

RUSH CREEK

Back and forth they rode, the glories of battle tempered with the sound of dying men. Karna, the most skilled of all archers, sweeping death upon the army of the Pandavas until even Krishna began to feel some sense of fear. Yet, the events changed suddenly. As the sun began to fall towards the coming darkness. Karna's chariot, perhaps weighted with the souls of so many dead warriors, became lodged in the churned earth of the battlefield. Karna leapt from his chariot and placed his hands upon the buried wheel. Thus Arjuna's chariot, with Krishna at the reins, found Karna and stopped across the battle line.

"Ho, Arjuna, lower your bow, for do you not see that I am defenseless, and outside my chariot?"

It was Krishna who answered. "Defenseless? I see a great warrior, humbled by the earth around him. Do not feel pity for him, Arjuna. Do what you must."

"You, Krishna? You of all would cheat the rules of honor and ask Arjuna, who is in my heart a brother, to kill me in this way?"

Krishna smiled sorrowfully. "Think of your life, Karna. Think of when you have laughed in the face of honor and duty. Do you deserve more than those you shamed?"

Karna, for the first time, felt fear, and fought harder to remove the chariot wheel from the mud. But the grip of the earth held, and he ceased struggling and lifted his eyes with sadness as if to say 'this should not be' as Arjuna raised his bow. The arrow came sliding toward him, weaving patterns in the air, and separated Karna's head from his body. The battlefield perfectly quiet. Each and every one of the warriors hearing the vibration of Arjuna's bowstring humming towards silence.

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They walked through the bushes of huckleberry that lined the creek's banks, stepping on twigs and old leaves bitten through by ants. On the other side of the river, the light fell through the clouds in long towers, as if it was funneled through a magnifying glass in certain spots. He took her hand, knotting their fingers at the knuckles, feeling the rough of his calluses like sandpaper on her light skin.

"Over there is where Manny killed him," he said, pointing to the thick copse of birch trees that overlooked the beaver dams.

"What did he do to him?"

He thought about it, thinking that perhaps it was important to her that she know the exact manner of Pablo's death. He could see her taking her time in waiting for his answer, using the space between them

wisely, as if the importance of getting it right in her head the first time was paramount. How can a manner of death be explained without blurring the tale into some theatrical production, complete with detail and audience participation? He shunned the idea of describing the shooting, thinking that his voice would betray him in the moment when he needed only cold, flat emotion.

"I think it was pretty bad. I don't know, I couldn't see it all too well. I heard them yelling first, and after a while it became difficult to tell who was saying what. They were just shouting."

He looked over to see her expression. "But I do remember the yelling stopping and a silence that seemed too long and then hearing Manny say, 'Asi, como es,' and then the sound of the gun going off."

Asi, como es.

Over in Somerville, near the factories of white smoke and the numbed faces of the men coming of the line at 5pm, he would hear that phrase. It was the saying of the hopeless, or maybe the hopeful. His father would say it after turning off the TV, which meant that it was time for the whole house to go to bed. It ended the matter right there, with a tired sort of finality, but if you listened the right way and believed in the lessons learned from all things, you could see that it was really an expression of confidence. Like the drunk, jobless teenagers who ran at each other in fighting poses, it was a way of recognizing that for all of life's shitty strikes against your body, you could survive. The knowledge of going onward for tomorrow's sake.

Asi, como es.

"You think Manny knew you were out there?" she asked.

"Doubt it," he replied, though it was easier to say than believe. He already felt involved enough for this lifetime, and it got his nerves tingling to ponder over the question for too long. Jose Tomas, who lived about a mile down the road had come around the evening after and told him that Manny was looking for him, and though he had been afraid he sought Manny out right away, finding him sitting on the stoop in front of his apartment building. He had figured that if Manny had suspicions it wouldn't do much good to try and hide.

"Where you been lately, kid?" Manny had said to him as he walked up.

The other guys, Quique, Toño, Ernesto, and the rest searched him for any change in expression, but all he said was, "Around. Seeing this girl." And with that they had all just cracked, as if the only thing that could be more interesting than a murder was the thought of him anywhere near a girl.

He couldn't recall the rest of the conversation. The wind had picked up a little, and it seemed to carry everyone's words away into the street-lighted sky. Their mouths moved in slow-motion twists and pulses,

especially Manny's. It was then that he realized, his face inches from the laughter and grins, how beautiful Manny was. His eyes so dark that they swallowed the warmth from those around him. The arc of his nostrils reminiscent of a quickly sketched figure study he had seen once on the public television channel. He spent the remainder of the evening watching among them as Manny breathed, pulling on his Marlboro and exhaling until it seemed the smoke danced in and out of his pores.

He looked over at her. "You're not afraid of me telling you?"

"No. I think maybe I was, but now that it's done, I'm not."

"I didn't see much of it, anyway," he said again, looking away from her.

"Sometimes people see enough to matter, and sometimes they see nothing at all. I don't know which is worse."

He had seen the killing close up, but it was easier to imagine the look on Pablo's face from the outside, filling in the gaps with bits he'd seen in movies. So starkly real that any shred of excitement the killing might have had lost itself in the transformation from life to death.

He walked in silence with her back to town across the fields of wind-kissed mossflower and violet earth, aware that what was unsaid between them was larger than the fading, burning sun that hung desperately over the rooftops. Pablo had made him stop and listen to the dead spaces in between people. The space of nothingness that filled him with a desire to burst out in a song made of tears. The sound of a memory.

Once when they were younger, and interested in stones and hidden things, Pablo had showed him a group of trees planted in concentric semi-circles, the arcs growing smaller as they neared the creek. In 1909, a man named Harvey Bellows had come to the creek in a haze of desperation after losing his wife to childbirth. There, his boots pressing against the roots of the long grasses curving like tongues over the water, he reached a pact with God. It was agreed that every day for a year, he would plant a tree in memory of his wife. In return, his wife would reappear after the year had passed. In this story, Harvey Bellows dies in the Spring of 1910, leaving behind a small forest of hope, full of leaves drunk on their own brilliant color in summertime.

He had watched as Pablo stepped from the bank onto one of the large stones sitting half-submerged in the creek, the tiny, silvery fish quickly swimming for cover as Pablo's shadow crept over the water.

"What's the matter?" Pablo had said, noticing him still standing on the bank. "The water won't hurt you."

He had been right, the water didn't hurt. Not even when he finally did lose his balance, overly eager to see what he thought might have been a crawfish, and soaked himself through. Pablo had helped him up, laughing, but sad too, thinking of the punishment he would get at home.

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Down in Somerville, where his father worked, the people were getting agitated. Women who normally stayed indoors with their televisions for the better part of the day found themselves making short walks to each other's front steps. They canvassed the neighborhood alone, sometimes in pairs, and often in multi-hued hair curlers.

"Can't believe it wasn't someone around here," said Mrs. Johnson.

"You really think it was?"

"Had to be. Just had to. People around here notice when something's not right. You can smell it in the air ahead of time."

"C'mon, Liz," said Mrs. Silvestre, "the only thing in the air is the smell from the factory, and let me tell you, the smell's getting worse."

"Well, that's because it's the end of summer. Happens every year when it gets hot like this."

"That's not true. Remember that summer when it was over 90 almost every other day? That heat killed just about everything, including the smell."

And so it went, with no one really wanting to know who had killed Pablo. What was real, and what no one spoke about, was the sense of danger that had started to creep in to the town's subconscious. That danger, which some blamed on the vanload of Guatemalans looking for work that had arrived six months ago, and which others described as a sort of fear that made it difficult to cut into your roast beef at dinner for fear that it might be your last meal ever, made friends out of persons who once shunned any sort of communal relationship. Bake sales were suddenly held every weekend. Joe down at the bowling lanes on Market Street had to turn away teams wanting to join the Fall League because there just wasn't enough space or beer to accommodate everyone.

Even Manny noticed it.

"Town's just about going nuts," he thought. What was the big deal? The town had lost plenty of kids. Just last year, that idiot girl had fallen in a drunken stupor off the back bleachers during a football game and cracked her skull wide open. He didn't have much sympathy for people who couldn't handle themselves right, though he'd heard she'd been getting groped up pretty good at the time by two guys from across town, and gotten carried away.

Manny had enough problems of his own to deal with anyway. His grandmother had started acting up again, with those fits where she would speak in Spanish and curse his father to the depths of the Virgin's soul for leaving Manny, Jorge and their mother here in this rat-stinking town. He began to notice that at dinner the plates always had a little bit of food left on them from the night before. If no one cared to clean them, he

thought, what did it matter that his little brother had started sniffing paint thinner with two friends every day on the way home from school?

The small things that deteriorated first were signs of the bigger decay coming, he knew that. This kind of thing had occurred before with his parents. It hadn't been a surprise when his father had left. He'd seen it coming, from the extra bit of liquor his father drank after dinner, and the way in which he'd started changing channels on the remote with more impatience.

Manny believed in those final, big changes, oddly enough. They refreshed him like nothing else did. In the hours close to dawn, he would snap awake and be aware of the silent darkness around him. In those moments, where he could practically taste the night sky it seemed so close, he never felt more alive.

The only thing that bothered him was that he didn't have any friends. Every now and then he would think that perhaps it might be better to give up some of the tightly held control of his life, just to feel something other than his sense of self. It would be good to be really present for once with another being in the same room. Ideas like that, however, seemed laughably ludicrous. He knew that thoughts which contradicted your nature never amounted to anything. His grandfather had been killed thinking like that. In that three week long uprising down in the Caribbean, his grandfather, *el carajito que nunca habia leido ni un solo libro*, had run alongside the protesters and revolutionaries, filled with the power of mass movement and fervor, knocking down signs and trash cans and shouting just like the rest of them. He ran with them, not understanding what he was yelling, right around a corner and straight into a thick smoke that wanted to paint them whiter than white, and instead of ending up at the *colmado* that evening where he should have been, he had been found leaning with his back against a small tree, a pinkish trail of blood, brains and left eye membrane marking his slide down the bark into death. "He was a true hero of the *patria*," the priest had whispered to his grandmother at the mass, out of the hearing of others. But at the *colmado*, they remembered him for the arrogant kid he was, checked to see if he had owed anyone money, and slapped his memory down like the rest of the dominoes into the game of life.

Manny attended Pablo's funeral two weeks after the killing. Almost half the town was there, and many from Somerville too. The procession from the church was mostly silent, maybe due to the chill in the air. The previous night, Manny's mother had turned on the space heater in front of his brother's bed, and it had glowed like some living thing, brighter and then duller, throughout the night hours.

The only other funeral Manny had been to had been for his great-uncle Ramon in the Dominican Republic, long before the family had

made it to the United States. That funeral was nothing like this one. He had walked behind his mother and father on the street in San Jose de las Matas, the pavement higher in the middle as it sloped away towards the rain gutters on each side. People turned their radios down and stepped out of their private lives to join the procession. Some came because it was something different to do that day. Tio Ramon had been someone important, though, running acres of cacao fields under a watchful (most often drunk) eye, keeping the Haitians in line when they forgot they were Haitians and started acting larger than they were. He was known for his tongue-lashings, which could last minutes or days according to legend. Some people even whispered that Tio Ramon had died because he had run out of things to say. ("He should have gone in to politics" was the standard response to that particular way of thinking).

Walking toward the cemetery, Manny noticed the *figueres* who normally lined the street corners on their *pasolas* and *motos*, slouching over the handlebars in new tank tops and gold chains, had cleared out of the way. That was respect, Manny thought, because he had never seen that happen before. His cousin Rafa was the most *figuere* of all, and he had never seen Rafa move for any one, except for that one *guapa* with the rounded hips that swayed oh so nicely on her trips to church on Sunday morning.

The coffin bearers walked softly, as if afraid of waking up Tio Ramon and hearing curses from the other side. Although Tio Ramon had been a big man and well-fed by his wife, the coffin bobbed lightly on their shoulders like a puff of smoke, and even as it was being placed into the grave Manny thought they had trouble keeping it from floating away into the sky. They finally trapped it with shovelfuls of dirt, laden with loss and Tia Yanira's weeping.

Later that evening, as he pretended to sleep, his father's sweaty t-shirted back against his own, Manny thought about the wooden coffin. Manny had seen his father and Tia Yanira and two other uncles arguing right after the funeral. The argument was about money and who hadn't paid for the undertaker to fix up Tio Ramon's face all nice, and for the casket, and for the priest. He decided the coffin was empty.

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She found him partly submerged in the creek, his legs occasionally covered by the water as it rose and fell. The town's first reaction was outrage, arguments over kitchen tables and calls for a manhunt in front of the police station, until the coroner determined it could only have been a suicide, and then suddenly people only talked about it to themselves in silence.

No one knew.

No one expected.
I just saw him laughing.
He said he was fine.

His mother, after scrubbing the kitchen sink into near non-existence for seven straight days, would move back to the Dominican Republic where everyone learned to turn his death into a horrible accident that must have been intended for him so that he could make the Virgin de Altigracia less lonely in heaven.

She saw Manny the day after, walking past the Safeway with his usual scowl and into the maze of alleys and corridors that ran behind the main street buildings. She knew Manny hadn't killed him, because Manny still looked like he wanted to kill someone.

The fact was that they had been fooled. All of those who might have mattered. He had been so good at it that for her, the pain of his suicide came from the surprise of it.

She thought he was stronger than that.

"I'm a lonely person," he had told her once. What did that mean? If one chose to live alone, to live apart as if deaf to the shaking world, what could be done? Had it always been that way? He couldn't maintain anything beyond a year, and that was being generous. There always came a time when the boredom took over. Boredom. Unheralded, yet such a powerful force. It covered up his weaknesses, and for that he was grateful. To him, life was like watching a body being pecked apart by indifferent crows. The drumming of his thoughts left him speechless. He could see in such detail. He found himself thinking how pleasant it would be if just for once he could see only vague forms. Our nature asks us to search for meaning, but he knew the torture of having too much meaning. If only he could be a banded hawk gliding low along the diagonal slopes of the hills, skimming over the long grasses whose tips ticked his chest as he flew by. A place where meaning was something undervalued and basic.

He had told her of a dream, though whether it was his or Pablo's she wasn't certain.

A shallow mountainside, the cold escalating as it traveled across the meadows of yellow grass and dry earth. On the opposite side of the field, towards the creek, a medium sized maple tree with red-silver leaves and bark turned a burnt honey by the sun. A marker. Two hundred years ago, the land was overrun with beauty.

This was going to be the place where he would live. The house he would build would receive the shade of the mountain in the late afternoon. A home built to his design and by many hands. His own would take part. The library floor would be thin, long pieces of cherry-wood locked into a clay-colored sheen across the entire room. In one corner a

matching desk capable of holding more than his life on its surface. Large panels of glass that could be pushed outward to taste the night sky on warm evenings would make up two of the four walls, and by lamplight would reflect the rows of books, surrounding him in volumes and volumes of comforting words.

From the windows of the library, he would see the maple, like some silvery, watchful eye. Its leaves too distant to see precisely, forming shapes in the sweeping breeze. In summer he would seek out its shelter from the sun and fall asleep beneath it, the book sliding from his lap and closing over an earmarked page. When he would wake, frightened by the immensity of the mountain and the openness of the meadow, he would make his way back to the house and sink deep into a library chair, thinking of lost opportunities, until the shadows on the wall told him it was evening.

There would be other evenings with other boys, she knew, passing half-truths to each other as they walked along the creek hand in hand. The air held the heavy promise of the known future. She thought of the terrible tears that were certain to come when she arrived home. She was comforted with the knowledge that in the end, though, she would not be held responsible.