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Manpower

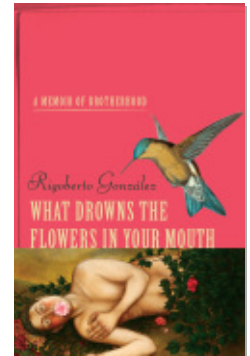
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passes; why did they make me drive around in circles until I found a printer for them?”

“When was the last time you were in an airport, Turrútut?”

You didn’t hesitate with your answer: 1982.

That was the year our mother died. That was the year we all flew for the first time to México—a financial sacrifice meant to relieve the stress for our mother’s body on her final trip back home. For our mother, it was her first and only flight. I always knew that, and I remembered how protective she was on the entire trip, how excited you were, how scared I was. But I didn’t know until that moment that it had been your first and only flight as well.

I leaned back in my chair with a sense of shame because my passport was a cluster of stamps that told the story of my international travels—Singapore, Spain, Italy, Scotland, England, Switzerland, Lithuania, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panamá, México, México, México, México, México. When I looked at a world map, it wasn’t as abstract to me anymore. And then I wondered if I had failed you yet again, from that day Abuela had suggested I take you with me to college, that in effect I should have finished raising you because it was my duty as your older brother.

And then your six-year-old son walked out of his bedroom, his eyes mischievous, so eager to engage with the surprises of the day. He walked right into your arms, and you received him, kissing the top of his head. “Ay, Tilico,” you said, nicknaming him the way Abuela used to do to each of us, the way we nicknamed each other. The affection for your son—you had learned it from our parents, certainly, and it gave me permission to keep moving on my journey because you had your own and that was perfectly fine. And every once in a while, for a few precious moments—I had to make peace with this truth—we crossed paths like two hummingbirds descending on the same rosebush before zooming out of sight to their respective vanishing points in the sky.

MANPOWER



Abuelo was the picker. Apá was the packer. Alex and I took turns harvesting grapes and carrying the heavy boxes of fruit down the row to our father. We had started out a group of seven, but the foreman said the group was too large. So Tío Rafael, who was an exceptional packer, was asked to form his own group with Tío Ramón and Juvenal, our cousin. That made sense since that was also how we split up between two cars to get to the fields. We came together as a family again during lunch hour, but the rest of the day, Alex and I had to stand opposite of Abuelo, who reprimanded us at every turn. We worked too slowly. We talked too much. We left the grapes too shiny. Since his hearing wasn't very good, we learned to whisper and to catch the words through the dusty leaves, over the sound of the squeaky hinges on three pairs of scissors.

“What are you going to do with your first check?” Alex asked. This was a question our father had asked us almost every day that first week on the job. It was his way of encouraging us since we were going to give up most of our summer to farm labor. Abuelo had already made it clear we were not going to be allowed to vegetate in front of the television when school was out. “*Al fil*,” he said. To the fields. Like every other kid who, at fourteen, was old enough to work.

When the task became tedious, when the heat became oppressive, we threw that question out as a way to keep going. No one was going to stop us from dreaming.

“I want to buy a pair of dress shoes that aren’t made of plastic,” I said.

“Plastic?” Alex said, pausing for a second.

“You know, fake. They make your feet sweaty and stinky. I hear them say that the ones made of leather keep your feet fresh.”

“Okay, but what do you want leather shoes for? You’re not going to the prom. You don’t go out on dates. You have no girlfriend. You don’t dance.”

“Neither do you,” I countered.

“So what do you want them for?”

I wanted to say that I wanted to feel like a man for once, but I didn’t really know what I meant by that. I had seen pictures of Abuelo in his youth, his mustache so black and preened to perfection, showing off the tattoos on his forearm. He was wearing dress pants and a pair of shoes that shone so clean and new they made him look respectable, despite the tattoos. During Apá’s days as a musician, he was also pictured with bright, shiny, patent leather shoes. All the glamour of their pasts was on display in the footwear. Their present was dirty sneakers and work boots. That was my present as well. I wanted to claim my moment of glamour.

“Take that box out,” Abuelo barked. He was only visible from the waist down, but I could see how he pointed to a full box with the ends of his scissors. I imagined his mustache punctuating his severe expression underneath that hat he always wore when he stepped out of the house.

It was Alex’s turn, so he crossed underneath the vines. The rustling reminded me of rain. An odd image to invoke in the near one-hundred-degree heat, the sand around my sneakers growing warmer by the hour. Another desert deception, like a mirage.

As soon as Alex was out of earshot, Abuelo began his griping. "I'm not sure what your brother is thinking, skipping school and running off with your good-for-nothing cousins. Without school, he's going to end up here, with us. He thinks this life is easy, well, he's about to find out."

I knew by now that Abuelo did not want a response, just a listener. I let his words dust each bunch in my hand as I inspected it and determined that it was ripe enough to pick and place in the box. One thing I did admire about Abuelo was how he dropped a bunch so fearlessly from as high as the vine, confident that it wouldn't fall apart, grapes bouncing off in all directions. When I asked Apá about this, he said that it was decades of skill. "And he doesn't give a shit anymore," he added. "He knows the packer has to clean it before it's packed."

Abuelo kept on: "And your father, running around with that woman, as if he were a teenager. Even you boys don't bring us that kind of trouble."

Trouble meant that Amelia, Apá's soon-to-be wife, was pregnant. I didn't particularly like her, but I liked Abuelo less, and I didn't appreciate any poison coming from his mouth, no matter where it was going. He voiced these things to me, to Abuela, but to no one else. He was cowardly that way.

"I need to use the toilets," I said, and walked away.

At the end of the row, Apá stood at the packing table, shifting his weight and shaking his leg. I knew how painful it was for him to stand all those hours from 6:00 a.m. to quitting time, sometimes as late as 2:00 p.m. He saw me coming and smiled. His dark skin looked even darker with that red shirt he was wearing.

"Where's Alex?" I asked.

"I told him to bring me some water. And I'm thinking, why don't you go get me some water too?"

I pursed my lips. I knew the code. It was our father's way of letting us stretch our legs, and to give us a break from Abuelo.

As I walked out into the dirt avenue toward the water truck, my body ached just watching people bend, then stand still as they picked grapes on the hot soil, the long sleeves of their flannel shirts covered in sulfur. My eyes became moist. I felt sorry for Abuelo and Apá and everyone else who had to do this an entire lifetime. I was not yet out of high school, but I was already certain this would not be my fate. All that talk about colleges in my home-room got me excited, though I had not yet revealed to my family what my plans were for the near future. I didn't want anyone—especially Abuelo—to get in the way. But I wasn't too sure about Alex's fate now that he had dropped out of school.

"Save me some," I said to him as I approached.

"It tastes funny," he said.

"Everything tastes funny here. Even saliva." I poured water into the paper cone. In a few hours, when the cones were exhausted, there would be a single dirty cup sitting on top of the tank. At that point, nobody cared about hygiene and everyone passed the cup from mouth to mouth.

"And what are you going to do with your first check?" I said.

"I don't know. Save for a car."

"A car? With the little money we're going to make? You're going to start with a tire?"

"Or maybe a fucking bicycle, okay?"

I didn't take his snapping at me too personally. The heat gave all of us short tempers.

We each filled a cone of water to take to our father. We already knew where his paycheck was going—to the new baby.

"What kind of car?" I said, as a way of assuaging Alex's hurt feelings.

"A convertible. I want to ride with the top off."

Alex, with his baby mustache that would never grow beyond chicken scratches, was only fifteen, but he already knew how to drive. I wasn't sure how this came to be since I was a year older

and had never even practiced getting behind the wheel of car. Driver's ed was still a semester away.

"Where would you go?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'd just go."

And I realized that this was his way of dreaming about leaving. I had been plotting my escape as well.

My father took the cones and threw the water into his mouth. He crushed them and dropped them at his feet. They looked so out of place there, white crinkled paper over a small graveyard of discarded fruit not good enough to pack. He smiled. My father had a handsome smile, but I resented it because he never got me braces, and my crooked upper row embarrassed me. When I was younger, I kept pleading until he finally shut me up by telling me that they would straighten themselves out naturally. "My teeth used to be uglier than yours, right, Apá?" And Abuelo agreed from the couch, complicit in the deceit.

When we took our places at the grapevine again, Abuelo was gone. Our respite from his supervision was extended.

"He hates to work, doesn't he?" I said.

"Yeah, and so he takes it out on all of us."

Usually it was Abuela who worked in the fields and Abuelo stayed home to cook. But his younger brother, Tío Justo, had come to visit from who knows where, and he wouldn't stop teasing his older brother about how he had become the woman in the marriage.

"You should lend him your aprons, María," he called out, and no one dared laugh. Tío Justo cackled at his own jokes for all of us.

Even my grandmother wasn't amused. She stood behind the stove, making faces, bothered that Abuelo had asked her to do the cooking, which she didn't like to do. Nor was she much good at it. We couldn't stand Abuelo, but we sure did appreciate his skills in the kitchen because Abuela's dishes were usually inedible.

Tío Justo was the only person who could shame Abuelo. He ridiculed Abuelo's belly, his bald spot, his lack of gold jewelry and flaccid muscles, and the fact that he didn't pay attention to young women anymore. At the supermarket, Tío Justo would goad him, elbowing him whenever a pretty young girl walked past them. Abuelo looked so awkward trying to keep up with his brother's ogling. The entire theater of masculinity was mortifying to all of us because my father never acted like that and neither did he expect us to.

And so here Abuelo was, trying to prove to his brother that he was still a man by coming to work and forcing Abuela to stay home, and I knew that neither of them was happy about the arrangement. It almost made me feel sorry for him, until I saw him walk back to his spot.

"Remember when someone we know bought exercise equipment to impress someone else we know?" I said to Alex. The mischief in my tone made me blush. We had reached that part of the day when we started making fun of Abuelo.

Alex giggled. "I certainly do. I still use it. All he did was remove the packaging."

"If you're ever that mean to me when we're old, Alex, I promise you I'm going to kick my nice leather shoe up your ass."

"And if you're as ridiculous as they are when you get old, I'm going to run your ass over with my convertible."

We couldn't contain our giggling. And it wasn't until Abuelo told us to cut it out that we slipped back into the coma of the hot weather.

At quitting time, we weren't as relieved as everyone because our car was parked the farthest. This was one of Abuelo's bright ideas: to show up before everyone else so that we could nab the best parking spot on the side of the road. Sometimes it paid off because the work route took us toward the road and we were the

first to reach our car, but if the route took us away from the road, we had the longest trek to Apá's precious blue Mustang.

Sure enough, we were the last to leave. And just as we settled into the hot vinyl seats, another heartbreak: the car wouldn't start.

"Now what?" Abuelo said. He wiped a ring of sweat underneath his hat.

"I don't know," Apá said. "We have gas. Let me check under the hood."

As my father went out to inspect the problem, Abuelo went at it: "What does your father know about cars? He's always buying these useless pieces of junk. He never has any money to invest on something that's not going to leave us all stranded in the middle of the desert. And now with another mouth to feed on the way, he's going to be broke for the rest of his life."

Wound up by his own anger, Abuelo got out of the car to join my father.

"And what the fuck does *he* know about cars?" Alex said.

We were getting too sweaty in the backseat, so we got out as well, only to find Apá and Abuelo arguing as one pulled on this wire and the other yanked on that cable.

"This is a piece of shit car," Abuelo said.

"You're not being very helpful, Apá. Why don't you go back inside?"

Abuelo grumbled, but he did just that, though not before calling the obvious: "And keep your eye out for anyone passing by; maybe all we need is a jump."

"Do you want us to walk to the main road, Apá?" I said. And that's when the tears started welling up in his eyes. So he smiled as he wiped them away.

"Dude," Alex said.

"I didn't do anything," I said.

But I *had* done something. I had reminded him of what was upon us: Alex wasn't doing well in school, Apá was expecting

another child with a woman I didn't want to accept as my future stepmother, Abuelo was inflicting his insecurities on all of us, and I was about to leave forever, though no one but me knew that. Or maybe my father did know—a parental intuition that told him he was about to lose his son. But at the moment, here we all were, stuck because my father bought the cheapest car he could afford. We had worked close to nine hours, and now he had to watch his sons beg for help from a stranger on the side of the road.

“This is not the kind of life I wanted for you,” he said, weeping with his hands flat on the car.

The raised hood kept us hidden from Abuelo's sight, but neither Alex nor I knew how to comfort our father. We were not used to gestures of affection. That was not manly behavior. Alex kept knocking on my elbow with his fist, as if encouraging me to make the first move. But I didn't know what that move should be.

“Stop crying, Apá,” I said. “Don't let your father see you.” I couldn't help but blurt out a phrase my own mother had said to me many times when I became too emotional when my father was nearby. It felt useful but not right. “Alex and I will get help,” I continued. “You wait here in case anyone passes by.”

Apá's sniffing was the last sound we heard as we made our way to the main road. It was going to be a wait because these were the grape fields and it was past harvesting time. Even the stragglers had made it home by now. Our best hope was one of our kin, an undocumented alien taking the back roads for safety, or a driver who had made a wrong turn somewhere. The nearest pay phone was miles away at the closest gas station.

“What do you think is going to happen?” Alex said.

“Oh, don't worry, a truck will come by and give us all a lift to the gas station.”

“No, I meant, about Apá.”

“Oh,” I said. I looked behind us. Abuelo was looking our direction as if that could make us walk any faster. We were hungry

and thirsty, and I knew Alex's legs were as weak as mine at the moment.

"I think he feels bad he left us with our grandparents after our mom died. And now that Amelia is pregnant, that means he's never coming back or even coming to get us."

"So that's it, then."

"Yes, that's it. And Abuelo is pissed because he knows Apá will be asking for money from him and Abuela."

"What a shitty father," Alex said.

I didn't want to ask if he meant Apá or Abuelo or both. I didn't want to know. I didn't care. I was sleepy suddenly, and I began to fantasize about the college dormitory room I remembered from the brochure that awaited me in a year or so. It would be the first time I would have my own bed.

When we exited the blocks of grapevines, we were met with a breeze. It was refreshing and liberating. But there was no movement as far as the eye could see. And not much sound, except for the vibrations of the telephone cables above us.

"So what are you doing with your first check?" I said.

Alex smiled. "Buying our dad a car so he can get our asses to work. You?"

"Same thing."

"What about your fancy shoes?"

I shrugged. Fancy shoes seemed so useless all of a sudden. But a bicycle would have helped. I let out a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Alex asked.

"Nothing. I was just thinking that maybe you weren't wrong about the bicycle after all."

"I told you, stupid. You and your fancy-ass shoes. Where do you think you're going?"

The answer was complicated: I was going to leave eventually. I was going to leave him. But that didn't seem like the right moment to tell him. So I simply said, "Nowhere. I'm not going anywhere yet."

“That’s right, Turrútut. Like it or not, we’re stuck here together, you and me.”

I had the strangest sensation that Alex was trying to tell me something, but I was too brain-dead. Or maybe I was reading too much into his words. Our father had abandoned us, but my leaving was not the same thing. And not for a few more years. Perhaps all he needed was reassurance. Especially after seeing our father break down in front of us.

“Hey, listen, Alex, it’s going to be okay. I’ll always be here for you. I promise.”

Alex looked at me intently. We had to try to read each other’s minds. Unlike Apá, he was not one to let his defenses down. We locked eyes for a few seconds, and then he turned away. We slipped into silence again. That was all the sentimentality we were going to manage between us.

No car passed us by for an additional thirty minutes, but we didn’t have to wait any longer because the blue Mustang came speeding out of the dirt avenue kicking up dust. Our father honked the horn, and our bodies jumped with excitement.

“We got a jump from the foreman,” Apá said. “He was making one last inspection, and your grandfather spotted him.”

Abuelo raised his chin slightly, acting like the hero of the story.

I patted Abuelo on the shoulder in gratitude. “Good job, Abuelo!”

“And don’t you dare stop anywhere, Apá, in case the car won’t start again,” Alex said.

“Yeah,” I piled on.

“Listen to your sons. Listen to your sons,” Abuelo said.

Alex and I climbed in, and we set off for home. I made eye contact with Apá through the rearview mirror for a fleeting moment. In the back seat, as we sat side by side, a glorious comfort came upon me, and I might have held my brother’s hand if it weren’t the least manly gesture of affection I could imagine. So instead I joined the banter and laughter until we reached the