

# COMING CLEAN

by Anina Robb

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"Oh, not today, Papi," Jasper shrugged and shrank down into his chair at the breakfast table. "Can't I get a break? I just want to go to the skate park after school with Savion." 1

Jasper's father poured him a bowl of cereal and shook his head. 2

"No, not today. You know that Wednesday is the busiest day at the bodega and I need your help stocking shelves. The park will be there another day. I know you are disappointed. But this is the way that things are right now." 3

Hunh. Right now? Jasper thought. This is the way things have been forever. Jasper had been helping his dad at the store for as long as he could remember. When he was a little kid, he had liked it. It made him feel grown up—especially when the customers got to know him and would slip him a dime or a quarter for helping. But now that he was in middle school, helping at his dad's store was a drag. He wanted to hang out with Savion after school. He wanted to sleep in on the weekends. Instead, he was stocking shelves and mopping floors. 4

"At least will you teach me the register? I am almost 12 you know, Papi." 5

"Okay. It's a big responsibility. But maybe it is time you got a seat at the head of the store. I'll show you this afternoon." 6

"Great. Thanks! I'll see you after school!" And Jasper was gone—heading out the apartment building down the block to his middle school—happy to have something to look forward to. 7

Savion, his best friend since first grade, was waiting by his locker. "So, are you going to come skating after school with all the guys?" 8

"I can't. I have to work." Jasper dug through his locker for his books. 9

“Man, you are always at that store.” 10

“Well, I’m working up front today.” 11

“Really? Interesting.” And Savion walked away. 12

“Hey, Wait up!” Jasper called after him. 13

In the lunchroom, a group of boys who were regulars at the 14  
skate park walked past Jasper and Savion. One of them, the  
best skater, nicknamed Spike, spoke up. “Hey, I hear you work  
at that bodega? You know, I really like candy.” They kept on  
walking past. 15

“What does that mean?” Jasper asked Savion. “And why do they  
all wear tie-dye shirts?” 16

“I don’t know.” Savion’s voice wandered off. 17

After school, Jasper went straight to the bodega like he  
promised his father. He left his book bag behind the counter  
and got to work restocking the shelves with all the Wednesday  
deliveries until his father was free to show him the register. His  
father was helping Ms. Santos with her shopping list in the back of  
the store. It was then when everything happened quickly. Savion  
came in holding his skateboard and right behind him was Spike.  
They both had their heads down and walked quickly down the  
penny-candy aisle. Spike gave Jasper a look that made Jasper’s  
blood feel like ice in his veins, and Jasper froze as he watched his  
best friend scoop up a handful of penny-candy and shove it in  
his jean’s pocket and walk right out of the store. Spike did the  
same thing. It all happened so fast. Jasper had no time to think  
about what he should do or say. He just stood there—frozen like a  
snowman. Like an idiot. 18

The next day at school, Savion was not waiting at Jasper’s locker  
for him. Instead, he was a few lockers down standing next to Spike  
and wearing a tie-dye shirt. In English class, Jasper passed Savion this  
note:

I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU STOLE FROM MY DAD’S STORE.

After class, Savion waited for Jasper. “Hey, Jasper. Listen, I know you 19  
are bent out of shape, but listen, it was just a little penny-candy.

And if you let the skaters steal from your dad's store then you can be a skater, too. Do you know how cool we will be? Do you know what this will do for our cred?"

Jasper asked with amazement in his voice, "Those guys will let me be a skater? Even though I can't get to the Wednesday practices?" 20

"Yeah, dude, you will be like the cool candy-man." 21

Jasper had never done anything like this before in his life. In fact, he'd always done the right thing. And he knew how hard his father worked to keep the store going and to make sure things were okay for him. It wasn't always easy—especially when his mom had gotten sick. Then it was just Jasper and his dad. But they had done okay, and the bodega had become the most popular one in the neighborhood. 22

But, wow, did Jasper ever want to be one of those skaters—and there was no way he was ever going to get to the Wednesday practices after school. His papi had made that clear. What was a little candy? His papi probably would not even notice. It couldn't matter that much. 23

"All right," he shook hands with Savion. "Let's do this." For the next two days after school, Spike sauntered in with Savion. They cruised the candy aisle, and Jasper turned his eyes down to the register while they pocketed fistfuls of hard candy and chocolates. When Jasper saw them, his heart raced so fast he thought he was going to pass out. Little beads of sweat gathered at his forehead and by his ears. He started to shake. Was this worth it after all, he wondered? 24

He peered out the corner of his eye and could see his father leaning over a mop in the store's back storage room as his friends raced out the front door of the store, laughing, shoving candies in their mouths. His father was in the back—trusting him to watch out for the whole store, for *their* whole store. Jasper decided that he had to tell his father what was going on that evening. 25

The walk with Papi from the bodega to their apartment was torture. Jasper dropped his book bag by the front door. While Jasper did homework, Papi cooked dinner. The smell of the fragrant rice and tortillas made Jasper's stomach grumble. "Wash up. Dinner is ready," Papi called. 26

Jasper turned the water faucets on and let his hands soak under the warm stream. He looked up at his reflection in the mirror. How could he have been so stupid? His father works all day then comes home and makes him dinner, and he is letting boys steal from his—no from *their* store, to be cool. What was he thinking? It was time to come clean. Jasper cupped his hands and splashed his face with water. He walked out of the bathroom knowing just what he had to do.

*Source: Courtesy of Anina Robb.*