

The Cipitio (and his Haircut) | K. Alexander Perez

On a Thursday afternoon, Wilson “Willy” Medrano saw a large, conical hat swing past the window to the shop. The hat obscured the small figure’s face, but Willy already knew who it was. His eyes peaked beneath his hat as he pressed his nose up against the glass. A child no older than ten smiled wide before pushing the door open. As the bell to the barbershop rang, he said, “Hola, compas. I’m back!”

All eyes in the barbershop turned to the Cipitio, the child damned to immortality by the gods. The wild child stretched his arms wide in the air as if to embrace everyone in the shop. Willy and the staff at Ramiro’s Barbershop and Beauty Lounge nodded at him before returning to their work or their phones.

By the door, Ramiro trimmed the sideburns of his customer. Without looking at the child, Ramiro said, “Qué onda, Cipitio?”

The regulars in the shop turned away just as quickly at the Cipitio’s entrance. The guys getting freshened up looked back up at the side-by-side monitors playing Dodger highlights and an ‘80s slasher flick. The señoras in Doña Clara’s beauty corner traded chisme while Clara styled one of them. One of the barbers played Soundcloud tracks from his Bluetooth speakers, while Doña Clara played an old cumbia CD on her stereo. As the Cipitio took his usual seat by the door, the non-regulars made themselves known. The young man sitting next to the Cipitio bolted out the door. One of the ladies in Doña Clara’s corner began to hyperventilate before her friend grasped her hand and explained the situation.

Willy shut one eye as he lined up the half-asleep customer in his chair. Roused by the rumblings in the shop, the man in the chair opened his eyes. When he saw the Cipitio, he shifted back in horror, and Willy’s clippers zagged past

the line-up.

“What the fuck is that?” the customer asked. “What is—what’s wrong with its feet?”

Willy looked back at the Cipitio. Through the centuries, the small, pot-bellied creature had maintained the same cherub grin even as the rest of him faded. The grimy child wore a soiled white smock and smelled more like a dog than anything human. When he stood too close, a musty odor wafted through his teeth, giving the impression he had the diet of a dog too.

Only his wizard-like hat remained immaculate. Braided from palm leaves somewhere back home, it never collected a speck of dirt. It briefly drew eyes away from the rest of the child, but below the ankle is what really set that poor thing apart. In their cruelty, the gods had cursed the Cipitio with hairy, calloused feet twisted backwards to the rest of his body. Varicose veins ravaged his decrepit feet and were the only hint of an unnaturally long life. When he walked, he didn’t teeter but defied gravity, as his heel somehow balanced the whole front of his body.

After enough of his visits, Willy stopped wondering how he walked. Of course, the first time, the Cipitio startled Willy, who was uninformed about him. Although his mother was Salvadoran, she regarded the Cipitio as *brujeria* better left untalked about. Willy only learnt a bit about Cuzcatlan and myths like the Cipitio from a few junior college classes he took before the barbershop. It was around that time that his mother decided that his new job, and Willy by extension, was better left untalked about.

As the Cipitio waited on the couch, he crossed one of his crooked feet over his knee, and he opened one of the magazines on the end table nobody ever read. Willy swiveled the customer in the chair away from the Cipitio and towards the mirror.

“He’s alright, man,” Willy said. “Don’t worry about him.”

The customer looked back at the Cipitio and said, “No,

for real. What the hell is that?"

Willy sighed and said, "He's some kid from way back when. His mom was married to the son of Tláloc, god of thunder, but she stepped out on him. So, Tláloc cursed them both with immortality and deformations. She got a horse face and became the Siguanaba, and he got his feet turned around and became the Cipitio."

The customer looked at Willy in the mirror and said, "Bro, you got five seconds to let me pay and get the hell out."

Willy frowned and said, "I gotta fix that weird line on your head, foo."

"Four!" the customer yelled.

Willy muttered, "Damnit." He undid the barber cape and led the customer to the cash register. The customer slammed his cash down and didn't leave enough small bills for a tip. As he left, Willy cursed the customer under his breath and slouched in his barber chair. While he scrolled through his phone, he saw a new text from his mother. Barely glancing at it, he typed in ok. At the front of the shop, he noticed Doña Clara whispering to Ramiro. When Doña Clara walked away, Ramiro gulped and hastened his work. Clara went down the shop whispering to all the barbers, and they hastily put the final touches on their customers. When she reached Willy on the other side of the shop, she folded her hands together. Willy put his phone back in his pocket without hitting send.

"We have a problem," Doña Clara said.

Willy peeked behind her and looked at the Cipitio. The creature scratched his toes against the couch, and he unfolded a panel from an auto magazine. The Cipitio stared at a car for a few seconds before tearing the page out, balling it up, and chewing on it like gum.

"Somebody's complaining?" Willy asked.

"No," Doña Clara said, "but Sandra's out sick."

"Yeah," Willy said, "but you got the lounge covered, right?"

Clara massaged her forehead and said, "We need someone to cut *his* hair."

Willy scratched his head and said, "I mean, Carlos hasn't had anyone in a minute."

"Willy, pon atención" Doña Clara said. "You're the only Salvadoran in the shop right now. I need *you* to cut his hair."

Willy leaned forward in his chair and asked, "Why does that matter?"

"You haven't noticed he only gets his haircut from Sandra?" Doña Clara asked. "Sandra told me he likes bothering other Salvadorans."

"You think he really cares who cuts his hair?" Willy asked.

"I don't know," Doña Clara said. "But I don't want to find out. We keep everything the same for him, antes que haga travesuras."

Willy rubbed his chin and said, "I'm half-Salvadoran though."

"I don't care if only your cuñado is Salvadoran," Doña Clara said. "You're what we have."

Willy crossed his arms and said, "I don't like it, Clara. I'm not on the best terms with ma or pa. Maybe I don't have ... the type of reference I need here."

Doña Clara rolled her eyes and said, "Keep him busy while Carlos gets Sandra here. She'll take over if she needs to."

Willy watched the Cipitio put down the magazine and stretch out over the couch. He angled his feet horizontally over the leather to fit them, and he pulled his big hat over his eyes.

"What's the worst he can do?" Willy asked.

At that instant, everyone in the barbershop heard it, but not with their ears. The sound of a torrent squeezing through the eye of needle filled the crevices of their minds. A distorted melody like a nursery rhyme scraped of comfort could be parsed through the harsh noise. It drowned out the music on the speaker and the stereo, and the longer it continued the more it drowned out their own thoughts. The remaining customers stumbled out of the shop, and the staff covered their ears to no avail. Willy curled up in a ball in his chair and writhed in agony. Only the Cipitio, stretched serenely over the couch, did not stir.

Carlos crawled over and mouthed out to Doña Clara, *What the fuck is that?*

Doña Clara clutched the arm of Willy's chair and mouthed out, *He's whistling!*

Ramiro used the couch to raise himself up off his knees, and he lifted the hat off the Cipitio's face. The creature had closed his eyes and puckered his lips for his soundless whistle. Ramiro tapped on the Cipitio's shoulder, and the whistling inside their heads ceased as the creature stood up straight. The child cocked his hat back in place, and he smiled with a look of anticipation.

Out of breath, Ramiro said, "We're ready for you, Cipitio."

The Cipitio looked around concerned and asked, "But where's Sandra?"

Ramiro brushed himself off, pointed at Willy, and said, "My friend over there is going to take care of you."

The Cipitio beamed and said, "I get to make a new

friend? Yay!"

The child hopped off the couch and swung his arms as he strode to Willy. Doña Clara leaned into Willy's ear and said, "Do whatever you have to. Just do it."

She led Carlos by the shoulder out the door, and she strained a smile at the Cipitio as he passed. As Willy tidied up his station, he heard Carlos's car squeal out of the parking lot.

"Cómo estás, querido Cipitio?" Doña Clara asked. "You ... whistled such a nice song."

"I'm doing great, Doña Clara!" the Cipitio said. "Mami showed me that song. She told me to whistle whenever I got bored."

"That's ... really good, what you did, Cipitio," Doña Clara said, "but my friend Willy will keep you from getting bored."

The Cipitio tipped his hat, and he continued to Willy's chair. Willy had never said a word to the creature, as he always went straight to Sandra to receive his cut. Sandra was something of a Swiss-Army knife, although she rarely picked up a pair of clippers. The thirty-something Salvadoran colored, styled, worked the scalp, and did makeup and nails, establishing a steady roster of clients during her two years in Los Angeles.

The Cipitio picked his nose and said, "Do you want to be friends?"

Willy gulped and said, "Yeah, sure. My name's Willy."

He unfolded the cape, and as the Cipitio took his seat he said, "My name's the Cipitio, but all my friends just call me Cipitio. Without the *the*."

Willy draped the cape over the Cipitio, swiveled him to face the mirror, and he said, "Cool. So ... what'll it be today?"

The Cipitio pulled his hat off his head and slammed his palm over it. The enormous hat flattened and disappeared entirely. "I'll have the usual!" he said.

The Cipitio had a wild mane of curly hair that reached to his shoulders. As big as the hat was, it didn't cover past the neck, and the bounty of tangles appearing out of nowhere threw Willy off. It couldn't have been more than a month since he saw Sandra at the shop, but it already looked as if the child had spent a year in the wilderness.

"What's the usual?" Willy asked.

"Whatever Sandra does," the Cipitio said. "Has Sandra told you what I usually get?"

"No, not really," Willy said.

Willy always talked to Sandra in passing, never really considering they were both Salvi. The hairdresser had several years on him and clung to her corner, to her clients, and to Doña Clara. That was not to say Sandra wasn't friendly. If anything, she had an effortless charm with everyone. Whenever the Cipitio stopped by, Sandra would drop whatever she was doing and gently rib the creature as her *salvaje amigo*. While Sandra lathered and snipped, the Cipitio would melt in her chair like a street cat suddenly dozing on a person's lap.

Willy held up a hand mirror to the back of the Cipitio's head and asked, "What would you want me to do?"

Willy himself hated small talk, as it always threw him off his game. In silence, he ignored the shop's noise and sculpted. Before he pulled off the barber's cape, he would ask for a picture on his phone. To pass the time between clients, he would scroll through all his photos like a flip book animation, watching the profiles morph as his work became stronger and stronger. He waited for the day when his last photo would be *the one*, his opus, a haircut so fresh he might just hang up his clippers and get the real job his mother badgered him about.

The Cipitio turned to face him and asked, "What do you want to do?"

Willy realized no one had ever asked him that question. He took a few steps back, and he spun the Cipitio, inspecting him from every angle. In the chair, the Cipitio muffled a giggle.

"You'd be good with ... anything?" Willy asked.

"Yup, whatever you think looks good!" the Cipitio said.

Willy knew he had a rare opportunity here. He pictured all the exotic shapes and designs he could unleash, but he knew he could do better than that. He had to do something simple, yet challenging. Classic, though rare. Bold, but refined.

"Do you know what a flat top is?" Willy asked.

"Is that popular?" the Cipitio asked.

"30 years ago," Willy said. "Thinking a flattop with a skin drop fade."

"Sounds good to me!" the Cipitio said.

At his station, Willy laid out his custom equipment budgeted from the scrawny tips he collected. As he picked up his modified DAHL Wizard X "Tyrannosaurs" Clippers, he felt his heart racing. In the mirror, he could see the panoply of reflections of everyone in the shop, and he realized everybody was staring at him anxiously. He put down the clippers and shook his hands to loosen them up.

"You ok?" the Cipitio asked.

"Yeah, I'm ok," he said.

He picked the clippers back up, attached the guard, and turned it on. He felt the tremors of the tool shake up to his wrist, and he took a deep breath to steady his hand. He

elevated the barber chair carefully, mindful of the Cipitio's feet tucked inside beneath the seat. Willy slowly pressed the machine against the Cipitio's mane, and as the first clump of hair fell the child yelled, "Hey!"

Willy turned the clippers off in terror, and the Cipitio said, "Where are you from, Willy?"

"Um, here," Willy said. "Sun Valley."

He turned the clippers back on and continued to debulk the creature's hair. As the clutter accumulated at the base of the seat, the Cipitio narrowed his eyes at Willy. He widened his nostrils and sniffed the air, and the scrutiny on his face softened to warmth.

"You're from Suchitoto, maje," the Cipitio said. He sniffed the air again and said, "And somewhere else. Close to the ocean."

Willy froze for a second before continuing steady strides with his clippers. "My mom's from there," he said. "My dad's Mexican, from Salina Cruz. How do you know that?"

The Cipitio scratched his nose and said, "I can smell the water on you. Somewhere fresh and somewhere salty."

The child rubbed his belly under the cape and uttered a satisfied laugh. The motion drew Willy's clippers in too close, and a larger chunk of hair than intended fell off

"I caught the tastiest fish in Suchitoto last week," the Cipitio said.

"That's great," Willy said. "Can you stay still while I work?"

"Oh, sorry," the Cipitio said.

The Cipitio closed his eyes, drooped his shoulders and coughed softly. With most of the Cipitio's hair significantly neater, Willy switched guards to get down to the real work. He made a few guidelines in the child's hair, and as he

began to blend the sides, the Cipitio pulled out a days-old catfish from beneath the cape. He made a full turn, and Willy's clippers zigged past the guidelines.

The Cipitio held up the smelly fish and said, "Hey, do you wanna take one home with you?"

Willy stepped back, gritted his teeth, and threw his hands behind his neck. He shook his head no without a word, and the Cipitio blithely disappeared the fish under the cape. Doña Clara saw the frustration brewing and walked over.

She leaned into his ear and said, "Keep him busy. Talk to him like Sandra does."

"I can't," Willy said. "It throws—"

"It throws you off your game," Doña Clara said. "No me importa!"

Doña Clara walked back to her corner, where by now the rest of the shop had gathered to bite their nails and clutch their rosaries. Willy sighed and tried to clean up the zig on the back of the Cipitio's head. The child's knee bounced beneath the cape, and he hummed to himself a tune that felt familiar. Suddenly, he began to purse his lips to whistle. Thinking fast, Willy blurted, "Uh, so how do you know, Sandra?"

The Cipitio beamed and said, "Sandra's been my friend for forever! Ever since we were both cipotes in Cuzcatlan."

Willy switched to his trimmers and asked, "What's a cipote?"

The Cipitio raised an eyebrow and asked, "You don't know what a cipote is, maje?"

"No, should I?"

The Cipitio wrinkled his nose and said, "Almost all the Cuzcatlecos I've met know what a cipote is."

Willy brushed the Cipitio's head and wondered whether he'd said something wrong. He thought back to his mother, who'd moved to Virginia to be with his aunt after the divorce. He ran through some of his mother's lexicon: *chucho*, *puya*, *babaso*, *bicho*, *maje*, and of course *puchi-ca*. He remembered running around the house when he was little, and he fell in the living room and slid far enough to hit his head on the kitchen table. His mother had made *sopa de res*, but his father would of course be coming home late again. When she saw him bruised on the floor, she balled up her apron, threw it into the cold soup and said, "Este cipote torpel!"

"Cipote's a little kid, right?" Willy asked, angling the trimmer around the ears.

"Exactly!" the Cipitio said. "I knew you would know."

Willy finished on the sides, and he moved the trimmer to the top of the Cipitio's head. He asked, "How come you followed Sandra when she moved here?"

"Me?" the Cipitio asked. "I was already here."

Willy carefully flattened the top of the creature's head and asked, "I thought you lived in El Salvador."

"I do," the Cipitio said. "I live in Cuzcatlan and here. I live everywhere where I have friends."

Willy felt a rush as the haircut he envisioned took form. The top of the Cipitio's head looked as smooth as a sidewalk in a nice neighborhood. He moved the trimmer to the Cipitio's hairline, and as he carved an immaculate line across the child's forehead, the joy of craft enveloped him. He felt unbound but focused. He felt so free that a question escaped his lips that he didn't even know had been gnawing at him.

"You ever know a Teresa Medrano?" Willy asked. "Teresa Portillo, I mean."

The Cipitio stared ahead blankly as if processing an

equation, and he asked, "Teresa Portillo in Oakland? Richmond? Houston?"

"Richmond," Willy said.

"With the gold tooth?" the Cipitio asked. "Or the five cats? Or—"

"She has a gold tooth," Willy said.

"Oh yeah!" the Cipitio said. "I know her!"

Willy finished the line up and realized there was little left to do. He took a brush and slowly swept through the creature's head. "Tell me about her," he said.

"She makes the best sopa de res!" the Cipitio said. "I first met her as a cipote in Suchitoto. I was throwing rocks at her by the lago and she got really mad. Then I saw her again when she was cleaning a house in Brentwood, and I threw more rocks at her by the pool."

Willy ran the trimmer down the Cipitio's neck. "How is she doing now?" he asked.

"She's doing great!" the Cipitio said. "She lives in a cozy house with her sister's family, and she goes for a lot of long walks by herself. She talks to me a lot more than she used to. I wonder why?"

Willy brushed the Cipitio's neck, and he realized he was done. A flawless tower topped the Cipitio's head. The fade was so gentle it could calm a bull, the lineup was so sharp it could cut through a diamond, and the flattop was so flush it could balance a marble. Willy marveled at his work, and from the corner of his eye he saw the shop exchange relieved high-fives. As he grabbed the aftershave spray, a sinking feeling stunted the satisfaction he anticipated for this moment, the fulfillment of his opus.

"She talks a lot about her son, Wilson," the Cipitio said.

Willy held the aftershave bottle in the air. "What does

she say?" he asked.

"She actually said he cuts hair too," the Cipitio said. "Just like you, Willy! She said he gives the best haircuts. That she wanted him to be a doctor or lawyer or something fancy, and it took her a while to understand that's what he wanted to do."

Willy sprayed the back and sides of the Cipitio's head, and the child squealed and said, "Puchica, that stings!"

As Willy grabbed the hand mirror to reveal his final work, the Cipitio said, "But mostly she talks about how much she wishes he called more."

Willy lowered the hand mirror and covered his face. Something building outside of the barbershop, when he was tossing and turning on his best friend's couch, or whispering sweet nothings to his ex to sleep in a comfy bed again, or microwaving frozen meals and catching his reflection, or scrolling through photos of his father's other family, intruded the space where he thought he could feel safe. Suddenly, the opus on the Cipitio's head no long mattered as much as the message on his phone that read, *Cómo estás, hijo? Call me.*

"I think it'd be nice if he did," the Cipitio said. "Don't you think?"

Willy heaved a deep sigh, rubbed his forehead and said, "Yeah, you're right. I think he should."

The Cipitio raised his feet from beneath the cape and wiggled his dirty toes. As the legend went, the Siguanaba could only reverse the curse on her and her son by reuniting with him. Because she always followed his backward footsteps though, she would always follow where he just left and not where he was going. Before he met the Cipitio, Willy wondered if the kid could just stop walking. After he met him, Willy understood how hard it was for the Cipitio to stand still. A myth cannot budge as easily as humans from habit.

"I wish I could talk to my mami," the Cipitio said. "Everybody says she's really scary, but I think she's a nice lady. I think I'll probably see her soon."

"Yeah," Willy said. "She'll catch up eventually, Cipitio."

As Willy got ready to swivel the chair to reveal his final product, the Cipitio covered his eyes and said, "I can't wait to see it!"

Willy turned the chair so the Cipitio could face the mirror at his station. He held up the hand mirror behind the child's head, and Willy remembered he had to commemorate this occasion. He reached into his pocket to take a picture with his phone. As he fiddled with the settings to make sure he took the perfect shot, the Cipitio's flattop began to unflatten. From every angle, the creature's hair grew and curled into the knots and tangles he came in with. Like a timelapse of wild grass overrunning a field, the fade, the lineup, and the flattop disappeared. The dry, matted mane once again covered the Cipitio's head.

Willy was too stunned to lower the mirror, and when the Cipitio opened his eyes, the creature took in his hair from every angle.

"Wow!" the Cipitio said. "It looks great!"

The Cipitio undid the barber cape by himself, and he reached into the pockets of his threadbare pants. He pulled out a small piece of folded-up straw that unrolled into his enormous hat, and he hopped off the chair and walked to the cash register. Willy listlessly followed him and typed in the amount owed.

"It's gonna be ... do you even know what money is?" Willy asked.

"Oh yeah," the Cipitio said. "I use money all the time!"

The Cipitio reached into his hat, and he pulled out some banana leaves, cigarette butts, and bird feathers. He laid them all neatly by the register.

"Keep the change," the Cipitio said.

The Cipitio fixed his hat back on his head, and the bounty of curls disappeared underneath the hat. He extended his hand to Willy, and Willy shook it limply.

"You've got a friend for life, Willy," the Cipitio said. "I'll be seeing you around now!"

"That's ... really good," Willy said. "C'mon, I'll walk you out."

The Cipitio's mangled feet pattered against the tile as they walked towards the door. The barbers huddled in Doña Clara's corner hugged each other as if they were mission control for a moon landing. Ramiro reached into his mini-fridge and pulled out beers for the shop, and Doña Clara slouched in her chair overcome with relief.

"Would you have cared if anybody cut your hair besides me and Sandra?" Willy asked.

"Nope!" the Cipitio said, "but I'm glad it was you!"

Through the windows of the shop, they saw Carlos's car had parked back in the lot. Carlos and Sandra stepped out of the car and entered the shop, and they saw a severe cold had gripped Sandra. She hadn't changed out of her pajamas, and she kept sniveling through her face mask. Her big bright eyes had sullen but mustered a quiet joy when she saw the Cipitio.

"Hola, mi salvaje," Sandra said. "Cómo fue tu corte?"

A fierce cough came over Sandra, and Doña Clara mouthed out to Carlos, *What did you do?* Carlos shrugged his shoulders as if to say *just following orders*.

Cipitio's hat shrouded his face, but the shop noticed a change in the creature when he said in a quiet grumble, "You made my friend work when she was sick?"

Sandra lifted her face mask down to blow her nose and

said, "No, no it's ok, bicho. Solo ... quería ver te ahora."

The lights in the shop flickered on and off and the Cipitio growled, "*Mentirosa!*"

Willy backed away from the creature towards his station. When the Cipitio lifted his head to stare eye-to-eye with the rest of the shop, a grimace of revulsion had replaced his genial, blithe smile. In one sweeping look he interrogated the crew of the shop and judged them all guilty. He began to huff and puff, and all the plugged-in appliances, the clippers, the dryers, and even the register, began to whirr and move on their own.

"No, no," Doña Clara pleaded. "Es un malentendido, querido Cipitio!"

The Cipitio sneered and said, "You guys are—you guys are ... **MEAN!**"

At this last word, the door to the barbershop shut without being pushed, and the blinds by the window closed on their own. The lights turned off, and they found themselves in total darkness. They fell to the floor in agony as the Cipitio's final condemnation reverberated deep in their minds. **MEAN! MEAN! MEAN!** In the darkness, they could hear their machinery going haywire and falling off their counters, and the two monitors displayed brief flashes of light from empty static. They felt water soak through their clothing, and they realized their sinks had turned on and had begun to flood the shop. A force like a gust of wind pushed them back and pinned them to the walls of the shop. From the flashes of light, they could see a torrent materialize in the shop and sweep up all the tools, trash, and belongings into a spinning gale that approached them on the walls.

As a pair of scissors flew inches from Willy's nose, the lights in the shop turned back on. The appliances turned off, and everything and everyone fell to the floor. Willy looked up, and he saw the Cipitio had disappeared. The shop looked as if a hurricane had washed exclusively into their corner of the plaza. Their electronics were dead, their scissors were dulled, and all the money in the register lay on the wet shop floor. The barbers lumbered up, picked Doña

Clara and Sandra off the floor, and sat them down. Doña Clara threw her face in her hands and screamed, "Hijo de puta, malcriado brujito niño!"

She looked up at Sandra and asked, "You think he'll be back?"

Sandra blew her nose into her mask and said, "He'll forget everything by next week."

Doña Clara shook her head and said, "Por supuesto."

She stood up, clapped her hands together and said, "Ok ... everybody get a mop, broom, lo que sea. We got a lot of work to do. Ramiro, call the insurance and ... think of something. Carlos, go take Sandra back home, and then drive to the supplier."

As the team began to pick apart the mess left by the Cipitio's tantrum, Doña Clara walked up to Willy surveying the damage to his station. All his custom equipment lay ruined, and his DAHL Wizard X "Tyrannosaurs" Clippers had shattered the large mirror on the counter during flight. As Willy tried to straighten the teeth of his favorite comb, Doña Clara put a hand on his shoulder.

"You can go home if you want, mijo," she said. "You did a good job today, a fin de cuentas."

"Thanks," Willy said. "I'll stay and help clean though."

"You sure?" Doña Clara asked.

"Yeah," Willy said, putting the comb back down. "I'll take my break now though. I've got a phone call to make."