Forget Me Not

By

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What is about to happen is no small matter. Vaporous and spectral, family members, friends and others gather. Some sit, some stand. All are waiting to hear and bear witness to the account of their lives to be told for the first time.

This story has taken a while to piece together. Some may complain too long awhile. But it has resulted in a densely woven chronicle that requires careful reading—I pray I am up to the task—and equally, it deserves attentive listening.

My name is Alejandro Salazar Herrera. But everyone for ease of pronunciation calls me Alex. Also, it avoids confusion as my mother and I share the same first name but for the last letter. Hers ends in an *a* and mine in an *o*.

After an absence I'm in my family home, in the market town of Medina del Campo, Valladolid, Spain and seated at the desk that was once my father's but which I now claim. My knees have begun to ache, a reminder I have sat too long.

On the desk are two piles of papers. One being the fragile letters exchanged half a century ago between my father and his mother. The other, a recently completed typed manuscript in which are their stories and mine; the secret stories of those I never knew for the longest time; stories of those I loved and lost; stories of those I did not realize I loved and almost came to losing, too.

In a row in front of the two piles are five recently received, soft grey metal canisters with screw-on lids. These contain the ashes of my paternal grandparents, my father, my first lover and a dog.

In a little while, once the sun has warmed the ramparts of the medieval fortress, La Mota—which keeps watch over our town—the ashes will be tossed to the wind. Wherever the wind wills, ash will fly and then settle.

Today is Sunday, November 2, 1980. As is the custom in Latin countries, *Día de Muertos*, The Day of the Dead, is being celebrated. In keeping with tradition, the deceased are remembered, their life stories recounted and—wholly dependent upon the teller—embellished or reduced.

By contrast, this story is as authentic as it possibly can be. And for the ease of simplicity, I'll start reading in chronological order the oldest story first starting here in Medina del Campo in the year of 1900.

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It was also a Sunday, nearing the end of a late summer afternoon. My paternal grandfather, Felipe Salazar, just twenty-three years old was dressed in the *vaquero*, cowboy clothes of his time. On his head was his Sunday sombrero. It had a tall pointy crown and wide flat brim. It concealed the scrunched up space between his eyebrows as he focused on the bull upon which all his hopes were pinned. Around my grandfather the fans who packed the bullring were assessing the third and final phase in the last bullfight of that day. Fizzy copper tangs wafting overhead cut through the thick smell of fresh blood from earlier fights.

The matador invited the bull to perform the paso-doble, better known in bullfighting culture as *Danza de la Muerte*. He swirled the magenta and gold cape

inches from the bull's nose. All held their breaths. The bull's hooves slipped. In the next beat he righted himself, then entered the dance.

In a cacophony of calls, hand claps and foot stomps, fans demanded the courageous bull's reprieve from death.

The matador and his crew withdrew to a safer distance. The bull stood rock still. Alone. A wisp of a breeze rattled the long spears, and fluttered cheerful little paper flags attached to the barbed sticks protruding from his blood-slicked hide.

A hush descended upon the crowd. All eyes looked for the twitch of *el Presidente's* little finger granting the reprieve. The fans whistled and whooped, but none louder than my grandfather.

The bull's prize was to be turned out to pasture, free to cover as many cows as possible. And my grandfather's prize was that his dream of riches would turn into real riches few *toreros* ever achieved. For in meeting the requirements of the centuries-old practice, fighting bulls would be sold for a hefty price. And bullfighting requires a lot of bulls.

Like poor farmers before them, Felipe Salazar and his new wife, Maria Guadalupe Moreno went in search of a better life.

She was short, dark, had a round cheerful face, was full breasted and blessed with broad hips. He was tall, fair, had a chiseled face, lean limbs and blessed with agile litheness. But just like the Universe teaches, opposites attract and together they formed a perfectly matched whole.

The couple left Spain for Mexico having heard Mexico needed a new seed line. Their honeymoon was an unconventional journey with the reprieved and crated up seed bull in tow. Weeks and several near mishaps later he was let loose in the corral distant to the patched adobe house my grandparents used as their new home.

Felipe Salazar was a *torero*. He had raised and worked with bulls all his life. He would have told you bulls are aggressive, to be avoided at any cost. That there is an old ploy to moving bulls safely. If honored, the task can be accomplished with neither bloodshed nor loss of life. A bull needs to be moved while surrounded by his herd of females. Ideally, a barrier should separate beast from man. And the *torero* is responsible for an unhurried relocation best unnoticed by the bull.

On an afternoon two years later, the cows, tantalized by the smell of new shoots in the adjoining corral, moved forward more quickly than usual. Heavy and slow, the seed bull, unimaginatively nicknamed *Toro de Semillas*, found himself alone.

In his peripheral vision, he must've caught sight of a moving shadow. His muscled mass swung round. He would defend his cows until death.

In the quiet time between two heartbeats Felipe Salazar found himself beneath the enraged bull.

A few days from giving birth to my father, my grandmother, Maria Guadalupe Moreno, heard her husband's cries through the ranch dogs' frenzied barks. She picked up her skirts and ran. He lay silenced. Curled in a fetal ball under the bull's belly, his clothes shredded. Miniature geysers spurted red, one from each wound.

Maria Guadalupe Moreno tore a sapling from the ground, the kind she wove into baskets. Gripping the frayed root ball she flicked the flexible end, stinging the lead cow's hindquarters. The cow turned back towards the bull. The others followed.

The bull looked at his arriving herd. Flanked by bobbing hips and swinging tails, he ambled through the open gate into the adjoining corral. He and his cows set about foraging the newly sprung grass.

With maniacal strength Maria Guadalupe Moreno heaved and dragged her husband to the other side of the corral fence. His face was white with agony or loss of blood.

The long-legged ranch dogs, which normally dashed about like spritely shadows, halted. Heads and tails held low, they formed a semicircle a few feet from their leader's body.

Consuelo the scrawny yellow bitch, who produced litters of indefatigable hunters, sank down. With her nose pressed forward, she belly-crawled to the unconscious body. She lapped up the blood in search of its sources. When she found it, she settled into a licking rhythm until there was no more blood.

A gust of wind swept Maria Guadalupe Moreno into the house, the soles of her feet skimming the dusty ground. Passing through the kitchen she raised one arm. From the top shelf—normally she could reach it only by standing on a chair—she grabbed a clay pot. It was filled with a salve of crushed tobacco leaves. Had there been a clock, the second hand would have shown hardly a moment had passed before she knelt beside her husband and the licking bitch.

As the gored wounds emerged pink and clean, Maria Guadalupe Moreno plugged them with the tobacco salve. With her teeth she tore her apron into strips and bound each injury. At the last binding, barely visible in the setting sun, she felt the first violent spasm. My father, José Salazar Moreno, was ready to enter the world.

My grandmother laboured. Her fingers scrabbled in the dirt with every contraction as she half lay, half sat beside her unconscious husband. Around them, the dogs inched closer.

At first starlight, the smallest of owls emerged from abandoned woodpecker holes in the trunks of cacti. Under their gaze my father slipped out of the birth canal. His warm body hit the cold air, creating little clouds of rising steam.

With the newborn between her thighs, Maria Guadalupe Moreno tied two knots in the length of the cord. Unsnapping the metal button on the leather sheath on her husband's belt, she withdrew the Bowie knife. She sliced through the space between the knots.

By the glow of the gibbous moon, she noticed that the child's tiny left foot was smaller than the other. But there was another matter at hand. The placenta emerged. With the swishing sound of rippling silk, it slipped smoothly from her fingers as she threw it in an arc to just beyond the circle of dogs. Consuelo growled low. Two of her pregnant daughters jumped. Mid-air they fought for a share of it.

With the newborn wrapped like a tortilla in one of her bloodied skirts, his pinched face barely visible in the crook of her arm, Maria Guadalupe Moreno lay down alongside her unconscious husband.

A torrent of emotions clamored for attention. Of these she isolated three. Joy for the bundle she cradled in her arms, for which she thanked the universe. Hate for the bull that had so injured her husband, for which she cursed the universe. Frustration because there would be no reason offered for the difference in her child's feet. And for this, she ignored the universe.

Under morning light she would explore the child's feet and decide her own answer. It was the first step towards changing the course of her son's future from what was already written in The Logbook of Futures Foretold.

The pack drew together. They pressed their boney rumps up against each other and along the length of my grandparents' bodies. Their heads faced outwards resting upon their paws, ears swiveling, alert to any sound.

The owls yipped their calls, to which, if you listened hard enough, you may have heard the unborn pups in Consuelo's daughters' bellies respond. Thus, under a star speckled sky, they all passed the night.

At dawn, Maria Guadalupe Moreno awoke to see her husband's eyes open. Vacant. She raised their newborn close to his face. She placed kisses on her husband's forehead. The pressure of her lips increased imparting her urgent need for him.

A pinprick of light started to gleam. Coming closer it grew brighter and stronger then flooded his eyes reflecting Felipe Salazar's awed joy at his first sight of the new life.

The bull and his cows moved back to the fence. Through the spaces between the horizontal corral poles, they watched the life-overcome-death tussle play out before them.

Before the sun climbed a quarter arc, Felipe Salazar began the return journey to the house. He crawled and then fainted with the pain from his injuries, his progress monitored by Consuelo and her daughters. Each time he fainted, the bitches lay down beside him. Then, judging it was time to try again, Consuelo thrust her wet nose into his face. Past noon he collapsed onto a makeshift pallet on the kitchen floor.

With her son tied to her by a woven sling, Maria Guadalupe Moreno never left her husband's side. Within hours of each other, Consuelo's daughters whelped in two large boxes, one on either side of the stove. Newborn suckling sounds filled the kitchen soon turning into strident yells or yelps, all eager for life.

Consuelo remained at the foot of pallet, one eye on Felipe Salazar and the other on everything else.

The rest of the pack remained outdoors. When not hunting, they slept. Paws together, backs arched, each curled nose to tail. And, in a corkscrew spiral, each sank into their hollowed out dustbowl. Furry-mounded sentinels, indistinguishable one from the other, dotted the yard.

Each morning, rabbits, birds, rodents, and once a Mexican hog lay dead at the kitchen door. My grandmother used what she needed from these kills throwing the remainder to the dogs.

My grandfather's first meal was the blood of the Mexican hog, boiled, mixed with crumbled bread, and sprinkled with vinegar and cumin. It was also his second and third meal. By the fourth, he'd had enough. He asked for something else. My grandmother barely managed to contain the flash of a quick grin. And with her raisin dark eyes dancing with mirth she gave thanks to the universe. Her husband was on the road to recovery.

The now-proven antibacterial enzyme lysozyme, found in the saliva of dogs was perhaps why my grandfather's wounds did not become infected. Or, it was the unproven curative powers of tobacco salve on open wounds. His healed scars became soft and supple thanks to wild olive oil smoothed into them.

Felipe Salazar got back on his feet. But his original strength and mobility did not return. He was unable to stand upright. Each year his upper spine curved more, forcing his head to drop forward. He could see to the right all the time. When he wanted to see to the left, he had to turn at a forty-five degree angle. His hunch became noticeable. He had to sleep on his stomach with his head turned to the right. He suffered blinding headaches and deadness in his arms.

Yet my grandparents remained on the ranch. They raised my father, Consuelo's extended line of hunting dogs and their herd of cattle destined for the abattoir. And they raised the most aggressive and physically correct fighting bulls for the *Luis Longoria Plaza de Toros* bullring on Sundays and feast days.

While beef cattle prices fluctuated, there was no haggling over the price of a fighting bull. The more aggression and courage shown, the higher the price. By raising bulls destined for the bullring, my grandparents amassed more money than they needed for the simple life-style they led.

When *Toro de Semillas* died, they did not weep. Yet when Consuelo the bitch died, they mourned and wept enough to fill the cattle water troughs. Each year thereafter, upon the Day of the Dead they celebrated her life. And wept a little more, causing troughs to spill their brims.

Even in death she remained true to the meaning of her name, bringing them comfort and solace. Of all the dogs, only Consuelo was buried under a home-fashioned cross in the area reserved for future members of the Salazar Moreno family. She was never forgotten. And once my grandparents died, there were three wrought iron crosses in the graveyard; theirs and Consuelo's.

The ranch spread over a few hundred acres. One side was bounded by the Rio Bravo, which the Texans on the opposite side called the Rio Grande. My grandfather managed it alone. Each dawn he rode out with a team of horses. He returned home when chickens took to their roosts.

Several times a year roaming ranch workers and their families stopped by. They'd help mend fences, brand stock, cut back dry and inedible brush, which around midday was prone to spontaneous combustion. It was then the companionless life my father led would be broken.

But his father had such a distorted physique, that upon seeing him children would run for their mothers screaming. So he'd go to their camps if he wanted to mix with others of his age.

To this, my grandmother was not inclined. For, from the night after his birth, she negotiated with the Universe much higher stakes for her son than the daughter of a roaming ranch worker.

When my father turned eighteen—standing nearly as tall as his father (his face by then had taken on his father's chiseled look, too)—my grandfather fell from a makeshift ladder. It was hardly a fall. His foot slipped from the first rung. But he landed at an awkward angle - on something blunt. He said it set off a ripple wave along his spine.

Each ripple was punctuated by loud popping like pulled bottled corks in choreographed timing, one after the other. He had drunk fizzy wine once. He felt as if a gallon of it had been poured down the length of his spine. All was a-tingle, light and bubbly and his head felt aerated and bright. Fused colors became sharp and in needlepoint focus.

The subterranean land of the ranch was crisscrossed with the empty connected tunnels and dens of long extinct marsupials. A den just below the surface of the ground upon which my grandfather landed collapsed. It reverberated along the network of tunnels reaching the town fourteen miles away. It carried such a loud and rumbling vibration, it was assumed by the townspeople they were experiencing an earth tremor.

He motioned to his son to let him be. A river of warmth flooded him. It reached parts that in former years had been tormented with hot or cold pins and needles. Or more worrying, tormented with no feeling at all.

With exquisite sensation he felt the tip of the longest strand of hair on his head all the way down through to the end of his shortest toenail. He felt so well he dared not move. He did not want the glorious fountain of aerated bubbles bathing him from the

inside out to stop. He lay there until shimmering dust particles settled all around and upon him, faded.

Mother and son stood alongside each other. Maria Guadalupe Moreno recognized they were in the presence of something inexplicable and unexplainable. But which, she knew, only the Universe would ever understand.

My grandfather rolled over to one side, bent his knees, and raised himself onto all fours. Hoisting himself up from the ground, he stood upright. As minutes passed the crook between his shoulders straightened. He assumed the height of his youth.

His head adjusted and sat squarely upon his shoulders. He could see his wife and son in aligned focus from both eyes.

With the first step forward his body moved smoothly. Joints worked as though oiled, all in sync and with full range of motion.

Alert to change, the dogs sprang up. Testing, my grandfather first hopped, jumped and skipped like kids playing hopscotch on a sidewalk do. Then he sprinted in a straight line and ended in a victory lap. For every step he took the dogs quadrupled, blurring the air in a mad whirl of exhilarating movement.

The chains choking his muscles and bones for near on eighteen years, fell away. He was restored to his former youthful and energetic body.

'A miracle,' the family's physician, Dr Raul Perez exclaimed peering over the rims of his pince-nez glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. He was still perplexed by the earth tremor he'd experienced in his consulting room the day before. Now even more so, given the time of José's fall and the vibration of the earth, coincided.

Years earlier, he'd run out of herbal poultice recipes, scientific and quack medications, mud baths and hot thermal spring suggestions to ease my grandfather's discomfort. Traditional but open minded, he had listened to my grandfather's description of the ripples accompanied by a series of cracks and pops along his spine. He deduced that it was similar to the new-fangled cure from across the border.

The hands-only-cure claim was bandied about as a breakthrough, ridding ailments of all sorts, real and imagined. This phenomenon was occurring regularly, without the aid of a single pill. Until then it was unproven, but success stories were pouring into newspaper offices. Pages of testimonials were read and shared. There were skeptics who made sure their opinions were heard. Nevertheless, standing before him was irrefutable proof that spinal adjustments worked. And could also cause the earth to move.

While the Salazar Moreno family was happy to accept a miracle verdict, my grandfather began to press the doctor for copies of recent articles on the new drug-free cure "Chiropractic".

My father too got caught up in the feverish curiosity heightened by hearing his father laugh for the first time, throw back his head face-up to the warm sun and walk tall and proud with a spring in his step. And change did not stop there.

Light points flamed and danced in the centre of his mother's pupils. Conjugal rights had resumed with ardor, making up for the lost years. Their bodies spooned together, bones melded as one. Their weights rested, balanced against each other afterwards. Just as it was meant to be.

My grandmother's relationship with the Universe intensified. She now dispensed loud thanks several times a day for the return of her husband as she had known him. But in silence she continued the tricky business negotiating the future for her son.