

"Oh, wash my song
into the dead man's soul,
and soak his marrow dry.
Let his eyes burst
like dying suns,
and let his blood
sweeten
my fields of corn...."

EL VELORIO

The deep water of the canal dumped Henry in the river, and the muddy current of the river sang as it enveloped its burden. It was a high river that carried the body southward, towards the land of the sun, beyond succor, past the last blessing of las cruces, into the dissolution that lay beyond el paso de la muerte. Dams could not stop the body that rolled and turned like a golden fish returning to its home. It was not until the body found a quiet pool that wires of a jetty would reach out like death's fingers and tangle the body in their grasp. Now the cold waters rumbled with the same insanity which had once driven Henry. The sun brought out an innocent fisherman who cast his hook and snagged dead Henry's heart.

"I'm telling you, you can't open that casket!" the county coroner insisted. He shifted his cigar in his mouth and placed his hands on his hips. He stood between Rufus and the casket he had just delivered to the mortuary door. He was a big man and he knew the law which said to get rid of the remains as soon as possible. "Why, man, there's more water wrapped in that plastic bag in the casket than there is body...." He shook his head.

"My son has been returned to us for a purpose," Rufus answered calmly. "He must have a proper velorio." He looked at Montoya who stood nervously by the casket.

"I have nothing to do with this...." Montoya wrung his hands. When he heard Rufus was coming to claim the body he had called the priest. Now he turned to Father Cayo for support.

"I know how you feel," the priest said to Rufus, "but things being as they are, why don't we just say a rosary for the dearly departed and have the coroner bury him. The county has jurisdiction in these matters...."

"You will not pray at his velorio?" Rufus asked.

"Impossible!" The priest shook his head and turned away.

"Then I have no use for you," Rufus shrugged. "I will take my son home. There the living will view the dead, the rosary will be prayed, the alabados will be sung. The velorio will last all night, the body will not be left alone. Then in the morning he can be buried. It is the proper thing to do. It is all I have to give him...."

As he moved toward the casket he remembered the death of his mother. Her eyes had not closed, and in his grief his father had placed two Liberty half-dollars on her eyelids. It was the last human touch for her on earth, and he remembered. When they were ready to seal the casket, the half-dollars were removed and the eyes remained closed. His father had given him the silver coins and he had

carried them ever since. Now he had to see his son's eyes, he had to be sure that death would let them close in peace. He wanted to give his son the silver pieces blessed by his mother so long ago. It would be his last remembrance.

"You cannot move this body without proper authorization!" The coroner blocked his way. In one swift movement, Rufus thrust him aside.

"I will take my son home!" Rufus' voice was stern. He nodded and Willie helped him slip the plain, welfare casket on his back. He bent like a mule and grunted, but he lifted the heavy load. He trudged away from Montoya's Mortuary bearing the crushing load to his simple home.

It was a strange procession that followed him down the winding streets of the barrio. The news of the slow cortege spread quickly and people came to their gates to see Rufus bearing his cross. Behind trudged his wife, her black shawl pulled around her head to hide her face from staring eyes. Her children followed, frightened and cringing, bewildered by the world beyond their home. Some of the old women of the barrio pulled their black shawls over their heads and left what they were doing to follow the mournful procession. One began to pray the rosary, and the refrain of Hail Marys from the chorus mixed into the dust of the street and ascended into the bright light of the afternoon.

Crispín came, and he strummed his guitar softly, a dirge for poor, dead Henry.

Rufus did not look back. He moved ahead with a determination that would not be deterred. Once he tripped and an old man stepped forward to help him. When they had straightened the heavy casket on his back, Rufus thanked the man and continued. They understood his need to bear the weight alone. They did not speak, but their presence was a strength. When the arduous march neared the house, some of the men went ahead to set some crates on which to place the casket, then they helped Rufus lower the

heavy load.

He wanted to be alone with his dead son, and so the mourners waited outside while Rufus took a crowbar and opened the coffin. The plain lid snapped open and the smell of death permeated the room. Rufus did not recognize the water-logged remains, but still a quiet sadness made him sigh. He wanted to pray, but he couldn't find the right words. Instead he opened the plastic bag and placed two half-dollars on the sunken pits that were once Henry's eyes. Rufus smiled. His son would have two silver moons to light his way into eternity. He crossed his forehead and then sealed everything as it had been.

The women of the barrio entered and cleaned the cluttered house while Rufus and his wife sat quietly beside the coffin. They opened the windows, airing the house, and they lit a candle at the foot of the coffin. They burned incense to drive away the smell of death. One woman brought a bouquet of roses and set them on the coffin. The house was swept clean and the kitchen was scrubbed so the feast of the wake could be prepared. The children of Rufus looked bewildered, but the women drew them out of their isolation and soon they too were helping.

The women worked cheerfully as they prepared food for the velorio. There should be plenty of food for the mourners who came to keep the vigil of the wake at night, so everyone helped and contributed something. The storehouse of food grew in the kitchen. Nimble fingers pressed the round tortillas that became the bread of the wake. Pots of beans were brought and their rich fragrance blended into the aroma of the roasting chile verde. The mourners brought other gifts of food. An old friend from Belén brought a goat which he butchered in the back yard, and soon there was tender carne de cabrito roasting in the oven. In Los Padillas, the blood of the lamb was saved and made into a rich blood pudding which became the gift that was offered with el pésame to Rufus and his wife. Bowls of carne adovada,

skillets of red chile de ristra made by hand, and pastelitos made of dried fruit also were brought until the tables in the kitchen were heaped high with food for the mourners. Wine and whiskey were delivered so there would be plenty of drink for those who prayed and sang for Henry's place in Heaven.

Black coffee brewed on the stove. Its fragrance and the sweet scent of burning piñon wood wafted into the living room and roused Rufus from his thoughts. What the neighbors were doing for him brought tears to his eyes. He smiled and understood that tomorrow he would be Rufus again, and that the children of the barrio would taunt him as he scavenged in the alleys, and they would sing songs about his wife. Tomorrow he would withdraw once again into the shell of his solitude, and he would walk the streets of Barelás not with the weight of his son's coffin on his back, but with the burden of his loneliness. He could accept that, because what had happened today would make that easier to bear.

Evening came and the mourners filled the small house. Then the man who would sing the alabados arrived. His name was Lázaro, tall and gaunt like an old, giant, gnarled alamo. Wrapped in his dusty World War I coat, he looked like an old prophet walking out of the pages of the BIBLE. Out of place in a world which called itself modern, he scoffed at time because his soul was timeless. He towered over the children who gathered outside the house and the power of his one good eye made them cringe and part to let him pass. He was tattered and unshaven, prompting some to laugh at the long hair that fell like a lion's mane around his shoulders. But he had a gift. He could sing the old prayers and make God cry in Heaven.

With his long duster-coat flowing behind him he walked quickly to the foot of the coffin and cried out, "¡Arrímense vivos y difuntos, aquí estamos todos juntos." His voice cracked with the essence of prayer and brought the mourners to their

knees.

"¡Oyeme Dios!" He raised his hands toward heaven and called upon the Lord to hear him. The people bowed their heads and waited for the earth to shake.

"¡La voz de Dios habla por el espíritu humano, y no hay muerte en este mundo!" he cried out.

"¡Alabados sean los dulces nombres," the women responded and made the sign of the cross. None dared look up at this man who called upon the spirit of God as a companion and a friend to be with them on this night.

"Hear me, Father!" one-eyed Lázaro sang, "I have come to sing the prayers for the dead...." His voice rose sonorously in the smoke of the burning candles. "I will sit by the throne of the Lord and sing my songs for my dead brother...." He carried all of the old alabados in his heart, and he was sure that they would please the Lord. He had walked in God's path all his life, renouncing the world and its goods, and he had walked through the door of death from an old life into a new one, so he knew that God listened to him. He was a man who conversed with God, a holy man, a man who had not sinned. And when he felt God turn to listen, he threw himself on the floor and knelt before the coffin.

"Padre nuestro que 'stas en los cielos, santificado sea tu nombre...." This was his prayer to the Lord, the opening lines of the drama he would recreate this night. He would sing to God and lead the chorus of women through the dark journey of the long night until they felt the presence of death and the power of God. He would drive the knowledge of death into their hearts.

"Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death," the women answered the dolorous sound of Lázaro's dry voice.

He rocked on his knees and made them understand that the body itself is a coffin, and the spirit is entombed in its blood-dark flesh. He made them understand that Henry's entrapment in the dark coffin

was like theirs. His dry, raspy voice in measured meter sought to draw them into the confines of the coffin so they could feel the presence of death.

Some of the men rose to stretch and go outside to urinate against the side of the house, but the women did not leave the one-eyed prophet. His deep, sonorous voice took them from hymn to hymn. At times it faltered and broke the rhythm, but it never descended from the hypnotic tempo that drove them higher and higher towards a climax with death. The concentric rings of mourners became one. The flickering light of the burning candles blurred in their eyes and reminded them of the brevity of life, while the coffin made them fear eternity. The immense weight of the mystery pressed down on them, and relief was only within the meaning of the dark coffin.

The rest of the men got up and left, moving quietly into the kitchen for a cigarette and a drink, but the women remained. Children fell asleep as Lázaro reached into his vast storehouse of songs and prayers to continue the velorio, to continue the wake that became a vigil and a conversation with one's soul. Finally the sing-song of the alabados, the fatigue, the incense of the burning candles, and the essence of faith raised the mourners to a climax where all emotions became one. There was a union with the rotting flesh in the sealed casket, and the illusion of life fell away like a veil as they made the connection with death and eternity. Suddenly the immense weight was lifted. The woman nearest the coffin cried out, "¡Dios mío! ¡Dios mío!" She clutched at the casket and tried to rip away the covering. Like the others, she had been driven to a vision of eternity, and she was engulfed with pity for dead Henry.

The other women reached out to help her. A flood of tears broke loose and they cried. Relief found its way into their tired bodies. They sighed and rested their souls. They comforted each other.

Lázaro rose and went to the kitchen. His legs felt stiff, and there was an empty feeling in his stomach.

God had listened, he knew, and God had heard him. The prayers of the women were sweet to God, for He had shown them the path that Henry would walk. The Lord is good, Lázaro thought. One of the men handed him a bottle and he took a drink.

"Gracias," he acknowledged. "What time is it?"

"Past twelve, compadre," the man answered. "You prayed four hours straight...."

"Now we must eat," he said before he went outside for a breath of fresh air, "then we must pray again. We must pray until the lucero of dawn appears in the sky."

They kept the vigil until the fingers of dawn reached over the Sandia Mountains and bathed the barrio with the yellow light of the new day. They alternated prayer with eating. Bottles of wine, tequila, and whiskey were emptied, and the kitchen roared and shook with laughter. Old stories were told, gossip exchanged. Lázaro's songs and prayers heightened their awareness of death, so they celebrated the brevity of life.

That was why Rufus had carried the coffin through the streets, back to his home so his son could have a proper *velorio* which would entitle the dead and the living to a proper burial.