

Christopher Malo

*Stoop*

It was finally over. The summer that is. We used to have four distinct seasons when I was a kid. Spring, summer, fall, winter. That's what I remember. This year, like most years, we did in fact have a Spring. It lasted all of a week. So when the sweltering heat and humidity of the summer months finally broke, it was important to make the most of the time. Once the sun goes down and the temperature drops, the respite of oppression makes being outdoors a priority. And what a better place than the front stoop. (I recently moved to Paris for a year. The two things I missed the most were sushi and stoops. Go figure...)

It was not long after the weather broke that I was on the stoop talking to one of my best friends. We are both late night individuals, so it is normal to call each other around 3am with confidence that the other is likely still awake. So there I was. Stoop. Cigarette. Phone. Conversation.

The house is on the corner of 6th and Wharton. It sits on the northwest corner and faces south, looking down 6th Street. Glancing to the right is Gold Star Park. To the left is a mixed block, followed by some bougie projects. Mid-sentence in my conversation, I looked up.

A Mexican had turned the corner and was walking directly at me. Seeing one at this hour was far from unusual. It was common. They often work at restaurants and bars and once they close they start making their way home. My neighborhood is very mixed, with a large Mexican population. As with anyone on the street, the first thing I do is threat assessment.

What I noticed first, between when he first became visible and the curb on the far side, was that he had both his hands behind his back. And they stayed there. This was a problem. My

brain instantly calculated the implications. This was a threat.

There was no telling what he had behind his back, but the fact he was keeping whatever it was hidden, compelled an appropriate action. I told my boy on the phone to hold up as I watched the man step off the curb and continue directly in my direction.

My brain continued to take in any and all information, calculating all the possibilities. It wasn't uncommon for the Mexicans to be a little drunk either, and since the man seemed to be stumbling slightly, this was a distinct possibility. But the look on his face was wasn't filled with a drunken stupor look, it was marked with an agenda. To get to me.

My brain still processed each step he took with rapid speed. I could turn and go in the house, which if he had a knife back there, would give me enough time to lock the door. But if he had a gun he could start taking shots, and/or get me and my roommate inside, in private, out of public view. There was also a touch of ego and pride coursing through me at this point, and I didn't want to back down. He was on my block. Fight or flight had kicked in and I decided to fight.

I stood up quickly, on the third step of the stoop and swolled up as big as I could, trying to alter the balance and put him in the position to start having to make decisions. Change the momentum so he would be doing the calculating, noting the fact I saw what was coming, not backing down, taking an aggressive stance, my puffed up body language and being over him, to display a sense of power. As I did this, I began weighing at what point I should rush him. I wanted a clear decision about the action I was about to take in about three of his strides. I decided when he reached my curb, as he stepped up, I would launch, aiming a punch to his face, mindful to be aware at every point where his hands were and what they held.

He continued his approach and in an effort to get him to reveal what he had behind his

back, in a loud, aggressive, threatening voice, a tone to convey that I was also going to be a threat, said, “What's up dude?” Street code for “I'm ready and willing to do whatever I have to do.” He continued to approach. I continued to calculate. That's when I noticed. He was bloody. Covered in sweat too, but this carried no significance to what was transpiring. Especially in light of the fact that he had blood on his face. From his nose. From his mouth. Everything was unfolding both rapidly and slowly, at the same time.

The next revelation to factor in was I could tell he was crying. “Help... Help...” he mumbled. Broken English, looking sad and scared and exhausted. My defenses were beginning to drop as I wondered if my perceived aggressor, was actually a victim. Of course as my mind began that lineage of thought, it also countered itself considering this could be exactly the ploy an attacker might use to get someone to lower their guard, and my defenses shot right back up. But then he did something that removed any question whether he was on the offensive or defensive. He stepped across the threshold from the street onto the sidewalk in front of my stoop in front of me, and turned around.

Both his hands were bound and hogtied behind his back with nylon packaging cord. “Help. Help...” he continued to gasp.

At first, things happened fast, but seemed as if they were slow. In a minute, things happened slow, but felt like they were transpiring quickly. But at that moment everything seemed to both feel and unfold as if caked in a heavy mud.

I knew if I was in his shoes, I would be doing the same thing. I knew I would be desperate for help. I know I would know my intentions were good but would understand if the person I was begging to assist, was put off by the sight of me. But I still didn't know what to do. I didn't want to leave him out there. I couldn't speak Spanish to let him know I would help.

(Spanish used to be my default secondary language, but since my return from Paris, French has replaced it as my default foreign language. Out of practice it comes to my brain as a jumble of Spanish and French. I was going to be of no use here. At least as far as communicating.)

I also didn't want to invite him in. Everything to this point had transpired over the course of about 10 seconds, so if his attackers or captors were still in pursuit, they could still be right behind. My eyes dashed between the man and the corner he had turned and appeared from. I felt for the dude, but there was only so far I was willing to go or put myself or place at risk. I put one finger in the air. "I'll be right back." Things sped up.

I went inside. Locked the door. "I have to go," I told my friend. Called 9-1-1. Got scissors. Looked out the window. He's across the street. Talking to two other Mexicans. Probably safe. Guy rides up on bike. Stops. Now four people. Plus me. Safe. Outside. Hold up scissors. He turns. Cut through cord. Free. Back to stoop.

That was it. I called my friend back, telling him what happened. The Mexicans stayed in the street. Talking. The hostage made no effort to flee. Instead, he continued to talk, as did I, until he casually sauntered back down 6th Street. In the same direction he came from.

Twenty minutes later, as I still sat on the stoop, still on phone, the undercover cops showed up. I explained what happened and they said they would ride around and take a look. I saw them make a few laps before they disappeared. Just like the man had.