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The Father of Candles

Charles Haddox

When the rains fell in Colonia San Martín, the cinder-covered streets would glisten like glass or fish scales, rivers of smoke and sky. It was as if the stars were raining grave crosses adorned with silver nails. An abandoned Neo-Mudéjar mansion on the corner of Calle Cuervo and Avenida Volcán Ceboruco that had once belonged to a wealthy family would provide temporary shelter for the neighborhood's feral children—though the three of us weren't truly feral. Leona, Oscar, and I were simply ignored. We would light a fire of sticks and fallen ceiling laths in a black marble fireplace on the eastern wall of a once-grand parlor. A corner of the room held an altar left by holy mendicants: the statue of a bearded saint surrounded by chains of palm leaf and paper, as well as candles melted long ago into white and golden globules without form or cords. We called the saint, who was propped up on an old cane stool, "the Father of Candles" or "Old Saint Joseph." We used to say, "He's as smart as Old Saint Joseph." Sometimes we'd also say, "He was as nice as the Father of Candles."

The family that lived in the house fell on hard times and sold off everything they owned, piece by piece, long before we were born. Nothing was left but a solitary bird living in the attic. My mother once told me that everything was bought by a moneylender: candleholders and enameled plates, forged copper roses and pins of gold, all the way down to the sepulchral doors. Even the damp-stained family portraits. A winter house, empty as the wallet of night. A ghost house. The very walls were collapsing. What a sad little story, sad as an old man singing along with the band, or a lost dog wandering here and there, or the waiter who always wanted to be asked to sing.

We would open our bag of snacks, warm bread or tortillas sprinkled with salt and sometimes stuffed with beans or

cheese, and old coffee with milk and sugar in a two-liter pop bottle that we would drink like bees drinking nectar. It was sweet, bitter, thick as molasses, but we'd pretend it was chocolate milk.

I was brought to that place by my parents. San Juan de los Lagos. They had family there. My mother's family. We were visiting, just visiting, and the children were my cousins. But it's customary in México to call even the most distant relatives "cousins" . . .

A little fire in the rain. In an old house, almost empty, with the lonely bird and Old Saint Joseph. The rain falling like a full sack, in the September of ripe amaranth, a tender voice in its rattle, its shorter days and violent skies.

With my cousins, enjoying a little feast.

Oscar, who everybody called "Trompo," said sarcastically, "This is the best food I ever ate."

"Screw you, Trompo," cousin Leona answered. She was older and stronger than the two of us, so she could say whatever she wanted. And she had made the snacks. Tortillas stuffed with beans and smashed Fritos.

Trompo could never sit still. He had infinite amounts of energy, liters of juice—a *rotor tricolor* that never burned out. He ran from one room of the gloomy old mansion to the next, like a deer being chased by a jaguar. Spinning and waving his arms. If he sprouted a few feathers, he'd wheel into the air. He was also the master of a good shriek and obliged us superbly when he found the body of an old man lying on the floor in one of the former bedrooms.

It was the first dead person I had ever seen. I'd never even been to a funeral. Leona knelt beside the body and shook its narrow shoulders, because she wanted to believe that the old man was only asleep. His skin was yellow, and his mouth hung open. Even though I had never seen a body before, I knew he was dead. Trompo stopped screaming and started cursing under his breath. Quicksilver stars continued to fall from the sky outside the vacant windows. The earth was filled with their

gentle patter. One of the bedroom walls had a dark water stain caused by a leaky attic; the soul of the dead man embossed on squalid plaster. My beans and tortillas and crushed Fritos wanted to make a return to the wider world.

“He’s dead, *mija*,” I finally managed to say to the tough little girl in pink overalls who was turning the guy into jelly.

Leona stopped shaking the dead man and looked up at me, a look, I swear, that scared me more than seeing the body.

“I’m not your *hija*.” She stood up and walked toward the window of the bedroom.

Trompo was back to whirling like a wheel, practically giving off sparks. It wasn’t helping my stomach.

“Settle down, idiot,” I said to him.

“What are we going to do with a dead guy. We’re not even supposed to be here. Fuck! We’re supposed to be at Leona’s mom’s store.”

“Shut up, you guys,” Leona said as she perched on the edge of the blue-tiled windowsill. “If he was killed by narcos, they’ll be coming for us next.”

“He’d be covered with blood if somebody killed him. This old guy just dropped dead.”

“We’re not supposed to be here . . .” Trompo muttered in a sing-song voice.

Leona looked like a shadow in the window. “If we have to tell somebody about this dead guy, we can say we were just passing by the place and used it for shelter when it started to rain.”

“What happens when they find our fire?” Trompo asked.

“We can say it was already going. Somebody else left it behind.”

For once, I was glad that Leona liked to take charge of things. Propped up on the windowsill, framed by a corona of purple clouds and argent thunderbolts, she looked like an avenging angel weighing souls at the Last Judgment.

What to do about the body of an old dead man in a place

that we weren't even supposed to be? For a moment, we entered the world of adult concerns and adult responsibilities.

"Hey, what if he starts speaking to us?" Trompo asked. "What if he tells us, 'I'm the Father of Candles'?"

"Shut up!" Leona and I said together.

Leona pulled out her phone and started texting her "boy-friend," a bearlike eleven-year-old who was rumored to have once peed on Trompo.

"I'll ask 'Oso' what to do," she said, as her fingers danced like drunken marionettes over the keypad.

"'Baboso,' you mean," Trompo said sarcastically. "Yeah, we really want to get him involved."

Leona stopped texting. "What do you want me to do? Call the police?"

"On Baboso. Sure thing."

She picked up a piece of broken plaster as big as the devil's scrotum and threw it at him. It burst into a million pieces when it hit the wall above his head. Bits of plaster fell on the old man's ragged shirt.

"Poor old man. Maybe he was somebody's grandfather."

Leona looked at me with surprise on her face.

"You're acting like you knew him."

Trompo chimed in. "He's the Father of Candles. He's the Father of Candles."

"Shut up!" Leona and I said together.

Leona got down from the windowsill and said to me, "He can't have been here long. We were in this room just the other day. Are you sure he's dead?"

"He's dead," I said.

"What if he's in a coma and needs a doctor?"

"You still breathe when you're in a coma."

"Okay. He's dead," Leona said with the finality of a bridge collapse.

"Have you ever seen a dead person before?" I asked her.

"I saw Linda's baby at his funeral. They said he was an an-

gel. But my abuela told me a story one time about a dog who was so pious he wouldn't eat meat on Friday. They said that after he died, he became an angel."

Linda was another "cousin." She was married to a "grasshopper" from Teocaltiche.

"How about this guy?" Trompo asked.

"Him? Are you kidding? You know what they say, 'If you have a tail, you're not invited to the angels' ball.' "

Trompo turned the old man on his side with a sturdy cedar lath to see if he really had a tail.

"I'm freezing," Leona said. "Let's go sit by the fire."

As we warmed ourselves, I looked in the food bag for scraps. It was empty.

"Man, for somebody who didn't like the snacks, you sure ate 'em all."

Trompo let out a loud belch in reply.

The walls of the former *sala* were mottled with patches of light just above the floor, a light so faint that it wasn't really there. A phantom light, or a play on the eyes. Tiny clusters of bioluminescent fungi were growing out of wet and crumbling lime.

Picking up the empty coffee bottle, Leona said, "The rain's over. Let's go. Somebody else will find the old man."

"Yeah," I said, "some other kids."

"That's not our problem."

"Leo . . ."

"You want to deal with my mother and the police?"

"No. But shouldn't we at least cover him up?"

"With what? Let's go."

A pale streak of moonlight peeked through a tall, key-hole-shaped window. The sky's front teeth in lips of cloud.

I thought I heard the singing of a solitary bird; a somber *vinuete* or the devil's favorite jig.

In the bedroom, the body made a rustling sound as it rolled over.

"The Father of Candles," Trompo wailed.

Leona and I exchanged a quick look as we hurried with our cousin to the cavernous front doorway.