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LA NOCHE DE LOS LAPICES



THE VERNAL POOL

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La Noche de los Lápices

I loved visiting my grandfather when I was younger. He always had the best stories. Growing up in Argentina for him was quite different than the life I was used to as a kid. He talked quite heavily about *los tiempos fáciles*. If I let him, he could talk about that till the end of time. One time he had us both stay up till three in the morning talking about going to the panadería as a kid for his mom to get free pastries for helping them sweep the porch and all the different stories he heard while being there. Or the time he and a couple of his friends decided to grab a bunch of inner tubes and float down the river. Halfway down the river the tube got ripped on a fallen tree branch forcing them to stop early and walk home dripping water the whole way home. Grandma was not as amused as I was by this story nor did she enjoy me staying up that much past my bed time.

The first time he told me one of his stories, I was too young to remember. He recalls walking to bed and saw me struggling to relax, so he lifted me out of the crib and tried rocking me to sleep. After an hour of rocking he tried pleading with me to go to bed. He insisted I found his sadness entertaining and a dark comforted smile drew itself across my face. He said he finally decided to tell me a story and that his voice comforted me to sleep. It was probably because his deep and robust voice drowned out the sound of the gunshots in the driveway.

Ever since that night, I could always rest assured that before I boarded my plane to leave Argentina he would wake me from my slumber and lead me into the sitting room where a glass of warm chocolate milk would be waiting for me. The smell of his filterless cigarettes were imprinted on the couch cushions. Grandma did not let him smoke in the living room but he knew I wouldn't tell.

There were numerous stories he would tell me. Like the time he ran down the hill into a barbed wire fence and came home tangled. The wire stabbed itself into his eyebrow and blinded him with blood. By the time he made to his house the blood had gotten itself into his nose and it became difficult to breath.

When I was five he told me about a story about how he became a hero.

“I was preparing for this day for weeks; the awesome fight. I was ready to make history. When people read in the history book they were going to see my name Alfonso Walter Coba. I reached into my drawer and pulled out my magical bandana that gave me strength and wrapped it tightly around my head. With my louuuuuud voice I screamed away the evil demons with the help of my own army of friends and was seen as a hero.” He had this little glimmer in his eye a glimmer of white hope and inspiration.

This story motivated me. My own grandfather, a war hero. I never understood what he was fighting about all and that did not matter, all I needed to know is that he kicked ass. He fought the monsters. My grandfather was in the history books all over Argentina and possibly the world. I talked about my grandpa when I was at the playground, when we were at the supermarket, and when I was with all my friends.

When I was ten my parents sent me back to Argentina for Christmas break and I looked forward to the day my grandpa would rescue me from that mildew-smelling room with sheets that poked into my skin. Sure enough two days before I left he shook me awake and led me to the living room where a glass of warm chocolate milk and a blanket were waiting for me. We talked for hours, he was really interested in America. He had numerous questions about the schools and the food, or just about California. I didn't want to talk about America, though. That was not the story time I remembered; the story time I longed for all those years away from him.

After regaining control of the conversation I asked him,

“Abuelo, cuéntame la historia de cómo fuiste un héroe.” “Ahhhh” he replied with hesitation, “Sí, yo me acuerdo de esa estoria.”

“It was a dark day, I knew what I was about to do was a noble thing for my friends. The local teachers’ protest, what a great way to help rally up our fellow classmates to support something. I searched for my red bandana long and hard. I’ll have you know I spent three whole months of saving change to buy the fabric that went into that bandana. It was not pretty, the stitching was clearly off and the scissors I used to cut the fabric were old and rusted but I made it with my own sweat and tears. I wrapped it tightly around my head and went off into the recently awoken morning. The police, they fought us hard but we yelled back harder. I remember how my close friend Juan almost got beaten to death by two cops but we pulled them off him, real crazy. But we did it we marched all the way to the podium on the steps of the Casa Rosada and spoke what we felt about this whole bullshit situation—don’t tell your grandma I used that kind of language—But anyways, we were there for about an hour just speaking our mind. Some of us were logical. Others, not so much. But we were all passionate that day and all to this day still feel righteous about doing what we did”. The faint glimmer was in his eyes again, a light coming from a man who did something he knew was right.

I could not believe my ears. I did not think my grandpa could become an even more powerful person. He rushed me off to bed shortly after and I had dreams for years of a big protest with all these people wanting to do good and the police trying to stop them. Then, one person emerges from the piles of passed out bodies, none other than my grandpa, and he ran past all the horrible men to get to that podium. And once he did his voice calmed everyone down, the police stopped fighting, citizens stopped to observe what was happening, even the president came out to apologize for what he had done to anger my grandpa.

It had been a few years till my parents and I could afford to send me back to Argentina. It was not until shortly after my

nineteenth birthday that I went back to visit. My grandpa was terminally ill and had very little time left to live, so between the whole family we salvaged together enough money to send my dad (his son) and me to visit him. He insisted to us that none of this was a big deal and he'd always had heart problems; but we all knew it was a big deal. He was no longer the same grandpa I grew up with. His skin no longer resembled that of a human but more so a decaying banana. He was constantly out of breath and always sleeping somewhere.

I did not care too much though. I came to Argentina for two things alone that time; partying and women. With a legal drinking age of 'being simply old enough to hold the beer' I was in teenage heaven. I spent most of my time and money playing Mr. Moneybags buying all my new friends drinks and taking pictures with beautiful women coming home at five in the morning. I had figured out that if I lifted the front door before pushing it it wouldn't squeak, letting me sneak in.

One of my last nights there I walked into not a dark sleeping house but one full of life. There was my grandpa sitting in the chair he has been using the last twenty years. And there was my chair, with the same blanket I have been using for almost twenty years. I glanced at the table expecting a hot chocolate milk to help wash the tequila shots from earlier out of my mouth, but instead there was a beer. "Sit down por favor" he said with a certain worry in his voice. He offered me a smoke but I refused. "I always tell the esstory desde the manifestación ahora, here is the other part.

"After coming home from the rally my parents were mad. They overheard horror stories of left wing citizens missing because the police decided to do something about it. I thought this was going to be a positive change, but what we did was set up the dominos for the biggest shock of all history. I got into all the history books, I was famous, I was a hero but the cost... I sometimes wonder if it was worth it. That same night I came home the government thought enough was enough, and implemented a marshal law policy on the

country. Everyone had to have their ID on their person at all times. You're wondering what happens if you don't have it? Just wait a bit mijo I'll get there. Those sons of bitches don't care where they get you, or who is there with you all they want is to do physical and emotional damage, I was asleep in bed when they came in. They beat my father up in front of me and blamed me for it, telling me this was my fault for not being a good citizen. It didn't stop there. They pulled me out of my own house and shoved me into their old bright green ford falcons. Blindfolded and gagged, they take you to a building outside the city where they could fuck with you all they wanted without having to worry about laws or witnesses. Have you ever sat in a urinal for more than about five minutes? Gets uncomfortable right? That was my bedroom bathroom and kitchen for five months; don't you understand these people are pigs who knew they were messing with human lives but kept pushing on. Do you know what it's like to go to sleep to the sound of girls being raped in the stalls next to you? Do you know what it's like to have one of those men come inside and violate you because his favorite girl is too swollen and infected to have sex? Have you ever been raped mijo? It something I don't wish upon even my worst of enemies. And the tortures, their favorite to use on me was to tie me to an old metal bed and spray me with water, touching a car battery to the bed. The electricity surging through my body and reverberating in my brain. I actually looked forward to passing out in hopes that I wouldn't wake up... There are costs to everything, mijo."

There it was, that faint glimmer in his eyes again. All along I thought it was passion or bravery, but it was none of those things.