

## Apá

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As a young man, Apá taught himself to play the classical guitar. He could also make his requinto (a smaller one) cry with melodious, crisp notes. My siblings and I thought that Amá had married him for his musical talents. In 1979, we were a family of thirteen living in Hermosillo, the capital of the Sonora Desert, in northwestern Mexico. I was the third youngest and one of my dad's favorites... his consentida, which translated as "beloved or spoiled" depending on who was judging. On Sunday afternoons, he would sit us down to enjoy the music from his two guitars. Since he was not a good singer and couldn't remember lyrics too well, he usually invited me to sing while he played. I would oblige, con gusto, because I felt very special to have him entrust me with this important and fun task. My memory, as it relates to lyrics, was excellent, and I would not disappoint him as he played song after song and I sang each one from beginning to end. "Gema," a beautiful bolero, was our favorite and we knew that Amá loved it too, so we would dedicate it to her often. "Eres la gema que Dios convirtiera en mujer, para bien de mi vida..."

When my parents got married, Mamá Lola, our paternal grandmother, gave them the last two adobe rooms at one end of her shotgun house and planted a tall garden between them for privacy. With a third-grade education, Apá was a self-taught mason, a maestro de obras, and he could design and build anything from a simple house to a three-story mansion. But somehow, he only managed to build three walls attached to the front of our casita. He never finished the addition that was supposed to be a large room for his eleven children. The two original adobe rooms were multi-purpose: one was a kitchen by day and my parents' "bedroom" by night and the other functioned as a bed, living, sewing and TV room all at once.

Apá was 5 feet 8 inches tall; slender but with strong, with defined muscles; light complexioned, with permanent rosy cheeks and jet black, short hair combed back. His receding hairline exposed a big forehead, but he always wore a cowboy hat when he was not at home. His eyes were small and looked as if he had just done a travesura; they were smiling eyes shaded by scattered, thin eyebrows. His nose matched the rest of his face perfectly; not too big, not too small. His clothing was of that of the traditional vaquero and my favorite part of his outfit was the press-button cowboy shirts with two picos on each side of his chest and one on the top, center of his back. I remember a light, pistachio green shirt in particular and wondered how it would look on my own butch body someday. Apá could grow a full beard, but never did. Instead, his whole life, he wore a trimmed thick mustache that highlighted his full lips. He used to shave every morning by putting his double-edge blade into his old fashion, metal razor; screw it on and then submerge it into a container with soapy water that smelled minty clean. When he arrived home from work, sometimes I would help him take off his steel-toe boots and he would give me a coin and a kiss. His prickly beard tickled my cheek and I liked feeling him close. My family was not affectionate; so Apá's beso was the only sweet gesture I received on any given day.

I loved him because he was an ideal, loving father to my siblings and me. But I despised him because as an alcoholic, he became a violent, unrecognizable version of himself every weekend. There were brutal, verbal and physical fights between my parents. Amá no se dejaba, she would hit him back and throw whatever she could at him. One time she almost got him in the face with a kitchen knife. Later, I learned that she would usually be the one to start the fights. In spite of their mutual beatings, Apá somehow managed to never lay an angry hand on any of us, bukis—his children. Amá, on the other hand, was often ready to discipline us with la chancla, her hand, a belt, or even garden hose. As a buki malcriada, I was terrified of physical violence so I behaved well... I was the only one who was never hit by my Amá.

My parents' fights were on Friday nights and sometimes on Saturday. Inevitably, the same violent scene would start whenever Apá got home drunk and had little or no money for our family because he would choose to spend his entire "raya" with his borracho friends. Chaos would ensue and the yelling, screaming, punching, pulling of hair and clothes would last for what seemed like an eternity. And somehow, regardless, my parents would end up sleeping together on the kitchen floor, like any other night. By Sunday morning, estaban como si nada and

learned to love domingos. They were fun because by then our family had managed to get through the violent spells and glue our scattered pieces back together. We would also get our “domingo” or a tiny allowance.

Sunday mornings began with the same ritual. My mom would turn on the radio and get ready to wash up her “rincones,” (her word for her intimate body parts). We did not have our own running water or a bathroom; instead, we shared both with our maternal grandmother. After pouring some warm water into a bandeja, Amá would go behind the kitchen door. I could hear the water splashing and her singing to the radio as if she were the happiest woman alive. Afterwards she would come out from behind the door, fix her dress and make her strong, black coffee. No sugar, no milk added. Smiling and lightly flirting with my Apá, she would hand him the first cup and then pour one for herself. He would drink it with a piece of pan dulce. As they prepared for the day, the two of them would purposely bump into each other around our small kitchen. They would exchange sweet miradas and smiles. Once ready, Apá would say to us kids: “ay nos vemos, raza” and he would take off by himself to go walk in the cerros around our city. His trips lasted two or three hours. He would return with tunas, pitayas or other desert fruits.

When I was seven years old, Apá started to complain about his throat hurting. Later, he began getting skin tags around the front of his neck. The bolitas started to grow and to bunch up like little grapes. Amá wanted him to go see a doctor, but he was too proud. Instead, when his health started deteriorating, he would only cover his neck with a bandana like a bandit at rest. He wouldn't allow anyone to see behind it. But one time I saw his neck by accident and it already looked like putrid over-sized blackberry. Apá's health got worse by the day and after going to sobadoras y curanderas he finally had to go see a doctor who diagnosed him with a cancerous tumor. By then, the cancer had already spread throughout his throat, mouth, and shoulders and he had a few months to live.

The night he died, I was waiting outside our casita with my brothers and sisters who were sitting on broken chairs and benches we made from lumber he would use in his construction jobs. We knew this was it. He had been agonizing for a week and something told us he couldn't hang on anymore. A curandera said there would be a sign; he would try to clear his throat and if he succeeded, he would swallow the cancer, expel it from his body, and survive; but if he didn't, that would be his last action.

As one of the youngest, I wasn't allowed in the bedroom, but the door was open and I peeked in. He was laying there, thinner than usual, his cheeks no longer rosy, his lips dried and cracked, his hair messed up and his face covered with stubble. This wasn't my Apá; I didn't know this man. Scared, I went back to join my siblings. Shortly after, we heard a loud attempt at him clearing his throat, followed by a short silence, and then my mom's loud "NOOOOOO, no me dejes sola... no te me vayas, viejo..." Her high-pitched wailing was piercing, so I ran as fast as I could to my grandma's cuartito de baño in the middle of our shared back yard.

I went in, stood on in the middle of the roofless room, looked up at the stars and thanked God for my finally taking the monster away: "gracias Dios mío por llevártelo..." But as soon as those words escaped me, I became terrified. Would I be divinely punished for my sin of wishing my father dead? That night, the monster was gone... but so was my loving protector.