

TACOS FOR A HERO

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A Story

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IT was a typical 100-degree day in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas on that particular summer day in 1968. Despite the oppressive heat I decided to visit my neighbor Doña Panchita. Like any 11-year-old boy I thrived on adventure. Not that Doña Panchita was an adventurous person but her eighteen-year-old son, Gabriel, was my hero.

He used to come over to my house and teach me how to shoot marbles and stuff. He even taught me how to fly a kite. And even though I was quite a clumsy kid he remained patient with me and I learned how to play all the children's games that elementary kids played at the time. Perhaps he stuck by me because we were both the only boys from our respective families. Whatever his reasons for standing by me I didn't think much about but I always looked up to him as if he were my big brother. He was honest, upright, and very respectful.

He was an only child whereas I had my three-year-old sister Victoria who never left my mother's side. This being the case, I often slipped out of the house whenever I felt that Victoria was detracting my mother enough to allow me to escape unnoticed through the back screen door. I would hold the door still as I closed it so that it wouldn't slam too hard and sound the alarm thus, foiling my escape.

Once out the door, I would scamper down the back alley that led to Doña Panchita's house. It was mid-July and the sun beat mercilessly on the dry caliche covered ground. As I made my way down the half block to her house, I would grab a handful of rocks and fire them at every lizard and horned toad that crossed my path. My aim was not very good and only once was I able to nail a horned toad with a lucky side arm throw.

As it lay writhing helplessly on its back, I neared it to observe its features. Its multi-horned appearance served it well in its scheme to scare away any predator regardless of its size. But a well-thrown rock is not afraid of anything. I had pummeled its belly's contents causing it to overturn and gasp for its very life.

As I observed it more closely, I was surprised to find a couple of fire ants scrambling to escape its gaping mouth. It had apparently been eating when the rock struck. And now in its death throes it had opened its mouth to inhale as much air as it could with its gasping efforts. This proved to be a golden opportunity for the lucky fire ants as they scurried out and ran into the dry brush and out of sight. It stopped breathing soon afterward and I continued

on my way. Later that day when I passed by again it was covered with ants as they took their turn at devouring their natural enemy. That had been the only time that I had nailed a lizard because the rest of the time I would simply miss and so I decided to try to break every beer bottle in sight.

The alley was often littered with such local brands as Carta Blanca, Falstaff, Pearl, Lone Star, Jax, and Corona. Since the beer bottles could not run away I was able to kill many of them and their remains lay strewn the entire length of the alley.

On this particular day I was going to ask Doña Panchita whether she had any news about Gabriel. After all, he had been drafted into the Army and had been in the military only a few months when he was sent to Vietnam.

Her face lit up when she saw me walking into her yard past the open fence gate.

"Luis, Luis, pasale! Que bueno que has venido, pasale!" (Come on in, Luis!)

I went into her house as she had asked me to and the fresh smell of tortillas "de harina" overwhelmed me.

"Gabriel's coming home today, Luis, and I am making him his favorite tacos," she told me in her perfect Spanish.

"I have prepared six tacos of carne guisada with refried beans," she continued, "he can eat them all day."

The news of his impending arrival made me feel good since he had been shipped out to Southeast Asia only six months before, but he did tell me he was going to do his best to return as quickly as possible. Perhaps he had finally decided to use up some of his allotted vacation time. I wasn't sure how he done it, but Gabriel was smart enough to do just about anything he set his mind to. He was indeed very smart. I also knew Doña Panchita's birthday was coming up soon and thought he might want to be there for her birthday.

"A sarjento called my vecina Doña Margarita and said that Gabriel was coming down and to meet him at the station by Archer Park. You know that her ingles is not very good and she is pretty sure that he will be there later today. You also know, Luis, that since I do not have a telefono Gabriel must have given the Army our neighbor's numero. I think Gabriel was trying to surprise me, but I am going to surprise him and on top of that he is getting his favorite food to boot. I can hardly wait to see the look on his face."

She offered me a taco, which I readily accepted and watched as she wrapped the tacos in foil paper and then she poured some red Kool Aid in a large glass mayonnaise container that she had washed up and cleaned for just such an occasion.

As she worked, she continued, "My son is a good soldier just like both of his grandfathers. My father rode with Villa and gave his life for la patria just

north of Monterrey. My father-in-law was decorated by Zapata himself for bravery when he killed 17 federales in Zacatecas. Gabriel viene de buena mata – Gabriel viene de muy buena mata,” she repeated.

Doña Panchita never mentioned a husband or ex-husband. I had just known her to be a happy single mom to my friend, Gabriel. And that was all I needed to know or cared to know. Young kids just don’t know anything about adult people and that was good enough for me – a young innocent neighborhood kid.

After she had packed the tacos in a paper bag, she handed me the Kool-Aid jar. It was wet to the touch because of the large ice cubes she had added to cool the drink. After handing me the drink she straightened up and pointed at the door.

“Vamonos,” she commanded and I respectfully obeyed.

There wasn’t a cloud in the sky as we walked the six blocks to the park where we were to wait for Gabriel’s arrival. About a block from the park, I remember that I jumped up to pluck a mesquite when we passed under a tall mesquite tree and I dropped the Kool-Aid jar and it broke, spilling the drink all over our feet. Doña Panchita had never lost her cool and she didn’t lose it that time either. She just nudged me around the broken glass so I wouldn’t step on it and told me that it was okay.

“I’ll buy him un refresco en la estacion,” she continued, “I have una peseta en mi bolsa. I’ll get you un refresco, too.”

Within fifteen minutes we arrived at the park and sat on a bench facing the bus terminal across the street. Even though we were sitting under a hackberry tree there was nothing whatsoever to break the silence except for an occasional “chicharra” which could and would whee loudly for such a small insect. This wheeing sound would attract the mockingbirds that would fly to our tree in search of food. Coincidentally, upon their arrival, the wheeing would stop.

We sat in silence and Doña Panchita looked at her watch to check the time. This seemed to remind her to wind it up, which she did. She spoke to herself softly,

“Ten minutes ‘til three – only ten more minutes.” And she went silent again.

The silence lasted 5 long minutes before we were both suddenly startled by a couple of mangy dogs that had appeared out of nowhere and crawled underneath our bench.

“Shh-tah, perros!” she shouted and swung her purse at the larger mutt. It backed away just in time to avoid getting hit near its scab-filled ear.

I suspect they were attracted to the delicious smell of the tacos and so I instinctively picked the bag up and placed it on my lap. Then I got up and kicked the smaller dog and hit its bony hindquarters as it let out a painful yelp. I put the bag down and was about to chase the dog down to give it a more solid kick when Doña Panchita shouted, "They're here!"

My eyes immediately focused on a green four-door sedan that had stopped across the street. On its doors were the letters, "U.S. Army". It eased onto the curb and a sharply dressed military man with bright red hair stepped out of the car. He looked toward the bus terminal as if looking for someone.

"Aquí estoy, señor, aquí estoy!" shouted Dona Panchita as she rose quickly from the bench and swayed uneasily across the street to meet the man. Her heavy-set frame with the jovial chubby face closed in on the soldier and she asked in perfect Spanish,

"Mi hijo, señor, donde está mi hijo?" (My son, señor, where is my son?)

I was a few steps behind her and I stared at the car looking for Gabriel but there was no one else inside.

He looked at Doña Panchita and hesitated before answering.

"Mrs. Rivera?"

"Si, yo soy la Señora Rivera," she replied. "Donde esta Gabriel?"

"He is in the next car," he blurted out.

Doña Panchita turned to me and asked, "Que dice el hombre?" (What did the man say?)

I had just been promoted to the fifth grade, and my English was now petty good and I easily understood what the soldier was saying. I translated his words to her and explained, "Gabriel is in the next car, Doña Panchita."

She smiled and turned to look for another sedan but did not see one. Instead, a white hearse turned the corner and stopped behind the military vehicle. Out stepped another soldier accompanied by a priest.

I was too young to grasp the meaning of all of this but Doña Panchita – she knew.

As I stood behind her, her body began to shake uncontrollably. She tried to say something, but no sounds came out of her mouth. The priest and the soldiers ran toward her. Just as the priest reached her, she collapsed into his arms and fell to her knees crying out, "No, Gabriel, no not you my little angel. Dios mio, no me lo quites, por favor no te lo lleves! No me dejes sola! Noooo!

One soldier turned to me and said, "We tried to reach her to tell that her son was killed in action. We had no interpreter available, but we managed to explain that he would be brought here today at 3:00 p.m. Every other time we tried to talk to her she would say "No English, no English," and hang up the phone. I am so sorry, son."

The callers had no idea they were calling Doña Panchita's neighbor's house. Apparently, they neither knew that the neighbor spoke no English.

The finality of Gabriel's death did not hit me for some time. I just remember climbing into the front seat of the soldier's car, numb to everything around me. Doña Panchita cried and cried in the priest's arms in the back seat of the sedan as I instructed the soldier to turn the car around to go to where her house was.

As he was turning the car around, I said, "Go about six blocks."

He did not say anything as we started to drive away. Doña Panchita's cries got to me and my eyes began to quickly well up with tears. Without any warning a couple of sobs escaped my mouth as I, too, struggled to keep my composure.

I stared out the window so the red headed soldier wouldn't see me cry and through tear-filled eyes I saw the two mangy dogs by the bench where we had been sitting. They had torn up the paper bag and foil paper and were digging in voraciously at the tacos - meant for a hero.

— *the end* —