Family Outing

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When I told my brother that I wanted to go to the beach during my visit, I imagined he understood I longed for a touristy spot where I could set up my towel and suntan lotion within walking distance of a palapa bar. I wanted to show off the improvement on my body—thirty pounds lighter and with upper torso musculature I never imagined I would ever achieve, certainly not in my midforties. I was also celebrating my sixth month without a cane. After seven years with a crutch, it was an exhilarating triumph. Instead, Alex took me to a more private area that looked more like a desert than a beach. I walked over the dried skeleton of a bird to get the edge of the water lined with smooth stone pebbles and the occasional seashell. Guadalupe and Halima, who had just turned sixteen, stayed back in the shade of the only straw hut left standing; all the others had tipped over from neglect. André, only a few months shy of seven, already knew how to unfurl the heavy net my brother would spend the next four hours casting from the shore while I baked in the sun. I made the best of it, appreciating the quiet, drifting into daydream as I watched Alex’s tenacity with his arduous task that netted only a few fish by the end of the day. But it was the exercise that kept him going, he said, and the reminder that there was something so grand and beautiful. I was surprised by the romanticism of his comment. But it made me appreciate his new life in this fishing village on the Sea of Cortez, considered the richest body of water on the planet. And
when a cobalt blue fish came close to the edge, I lost my words and simply pointed at it as if that were enough to pin it down long enough for my brother to run over with the net.

“Here! Here!” I blurted out finally.

Alex slowly gathered the net weighed down by sinkers and dragged it through the water. By the time he was close, that dazzling fish had darted back into the depths of the sea.

“A bit late, Turrútut,” I said.

Alex laughed. “That was a dorado. You should have tried to grab it. Or knocked it unconscious with a shoe.”

“At least I got to see one,” I said, shaking off my brother’s silliness. “I’ve never seen such a gorgeous color.”

“Now you can write a poem about it. See? The trip will be worth more than sunburn.”

I checked my shoulders and chest. They had reddened, but they didn’t hurt like the area just below my receding hairline. I wasn’t looking forward to the next day.

During lunch hour, I insisted on eating with my brother on the beach. He refused to leave the fishing poles he had cast just in case something bit. André joined his mother and sister beneath the hut.

“This is paradise,” I said. Saguaro sprawled across the foot of the mountain behind us. The stark contrast to my brother’s previous residence at the impoverished El Rancho prompted me to ask if he had heard from our stepmother, Amelia, or her children.

“Not really,” he said. “Although I did hear something interesting about Mari, Tío Rafael’s widow. Remember her?”

It had been awhile but yes, I did remember the plump lady who put up with our temperamental uncle’s shenanigans until his death. “What about her?”

“ Turns out she moved in with Amelia for a bit, until she sold the house and moved back to wherever she was from.”

“The two González widows living together? Well, that’s quite a plot twist.”
I couldn’t wrap my head around it, but I supposed the two women had to do what they could to survive. All the Gonzálezes who had once lived there were gone, dead or relocated. They were the last people to arrive, and yet there they were, the last two still standing. And now it was only Amelia, her five children spread out in different residences on the same block, repeating a pattern they must have learned from the González clan—stay close enough to each other in order to keep an eye on things and then talk shit about them.

“That’s pretty rich territory to write about right there,” I concluded.

After a pause, Alex changed the subject. “Let me ask you, Turrútut, did you always want to be a writer?”

I tried to explain that the easy answer was yes, because that’s what I grew to love. But the truth was that when I first fantasized about being a writer, I thought writers remained hidden away, that only their labor came to light by way of publication. If I had known then that a writer had to stand in front of people as often as I had, I would have chosen a different profession. I was much too shy for this one.

“Like what?” my brother pressed. “What else did you want to do?”

I wasn’t sure what my brother was searching for, but it was making me nervous. Did I have an honest answer for that? As we munch on ceviche tostadas, I considered the question. A teacher was what I always told myself, and others. I wanted a life near books, the only places that gave me comfort. Though at one time I fantasized about being an actor—a capricious dream I became embarrassed to admit later, though in fact this was another effort at escape from the person I didn’t want to be. The gay boy could hide in the silence of being a reader, or a nerd, or a character. A profession was more than a purpose; it was a disguise.

“I guess I’m doing what I always wanted now,” I said. “To be out in the open. Without fear.”
Suddenly Alex shot up from his chair and grabbed the fishing pole. He had kept his eye on the line the entire time. But after he reeled it in, there was nothing caught in the hook. He grabbed the bait and jiggled what looked like a toy at me.

“I made this myself,” he said, proudly.

I had the impulse to poke fun at him, to say, “Well, I guess it sucks, doesn’t it?” But I held back.

“Don’t worry, it works sometimes,” he said, as if reading my mind. I laughed.

After he threw the line again, I turned the question over to him.


I rolled my eyes. “No, seriously.”

“A wrestler.”

“A wrestler? Like, an Olympic wrestler?”

“Nah, like a World Wrestling Federation wrestler. Like André the Giant. He was my hero. Why do you think I named my son after him? Just don’t go telling Guadalupe.”

I didn’t want to know if he was kidding or not, so I let it slide, especially because it was me who had come up with such a poetic name for his daughter.

Once he stopped giggling, he looked out into the water. “I guess I’m doing what I always wanted too. To be out in the open. Without fear.”

We were using the same words but we were talking about very different experiences: my sexuality, his freedom, the prisons we both endured locked up in our family’s houses and inside that ugly designation, orphan. After our mother died, relatives lined up to offer to take me in. I was the quiet one, the obedient one. But Alex was the rambunctious one. When my aunts offered to take me in without him, I refused. I didn’t want to be separated from my brother, even if we didn’t get along much. The only person who agreed to take us both in was Abuelo, but we knew he
had ulterior motives—the social security check that came with taking in the two orphans, as long as we stayed in school. I managed it, but my brother dropped out, and so he was tossed out of that house as well. What a terrible thing to feel unwanted. I understood that more than anyone, and so I kept my sexuality a secret. But now, both of us men in our forties, we didn’t have to cower any longer. We were free.

“Maybe we’re free because everybody’s dead,” I said out loud.

My brother turned to me, aware that this was another one of my episodes in which I got lost in thought and then uttered statements without context. He wiped his hands on his shorts and turned to his net, resuming his casting and dragging. By early afternoon, the tide began to stretch more noisily up the shore.

All this time, not a single soul came to this part of Alex’s beach. Perhaps because it was a weekday or because it was so isolated and there was nothing attractive about a spot nowhere near any amenities. If anyone had to pee, well there was the water—one just had to make sure to go in waist deep. This really was my brother’s paradise, where the only inhabitants at the moment were his immediate family and his brother from the big city who kept taking shirtless selfies and sending them to his ex-boyfriends, expecting compliments.

“Okay, supermodel,” Guadalupe chided. “Help me carry the cooler to the truck.”

I felt the sting of the heat at various points on my skin. “How long does he plan to stay out here?”

“All night, if he had his way. You’re lucky we all came. Once he starts hearing the kids whining, he loses his patience. He knows that time is coming soon, so let me start packing up.”

We lifted the cooler onto the truck bed and then pushed it forward. As Halima and André folded the chairs outside of earshot, I took advantage of the opportunity to speak privately with my sister-in-law.
I touched her arm. “Hey, I’m glad you and Alex are still together.”

“Well, of course we are; why wouldn’t we be?” she said defensively, and I knew then that Alex had never told her that I knew everything that had transpired between them. I also promised him I would keep that to myself, but it took so much effort to drown out the memory of those hurtful exchanges between them.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re looking well,” she said. “Alex told me you were falling apart. You look like you have a few more years left.”

“Oh, I suspect I may have more than that,” I said. “I have to keep my eye on things.”

Not until that moment did I realize that I still held her partly responsible for my brother’s breakdown, for not doing enough when she was right next to him the entire time. It was unfair of me to place such blame, but I couldn’t help it. Men like my abusive Abuelo and my pitiful father had wives who stuck with them; why shouldn’t my brother, who was like neither of these men, deserve as much if not more?

Suddenly I remembered the call I had made to them from Venice. I was on a month-long artist residency to Italy and had been convinced to do something extra special during my birthday, my forty-third. My companion to the floating city was a young writer from the Philippines. We marveled at the traffic on the canals and walked the winding roads until nightfall, when the streets began to empty. It was he who had also convinced me to call my brother because this was a momentous occasion and I needed to reach back to my homeland, México. Enchanted by the trip and sentimental after a few glasses of champagne, I couldn’t help myself. It would be a nice surprise for my family to hear from me all the way from Venice, I thought, and so I dialed. Guadalupe answered.

“I’m in Venice!” I yelled into the phone.
“Well, good for you,” she said, in a tone that made me realize I had interrupted something important. “I wish I could let you speak to your brother, but I kicked him out.”

My heart sank. “What? I don’t understand.”

“I kicked him out. So I need another man. Bring me back an Italian.”

And then we got cut off. But I didn’t feel like dialing again. My companion saw the look of devastation on my face, so he turned away to stare at the canal. A boat passed by with a group of revelers singing in a language I didn’t know. They were drunk. One of them dropped a plastic cup overboard, and I wanted to scold him.

I shook the memory out of my mind and returned to Guadalupe, who looked quite annoyed.

“You don’t have to keep an eye on things,” she said. “That’s my job.”

“Oh, is it?” I snapped. “Well, one of those things is your man. Just so you know.”

Her disdain made me ashamed I was letting my overprotectiveness become an exchange of cheap shots and innuendoes. I wanted to apologize, but she shifted her energy over to her children. In the distance, Alex kept casting his net, his last desperate attempts at snagging something. Guadalupe walked over to convince him to give up; Halima and André followed closely behind.

Now the family portrait was complete without me in it. This was my brother’s most hard-won journey, this twenty-year marriage and fatherhood. My one sadness was that neither of our parents was alive to witness it. But I was. I was witnessing it. And as their bodies moved forward in unison, it was the most beautiful sight I saw that day.