

## GRAHAM NICKSON

*Sun in House III*, 2014  
Watercolor on paper, 18 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## STEPHEN GUTIERREZ

# The Count

Family myth,  
meshed cultures,  
and shots of whiskey

**M**y *nino* The Count made me proud to be his godson. He exuded nobility. Not many people have it. Even at the young age I speak of, my early elementary school days, I knew it. And I knew a special day when I lived one.

And I vowed to preserve this particular one and set it down in words once I became adept enough to handle them. I do not know if I am. I am just ready to try. I am game, because I have a streak of courage gained from a fierce shot of whiskey, followed by a slowly imbibed glass of the same amber-colored fluid. What bigots call “Mexican courage” isn’t mine, but memory’s richness is. Isn’t that where the treasure lies? Where what we need to endure exists when the day seems blank and awful, and the future bleak? I have known those soulless times. Maybe this piece is written against them on this pleasant blue afternoon, against the paralyzing fear to live well and honestly when all the lies have caught up to you—I have a few secrets—and it seems useless to go on. Simplicity at work in the complicated world—that’s the ticket. I have a basic urge to communicate quiet strength and share what I have found moving in the world, no matter how small or uneventful the moment.

My *nino* was an extraordinary man. That is, my godfather The Count radiated a larger-than-life aura. He seemed descended from another race of men, not like the men around him, who were good enough. He came from another breed entirely, not pitifully human, cramped in spirit, practical and judgmental and guarded. Not like the mass of men when you break them down, the regular guy who is decent enough, but not kind enough to make the world bearable for the sensitive. Oh, that’s me! I loved The Count, my godfather.

“How did he become Count? Did he always go by that?” I asked my mother once.

“I think so,” my mother answered. “I can’t remember a time when he wasn’t The Count.”

She mused in her kitchen. “He was a magnificent man, wasn’t he?”

“Yup, nothing special on paper. Just grand. But no more.” He was already dead and buried. They all were, my older relatives who had played a big part in my life, raising me unconsciously by their actions, by their selves. I watched them carefully and picked up what I could of

grace and strength. There were affable uncles, and gregarious aunts, and stern grandparents, and occasionally distant relatives arriving in Los Angeles from up north, from Arizona, from the coast. They stayed at my grandparents' modest two-bedroom home that sat squarely on a ramshackle street in Montebello, the east side of Los Angeles. They impressed me with their character. And seriousness. And intelligence.

It shone through the bright, brown eyes of the men slapping down cards at the kitchen table, my grandfather gruff and serious, too, and obviously pleased to be playing cards with his uncle Nacho or cousin Rufino. And this brightness came through the faces of the women catching up on the sofa in the living room. These faraway relatives stamped me positively when they visited. They had it, the stuff I wanted and knew to be important. Gravitas. Dignity. Confidence.

That's who we were. Competent people. Strong people. Unbowed people. I am giving you the best side of my family.

I am leaving out the sweet failures and belligerent drunks and the two heroin addicts, admittedly, the nondescript men and women worth something, but not to me, not in this essay where they necessarily take a backseat to the rest, sweetly and sadly fulfilling their average destinies with their own immense heartaches and loneliness imprinted on their faces, paper plates bearing abundant food on their laps at family parties. And I don't herald the mysterious few who fled the family—who broke free from heritage and race and all the complication and shame or just plain bother of being one of the least favorable hyphenated Americans. I'm talking about the richly successful self-made men in various fields (trucking and construction come to mind) and the glamorous women in prosperous marriages who didn't want to associate with "the race" anymore, not strongly, anyway. They didn't want to be considered a \_\_\_\_\_ (one can't, can't voice it without apologizing first, which I refuse to do), so evidently in the eyes of the world.

Self-released ethnics. I'm not naming the son of one who exited completely in time and, ruining the empty comfort of his room, and the way he left a note that brought his father back to the fold, tragically spent—beaten, humble, lonely, and uncommonly kind. I'm purposely not dwelling

on the house he died in, a pale gray McMansion perched on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He stuck a handgun in his mouth. He pulled the trigger.

I skirt the failures and the absconded—there were enough to fill another essay, or a book—and concentrate on the moderately successful, the everyday victors, the pardonably assimilated homeowners and workers. I shine the light on contentment as opposed to regret that characterizes so much serious memoir, rightly. I echo the happy voices at payday, and laughter.

The Count. My *nino*. My godfather. He was taller than average, just over six feet, probably, with silvery-gray hair and big ears he pushed it over. He wore smoky-gray horn-rimmed glasses at times and never made me nervous like some other men—like those familiar figures at family gatherings who loved to prank me, or make me the butt of a joke. They sat with wary eyes, perpetually scared of being taken. They knew a deeper insecurity than anybody in the room and took it out on kids while they could.

So my intuition told me. But The Count operated differently. A great jokester, he nevertheless remained imperial in manner. He didn't make people the butt of his jokes, either, but life itself. I didn't feel afraid around him.

I tagged along with my father on his day off a few times when we ended up at *El Count's* for an afternoon visit. Whiskey invariably came out. It got poured ceremoniously into two short glasses with an ice cube or two for my father. *Nino* Count drank his straight.

They knew how to drink. I didn't. But I know now they knew the fine art of imbibing.

"*Salud!*" A glass got raised. It kissed another. Maybe a beer chaser came into play, but I doubt it. It's the whiskey that sticks in my mind. It was sipped appreciatively at the oval table in the cozy kitchen with the plump birdcage hanging out the window, but no bird in it. "Your *nina* and I think it's good to have a birdcage with no bird in it, Steve-arino! Look at the door. Open!" Not a bad idea.

*Nino* Count worked for the state highway division, the road maintenance people, and he wasn't a drunk. He happened to have a day off on the same weekday my father did. He invited us in when we showed up on the porch, happy to see us in midafternoon.

"Oye, Count! Here we are," my father said. "Just passing through the neighborhood."

"Well come on in! *Pásale!*" He lumbered through the small living room that my *nina* had done up tastefully in some kind of Asian—Japanese—theme. It was different. Low orange sofas and black lacquered end tables sat on a hardwood floor with scuffed marks before the TV, a huge console against the wall. Pictures of those Japanese women with fans saw us through to the kitchen.

He took down a bottle from the cupboard. He spoke over his shoulder the whole time, asking about my mother, my brother Albert, my sister Norma, everybody. He made us feel comfortable.

It wasn't a remarkably different visit. It went as usual. Still, the day grew into something bigger. It separated itself from the others. Maybe it was the natural mood of summer, the easiness of the season. July is nice, what summer is meant to be, expansive, carefree, inviting. August hasn't arrived horribly, with dry heat and headaches, and the Santa Ana winds that cause fires in the canyons. It is still new, the feeling of freedom and nothing to do, and the air more still and full. And the landscape greener, outside the window. It is relaxed in the tiny kitchen with my *nino* and father this day, this uneventful day where nothing grand is going to happen, nothing dramatic or upsetting. Nope, you won't get that. It's going to be low-key. It's not going to suggest anything but itself, or slip in anything deep about life or the nature of God or even about the chances of the Rams that season.

It probably got discussed, the Rams.

"I think they got plenty good players. They just got to put it together, do it!"

So my *nino* claimed. So he still believed, year after year, in the bright destiny of the Rams. His eyes sparkled. His analysis of the season included the goddamn Cowboys and those monsters the Vikings. Jeez! We got to stop them!

"Yeah? We need to go see them, this season, for sure! It's not so much. They give you a good seat for eight dollars." I can't pretend to know the price of Rams tickets in the late sixties.

I do know the tenor of this day. In the kitchen, shortly after arriving, the bottle came out, brandished in *nino's* hand like a very special potion only reserved for the prince, his guest, my father. "*Un* shot?"

"*Un* shot to sit here a little bit with you, Count. I know you're busy."

*It is still new, the feeling of freedom and nothing to do, and the air more still and full.*

"Nah, doing nothing today, nothing."

"Well, that's good. It's your day off."

"You can say that again, brother. Right here, let's sit. *Sentamos.*"

We slid into the booth in the corner, me in the middle, pretending I was in a restaurant, looking around. I knew the pictures and knickknacks on the walls and shelves, but they always seemed new—whiskey glasses from souvenir shops around the state took up a wall, underneath a pleasant picture of San Juan Capistrano, my *nina's* favorite place, the old Mission with the swallows aflutter in the belfry; and a clock in the shape of a tea kettle hung nearby; and humorous marriage vows stayed framed in burnt wood next to a calendar that reflected the season, with an ocean wave curling in my mind still, green blue beneath an orange burst of sunset by the pier that looked both close and far, and lonely, and tranquil.

It was a turquoise booth seat we squirmed on, very comfortable, and *nino* Count threw back a shot. Did he? He did. And my father followed with a shot of his own. Ah! It burned! Then they did nurse the beers with the second whiskeys that got poured in short order, and studied on the table, twisted about. Memory awakens and deposits me in the kitchen more firmly, whiskey breath in the air, talk. *Nino* Count sits regally in a loud summer shirt, like a Hawaiian shirt but for older men, not so silky. It is him, my father similarly authentic in an unassuming, button-down, almost colorless yellow shirt with short sleeves, a pen stuck in the pocket, a small ink stain permanently visible at bottom. Such are the grand details of an important day in my life! Such is the material upon which my life turns!

*There they sit in the picture kept in memory, my nino Count the road worker and my father the railroad man enjoying a civilized drink in the prime of their demanding lives. It's framed in gold. It hangs on the mind's wall unmolested.*

It got better, *nino* in fine form, clutching his whiskey glass on the Formica table, regaling my father with stories, sending me outside to play with Pepe's toys if I wanted.

"Sure! I don't know where he is. Out! Oh, yeah, summer camp!" He threw his head back and roared the news. He had remembered where he was, Pepe! He doted on his only son.

My dad sipped modestly at the table, eyes shining, happy to be with his *compadre* on his day off, sharing *un* whiskey. "How's work, Count?"

"Far away today, ha! Another one?"

"No, better not. *Tengo que ir*. We have to leave soon." They sat for a while more.

They didn't have a third. They made their share last.

"And my cousin Manuel, have you seen him?"

"Oh, that son of a gun. He came by . . ." Spanish got used. English abused. Not terribly, but mangled enough to get my attention. I liked it. I cannot reproduce it now. I don't want to do it badly.

They practiced it, our language, our balled up version of blue-collar English and tainted Spanish, the low

form of Mexican Spanish, I understand from people who speak Spanish fluently (I don't), not the lowest kind but colloquial enough to make the biggest snobs in the world, rich Mexicans, laugh.

And turn up their noses. And indicate stupidity.

"Oh, boy, those are the worst," I had heard. "Those sons of bitches think they're something. But they're just peasants like us, only dressed better."

They relayed the latest news from work.

"Oh, yeah. There's still some stuff on the crew. *Unos de los gringos* don't like me. But they're just a few. I wore a Mexican hat just to piss them off, a little sombrero!"

"Ay, *cabrón*. You're too much, Count." After that, they finished up.

It's quite simple, this essay: Two whiskeys are taken on a Tuesday afternoon. Two Mexican-American gentlemen—my half-Spanish *nino* Count, unrelated to me (the blood thing) but close in my heart, and my all-Mexican father—two East Los Angeles working men—two steady bread winners—are stopping everything, and smiling at a kitchen table. Before them a whiskey bottle sits. They clutch glasses, get glassy eyed, but not drunk.

There they sit in the picture kept in memory, my *nino* Count the road worker and my father the railroad man enjoying a civilized drink in the prime of their demanding lives. It's framed in gold. It hangs on the mind's wall unmolested.

No great turn for the worse occurs. No puzzling shadow casts itself over the table as the clouds thicken outside. No phone call interrupts the peace with bad, bad news. *Nino* doesn't confess an affair that I barely understand, as might happen in a poignant story related by a naïve narrator. This isn't fiction, but unadorned life, paltry in its drama but rich in its overtones. *Nino* doesn't give himself away, Pepe doesn't barge in bleeding, "Dad, they beat me up!" nor does my father share his dread of having the hereditary disease that will lay him low in a few years, the smallest signs showing.

Nothing like that darkens my essay. Nothing like that ruins my day. In fact, it ends perfectly with a hardy salute at the curb, *nino* Count seeing us into the car after slapping my back and clutching my neck fondly. "Steve-arino! Be careful out there, everyday! I'll tell Pepe you came by. He'll be sorry he missed you."

"Thank you, *nino*."

"For what? I didn't even get you drunk! Ha!"

I waved goodbye to him from the window. I told myself I would remember the day.

"Yeah," I said to myself. "I need to do that."

My father drove along. "You like the ice cream he gave you, *su nino*?"

"It was good." But that conversation came later.

We had already run a few errands and the afternoon visit had scooted behind us, not a part of the current bubble of time we lived in. It was in the past already, a glorious memory lodged in my brain for when I might need it. It is probably an occurrence—if it could be called that—that doesn't impress you. It falls flat and seems worthless as an anecdote, a remembrance to share. Why bother?

Because. Really, it is only because of men like that in my life—because of those two in particular, my gentle father and my boisterous *nino* Count—that I am able to do anything. Anything worthwhile. Anything commendable. Anything laudatory and lasting and fun and high-spirited, and worth a shit. I insist on the connection beyond the sphere of mere "influence" to something deeper—call it the magical alchemy of being that helps transmute an ordinary boy into something finer by timely exposure alone, not actions and lessons and morals, but spirit. I distrust the two-dimensionality of obvious "influence" and grope for something larger—something close to transfiguration but without the radiant cloud of God casting a shadow, only the luster of common human love, as if love can be common. When you're enveloped by steady love, and the source is fine, you are changed from within, not without. My meaning is lost. I'll make it plainer. I trace my modest success in writing and my small measure of decency and goodness matched by a tolerable amount of oomph at least in part to an afternoon spent with two neat whiskeys in my sight, and an open birdcage.

"That was fun, wasn't it?" my father asked, right after we left. He turned to me as if the question were important.

"It was pretty good, Dad," I said. "It was fun. I always like seeing my *nino*."

"So do I. He's a good man. There aren't too many like him."

"You're like him," I said.

"I am?"

"Yeah."

He concentrated on driving. "Well, I don't know about that."

"You are." We caught a green light on a busy industrial boulevard and passed up a diesel truck lurching through the intersection. It had a Rams sticker on the rusted rear door of the trailer. The white helmet with the blue Ram horns bounced along next to us for a second. I remember these silly things. I carry them fondly.

**Stephen Gutierrez** has published creative nonfiction in *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Under the Sun*, *Santa Monica Review*, *Third Coast*, *ZYZZYVA*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Cleaver Magazine*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*. Gutierrez lives and teaches in the San Francisco Bay Area.