



Requiem for a Lowrider

The following story is excerpted from a commencement address presented by Albuquerque novelist Rudolfo A. Anaya to the 1978 graduating class of Albuquerque High School on June 1. In his address, Anaya pointed out that although many changes have occurred since his graduation from AHS in 1956, there are still many similarities: "We were post-Korean war; you are post-Viet Nam. We faced the poor times and recession of the late 50s, and you face the issues of inflation and high unemployment. So we have, I think, more in common than might appear on the surface." He goes on to describe his experiences with Jessie, a high school friend.

BY RUDOLFO A. ANAYA
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Jessie was one of the original lowriders, a crazy cruiser with a customized '48 Ford . . . he spent more time cruising around the school on Broadway and Central than in it! But he was one of the kindest and brightest persons I have ever known.

In the 50s, we developed lowriding and cruising to an art! And thank heaven for cruisers and lowriders, right? Just think how many lowriders it has taken to make this country what it is today. Christopher Columbus was one of the original lowriders! That's right, I think old Chris was just kicking back, cruising around the Atlantic, and by accident he happened to bump into the Americas. And most of us wouldn't be here today if he hadn't gone cruising that Sunday.

*But what is cruising all about?
When you say, "Hey Dad," or "Oye Jesito, I'm going
cruising . . ." The typical response is: "Where are you going?"
And the typical answer is: "I don't know, just cruising . . ."
Just cruising . . . that's the question which keeps turning in
my mind when I think about Jessie.*

*"We have a big assignment in History," I'd say to him,
"Let's go hit the books at the library . . ."
And he would smile and put his arm around my shoulder and
say, "Hey, let's go cruising, man. You only live once. You take life
too seriously . . . Just cool it . . ."*

*(Cool it. In the 50s it meant kick back, take it easy . . . the
words change . . . language fads come and go . . . but deep down
inside we all still have to deal with the real gut issues which life
presents us. You're going to have to make choices.)*

*Because what is it that we're looking for when we go cruising?
We are looking for excitement to put in our lives. We go cruising to
meet a friend, we hope that that special someone we like is also out
there . . . just cruising. We turn up streets randomly,*

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we follow the crowd . . . if there's a wreck or a flight or a party everybody shows up, looking for the action, looking for some excitement. In short, we're all waiting for an accident to happen!

That's what Jessie was doing. I know now. He was dissatisfied. He cruised around waiting for something to happen. In a roundabout way he taught me that life requires a little more planning than goes into just cruising.

But everybody loved him. Duck-tailed, baggy pants, hair slick with pomade, swinging like a *pachuco*, he'd come dancing down the hall, snapping his fingers, looking the girls over . . . He was Mr. Cool! He was crazy but he treated everybody with respect. Even the teachers liked him . . . that is when he was in class long enough for them to get to know him.

"Hey, Rude!" he used to say, "Let's go cruise around before class. We can smoke a few tokes and be back in time for third period!"

Life was easy for him when he was cruising and smoking up, looking for that excitement he needed.

By his senior year he was beyond just drinking beer and smoking *mota*. I still remember the first night I saw him loaded with heroin. We were going to a dance at the Heights Center, and he came to pick me up. He was really loaded, and I knew it was on heavy stuff. *Carga*, horse, smack, . . . call it what you want, the words change, the junk remains the same beneath.

I cried, "Hey, Jessie, what are you doing to yourself?" I asked, "Do you know what you're getting into?"

I don't want to sound moralistic. I had done a lot of things he had done. We were young men and we were growing up, bumping into accidents and new excitement everyday was a part of our lives. All I tried to tell him was that there was other excitement to life. I tried to tell him that sometimes I got my high from some of the books I was reading, and that . . . yes . . . even some of the ideas the teachers kicked around in class were exciting. It wasn't all sheer boredom. I didn't give him a lecture. I talked to him as a friend. I was concerned for him because I loved him as a friend . . . and I knew he was on the wrong road!

"Easy, Rude, easy daddy-o," he smiled, "I'm okay . . . I know what I'm doing . . . Hey, this is a great high. I can handle it. Come on, let's go dancing!"

And he was a great dancer. The girls loved him. We all loved him. The

only people who could have cared less about him were the ones he had run into while cruising . . . the ones who sold him the junk!

After awhile his habit was daily. He dropped out of school. We drifted apart . . . went our separate ways. I stayed in school, hoping there was something there that would help me solve the complexity of my own life. Jessie began to run with a new crowd. But he was no longer the happy-go-lucky lowrider I once knew . . . he was running scared.

We talked once, but it didn't do any good. "You take life too serious," he told me, "It's only a slow cruise . . . so take it easy. Look, I'm not busting my ass on books, and I've got a car, plenty of bread, everything I need." And he smiled.

But we both knew it wasn't Jessie who had those things, it was the monkey on his back who owned everything . . . and the monkey was growing, sitting by Jessie as they cruised up and down the *barrio* streets.

The last time I saw him was for graduation night . . . 22 years ago; it almost seems like yesterday. I was graduating; he wasn't. I wanted him to be with me and share whatever this small accomplishment meant. "I wouldn't miss it for the world," he smiled. "I may not be getting my little piece of paper, but I'm glad you're getting yours. Hey, you keep getting those things and you're going to be a big *vato* someday . . ." We laughed.

But he was there to wish us luck, and he came to the party afterwards.

He was really high that night, and he was desperate. He mentioned once that he needed money, that he had big debts to pay, and then the party got loud and crowded and I lost track of him for awhile. Later, when I asked for him, somebody told me that some of his "new" friends had taken him outside. I ran outside, but his car was gone. Jessie had gone on his last ride.

The following morning his brother called me and told me Jessie was dead. They had dumped him down by the river that night. He had paid his debt. We saw too late that he had drifted into an accident from which there was no return . . .

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Rudolfo Anaya is the author of the prize-winning "Bless Me Ultima," "Heart of Atlan" and other works reflecting the Hispanic heritage of the Southwest.