

# My Son

By Robert McClure

I am a week out of San Quentin when my son pulls to the curb in his Crown Victoria Police Interceptor, an unmarked one that reeks of crack. The odor stings my nose when I lean into the passenger window and say, "Hey, want to come in the house, maybe have a drink?"

"At ten in the morning?" he says, and the way my son looks at me makes him a kid again in my mind: He is ignoring my question about a book he thinks I'd never understand, or he is behind the glass wall of a prison visitation cubicle gawking like I am a snake on display at the zoo.

What I sorely want to say to him is: What, you would rather us cruise around and get stoned in your pig rig? But I know it would ignite the tension hanging in the air with the crack fumes. So instead I say, "After paying my eight-year debt to society, I am entitled to twenty-four happy hours per day. C'mon, let's get reacquainted before we get going."

His bloodshot eyes burn holes through the windshield.

No, it would take a logging chain and two-ton truck to drag him inside my house. I realize at this moment that my son has a bad feeling about the shitty little bungalow he grew up in, this nostalgic juju that has his head spinning with thoughts of where we started and where we are now, of where we are going to end up.

I toss my car keys in his lap and I am thinking, *Son, please, do not make our journey more complicated than it is.*

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He exits his car and flops behind the wheel of my new Caddy. I tell him to skip the expressway and take the scenic route through the heart of Boyle Heights, Cesar Chavez Avenue, a street called Brooklyn Avenue when I grew up there. I say I want to enjoy the sights - the crazy murals painted on buildings, the street vendors, the new businesses that have sprung up here and there, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

He does what I say but does not like it.

I do not care what he likes.

Even after enjoying a week of it at full throttle, freedom still makes me so giddy that nothing much bothers me, even a mute son I have not seen in nine years. The things I notice out the window are a punk boutique, a tattoo joint and two chink babes I know are streetwalkers, and I savor the fact I can patronize any of these conveniences at my whim, permission needed from no one.

My son ignores my comments to that effect, seems somehow put off by them, so in a further effort to break the ice I tell old lardass a lie. "Well, uh, you look great, kid. Really great."

He says nothing and here I was, vainly expecting a return compliment.

For laughs, I slap his thigh and he jerks as if I had grabbed his dick.

My son, you see, never adjusted to the touch of other human beings. Even refused to let his mother breastfeed him, and would let her hold him just long enough to suck his bottle dry. I picture her in the rocking chair by his crib with her arms crossed, returning my son's stare and saying, "It's unnatural for him to cry every time I hold him. It's too fucking strange to contemplate."

"Well, look at that," I say to him, pointing to my left, "el Parrilla is still open after all these years. Say, how 'bout we pull in and order up some burritos for a late breakfast? You still like steak burritos for breakfast, right?"

He looks at his watch, his anxiety self-evident. His eyes appear ready to pop their sockets and sweat dots his brow. He knuckles his right eyeball as if to re-seat it and cuffs the moisture from his mouth. "We don't have time. Macky'll get pissed if we're late."

I smile. "I will handle Macky. How many times do I have to tell you I will handle him, huh? How many?" I have repeated this fact to him often over the last two days, probably more often than I have ever said any one thing to him.

He looks relieved in a hesitant way; like the only time I ever took him to the doctor, the time I told him the penicillin shot would hurt just a second then make him feel brand new.

"I really want to get this over with," he says. "Let's eat after we meet with Macky."

For an instant I forget all about that lump of shit Macky, am jubilant to the point of almost wetting my shorts. It is shameful, I know, to get so excited just because my son agreed to eat a simple meal with me. It is nonetheless a heartfelt reaction that, in fact, makes my heart race, and I actually feel it pound against the two tickets tucked in my breast pocket. I almost ask if he wants to catch the Dodgers game this afternoon, then decide to save the invitation for breakfast.

My smile gets bigger. After all these years, sometimes I actually know when not to push my fucking luck.

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Not that my so-called Life of Crime has been an unfortunate one, at least when viewed in strict economic terms. I have hijacked semi-trailers chocked with electronics and cigarettes, burglarized mansions and jewelry stores, smuggled drugs, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, and took only two falls in the process. The falls were hard ones, I admit, that consumed almost a third of my fifty-two years. To me, though, living The Life has always been about taking big risks to achieve big rewards. I got caught two times - so what? I say think positive, consider I got a free pass on the thousand other times I did *not* get caught. Seventeen years, two months and thirteen days served for a thousand and two criminal acts, all more or less profitable. Not bad, especially when you further consider prison was not totally unbearable for a connected guy like me. And though never what most people would call rich, I always had enough money tucked away to provide for the wife and kid in abstentia.

Some say that was my big mistake, throwing away so many hard-earned shekles on people who turned out to be ingrates - a sexaholic wife and everything-aholic son, two slightly different animals of the same species.

They are right about the wife, to my eternal embarrassment, but women who forget their marriage vows are easily disposed of (to say nothing - repeat, *nothing* - of the so-called friend who induces her to break said vows while you are incarcerated). Sons are different. Whatever indignity he suffers at the hand of his son, a father cannot beat him to within an inch of death, finish him off with a bullet to the head, then reduce his body to sludge in a barrel of nitric acid. A son is the product of his father's labors - or the lack thereof - and for that reason a father's love for his son depends on nothing except that his son is his son.

Believe me when I say these things. These are things I know above all else.

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We leave Boyle Heights when we merge on 60 East toward Pomona, are on 605 a few minutes then take I-10 toward San Bernardino. We are at the West Covina ramp before you know it.

We drive side roads for around ten minutes then pull into the parking lot.

My son says, "It's a set-up. I can feel it."

He parks at the end of a row of luxury cars and I say, "Nah, this old warehouse has just got you spooked, that's all." I look it over and make some professional observations: "We are, what, over four miles outside town? Christ, you could fight a war out here and never upset a civilian ear. It's a perfect place for a hit all right."

This is not what he wants to hear.

I recognize this and say right away, "But Macky would've already whacked you if that's what he wanted to do. Relax."

He asks me a question that comes from nowhere, as if it is something that has occupied his mind all along: "Why are you doing this for me? *Why?*"

My son and I are communicating here, making progress, and a small lump rises in my throat. I think a few beats and almost come clean with him, almost reveal all there is to know about the meeting with Macky. I change my mind when I realize I cannot predict his reaction, that he might spoil the dynamics of it all.

"Why else?" I say, and change the subject. "A condition of the sit-down is that we be unarmed. Hand over your weapons."

He un-holsters his department-issued Sig Sauer from under his jean jacket, hands it over with no complaints - something of a surprise to me.

I tuck the pistol under the seat then look him in the eye. "Your throw-down, too. I know you have one."

He pouts and I hold out my hand and wiggle my fingers. "C'mon, *c'mon* . . ."

He sighs and reaches for his right ankle, unsnaps the peashooter he has strapped there and palms it to me while looking the other way.

"You got a knife on you, can of mace, stun gun, any other weapon at all?"

"All I have now is you," he says to the window, and turns to give me that hesitant look of semi-confidence again.

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We no sooner set foot on the pavement when a guy walks on the loading dock wearing a beat up black suit, white shirt and black tie. I recognize him as Jack Barzi, a giant mass of muscle with hippy-long and graying hair; everybody called him "Chief" in the old days because he resembled that big injun in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He has not changed much.

I stroll up to Chief like I am here to buy the place. He is standing a good four feet above me on the dock and looks twenty feet tall. I remove my Ray Ban Aviators.

"Chief? You work for Macky now?"

He nods and twists his mouth around to make it resemble a smile. "Long time, Babe. You ain't changed a bit."

I give him a smile that is genuine. Finally someone recognizes Babe Crucci for the Grade A physical specimen he is, living proof of the adage that Age is Only a Number. My youthful appearance is mostly genetic; the rest of it is attributable to the weights I humped religiously in prison and the food in there I could barely eat enough of to stay alive.

I say to Chief, "Except for the hair, you're hanging in there pretty good yourself." I take out my wallet and dig inside it. "Look, here's my hairdresser's card. Call her and she'll get rid of that gray for you. My treat."

"You get your hair dyed?" he says, takes the card and says, "I'll be damned," while squinting to examine my hair. He fingers the locks on his shoulder, inspecting them like they are someone else's, and laughs that grunty laugh of his. "Macky says you only been outta The Q a week?"

"Macky speaks the truth."

He digs in his wallet and hands me a card. "This'll connect you to the best call girl service in LA. First pop's on me. Just tell 'em I sent ya."

"Good deal," I say, though I am certain I have already found the best call girls in LA, best in the world even.

Chief looks satisfied before he looks at my son then his lips snap back to their natural snarl. After a few seconds of this he squats, motions me over with a tug of his head. In a low voice he says, "Babe, listen...between you and me. I don't know everything going on here, but I've heard bits and pieces that worry me. Macky pays me - all right? - and I gotta do my job - okay? - so be careful. Don't do nothin' loopy."

"Hey," I say, "you know I do not do loopy things."

"Maybe," he says with the slightest twinkle in his eye, "but you never been convicted of bein' careful neither."

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Chief frisks us then leads us inside, through an area big enough to store the cargo off an ocean liner that now contains nothing but hundreds of wooden plats stacked against support beams and concrete walls, into a maze consisting of two stairwells and three hallways. All of it dark and dusty and in need of pest extermination and paint, then into an elevator. We exit the elevator and are walloped with blasts of cleanliness and fluorescent light, walk down a blue-carpeted hallway.

We stop before a metal door and Chief raises an eyebrow at me, no doubt a reminder of the friendly advice he rendered outside. "See ya later," he says. "I have'ta go back downstairs."

"Hold down the fort," I say, and give him a wink that I can tell makes him uncomfortable.

I open the door.

Three goons are in the reception area, probably Macky's A-Team. They are polluting the atmosphere with wiseguy talk until they see me, then silence grows so thick in the air you can hear the humidity rise.

They sneer and shrug and straighten their jackets and ties.

Before I can ask where Macky is, the fat hump appears at his office door.

"Babe Crucci!" he says with outstretched arms, "*Paisan!*"

*Paisan*, shit. Macky's no more Italian than Sammy Davis, Jr. was. He's a fucking mick with a *Godfather* complex, a punk paddy with Pacino pretensions. He has the kind of Irish face Mama always warned you about - dirty red hair, rheumy eyes and a bloated, splotchy complexion that reminds me of a diseased lung.

I do not usually allow men to hug me - call me homophobic, go ahead, it is still behavior that sends confusing signals on the old cellblock - but circumstances dictate I let Macky do so today.

The Hug is over with and Macky turns to my son. "So, you're Leo."

"Wow," he says, "you figured that out all by yourself?" and starts to light a smoke.

At which point Macky slaps him in the mouth so hard the cigarette ricochets off the wall a good twenty feet away.

Macky steps back and smiles at his bodyguards, who have all pulled their weapons by now.

I prevent my son from doing something stupid by placing my hand on his chest.

Macky turns to me. "Sorry you had to see that, Babe."

I hold out both hands in a conciliatory manner. "You had the right," I say, and part of me is in total agreement, that part of me that wishes I had been around more to properly discipline my son.

The other part of me wants to rip out Macky's heart and bite a chunk from it before his horror-struck eyes.

It will be that kind of meeting.

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Macky closes the office door and sits behind his too-big desk. Me and my son ease into the chairs across from him and Macky takes a chrome-plated revolver - which is also too-big - from the desk drawer and makes a production of assuring it is loaded, unlatching and spinning the cylinder then flipping it shut. He places it on the desktop, grinning like the cocky asshole he has just confirmed that he is.

"No disrespect intended, Babe, but I was shocked to learn that you are standing up for this pitiful excuse for a son." He looks at him. "A cop. A drug addict. A lousy gambler who don't pay his debts. Pathetic is the best word that comes to mind."

I seethe a few seconds before I say, “He has certain compulsions that he cannot presently control. But - and I say this as objectively as any father can - he also has certain qualities that make him worthy of redemption.”

This is a true statement. My son has a good head for academics, especially for math, and has a business administration degree. And he was always as proficient and enthusiastic a street fighter as his father ever was; just ask any of the old neighborhood bullies who don’t walk or talk quite right anymore. Better yet, ask any of the so-called criminals who have filed complaints of excessive force against him, and I hear there are quite a few.

Macky looks so bored he is practically yawning, so I take a thick envelope from my breast pocket and toss it over the desk to him. “In any event, this is not about him. It is a matter of honor with me,” and I say this because this is the kind of corny goodfella crap I know impresses Macky.

And he is, in fact, impressed. He sighs after a long few seconds and says, “Well, I certainly understand that,” and nods and shrugs as if he would never allow a stand-up guy like me to dishonor himself. Like he is only accepting the money for my benefit.

He finally picks up the envelope and peeks inside it, thumbs through the bills absentmindedly like he knows it is all there. He looks up. “I demanded that both of you be here in person so I can make something very clear.” He points a fat finger at my son. “The only reason you’re not dead or at least seriously fucked up is because I’ve known your father for years. This is the only pass you get. Ever welsh on another betting tab with one of my guys? I’ll have you slaughtered like an Easter lamb - Crucci or no Crucci, cop or no cop. Understood?”

My son barely nods.

Macky looks at me.

I nod.

Macky appears satisfied.

I rise and prepare to say, *We now have no conflicts and no debts between us*, a take on a line from *Godfather III* that I know will make Macky want to hug me again.

But Macky does not stand. Instead, he leans back in his chair, picks up the revolver and rests it on his bloated stomach. “Not yet, Babe. I want to talk about something else.”

I sit.

“You need a job?” Macky says.

My son rustles in his seat.

I am not surprised by the question because I know for a fact my so-called unemployment is the subject of much talk and conjecture on the street. “Why do you ask?” I say.

Macky smiles. “I hear you’re not working for Sacci anymore.”

“He will not take me back,” I say, “because he has problems with him,” nudging my head toward my son, “that are similar to the ones I just resolved with you.”

This is a true statement.

Macky nods understanding. “You pay him yet?”

“I offered but he will not return my calls.”

This is also a true statement.

He looks disgusted. “Sacci, the prick, never had no sense of justice, no honor... Look, you know about Victor Tarasov?” he asks.

“Not much.”

This is *not* a true statement.

Macky turns solemn, and his face becomes even more inflamed than usual. “Tarasov’s a Russian who’s been establishing a growing presence here in LA for a couple years now. He’s trying to take over my drug and gambling trade. Shit, eliminate me from the face of the fuckin’ planet is what he wants to do. I need good men like you to protect my interests. Men who will permanently see to it that Tarasov will no longer present a competitive threat.”

He winks as if a wink is necessary for me to understand the underlying meaning of the latter comment.

I pause as if I am thinking it over - though what I am really doing is savoring the irony of all this. Then we talk amicably about the proposed salary, the car he will provide, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. I say, “Sure, on those terms I will help you address this Russian menace.”

This is *not* a true statement.

I say further, “I have admired and respected you from afar these many years,” which is not true either, “and swear upon the soul of my dead mother that I will be loyal to you ‘til my bones turn to dust.” Ditto.

Macky is so clearly moved by this goombah bullshit, the likes of which I have heard uttered only in movies, that his eyes mist up.

He rises from his chair, places the revolver back on the desk and walks around the desk to give me The Welcome-Aboard Hug. “I’ve always wanted you in my family. C’mere, you big wop, you’re one of us now.”

I am very relieved he does not hold out his fucking hand for me to kiss, which would have sent me into such a fit of uncontrolled laughter that it would have spoiled everything.

He gives me The Hug and I enthusiastically return it.

We separate a few inches and look into each other’s eyes. I pat his cheek affectionately. “Macky?”

“Yeah, Babe?”

“Victor Tarasov wanted me to say goodbye to you on his behalf,” and I clutch his trachea by sticking three fingers just below his voice box on one side and poking the thumb behind the other side, then squeeze my fingers together and twist with all my might.

To learn how to crush a trachea, surround a fat carrot with, say, two sticks of celery. Wrap a flank steak around the entire concoction. Anchor it in a vise then hold the top steady with one hand and perform the above procedure with your dominant hand - a forceful squeeze followed by a mighty twist. The carrot should be cleanly broken and the celery reduced to a juicy pulp when you unwrap them. If the latter two events do not occur, do not try to kill someone in this fashion - instead, go to the gym.

Macky’s unconscious if not dead already, his face turning reddish blue and streaked by a very pallid white.

At the other end of the spectrum is my son’s face, which is drained of all color. He lights the wrong end of a cigarette and takes a deep drag before his eyes go wide at

the flaming tip. He nonetheless takes another drag then stares at me and moves his mouth soundlessly, looking like a big fish that needs to jump back in the lake for a dose of oxygen.

I have my son's rapt attention.

So I allow the weight of Macky's body to lower itself to its knees. I halt its descent, step behind it, cup the chin in the palm of my left hand and grab a hunk of hair with my right. In a rapid counter-clockwise motion, I twist the head.

The neck snaps.

My son flinches.

Try as I might, I have never figured out the right combination of inanimate materials that realistically simulate the sensation of snapping a human neck. You can, of course, practice on stray dogs that shit in your yard, the bigger they are the better. But, if you are a kid, I do not recommend you do this to the pet German Shepherd you name Adolph who bites you one too many times. Your parents will ask far too many questions.

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I ease the carcass to the floor.

My son is relatively composed now, has lit the business end of a fresh smoke and is gazing wistfully upon the scene.

"Did I really just see what I think I just saw?"

"No, so forget about it."

He smiles. "How much did Tarasov pay you to do that?"

"Kid, I am *flush*."

His expression now is one that can only be described as "avaricious."

I continue: "Um, sorry I didn't warn you in advance but--"

He waves me off. "I might've ruined it." Then his expression mutates to one of concern and he nods at the door. "Hey, how are we, you know, gonna get out of here alive?"

"Oh, *them*," I say. "They will be no problem," then I tell him my very straightforward plan: I surprise the bodyguards outside with Macky's pistol and he ties them up with the pull cords from the window blinds.

"What about the gorilla downstairs?"

"Chief?"

"Yeah."

"I will tell him what happened then offer him a job with me and Tarasov. Me and Chief are friends, plus he needs work now. He will be no..."

He is pouting.

"What now?" I say.

"Why not offer me a job? I-I don't think I can be a cop much longer...even if I wanted to."

The way my son looks at me makes him a kid again in my mind, like the times he asked to go to baseball games with me and I ignored him and breezed out the door.

I retrieve the revolver from the desktop, to say nothing of the fat envelope of cash next to it. I move to the door with my son in tow. I conceal the gun behind my back and

grip the doorknob. I hesitate and whisper to him, “All right, we can talk over breakfast about you working with me and Tarasov.”

He nods in a satisfied manner. “Man, am I ever hungry. Steak burritos, right?”

“At el Parrilla,” I say and start to turn the knob. Before I do, though, I cannot help but ask, “Hey, after breakfast, you want to go to the Dodgers’ game with me?”

I know, *I know*, I was supposed to wait ‘til breakfast to ask him that. But, the thing is, now I have little doubt what his answer will be.

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