

## A SERENADE FOR CHAGO

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*Vicente* cannot remember his father whole. It follows him all of his life: the memory of his father bent like a crushed wire hanger, pulling the wagon loaded with tamales.

### **Procession, 1963**

They were waiting for Vicente outside the church after his father's service: four charros he did not know, except that they were Pedro Quiñones's men; Pedro's nephew Sam, already perspiring in his black wool suit, holding a rolled up sarape by its middle so that it hung ridiculously, like a dead snake; and Artemio, with Big Red's reins gathered in his hand, leading the horse to the church steps so that Vicente could set his father's boots in the stirrups.

Pedro himself stood beside the family car, eyes shaded by dark glasses. There would be a moment today, Vicente's mother had told him, when Pedro would press him about the charreada across the border, in faraway Torreón. Pedro and another man, each with their own team of paid athletes, betting cattle and transport licenses on suertes.

*You must say no*, she had said that morning. *We don't need him. Not anymore.*

Vicente tucked his mother's hand into the crook of his arm, feeling resentment in her stiffness. Well, he had been disrespectful to her. But hadn't his father been preparing him for this very thing? She had never liked Pedro Quiñones. *The man who owns everything*, she called him.

Vicente's father, Chago, had been born on one of the Quiñones ranches in San Carlos, across the border in Coahuila; they had been young men together. In Texas they had been old men together. Probably his mother was glad at least that today she might be rid of Pedro.

Vicente and his mother waited while the charros dressed the saddle—lashed the sarape behind the cantle, the gun belt and sombrero across the pommel, and tied the machete to the saddle bag strings. These things were not his father's. They were Pedro's, like the empty saddle. But Big Red belonged to Artemio.

"Thank you," Vicente said when Artemio handed him the reins. Artemio nodded and went off to where the other horses were tied along the churchyard fence.

Vicente's mother leaned in to whisper, "Move that animal. I don't want him to do caca right in front of the church."

She smoothed a stray curl away from her forehead and stalked to the car. He saw her give a cool nod to Pedro as he shut the passenger door for her. *Be kind to Mami*, his father had said. *When I'm gone, remember to be kind to her.* Vicente thought of her, in the back seat of the long black car that Pedro had gotten for her, riding alone to the cemetery. She would hate its luxury, the wasted space, all for one small woman. No doubt Pedro knew it too.

*I should be better than this*, Vicente thought. *I should be kinder.* But he did not know how. He wanted his father very much. But he would not think about that now.

Vicente waited at the head of the procession while they mounted their own horses, pressing his fingers lightly into the roots of Big Red's mane. The groove at the hairline was humid. The night before, he had stolen a bottle

of his mother's Prell and washed Big Red's mane with it, but the flowery perfume was thin, already giving way to the smell of sweaty animal hair and the fresh neatsfoot oil on the saddle.

Big Red tongued the copper bearing in the bit and the sound steadied him. *They like the taste*, his father had told him. He would lead Big Red up the hillside on foot. It was not far. He could see the pale ribbon of road winding through the brush to the top of Loma Alta and the indistinct shapes of tombstones amid the firs.

*A memory surfaces with the scent of warm horsehide: a red mane whipping up from a long sorrel neck, his own small fingers twisted in the rough hair. His father's arm anchoring him to the horse. How the wind had snatched his breath, cut the water from his eyes.*

**Vicente, age 7**

His mother circles the living room murmuring her morning rosary. Vicente shifts on the sofa, his sleeping place, to watch her. It is early and her cotton nightgown glows a pale, floating blue in the darkness. Vicente loves her most in this quiet moment, while she asks for blessings.

It is better not to interrupt her. She will not respond if he speaks to her. She will not shift in the direction of his voice. If Vicente persists she will let loose swift deterrents, snap her fingers at him or pinch, but her prayers will not waver.

She paces around the narrow coffee table, passes him again, and enters the bedroom opposite Vicente's sofa. His older brother, Enrique's room. Misshapen Enrique, who must be fed and dressed, propped up on his pillows like an infant.

Vicente hears his gurgles, the soft warbling that passes for Enrique's speech. His mother is changing his diaper, soothing him back to sleep with Hail Marys. Vicente hears his father's boots clomp down the hallway into the kitchen and then into the living room. His mother comes out of Enrique's room. Vicente shuts his eyes, pretends to sleep.

"My lunch, Dorita?" His father's voice is just above him.

"Coming," says Vicente's mother, just an intake of breath between refrains, and slips past him into the kitchen.

"Buddy," says his father after she has gone. He drops something beside Vicente, something light and hard and tumbling. "I want you to practice roping that stump in the back yard."

When Vicente doesn't answer, his father says, "And get up and help Mami with Enrique. I know you're awake."

### **Procession, 1963**

Pedro Quiñones had shut down the streets between the church and Camino Loma Alta, about a mile and a half of asphalt and traffic lights. It was strange passing the Woolworth and the Piggly Wiggly, the lunch counter cafés and the Phillips 66, with all the people on the sidewalks staring at him. Spectacle, his mother would say.

Behind him, Vicente heard a snort and the indecorous jingle of a bridle—someone's horse was acting up—and somewhere behind him, Sam Quiñones hissed, "Cut it out, Cielito."

Poor Sam was still an uncertain rider. He did not know how to manage his horse on the slippery asphalt. Big Red was a better horse, Vicente decided. The veteran of many parades, the horse accompanied him with good cheer. They were a good team. He barely had to touch the bridle as they turned the corner onto Camino Loma Alta. What if he said yes in spite of his mother? Artemio would lend him Big Red. He already had his own lariat. The rest would come.

*Keep time, but keep it close, his father reminds him, those long evenings in the back yard after his father's accident, when Vicente leaps and sweats, and works methodical figure eights with his wrist. The lasso swells and contracts, swells again, rises and swoops. Count, his father says from the wooden wheelchair—no don't move your lips when you count, don't let them see you do it.*

**Vicente, age 7**

His mother's hard fingers wake him. It is almost three a.m. and the corn husks have been soaking for hours. The smell of steaming beef fills the house. Vicente drowns on the sofa. His body feels heavy, too warm to move, but he knows he must be sitting up when she returns, or she will bruise his arms with pinches. The rise and fall of her prayers fills the air like vapor, loses him, until he cannot tell where it begins. He only knows she's coming. Enrique is dead and the bedroom behind the door is his father's now, but his mother's praying never falters. He lurches up, light-headed, groping for his pants.

Vicente sets out with the wagon and hauls the tub of hominy five blocks to Eulalio Frausto's tortillería. For a dollar Eulalio grinds the tub of hominy for Vicente's mother before the factory opens. When he knocks at the back door, Eulalio, red-eyed and rubbing at a persistent cowlick, is just turning on the lights. Eulalio drags the wagon inside, folding the dollar into his shirt pocket. Vicente stays out because it's quieter. The air is thick with night-blooming

jasmine and the humid threat of rain. The corn grinder rumbles beyond the door. Vicente curls against the wall and shuts his eyes.

“Órale, the tamales are waiting!” Raúl López prods at Vicente with a scuffed brown shoe. He’s seventeen and works at the factory before school. He never lets Vicente oversleep.

Vicente gets a face full of hot, corn-scented air as Raúl opens the back door. The grating blades are deafening. The floor throbs against the soles of his feet. Eulalio nods at them, already packing the wagon.

Raúl wraps a dingy white apron around his waist then pulls a hairnet out of his pocket and slips it neatly over his head. He hums to himself, a Frankie Lymon song Vicente knows from the radio, something about why fools fall in love. He has big teeth and a nose like a spigot, but Vicente admires the complicated waves of his pompadour. Vicente hates his own hair—his mother sends him to the barber every other Wednesday for “el flat top.”

Raúl grabs Vicente in a headlock and then runs pomade through Vicente’s bristles with an ace comb. “All right, get out of here, chavo.”

Vicente shoves him and darts out the door, hoping everyone except his mother will smell the sweet hair grease.

When he gets home, Vicente dozes on his sofa, weary but watching for his mother. The front of the kitchen is framed by the black doorway to the living room. Under the yellowish light, his mother papers the kitchen floor with newspapers. She is a narrow woman with a hard mouth and small, grim eyes. She sets out the items in an assembly line: the pot of meat, the

galvanized tub of masa, the corn husks wrapped in a large green towel, and a ball of twine. She kneels on the newspapers, her blue flowered dress riding up to show the rolled tops of her stockings. The kitchen is damp with steam. Little wisps of hair escape her bun and curl up at her hairline. She slaps the dough and meat into the limp husks and rolls them up, folding the ends tight. She hunches, her skin shiny as wet copper, brows furrowed deep over her eyes. Her arms work like pistons, quivering with volcanic energy. Slap and roll, slap and roll, for two hours. Then she binds the tamales up in twine, steams them for an hour more.

At six-thirty, Vicente hears his father's uncertain stride, the left leg that drags and sometimes hitches. He emerges from the bedroom, puts a hand on the wall to steady himself. He has been walking for a few months, but sometimes he still stumbles. He's as crooked as mesquite tree in a white cotton shirt. The only straight line on him is the part in his silver hair.

“¿Qué dice, el Buddy? One round before school?” There is a heaviness in his breathing, but he gives Vicente his grin approximate. The hand stays on the wall.

They will take this batch up to the Phillips 66, because Mr. Morris will buy them all to sell at the station. They takes this walk every morning.

“Papi, Papi, can we go to the lienzo after?” Vicente asks, not hugging him. He is afraid to touch those ill-mended places.

“The lienzo,” sniffs his mother. “This is the United States. If you want to do something useful with your free time, mow some lawns.”

**Procession, 1963**

Yellow cactus flowers bloomed alongside the road, where it narrowed and gave way to caliche. Off the concrete, the horses moved with more ease. The hearse, the family car, everyone else, followed the horses. Somehow it was better to head the procession, where it was quietest, just the rocks beneath him and the horse beside him, without the bitter filter of his mother.

“Be kind to Mami,” his father had said to Vicente, not long after the faulty boxcar door had nearly crushed him to death. “She loves you, but her heart is shut. Too many bad hurts.”

Vicente was the only son left of three. The oldest, Santiago, lost to snakebite not long after his parents had left the ranch in San Carlos; stunted Enrique dead at aged ten. Perhaps after them there was not much left over for Vicente or his broken father.

He had not known little Santi, but Vicente still dreamed of Enrique, alive and restless, sighing behind the bedroom door. Vicente could picture the door to the bedroom perfectly: black and not fully closed, the sliver of dim light from the room within. He never went in there, never. Not even when it became his father’s room. There were worse things than death. There was the half-life of the bedroom. The weight of his mother’s eyes on him, finding him wanting.

Big Red chuffed at Vicente’s jacket sleeve, leaving a thin trail of foam. Probably he was thirsty. They would water the horses after the service. He would think about his mother after the service too. The business of the funeral belonged to his father, and Vicente would stand it; even if it was only the punch line to a joke between his father and Pedro Quiñones, Vicente would stand it.

*Before his father rose up, there was only the exhaustion of waiting. Rufino the grocer who extended credit, but said, until when Dorita? The humid afternoons of shuttered breathing, glazed light tamped by heavy curtains, his broken father not dying. Knitting himself back together, slowly, slowly, slowly. Only when he got out of the bed that had been Enrique's, his father had become an old man.*

**Vicente, age 7**

The stockyard houses enough pens for the thousand head of cattle arriving daily from Durango, from Sonora and Chihuahua. It smells sharply of old mud, urine, cow shit and, over everything, the humid aroma of hay bales. Wealthy cattlemen in ostrich-skin boots and fringed leather vests chat in groups while the vaqueros sort the livestock into the holding pens. Cattle trucks come and go, trailers rattling. Always upon arrival, Vicente marvels that once upon a time his father had been a foreman. He had been picking up freighted Andalusian horses from the train yard when the boxcar door fell on him.

The stables are a quarter-mile down from the stockyard, near the large charro arena and stadium-style bleachers. Vicente hears Artemio's voice inside the arena and climbs through the chutes to find him.

Artemio Cruz is from the same ranch in San Carlos as his own father. Pedro Quiñones had brought Artemio to Texas after the accident. He is only one of the stable hands, but he is also on Pedro's team of charros, where the best riders make good money at each event. Vicente admires Artemio, who is twenty years old. He is full of jokes and bloodcurdling ghost stories, and in spite of strong legs and a straight back, cannot replace Vicente's father after all.

Pedro still comes to the house on Thursday nights to play cards with his father. Pedro gambles ridiculous things—to shave a moustache or for half

a dozen tamales or a damn good story, or a secret, or the moldy potatoes at the back of the pantry—anything but money, as Vicente’s father has none. Vicente sleeps under the kitchen table those nights, just to listen to them, though his mother doesn’t like it and his father cannot carry him to his sofa bed, only prods him gently with his big toe and says *Buddy, go on to bed*. Pedro had come into the sick room after the accident to say, *Chago, tell me who I should bring* because the best horsemen come from San Carlos, and it is not only the skill of the body, but the knowing inside of it. It does not matter whether a boxcar door breaks off its hinges and crushes everything except the head and one arm, that knowing makes Pedro look for his father though he can no longer ride or train horses.

And one night, when they are drinking and listening to Agustín Lara and it is so late that Vicente is nearly asleep, warm and forgotten beneath the table, his father wins hand after hand, and Pedro Quiñones pays him with a charro’s funeral, with a phalanx of charros in procession, with a mariachi serenade.

“Write me an I.O.U.” laughs his father.

“My word on it,” says Pedro. He prods Vicente with a pointy boot. “Ánimo, Chente! You’re my witness. A charro funeral for your father.”

“The funeral and a serenade,” Vicente says, annoyed about the boot.

“And the serenade,” says Pedro. “Of course.”

*He dreams of riding Big Red; they race full gallop toward a receding horizon. His legs are bare and the horse’s hoof beats thunder through his body. Each time, he wakes wet-eyed and trembling, convinced that he’s been flying.*

**Vicente, age 12**

He sits atop the arena wall waiting for his father to meet him in the faltering light of evening. They will walk home together, trundling the empty wagon between them. Artemio is in the arena teaching a boy to floriar la sogá.

“Bend your wrist. Like this.” Artemio says, makes a figure eight with his wrist and the lasso, small and unopened, twists through the air like a water snake.

“Then snap it.” Artemio flicks his wrist and the lasso expands. “C’mon Sam, snap it hard.”

The boy in the arena with Artemio looks about Vicente’s age, but much fatter. His belly makes a shelf over the top of his shiny western belt buckle. Vicente climbs on top of the chute to watch them. Artemio is showing the boy how to make the lariat bloom. The kid is clumsy and the rope doesn’t respond to him. He sends his lasso into the dirt twice more.

“Try it when it’s going up,” says Vicente. “You’re waiting too long.”

“Vicente, come down here,” says Artemio, holding out the lariat. “Here, watch him do it.”

When Vicente wields the lariat, the tiny lasso dips and rises as if waves are breaking beneath it. “Right there at the top, see? That’s where you snap it, so it’ll spin back around.”

“I’m Sam,” the boy says. Vicente nods. This is Pedro’s nephew. The boy has round green eyes, like all the Quiñoneses. Besides, the vaqueros have been saying Pedro’s nephew has come to the border to finish his schooling in the United States.

“Move back,” says Vicente. *I am from San Carlos too*, he thinks, though he is the third son, born long after his parents had come to Texas. He cuts an arrogant eye at Sam and makes the lasso swell larger and larger, until it’s big enough, then hops through it: once, twice, backwards.

Sam hooks his thumbs through his belt loops. “Man, that’s good.”

“It is good,” says Pedro. He is standing in the bleachers next to Vicente’s father. “But can you do it on horseback?”

“He can,” says his father. His voice is steady, but he looks fatigued. Vicente wonders how he managed the stairs.

“Bring him to practice sometime,” says Pedro. Pedro claps Vicente’s father lightly on the shoulder and motions for Sam to come out of the arena. They leave in Pedro’s shiny Ford truck.

Vicente knows enough to not speak up, but everyone understands. Pedro’s team of paid charros competes all over Mexico, has won the national championship in Saltillo, and is made up of men, not children. That night he asks about Pedro’s invitation, but his father shakes his head.

“Not yet. When we saddle a colt, we wait until he is at least two years old, but sometimes three, if he’s very fine. Why is this?”

“Too young,” Vicente says. His father has told him many times that a horse is a living jewel, not the saddle maker’s leather.

“Too young.” His father nods, approving. “His back needs to be strong enough to bear the weight of a man. Any earlier and he’ll be ruined. He’s a

waste of money. No one wants him. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Vicente says, and then, unable to keep the surliness out of his voice, "I bet Sam goes to the practices. I'm better than he is."

"Sam is Pedro's nephew. You know that."

From the kitchen window his mother says, "Watch out you don't end up Sam's old horseman. Look at your father, Pedro's put him out to pasture."

### **Procession, 1963**

The mariachis met Vicente at the entrance. Their instruments lay in black cases at their feet. Behind them, the cemetery trees stretched dark green and towering. Vicente passed beneath the iron archway.

Vicente would not watch the charros set the coffin down. He fixed his gaze beneath the awning instead, looking at the people sitting and finding seats underneath it, listening to the soft rustle they made. His mother sat closest to the grave, quiet as a blown-out candle.

*Be kind to her*, he reminded himself. Seeing her, he wished he had not said the thing that had cut her. *Working for Pedro is better than selling tamales.*

### **Vicente, age 13**

Vicente and Big Red pace the arena, brittle with dust and sweat. He stands on Big Red's broad back, one foot planted on the saddle seat, one on Big Red's wide rump. The lariat swoops around them, the lasso growing larger and larger as it circles. From the corner of his eye, he sees Artemio sitting on the chute. He reminds himself not to move his lips as he counts. Then he steadies himself and clucks at Big Red who breaks into a canter around the arena.

“You’re going to open the exhibition,” his father had told him. “Not Artemio.”

“It’s better because you’re small,” Artemio had assured him. “Good for dramatic effect.”

Vicente has only performed in a handful of charreadas and never in the competition, only during the trick riding and intermission periods. He has tried the manganas, but he doesn’t weigh enough yet to lasso and haul down a bronco as it charges by. At practice, Artemio is teaching him bareback riding, how to leap from horse to horse at a light canter, but it will be years before he can try the *paso de la muerte* in the arena with the full entourage of wild horses and mounted charros surging behind him. It is Artemio’s especial event.

Charreadas. This is the thing that his mother will not forgive, has no patience for. The bad time is past, she says. She works at the bottling plant and sells tamales from home. His father is a fill-in school bus driver. Why doesn’t Chago make Vicente get a job instead of encouraging tonterías that will surely kill him? But his father, diminished and lame as he is, says firmly, *He has talent, Dorita. And Pedro will pay him when he can compete.* Now she is the one sleeping in Enrique’s room.

In the arena, Vicente urges Big Red into a full gallop, keeping time silently, twisting his wrist in swift figure eights, the rope held lightly between his forefinger and the flat of his thumb. He spreads his fingers for balance and lets the rope play out. The lasso begins to swell and Vicente turns his wrist faster, making the figure eights small and tight.

“Take it back to the middle now,” Artemio hollers as he flashes by.

Vicente clucks again and Big Red makes a final, slowing pass around the ring. They move to the center of the arena, where Big Red goes stock still. This is the moment; Vicente shifts as far down Big Red's back as he can. He maneuvers gingerly, sends the lasso out again, shakes it out, holds his breath and tenses. Then he snaps the lasso hard and it sails back at him. He jumps, passes through, jumps again as it returns. Below him, Big Red stands firm as a rock.

Artemio makes double victory fists. "Eso! Eso es!"

### **The Serenade, 1963**

There was no eulogy, only mariachi. They were old men, gray and paunchy in their dark suits. The four musicians took their places before the coffin. They arranged themselves in a half-circle around the singer. They did not acknowledge the crowd, their fat faces detached and faintly condescending above sprawling black neckties.

The violinist ran his bow across the strings thoughtfully. The sound was low and uninspired, but it chased away the stirrings beneath the awning. He made whispers on the strings. The others lifted their instruments. The trumpeter began it with a single, low note. The dark voice of the violin joined as trumpet diffused into melody, and then came the guitar, galloping across them both, braiding them together and the bass slid in behind, giving form to the song. The sound swelled then fell away. The mariachi in the center, swelling with the music, filled his lungs and began to sing.

The refrain washed over Vicente again and again, held aloft by the melody, which had risen once more, circling the voice. The mariachis strummed their strings and keys, stretched fluttering notes, pounded them out of their instruments, as though they were grieving through their hands. They played

on and on, until at last the singer flung the final word scarf-like into the air. It hung briefly, spread itself out to touch everyone, then dissolved into the strains of music.

A pause. A slow sigh as the people beneath the awning stirred. The mariachis collected themselves and left. The farewell began. The charros dismounted and stood patiently. They were last.

Each carried a single white rose, and when his turn came, each one passed the awning slowly, and stood before Vicente's father. Vicente watched their progression as each man took his leave and returned to stand beside his horse.

It was Vicente's turn. He moved slowly, robbed of the giant anchor that was Big Red. He carried his father's sombrero. The smooth lid of the coffin offered nothing but his reflection. The white roses glowed incandescent against its dark gloss. He could not think about his father inside it. He could not. *I am from San Carlos*, he told himself. *I am from San Carlos*. He covered the flowers with the black sombrero.

He stepped away from his father. Past Santi and Enrique's uneven grave markers. He collected Big Red and brought him alongside his mother. There was Pedro Quiñones in the farthest corner of the mourners' tent, out of her orbit. Pedro nodded at him and Vicente nodded back.

He bent to kiss his mother, to place his father's boots in her hands. She let them fall in her lap, clutched Vicente as she almost never did. She was very strong.

Be kind to her, he thought. Be kind to Mami. He hoped that he could.