

Robert Soto

My Little, Dark Neighborhood

“We change, I have changed.” (Donohue)

When I was seven my neighbor Tony died. Would you believe me if I told you that? At least, I think I was seven. See, I don't remember much before his death. I don't mean birthday parties, Christmas presents, Grandma's music box, I remember all those things just fine. The important things. But they say adults don't remember half the things they did as kids, especially before seven. The stuff you remember becomes your past and the other half well, that just sort of becomes a blur. Like it never mattered. Don't get me wrong, I remember plenty of things growing up. Like when my friend Ted drove a Tonka truck into my head, Mom's Friday meatball dish, and Dad's mustache. These things become your past while the rest of it is lost in memory, and no one talks about it.

November 3, 1996, I was a kid riding my bike down the paved streets of my dark neighborhood. The houses of my dark neighborhood were all painted white. The kind of white you find neatly stamped onto a helicopter landing pad. But regardless of this particular white's history of making giant bold H's noticeable from 30 stories up, the houses never shone too brightly. But as white as the houses were, the streets were just as black. And the two clashed together in a battle of absence and presence. It was hard to look at; it bothered my eyes to see such drastic changes in shades but never a single color. So I didn't look. I mainly looked at the sky. It was usually blue. Some days the sky would be so vast and overpowering that I would lay out on my dad's '92 Accord for hours on end staring upwards at the endless palette of monotony. I would spoil myself and indulge

in my blue eye candy for hours and hours until nature took it's course once again and night time cast it's consuming shadow on my little, dark neighborhood.

November 3, 1996, Tony was a man watering his orchids, the same way he would water them on November the second and the first and many days before that too. He spoiled his flowers rotten. That's the only explanation I came up with when a couple of weeks ago I noticed them begin to wither at the stems. I remember my mother telling me that spoiled kids get too much of a good thing and they turn nasty. I just figured the same applied to orchids. Tony had the kind of body, that if you were to put him into a Jell-o mold, he could flawlessly fit every contour of that shape. Sacks of fat hung from under his arms, below his chin, above his brow, above his neck, beneath his gut, and all of it stunk. He always had sweat and dirt caked in between his folds and yellow sweat stains under his arms.

Tony's hair was brittle and cracked but held together well because of his strong curls. His skin felt like the rough side of a sponge and was the color of powdered Ovaltine. And you would probably never notice any of these features because you'd be too rapt by his eyes. The whites of his eyes were yellow like glossy lemons and they had a certain kindness to them. I found comfort in his eyes, the way they sat so heavily in his skull and created bags underneath them. I could see him on those advertisements for eye glasses that you see at the optometrist. His eyes were better than any of those digitally altered phonies. And when the blue sky decided it was time to give it a rest until tomorrow, I had Tony to look at.

Needless to say, many of my nights were spent at Tony's house where he would teach me about football and girls and life and nature and Italy and cars. I learned about

the important things. How a V6 engine with a four cylinder layout can improve car efficiency, how to chisel a stick of wood into an arrow, how big a Sicilian pizza is and how long it takes to eat, and how long a mayfly lives. These important lessons among many others became the building blocks of my memories past.

November 3, 1996, I was a kid in Tony's house. Tony's house was scraping bare minimum. It was a place for him and his wife to sleep and nothing more. He easily had the smallest house in my little, dark neighborhood and this was no secret. I knew this because my father chose to mention it every night during dinner, a constant reminder of how privileged we all were, and how unfortunate Tony's life had become. In fact, the whole neighborhood seemed to have the same mind set about him. At parties I could always hear the elders talking about poor Tony and how pathetic that fat slob has become. Many times it would go a step further where one would wish an ill fate onto the sad bastard and the elders would lessen themselves to their grade school roots of poking fun and ridiculing a man who never stood a chance in the first place. And like a room full of hopped up seven year olds, the mockery became a frenzy of laugh riots, ruthless insults, and vicious banter. Tony never stood a chance, but he didn't care about that, perhaps because he never knew of these parties or perhaps he did. Either way, his life had become sheltered from society and society had shunned him for doing so. He was a recluse of the worst kind limiting himself to the safety of his home deserting all hopes of human contact and letting the basis of relationships become a thing of the past, like a memory. But Tony had me.

November 3, 1996 I was a kid watching Tony die. Death isn't as glorious as they make it out to be in the movies. It's a lot less dignified and much more vulnerable. The

thing about death is it kicks in very suddenly and ends very abruptly. Tony taught me that. See, Tony was walking towards me with a slice of pecan pie and suddenly his right leg buckled. His knee came crashing down shaking the foundations of his little home. And with one knee on the ground and one leg propped up attempting to support his weight, I saw Tony's yellow eyes begin to roll. They twitched and squirmed and thrashed violently in his skull and all this scattering of his brains had caused his body to go limp and sink to the floor. Tony quivered every ounce of life he had in him until he had nothing left. See, in the last few seconds of his excruciating ordeal Tony's head had cocked itself backwards so far and with such force that it had caused his neck to crack down the middle. And now, with his mouth flung open and his eyes facing the inside of his head, Tony was dead, and the only thing I could think about was his eyes. I missed them already.

My little, dark neighborhood proceeded to talk about Tony with more sympathy after November the 3rd. They would say things like "it was a damn shame" or "the bastard couldn't save himself" or "he was a pathetic prick but he didn't deserve that." And at the funeral they all gave their condolences and lied about how highly they thought of him and how unforgettable he was, but they never knew him. Nobody did, and now he doesn't even have a chance. Like memories, certain things you remember and others get lost along the way, and no one talks about it.