mirror of Dad's '66 Mustang.

I snatched the broom from her hands and pulled her from the fight.

My mother shouted, "Dean, stop. He has had enough."

My father stopped hitting Uncle Bobby and took a step back. As Dad walked away, Bobby muttered, "Son of a bitch." A right hook landed on the side of Dad's head. Dad stumbled backward and caught himself against a craftsman tool box. His eyes opened wide when he saw Bobby's fist hurdled toward him.

Uncle Bobby's second punch missed. He stumbled onto the floor.

Dad's steel-toed boot landed in Bobby's gut. Dad threw a haymaker that landed on Bobby's cut head. Dad kept punching Bobby even after he submitted. My mother didn't stop him.

"Bobby, you took your ass whippin'. Now, get off my land. Don't come around here stealing shit again," my father said.

"Dean," my mother asked, "you are not going to let him drive, are you?"

The Ford's wheel well was rusted, the truck's white letters faded brown. Bud Light cans scattered across a cracked dashboard. A set of speeding tickets was tucked in the visor. My father reached inside the window and grabbed the keys.

Bobby swerved as he walked down the road. Halfway to the end, his legs buckled. His hands and knees hit the pavement. As he stood up, his arms stuck out like the wings on an airplane. When Bobby reached the end of the road, he braced himself against a stop sign. The stop sign had been covered with bullet holes and faded red paint. The pole that held the stop sign leaned crooked.

Before my uncle started stealing and selling drugs, he worked for a bottling factory in Bristol. He and my Aunt Tracey had been going on four years of marriage when she caught him in bed with a stripper.

Tracey walked into their bedroom and found Jasmine on top of Uncle Bobby. Aunt Tracey took all of my uncle's belongings and stashed them inside his racecar trailer. She parked the trailer in their yard and sold the belongings for a dollar apiece. She got one hundred dollars for a trailer uncle Bobby paid over three grand for.

Uncle Bobby moved back to Grey County to live with my grandparents. He hoped his VA check would come soon. Bobby had been in the army but never spoke about his service. Before he lost his job, our family never suspected he was unstable, but after the stripper incident, they realized he was crazy. He experimented with drugs such as marijuana, oxycodone, and cocaine. He liked to mix his medicine with Bud Light and Kentucky Bourbon. Doctors diagnosed him with PTSD, depression, and bipolar disorder. Jail, rehab, and state care facilities couldn't keep my uncle clean.

Bobby wasn't always crazy. When I was younger, my father and uncle got along great. They drank beer and laughed at each other's dirty jokes. They fixed cars together. They restored a rust bucket '66 Dodge and turned it into a work of art. The candy apple red paint shined. They made a 440 engine roared.

I remember when I was eight, my uncle bought us tickets to the racetrack. He lifted me on his shoulders and carried me to the concession stand. Uncle Bobby bought me a hot dog. I spilled chili on his hat, but he didn't mind. I clamped my hands over my ears to try to cover the noise. The bleachers shook as the cars passed.

The number three car's tires slid across the pavement and hit the wall. The car's straight lines of metal bent into sharp jagged edges. The announcer's voice spoke over the loud speakers, "number three spun out in turn two." I saw black smoke from across the racetrack. I heard an ambulance siren coming for the driver.

Those days are gone. I was sitting in my room watching TV thinking about the fight I had just witnessed. My mother knocked on my door. "Sunny, your mamaw has your tux ready." I had left my tux with my mamaw so she could fix a seam. Cooking, sewing, and cleaning had been her vocation for nearly 40 years. Raising four roughneck boys turned Mamaw into an expert seamstress, a brilliant chef, and miraculous mother to all.

I pulled into my grandparent's driveway. Papaw sat in his rocking chair outside of his garage. The smell of cherry pipe tobacco lingered in the air. The garage door had been opened. My papaw's '67 Dodge sat in the bay. He waxed his car once a week, twice if there was a car show. My grandfather's garage had been spotless. There were no signs of grease stains on the

floor. All of the tools were organized in a neat and orderly fashion. Old racecar drivers' pictures hung on his walls: Dale Earnhardt, Junior Johnson, and, of course, Richard Petty.

"Hey, Papaw, how are you doing tonight?"

"I'm alright. You ready for your big day tomorrow?"

"Yes sir; I love her."

"Boy, I love that car. I love my pipe tobacco, but I can't live without my wife. You have to ask yourself, can you live without her? Remember, marriage is forever."

The thought of marriage scared me, but I knew once I saw her walking down the aisle I would be fine. "I don't think I can live without her."

"Good, because she is a good girl. She has a great job and comes from a good, Christian family."

"Thanks, Papaw. Is my tux inside?"

"It's hanging in the back of the garage."

"Okay." I found it strange that Mamaw had put my tux in the garage, even though it is as clean as her house. I placed my tux on the back of a lawn chair. "I am going to thank Mamaw for fixing my tux."

"I'll thank her for you."

"Well, I also want some coffee. Mamaw makes the best coffee."

"Dang, Sunny, sit down and I'll get you some coffee." At a young age, I learned if Papaw gave you an order, you better follow it. I sat in the lawn chair and waited.

He handed me a cup of coffee and leaned back in his chair. "So, Buck, how is the house coming?"

"Fine, I guess."

“Boy, when you are building a house, you can’t guess. You have to know that house front and back. You have to know every square inch. If a beam is off a hair on a gnat’s ass, you better get that beam fixed. That is what’s wrong with this country: people are cutting corners and saying things like ‘good enough.’ You and that future wife of yours need a home with straight beams and straight lines. You and her need a house you can be proud of.” Papaw had been a masonry man, a carpentry man, and an overall handyman.

Mamaw once said, “Papaw could fix anything but a broken heart and a hole in the sky.”

“Eli,” Mamaw said as she ran from the house. “He is in your guns.” Papaw tossed his pipe against the garage and headed toward the house. I stood from my chair when Mamaw said, “Sunny, don’t you dare go in that house. I think your uncle is having one of his flashbacks.”

“I’m going to kill him. I swear I’m going to kill him,” my uncle's voice shouted through the screen door.

I ran inside the house. My grandfather stood in the hallway beside my uncle. Bobby had a .22 rifle gripped in his hands.

He raised his head and saw me standing in the living room. “Sunny, I’m gonna kill that drunk daddy of yours. If that mama of yours hits me with that broom again, I’ll get that bitch.”

I took a deep breath, clenched my fist, and charged. My fist landed on my uncle’s cheek. He stumbled backwards almost losing the grip on his gun.

My grandfather wrapped his arms around my body and pulled me outside.

“You want a piece of me, boy,” my uncle said.

“You’re nothing but a pill-head,” I said. “You’re a coward.”

“I’ll show you coward, boy.” He followed us into the yard and placed the gun against his shoulder. Bobby focused his right eye on the gun’s sights.

I stared at the gun barrel with the feeling of wanting to piss my pants.

Bobby's index finger wrapped around the trigger.

I tightened my sweaty palms. With my fist at my side, all I could do was stare down the barrel of the .22.

"You don't want to do this, son." Papaw said. "Drop the gun. I'll talk to Dean, and we can settle this. Sunny hasn't done anything." Papaw's hand eased toward my chest.

"Don't you dare touch him, Daddy, or I'll put you down, too." The gun focused on Papaw. "You always take Dean's side. You treat his kids like royalty. What about me, Daddy? Where were you when Dean and his wife were beating the shit out of me? I couldn't defend myself. Dean wanted to teach me a lesson; now I'm going to teach him one." The gun focused back on me. Uncle Bobby clinched the barrel and prepared to fire.

I closed my eyes, my shoulders tensed. I heard a siren coming from behind me. I slowly opened my eyes to red and blue lights.

My uncle's rifle laid firm in his hands. The police officer opened his car door and pointed his gun at my Uncle Bobby through the car window. "Drop the weapon, sir." With the .22 rifle in one hand, Bobby's arms opened wide. "Drop the weapon, sir," the cop said.

Bobby eased the rifle toward the grass. As soon as the rifle touched the lawn, Uncle Bobby stood with his hands in the air. "Get down on your knees." Bobby's knees collapsed to the ground. With his head hung, Bobby spat on the officer's shoes.

The officer grabbed my uncle by the arm and slammed him face first on the ground.

Bobby tried to escape, but the police officer put his knee on Bobby's back. The handcuffs locked around my uncle's wrists. His eyes stayed closed as the officer lifted uncle Bobby from the ground.

While the officer pushed him in the car, my mamaw spoke, “I’m sorry Bobby. I’m so sorry.”

The squad car’s door slammed shut. With his arms locked behind him, Bobby struggled. His head banged against the glass. He let out a yell. “Help me, Mama. I’m sorry. Daddy, Mama, Sunny, I’m sorry.”

Mamaw buried her head in my papaw’s chest. “I shouldn’t have called them, Eli,” she said covering her ears and turned away.